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Eric Zemmour, The New Face of the French Far Right: Media-Sponsored, Neoliberal, and Reactionary

PÉRINE SCHIR AND MARLÈNE LARUELLE

Abstract

French polemist and far-right candidate to the presidency Éric Zemmour personifies a new form of identitarian conservatism, combining a revival of radical notions long taboo in the French political culture—such as race—with more traditional pro-Catholicism language and a neoliberal approach to economics. This article explores Zemmour’s trajectory from journalist to polemist to political activist; his strategy of competing with Marine Le Pen’s Rassemblement National through his ambitious project of “Union of the Rights;” and his ideological offering, which can be summed up as a version of Trump’s MAGA narrative adapted to the French context. It concludes with the systemic reasons for Zemmour’s visibility on the French media and political landscape, as well as explaining why his modest electoral results should not be allowed to obscure his success at creating a new political brand that will remain on the French ideological market.

Keywords: Zemmour, France, Le Pen, far right, illiberalism

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The French presidential elections of spring 2022 resulted in Emmanuel Macron's re-election with 58 percent of the vote, the lowest result ever achieved by a centrist candidate against a far-right opponent. Marine Le Pen, who earned almost 42 percent of the vote, faced an electoral defeat but a political victory: not only did she get the highest result ever achieved by a far-right candidate, but she was also not seen as a real threat by the 28 percent of potential voters who decided not to turn out, including 40 percent of young people.

But the genuine novelty of the election was the emergence of a new far-right candidate, the journalist and polemist Éric Zemmour. Even if he garnered only 7 percent of the vote (he reached 17 percent of voting intentions in January 2022, making him a potential candidate for the second round¹), he dominated the media landscape throughout the campaign and was able to shift the overall tone of the debates toward his pet themes: immigration, Islam, identity, and the "Great Replacement."

Zemmour personifies a new form of identitarian conservatism, combining a revival of radical notions long taboo in the French political culture—such as race—with more traditional pro-Catholicism language and a neoliberal approach to economics. Zemmour embodies the vocal revival of conservative ideologies that began in France with Nicolas Sarkozy's presidency (2007-2012); crystallized with La Manif pour Tous, the popular mass protests against gay marriage that revived the rightist landscape in 2013-2014; and continued with a wave of Islamophobia related to the 2015 terrorist attacks on *Charlie Hebdo* and the Bataclan. Since then, these conservative, sometimes reactionary ecosystems have been organizing themselves to secure their voice on the political and media landscape, benefiting from corporate support and corporate control over the main media outlets, as well as a public opinion skeptical of traditional liberal values.

This article explores Zemmour's trajectory from journalist to polemist to political activist; his strategy of competing with Marine Le Pen's *Rassemblement National* through his ambitious project of "Union of the Rights;" and his ideological offering, which can be summed up as a version of Trump's MAGA narrative adapted to the French context. It concludes with the systemic reasons for Zemmour's visibility on the French media and political landscape, as well as explaining why his modest electoral results should not be allowed to obscure his success at creating a new political brand that will remain on the French ideological market.

Zemmour as a Journalist: Shifting the Media Landscape to the Right

Before announcing his candidacy for the 2022 presidential election, Éric Zemmour had a career in the print and audiovisual media. His trajectory embodies the mainstreaming of far-right topics in the right-wing media.

Zemmour began his career at a small print media outlet in 1986, then joined the political department of *Le Figaro* in 1996, staying there until 2009 (before returning in 2013). Between 2010 and 2021, he wrote columns for *Le Figaro Magazine*. Since its creation in 1826, *Le Figaro* has always been a right-wing newspaper. Notably, the newspaper opened its pages to the New Right² in the late 1970s and early 1980s, helping to give a mainstream platform to far-right notions, a pattern that has been repeated with Zemmour. In the 25 years that Zemmour has been

¹ "French Poll Puts Far-Right Pundit Zemmour ahead of Le Pen," *Al Jazeera*, October 6, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/10/6/french-poll-puts-far-right-pundit-zemmour-ahead-of-le-pen>.

² See Pierre-André Taguieff, *Sur la Nouvelle Droite* (Paris: Descartes & Cie, 1994).

working for *Le Figaro*, the newspaper has undergone a notable rightward shift, as evidenced by a recent dossier on the “indoctrination” of children by “decolonialism, Islamogauchisme, communitarianism and transgender promotion.”³

This shift resulted in the newspaper turning a blind eye to Zemmour’s media slip-ups, convictions for incitement to racial hatred, and accusations of rape.⁴ The *Figaro* corporate culture seems to have been comfortable with him defending racial profiling by the French police in 2009,⁵ calling Muslim immigration an “invasion” and a “struggle to Islamize the territory” in 2016,⁶ denying the Holocaust in 2019,⁷ and referring to isolated underage immigrants as “thieves,” “murderers,” and “rapists” in 2020.⁸

Éric Zemmour’s longtime protector at *Le Figaro* is his friend Alexis Brézet, its editorial director since 2012. Brézet started out as a journalist for *Valeurs actuelles*, the most popular far-right weekly magazine in France. *Valeurs actuelles* was founded in 1957 by Raymond Bourguine, a French journalist and politician who supported French Algeria and was a member of the Vichy-nostalgic Association to Defend the Memory of Marshal Pétain (*Association pour défendre la mémoire du Maréchal Pétain, ADMP*).⁹ Following Bourguine’s death in 1990, the magazine changed hands several times. But the real change took place in 2012 with the appointment as director of Yves de Kerdrel, who completely transformed the magazine’s editorial line, making it an outspoken showcase of the radical right. Since then, the magazine has stood out on newsstands for its shocking front pages featuring divisive themes. This lack of moderation has led to its being condemned twice by the courts for incitement to racial discrimination and hatred.¹⁰

What distinguishes *Valeurs Actuelles* from other far-right newspapers is that it is much more integrated and legitimate on the French mediascape than other far-right newspapers like *Rivarol* or *Minute*. The magazine owes this to two strategies. The

3 Le Figaro Magazine (@FigaroMagazine_), “Ce sont les dérives qui sont dénoncées dans l’article de @jwaintraub et Nadjat Cherigui. Voici le début du papier pour ceux qui s’arrêtent à la Une sans lire le dossier,” Twitter, November 13, 2021, 2:40 p.m., https://twitter.com/FigaroMagazine_/status/1459516471525191683/photo/1.

4 Lénéaig Bredoux, David Perrotin, and Marine Turchi, “Violences sexuelles : plusieurs femmes accusent Eric Zemmour,” *Mediapart*, April 29, 2021, <https://www.mediapart.fr/journal/france/290421/violences-sexuelles-plusieurs-femmes-accusent-eric-zemmour>.

5 Julie Saulnier, “Eric Zemmour condamné pour provocation à la discrimination,” *L’Express*, February 18, 2011, https://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/societe/justice/eric-zemmour-condamne-pour-provocation-a-la-discrimination_963962.html. In 2009, Eric Zemmour ceased his collaboration with *Le Figaro*. If this breach of contract could be interpreted by some as a dismissal following his racist remarks, in reality it is mainly due to a discrepancy between his high salary and his low number of publications. In this regard, see “Zemmour: 9.700 euros pour un petit papier par semaine,” *Slate.fr*, March 25, 2010, <http://www.slate.fr/story/19171/zemmour-9700-euros-pour-un-petit-papier-par-semaine>.

6 “Eric Zemmour condamné en appel pour des propos islamophobes,” *Libération with AFP*, May 3, 2018, https://www.liberation.fr/france/2018/05/03/eric-zemmour-condamne-en-appel-pour-des-propos-islamophobes_1647536/.

7 Pierre Plottu and Maxime Macé, “Après la haine raciale, Zemmour condamné pour négationnisme?,” *Libération*, December 10, 2020, https://www.liberation.fr/france/2020/12/10/apres-la-haine-raciale-zemmour-condamne-pour-negationnisme_1808248/.

8 “Eric Zemmour, condamné à 10 000 euros d’amende pour provocation à la haine raciale, va faire appel,” *Le Monde*, January 17, 2022, https://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2022/01/17/eric-zemmour-condamne-a-10-000-euros-d-amende-pour-provocation-a-la-haine-raciale_6109814_823448.html.

9 AFP, “Valeurs actuelles, vitrine écornée de la droite radicale,” *Le Point*, September 9, 2020, https://www.lepoint.fr/societe/valeurs-actuelles-vitrine-ecornee-de-la-droite-radicale-09-09-2020-2391086_23.php.

10 *Valeurs Actuelles* was condemned for the following press releases :

- “The Roma, the Overdose” (Roms, l’overdose) of August 22, 2013 (judgment of the Tribunal de Grande Instance of Paris of March 5, 2015, confirmed on appeal on December 9, 2015)

- “The Naturalized: The Hidden Invasion” (Naturalisés : l’invasion qu’on cache) of September 22, 2013 (judgment of February 3, 2015, confirmed on appeal but cancelled by the Court de Cassation on June 7, 2017).

first is its hiring policy: most of its journalists and columnists have been recruited from mainstream newspapers—*Le Figaro*, *Les Echos*, *L'Express*, *Le Point*—and they usually continue to participate in other media, notably as commentators on national TV channels. The second is its practice of having leading political actors give interviews to the weekly, notably President Emmanuel Macron in 2019. This has served to manufacture a certain level of respectability for *Valeurs Actuelles*. Thus, rather than being confined to a marginal role in the specialized far-right press, *Valeurs Actuelles'* journalists accumulate media capital,¹¹ allowing them to position themselves as key personalities on such subjects as immigration or security.

The same mainstreaming of far-right ideas happened for Zemmour at *Le Figaro*. Under Brézet's leadership, the newspaper has become Zemmour's biggest supporter, offering him full pages to advertise his very popular essays. This support has been so great that some journalists have even resigned, refusing to work for what they see as "Zemmour's newspaper."¹² At *Le Figaro*, Zemmour is also no longer alone on the right wing: the newspaper now employs several young columnists known for their right-wing positioning, among them the Quebecer Mathieu Bock-Côté, author in 2021 of *La Révolution raciale et autres virus idéologiques* (The Racist Revolution and Other Ideological Viruses) and Eugénie Bastié, known for her reactionary vision of women and the family (LGBT+-phobia, sexism, anti-gender studies positioning) as well as her rehabilitation of antisemitism, notably through *Limites*, the magazine she co-founded, which claims the heritage of the monarchist Action Française.¹³

While a prolific author for *Le Figaro*, it is television that has earned Zemmour real popularity. Since 2003, he has been a regular guest on late-night shows,¹⁴ where he has become known for clashing with other guests. He made a name for himself in 2010 after claiming on national television that "most drug traffickers are Blacks and Arabs."¹⁵ That scandalous image has paved the way for his success: later that year, he was offered the opportunity to head up his first radio show,¹⁶ followed a year later by his very own TV show.¹⁷ But if different channels historically employed Zemmour to "generate buzz" and increase their viewership, they did not necessarily follow him down the slippery slope to the far right. Indeed, one after another, they parted ways with the scandal-loving anchor.

Things changed in 2019, when Zemmour became the main anchor of the program *Face à l'info* on CNews. CNews is the first stone in a much larger reactionary media empire being built by the well-known billionaire Vincent Bolloré. Bolloré

11 Abdellali Hajjat, "L'emprise de Valeurs Actuelles," *Carnet de recherche Racismes* (November 2020), <https://racismes.hypotheses.org/222>.

12 Aude Dassonville, "Au 'Figaro,' le cas Eric Zemmour crée un profond malaise," *Le Monde*, December 18, 2021, https://www.lemonde.fr/actualite-medias/article/2021/12/18/au-figaro-le-cas-eric-zemmour-cree-un-profond-malaise_6106575_3236.html.

13 Action Française is a far-right monarchist movement born out of the Dreyfus affair in 1899, known for its antisemitism. See Laurent Joly, "D'une guerre l'autre. L'Action française et les Juifs, de l'Union sacrée à la Révolution nationale (1914-1944)," *Revue d'histoire moderne & contemporaine* 59-4, no. 4 (2012):97-124, <https://doi.org/10.3917/rhmc.594.0097>.

14 *Ça se dispute* on I-Télé and *On n'est pas couché* on France 2.

15 "Thierry Mariani exprime sa 'consternation' après la condamnation d'Eric Zemmour," *Le Monde with AFP*, February 18, 2011, https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2011/02/18/eric-zemmour-condamne-pour-provocation-a-la-discrimination-raciale_1482264_3224.html?fbclid=IwARiz1aRIWtYRUGAz2sYo5KuYd8taQ4gYeOub9zaKehwO_N3mlgdmTqq60Cw.

16 A radio show called "*Z pour Zemmour*" (Z for Zemmour), which aired from 2010 to 2019 on the radio network RTL (owned by the digital media group RTL Group)

17 A TV show called "*Zemmour et Naulleau*" (Zemmour and Naulleau), aired since September 2011 on Paris Première (channel of the *Groupe M6* media holding company, majority-owned by the aforementioned RTL Group).

rose to prominence as one of the leading advocates of “Françafrique,” or French interference in the affairs of its former African colonies, which can be described as neo-colonialism. For example, the Bolloré Group has been condemned for having helped elect Faure Gnassingbé, the current president of Togo, to succeed his father—in exchange for which Bolloré obtained the management of a container terminal in Lomé.¹⁸ It is therefore easy to understand why Bolloré is now funding CNews, a television channel engaged in an ideological war against post-colonial theories.¹⁹

The Bolloré group owns several print and audiovisual media, and is in the process of “right-wingifying” all of them. In October 2021, Bolloré fired the general manager of the famous weekly newspaper *Paris Match* in order to install in that post Patrick Mahé, a former member of Occident (a neo-Nazi group from the 1960s) and former leader of Jeune Europe (created in the 1960s by Jean Thiriart, a former Nazi collaborator in the Belgian Waffen-SS).²⁰ The whole Bolloré family seems to have a far-right agenda: in January 2022, Chantal Bolloré, the billionaire’s sister, who sits on the board of directors of the family-controlled Bolloré Group, was revealed as one of the sponsors of Zemmour’s presidential campaign.²¹ And if the audience share of CNews increases year by year, and now stands at 2 percent, this is largely thanks to Zemmour’s *Face à l’info*, which enjoys an average of 800,000 viewers, or 4.1 percent of the public, with some peaks of more than one million viewers.²²

Zemmour as a Politician: Fighting for the Leadership of the Right

Competing with Marine Le Pen

Once announced as a presidential candidate on November 30, 2021, Zemmour’s public support grew rapidly, reaching 15 percent of voting intentions in February 2022. According to polls from January 17, 2022, a majority of French people surveyed (64 percent) consider Zemmour to be *the* representative of the French far right.²³ Zemmour has thus been able to supplant, at least for some time, Marine Le Pen in this realm, over which she had heretofore reigned without a strong opponent.

If both candidates have a predilection for the same set of themes—that is, security, immigration, and nativism—there are major differences in their approaches. Zemmour targets Islam per se, while Marine Le Pen limits herself to denouncing illegal immigration; Zemmour celebrates France’s Catholic heritage, while Marine Le Pen employs a more secular narrative; Zemmour engages in confrontational attacks

18 Joan Tilouine et Simon Piel, “Afrique, amis, affaires: révélations sur le système Bolloré,” *Le Monde*, April 27, 2018, https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2018/04/27/revelations-sur-le-systeme-bollore-en-afrique_5291522_3210.html.

19 Philippe Bernard, “Il est logique de voir CNews, liée aux opérations africaines de Bolloré, militer contre l’étude des séquelles du colonialisme,” *Le Monde*, March 6, 2021, https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2021/03/06/il-est-logique-de-voir-cnews-liee-aux-operations-africaines-de-bollore-militer-contre-l-etude-des-sequelles-du-colonialisme_6072152_3232.html.

20 Laurent Mauduit, “Médias: l’extrême danger Bolloré,” *Mediapart*, October 21, 2021, <https://www.mediapart.fr/journal/france/211021/medias-l-extreme-danger-bollore>.

21 Sébastien Bourdon, Ariane Lavrilleux, and Marine Turchi, “Révélations sur les grands donateurs de la campagne d’Eric Zemmour,” *Mediapart*, January 20, 2022, https://www.mediapart.fr/journal/france/200122/revelations-sur-les-grands-donateurs-de-la-campagne-d-eric-zemmour?at_medium=custom7&at_campaign=1046.

22 “Audiences access: Le grand bilan heure par heure,” Pure Medias, last modified January 3, 2021, <https://www.ozap.com/actu/audiences-access-le-grand-bilan-heure-par-heure/600344>.

23 Ivonne Trippenbach and Franck Johannès, “Présidentielle 2022 : confrontée à Eric Zemmour, Marine Le Pen apparaît moins extrême mais plus fragile qu’en 2017,” *Le Monde*, January 17, 2022, https://www.lemonde.fr/election-presidentielle-2022/article/2022/01/17/presidentielle-2022-confrontee-a-eric-zemmour-marine-le-pen-apparait-moins-extreme-mais-plus-fragile-qu-en-2017_6109760_6059010.html.

on progressive values such as abortion, while Marine Le Pen takes a more nuanced view, to the point of not having participated in the anti-gay marriage protests.

Marine Le Pen's tactics are consistent with her decade-long effort to "de-demonize" the *Rassemblement National (RN)*. Since she took over the reins of the party in 2011, she has been trying to rid the *Front National (FN)* of the shadow of her father, party founder Jean-Marie Le Pen. For years, his sordid past of torturing Algerians²⁴ and his many media slip-ups related to Holocaust memory, antisemitism, and open racism were like a black cloud over the party. Admittedly, Jean-Marie Le Pen's FN was the first far-right party to reach the second round of the presidential elections (in 2002), but it earned only 17 percent of the vote in that round. Its electorate was unstable,²⁵ and a vote cast for the party in the first round was often interpreted as a protest vote²⁶ motivated by a particular issue that was unlikely to be repeated in the second round. This led to the FN being described as a scarecrow: once in the second round, the party was perceived to scare off voters, who would either go back to its opponent or abstain from voting.

Marine Le Pen has been successfully trying to rid the party of this curse.²⁷ In the 2017 presidential elections, she seemed to be approaching her goal. Like her father, she passed the threshold of the first round, but the wave collapsed in the second round, where she won "only" 33 percent of the vote. Reflecting that this was almost double the score of her father, which seemed to indicate that she was moving in the right direction, she decided to double down on the "de-demonization" strategy: evicting her father from the party he himself founded, eliminating disruptive elements,²⁸ providing media training for her new elite.²⁹ Every effort was made to smooth the image of the party in order to make Marine Le Pen look like a valid political option and a credible potential president.

This strategy finally seems to have borne fruit: according to a poll on January 17, 2022, Marine Le Pen is seen as the representative of a "patriotic right attached to traditional values," an inflexion in the vocabulary that moves her outside the taboo "far right."³⁰ This has been reflected at the ballot box: a vote for the RN is changing

24 Lucie Soullier, "Torture en Algérie : Jean-Marie Le Pen dément une nouvelle fois," *Le Monde*, February 21, 2018, https://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2018/02/21/torture-en-algerie-jean-marie-le-pen-dement-une-nouvelle-fois_5260134_823448.html.

25 See Gérard Mauger and Willy Pelletier, *Les Classes populaires et le FN. Explications de vote* (Vulaines-sur-Seine: Le Croquant, 2017).

26 IFOP, "Radioscopie de l'électorat du Rassemblement national à un an de l'élection présidentielle de 2022," *Ifop-Fiducial pour Le Journal du Dimanche et Sud Radio*, March 2021, <https://www.ifop.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/118005-Rapport-RN-23.03.2021.pdf>.

This is also called "strategic reverse voting," i.e., voting for a small candidate that one does not want to see elected and that one thinks has no chance to send a message to one's preferred candidate. See Nonna Mayer, "Le vote FN: historique, sociologie et enjeux," *TNS Sofres*, 2007, 1–7, <https://spire.sciencespo.fr/notice/2441/fouohitsgqh8dhk97is3m298g>.

27 See Nonna Mayer, Sylvain Crépon and Alexandre Dézé, *Les faux-semblants du Front national* (Paris: Les presses de Sciences Po, 2015); Cécile Alduy and Stéphane Wahnich, *Marine Le Pen prise aux mots—Décryptage du nouveau discours frontiste* (Paris: Le Seuil, 2015); Mathias Destal and Marine Turchi, *Marine est au courant de tout* (Paris: Flammarion Enquetes, 2017).

28 Franck Johannès and Abel Mestre, "Marine Le Pen fait le ménage au Rassemblement national avant les régionaux," *Le Monde*, August 4, 2020, https://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2020/08/04/marine-le-pen-fait-le-menage-au-rassemblement-national-avant-les-regionales_6048075_823448.html.

29 "Un ex-présentateur de BFMTV coach du RN Jordan Bardella," *Libération*, November 7, 2019, https://www.liberation.fr/en-bref/2019/11/07/un-ex-presentateur-de-bfmtv-coach-du-rn-jordan-bardella_1762156/.

30 "Marine Le Pen : les Français estiment que son image s'est 'adoucie,'" *Le Point*, January 17, 2022, https://www.lepoint.fr/politique/marine-le-pen-les-francais-estiment-que-son-image-s-est-adoucie-17-01-2022-2460773_20.php.

from a protest vote to a vote of ideological support, especially among young people.³¹ Indeed, the RN is said to be the leading party among those young people who vote. Overall, the proportion of votes for the RN among young people is the same as among the rest of the population: around 20 percent, the share earned by Marine Le Pen in the 2017 presidential elections. But since only one in two young people actually turn out to vote, Marine Le Pen is indeed their first choice.

Unlike Zemmour—who announced that he would, if elected, create a “Ministry of Remigration”—Marine Le Pen understands that it is useless to harp on the theme of immigration, which only interests an electorate that already plans to vote for her. She spoke little of her favorite subjects during the campaign, betting instead on the promise of an increase in the purchasing power of the French people, an appeal that reached a broader audience. This is indeed one of the major ambivalences of the RN: it seeks to bring together all right-wing voters, but its economic program is focused on the working classes, which are more present on the left than on the right.³²

Zemmour chases the same far-right electorate as Marine Le Pen, but he also attracts free market-oriented groups to a much greater degree, making him more credible to mainstream right-wing voters. He also has another important asset: the support of Philippe de Villiers, a far-right politician known for founding the *Puy du Fou*, a theme park that immerses its visitors in the France of the past, the time of kings and princes and knights, a Christian France resisting foreign invasion.³³ This cultural message uncovered its real significance when one remembers that de Villiers is an adept of the theory of the “Great Replacement.”³⁴ He is also one of the main propagators of conspiracy theories in France, especially with his latest book, published in 2021, *The Day After (Le jour d’après)*, in which he argues that the elites have used the COVID-19 pandemic to enslave the world’s population and impose their progressive ideology. A presidential candidate himself in 1995 and 2007, De Villiers officially backed Zemmour’s candidacy this time around, bringing to the table an electorate that, even if small (4.7 percent of voters in 1995 and 2.3 percent in 2007), represents a non-negligible gain: a Catholic audience nostalgic for “Old France” and the royalist *Ancien Régime*.

The “Union of the Rights” Strategy

Contrary to Marine Le Pen’s strategy of appealing to the working class and therefore hunting on the turf of Jean Luc Mélenchon’s La France Insoumise (LFI), Zemmour stands as a candidate of the “Union of the Rights”³⁵ (*Union des droites*): he hopes to bring together in a single party the mainstream right, represented in France by *Les Républicains (LR)*, and the radical right, including encroaching on the ground of Marine Le Pen. By signing up Guillaume Peltier—former second-in-command of

31 Franck Johannès, “Comment le Rassemblement national est devenu le premier parti de la génération des 25-34 ans,” *Le Monde*, April 5, 2021, https://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2021/04/05/le-rassemblement-national-premier-parti-des-25-34-ans_6075574_823448.html.

32 Barthélémy Philippe, “Eric Zemmour et Marine Le Pen... leurs différences flagrantes sur l’économie,” *Capital*, November 16, 2021, <https://www.capital.fr/economie-politique/eric-zemmour-et-marine-le-pen-leurs-differences-differences-sur-leconomie-1420130>.

33 Guillaume Mazeau, “Le Puy du Fou : sous le divertissement, un ‘combat culturel,’” *The Conversation*, March 29, 2019, <https://theconversation.com/le-puy-du-fou-sous-le-divertissement-un-combat-culturel-113888>.

34 The concept of *Grand Remplacement* (Great Replacement) refers to the supposed disappearance of France’s “Christian heritage,” which will allegedly be replaced by an Arab-Muslim culture and customs.

35 Masha P. Davis, “When the Far Right Courts the Right: Understanding Marion Maréchal’s Project of a ‘Union of the Rights’ in France,” *IERES Occasional Papers* 7 (September 2020).

LR—and former RN members Damien Rieu, Jérôme Rivière and Gilbert Collard, Zemmour has begun to sketch the outlines of the gathering he advocates.

LR brings together people from very different backgrounds. These can be roughly divided into four not-mutually-exclusive archetypes: the free-marketeers, who favor the expansion of globalization and France's participation in transatlantic organizations; the Gaullists (a reference to the politics of Charles de Gaulle, French president from 1959 to 1969), who are fervent defenders of France's sovereignty and independence; the centrists, who propose measures for the redistribution of wealth; and the conservatives, who advocate a model of society based on the traditional family and the assimilation of immigrants.

Among the latter thrives an ultra-conservative, identitarian line that is close to the far right. A representative of this radical fringe at LR, who tried to get himself elected as head of the party during the primary, is Éric Ciotti, a "Great Replacement" enthusiast.³⁶ The 39 percent of voters who voted for him in the LR primary in 2021 are the same people who voted for presidential candidate François Fillon in 2017. On the French political landscape, Fillon was positioned at the intersection of the free-marketeers and conservatives, with a particular emphasis on France's national identity and Catholic roots, a viewpoint accompanied by a stigmatization of Muslims and Islam. In 2021, Ciotti positioned himself in exactly the same way, hoping to repeat Fillon's victory in the 2017 primaries. But to the great displeasure of the identitarian group, the 2021 LR primaries saw the election of the least radical candidate, Valérie Pécresse.

The position of new idol of the Fillonist orphans was therefore up for grabs, and Zemmour was quick to come to the rescue. To introduce himself to this new electorate, he participated in the *Journée du Conservatisme* (Conservatism Day) organized on September 26, 2021, by the *Mouvement Conservateur*, formerly *Sens Commun*, a movement born out of the crystallizing moment of La Manif pour Tous.³⁷ In 2012, France proposed that same-sex couples should be allowed to marry. The proposal caused a stir on the right, and many organizations, led by La Manif pour Tous, formed to organize protests against it. The conservative fringe of LR, wanting to take advantage of this momentum to assert its power within their party, participated in the creation of Sens Commun, which was intended to become the link between La Manif pour Tous and the LR party. After the law was passed, Sens Commun did not disarm. The group continued its ideological battle within LR, broadening its focus to a pro-life and anti-LGBT+ rights agenda.

In 2016, during the LR primary, Sens Commun supported the conservative candidate François Fillon. Five years later, in 2021, the movement refused to support Valérie Pécresse, whom it deemed less able to ensure the "preservation of the Judeo-Christian civilization."³⁸ It then disassociated itself from LR, renamed itself *Le Mouvement Conservateur*, and chose a new champion, Éric Zemmour. The rest of the radical fringe within LR went along with it: a month later, on January 13, 2022, 1,417 elected

36 Mahaut Landaz, "Grand Remplacement, 'priorité nationale' ... Eric Ciotti, à l'extrême de la droite," *Nouvel Obs*, November 9, 2021, <https://www.nouvelobs.com/politique/20211109.OBS50811/grand-remplacement-priorite-nationale-eric-ciotti-a-l-extreme-de-la-droite.html>.

37 See Yann Raison du Cleuziou, *Une contre-révolution catholique. Aux origines de La Manif pour tous* (Paris: Seuil, 2019); Sara Garbagnoli and Massimo Prearo, *La croisade "anti-genre." Du Vatican aux manif pour tous* (Paris: Textuel, 2017); Léa Morabito and Manon Réguer-Petit, "Les traces de La Manif pour tous," in *La déconnexion électorale* (Paris: Fondation Jean-Jaurès, 2017), 95–106.

38 "Le Mouvement Conservateur soutient la candidature d'Eric Zemmour," *Mouvement Conservateur*, last modified December 4, 2021, <https://www.mouvementconservateur.fr/9458-2/>.

officials, executives, members and sympathizers of the LR party signed on to an article in the newspaper *L'Opinion* entitled "Why We Support Eric Zemmour."³⁹

Behind the new champion of the "Union of the Rights," there is a very solid pre-existing network. The first pillar of this network is the spin doctor behind the 2007 election of Nicolas Sarkozy: Patrick Buisson.⁴⁰ It was he who invented the "Union of the Rights" strategy, at a time when the mainstream right and the far right did not mix. To enable Sarkozy to capture the far-right electorate, Buisson created a compelling narrative by hijacking the populist "appeal to the people against the elites" traditionally used by the left and turning it into an identitarian concept. Indeed, the "elites" against whom he urges people to rally are not the financial capitalist elites, but rather the "cultural establishment," defined notably by cosmopolitan values and multiculturalism. Buisson's narrative advocated a nationalist cultural model for France that was centered around the Christian, traditional (and implicitly racial) roots of French identity.

Through this clever shell game, Buisson managed to bring together two opposite tendencies: he prized the defense of the "French identity" dear to the far right, while at the same time continuing to defend the free-market matrix necessary to keep the liberal-conservative label. Today, he applies essentially the same strategy to Zemmour's campaign: maintaining his ultraconservative narrative while superimposing a discourse in favor of the free-market economy.

But the *éminence grise* behind this network is Marion Maréchal, granddaughter of Jean-Marie Le Pen and niece of Marine. A former *Rassemblement National* MEP, she retired from politics in 2017 at the age of 27 to focus on what she calls "metapolitics": seeking to rise above transient presidential struggles to have a long-term impact on political culture. To that end, she created in 2018 a far-right political training institute, the Institute of Social, Economic and Political Sciences (*Institut des sciences sociales, économiques et politiques, ISSEP*). The scientific board of ISSEP reflects the institution's anchoring in the far right: among its notable members are former editor-in-chief of Breitbart News London and Nigel Farage adviser Raheem Kassam; and Pascal Gauchon, former secretary general of the *Parti des Forces Nouvelles* (PFN), a neofascist party that splintered off from the *Front National* in the 1980s.⁴¹ Among the classes offered, one can find a smokescreen of "legit" options—like management and business strategy—but also more problematic ones, like "History of Religions and Civilizations" (taught with a very anti-secular mindset) or commando training.⁴²

During Zemmour's campaign, Marion Maréchal was lurking in the background, meeting in secret with his campaign manager, Sarah Knafo. The two share close friends, including Jacques de Guillebon, director of the far-right magazine *L'Incorrect* and director of studies at Maréchal's ISSEP. Knafo and Maréchal co-

39 "Pourquoi nous soutenons Eric Zemmour." La tribune de 1 417 élus, cadres, adhérents et sympathisants LR," *L'Opinion*, January 13, 2022, <https://www.lopinion.fr/politique/pourquoi-nous-soutenons-eric-zemmour-la-tribune-de-1-417-elus-cadres-adherents-et-sympathisants-lr>.

40 After his upbringing in a royalist family, he made a name for himself in far-right circles, notably through his managerial positions on two major far-right newspapers: *Minute*, very close to the National Front, where he was on staff from 1981 and was director in 1986-1987; and *Valeurs Actuelles*, which he joined in 1987 and of which he was managing editor from 1992 to 1998.

41 "Les missions du Conseil scientifique," ISSEP, last accessed March 24, 2022, <https://www.issep.fr/le-conseil-scientifique/les-membres/>.

42 "Magistère Bac+5 Science politique et management de projet," ISSEP, last accessed March 24, 2022, <https://www.issep.fr/les-magisteres/magistere-2eme-annee/>.

organized in September 2019 *La Convention de la Droite*—a French replica of Trump’s Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC). Éric Zemmour was the guest of honor and gave a very violent speech against Islam and Muslims in which he compared immigration to the Nazi occupation.⁴³ In the summer of 2021, Zemmour, Knafo, and Maréchal met to discuss the possibility of his running for president, and the number of meetings between Maréchal and Knafo has since multiplied.⁴⁴

Zemmour was hoping to win Maréchal’s official support, as the latter represents quite a nice prize for him. First, of course, because Marion Maréchal is the niece of his rival Marine Le Pen. Second, because Maréchal has a well-stocked Rolodex that she could put at his disposal. Notably, it was she who organized Zemmour’s appearance at the Budapest Family Summit on September 26, 2021, co-organized by such powerful conservative Christian lobbies as the World Congress of Families and the ultraconservative advocacy group CitizenGo⁴⁵ and supported by the government of Viktor Orbán.⁴⁶

Zemmour’s wish came true on March 6, 2022,⁴⁷ when Marion Maréchal joined him on stage to announce her official endorsement of his campaign (Jean-Marie Le Pen did the same). This seems to spell the end of Marion Maréchal’s “metapolitical retreat” and show her desire to return to politics. Having left her post as RN MP in 2017 and led the ISSEP with limited success, she found herself gradually isolated, watching her close friends rallying to Zemmour’s party one by one, including Thibaut Monnier, co-founder of ISSEP.⁴⁸

Marine Le Pen was quick to comment on the endorsement, deploring the fact that her niece and former RN deputy has been “transformed into a sort of lifeline for a campaign that is collapsing on itself.” Indeed, in the context of the war in Ukraine, Zemmour was heavily criticized for his pro-Russian stance, less nuanced than Marine’s, and was embarrassed after the revelation of his 2015 meeting with Vladimir Yakunin, a Russian oligarch close to Vladimir Putin.⁴⁹ If Marion Maréchal’s support brought about a surge in Zemmour’s popularity, it did not help the pro-Russian tropism of his party. Marion Maréchal also shares this fascination with Putin: in February 2014, immediately following the annexation of Crimea, she praised Putin and called him a “good patriot.”⁵⁰ She was then invited to a May 2014 meeting of European right-wing parties organized in Vienna by Konstantin Malofeev, a Russian oligarch close to Putin who is the co-founder of the Saint Basil the Great Charitable

43 Lucie Delaporte and Marine Turchi, “L’équipe de campagne d’Éric Zemmour : le listing secret,” *Mediapart*, October 20, 2021, <https://www.mediapart.fr/journal/france/201021/l-equipe-de-campagne-d-eric-zemmour-le-listing-secret>.

44 Marylou Magal, “Marion Maréchal, la tentation Zemmour,” *L’Express*, September 23, 2021, https://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/politique/marion-marechal-la-tentation-zemmour_2159046.html.

45 See Ellen Rivera, “Unraveling the Anti-Choice Supergroup Agenda Europe in Spain: A Case Study of CitizenGo and HazteOir,” *IERES Occasional Papers* 4 (October 2019).

46 Kata Balint, “Hungary’s Pivotal Role in the Global Network against Sexual & Reproductive Rights,” Institute for Strategic Dialogue, last modified December 17, 2021, https://www.isdglobal.org/digital_dispatches/keeping-it-in-the-family-hungarys-pivotal-role-in-the-global-network-against-sexual-and-reproductive-rights/.

47 “Présidentielle: Marion Maréchal officialise son soutien à Éric Zemmour,” *France Inter*, March 6, 2022, <https://www.franceinter.fr/politique/presidentielle-marion-marechal-officialise-son-soutien-a-eric-zemmour>.

48 Ivanne Trippenbach, “Derrière les hésitations de Marion Maréchal, la guerre des extrêmes droits,” *Le Monde*, January 29, 2022, https://www.lemonde.fr/election-presidentielle-2022/article/2022/01/29/derriere-les-hesitations-de-marion-marechal-la-guerre-des-extremes-droits_6111486_6059010.html.

49 Robin D’Angelo and Antoine Malo, “Quand les Russes choyaient Éric Zemmour,” *Le Journal du Dimanche*, March 5, 2022, <https://www.lejdd.fr/Politique/info-jdd-quand-les-russes-choyaient-eric-zemmour-4097637>.

50 Ivan Valerio, “Marion Maréchal-Le Pen: ‘Poutine est un patriote et ça fonctionne plutôt bien,’” *Europe 1*, February 4, 2014, <https://lelab.europe1.fr/marion-marechal-le-pen-poutine-est-un-patriote-et-ca-fonctionne-plotot-bien-12775>.

Foundation, which defends traditional family values against the “homosexual lobby” of the West.⁵¹

Zemmour as an Ideologist: MAGA, French-Style

While Marine Le Pen has been working hard to erase or at least soften many themes of the French far right that her father promoted (antisemitism, pro-colonialism, rehabilitation of the Vichy regime, sexism...), Zemmour has been reactivating them, recreating a space for what was the Front National narrative during Jean-Marie Le Pen’s leadership. Zemmour has also been offering a “Make France Great Again” narrative that borrows extensively from Trumpist themes, but with a heavy insistence on French history, something that is not present in Marine Le Pen’s discursive strategy.

Ethnodifferentialism: Race War and Civilizations

Zemmour does not hesitate to activate all the classic themes of identitarian conservatism: order and authority, the restoration of so-called traditional values, and the defense of the nation (understood in a very ethnicized way). Indeed, Zemmour speaks openly about race, a notion that has been marginalized in French politics since the end of the Second World War and the shadow of which hampered the far right for decades. He has revived racial ideas in their contemporary variant, namely the conspiracy theory of the “Great Replacement,” which he puts forward in the most straightforward way. Zemmour believes that racial/ethnic nations have existed throughout history and are living entities to be protected from mixing with others and defended from enemies. He thus belongs to the ethno-differentialist trend that has been rising since the New Right, in particular Alain de Benoist, crafted the notion in the 1960s and 1970s.⁵² While Zemmour is almost the only French public figure to use the term “race,” he combines it with more accepted notions such as “civilizations” and of course “war of civilizations” that resonate better with the culturalist *zeitgeist*.⁵³ Policywise, he advocates for theories of “national preference,” i.e., that social policies in employment, healthcare, pensions, and education prioritize “ethnic French” and benefit only secondarily migrants who have “assimilated” to French culture. Those deemed “non-assimilated” (obviously, the definition of assimilation is Zemmour’s own subjective one) would be deported back to their country of origin.⁵⁴

Reactionary Ideology: Gender and Religion

In Zemmour’s view, the French nation has two key enemies: Islam, which he sees as a dangerous religion that is by its very nature incompatible with French culture, and the egalitarian left that has dominated the French cultural landscape since the

51 AFP, “Réunion prorusse à Vienne de partis d’extrême droite européens,” *Libération*, June 4, 2014, https://www.liberation.fr/planete/2014/06/04/reunion-prorusse-a-vienne-de-partis-d-extreme-droite-europeens_1033208/.

52 Taguieff, *Sur la Nouvelle Droite*.

53 Henry Hale and Marlene Laruelle, “A New Wave of Research on Civilizational Politics,” *Nationalities Papers* 49, no. 4 (2021): 597-608, <https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2020.83>.

54 Benoît Bréville, “Préférence nationale, un remède de charlatan,” *Le monde diplomatique* (November 2018): 1-18, <https://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/2021/11/BREVILLE/64034>.

May 1968 revolution.⁵⁵ He thus produces a classic model of horizontal and vertical enemies that cooperate with the aim of destroying the nation.⁵⁶

Zemmour virulently denounces social and cultural modernity, particularly its most obvious features: gender equality and multiculturalism. His first book, *Le premier sexe* (*The First Sex*, 2006) is an answer to Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex*: it denounces the feminization of society, which is allegedly demolishing such masculine values as courage, heroism, sacrifice, and hard work. Zemmour has been accumulating ultraradical misogynist comments, presenting men as natural predators and stating that rape trials are just "judiciary surveillance of desire."⁵⁷ This feature sharply dissociates him from Marine Le Pen, who does not play that card, for obvious reasons: as the most popular female politician in France, she will gladly put aside the defense of traditional values if it can help her to gain access to a female electorate. She is also decidedly more nuanced than Zemmour on LGBT+ issues in order not to alienate any potential voters.

Notably, while she has declared that she is personally against gay marriage, she opposes a legal ban and proudly supports the (very few) gay members of the RN's executive committee, including Florient Philippot before he left the party in 2017 and the RN mayor of Hénin-Beaumont, Steeve Briois. But if Marine Le Pen positions herself as a seemingly gay-friendly feminist, it is in service of her favorite argument: the fear aroused by Islam and its supposed intolerance of gays and women. Meanwhile, Zemmour condemns homosexuality as an anomalous choice contrary to good morals; castigates transsexuality as a mere trend and gender studies as a danger to the youth; and denounces the existence of a "homosexual lobby"⁵⁸ protected by capitalist elites.

In his bestselling trilogy *Mélancolie française* (*French Melancholia*, 2010), *Le Suicide français* (*The French Suicide*, 2014), and *Destin français* (*French Destiny*, 2018), Zemmour traces the history of what he sees as the deconstruction of France's identity and sovereignty in all domains. He focuses obsessively on the 1960s, his "decade horribilis," and on the May 1968 revolution, criticizing what he calls the new mandatory ideological trio "derision, deconstruction, destruction."⁵⁹ Since then, French political and intellectual elites are accused of having embraced the values of multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism and having allowed these to destroy the nation.

One of his most famous polemics has been around the names given to newborns in France. Zemmour wrongly affirmed that Muslim names now comprised a majority of those being given and called for banning Muslim names, as well as some American-inspired names like Kevin, to force people to give "traditionally French" names to their children, because "naming a child Mohamed is colonizing France."⁶⁰ In his main political meeting as a presidential candidate in Villepinte in December 2021,

55 Gilles Ivaldi, "Éric Zemmour: Un 'Backlash Culturel' à La Française?," HAL (CEVIPOF; Sciences-Po Paris, February 3, 2022), 1, <https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-03553884/>.

56 Rogers Brubaker, "Why populism?" *Theory and society* 46, no 5 (2017): 357-385, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11186-017-9301-7>.

57 Éric Zemmour, *Le premier sexe* (Paris: Editions Denoël, 2006), 53.

58 Éric Zemmour, *Le suicide français* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2014), 73.

59 *Ibid.*, 14.

60 Marie-Pierre Haddad, "Polémique sur les prénoms : qu'est-ce que la loi de 1803, défendue par Zemmour?" *RTL*, September 14, 2021, <https://www.rtl.fr/actu/politique/polemique-sur-les-prenoms-qu-est-ce-que-la-loi-de-1803-defendue-par-zemmour-7900072054>.

Zemmour summarized his vision as being the only one “against globalism, against living together, against mass immigration, gender theory, and Islamogauchisme.”⁶¹

If the nation is facing an existential threat, it has the right to respond with violence to survive. This claim is regularly advanced by Zemmour, often implicitly, sometimes explicitly, as when he asked at the Convention of the Right in 2019: “Will young French people accept to live as a minority on the land of their ancestors? If so, they deserve their colonization; otherwise, they will have to fight for their liberation.” Lexicometric analysis of his discourses and books by the Stanford scholar Cécile Alduy has shown that “war” is Zemmour’s third most-used concept.⁶² The idea that war will be the unavoidable result of the current clash of civilization and of the supposed colonization of Europe by Muslim migrants connects Zemmour to the accelerationism movement. Common among white supremacists, accelerationism presupposes that race war is desirable to achieve white power. Zemmour does not state it this transparently, but legitimizes violence as the only technique that can be employed to ensure the survival of the French nation.

Antisemitism and Judaism: The Paradox of Zemmour

Another feature of Zemmour’s ideological packaging is his Judaism. He comes from an Algerian Berber Jewish family, attended Jewish schools, and regularly practices Judaism. Yet he presents this feature as a purely private one, supporting Catholicism as the historical religion of the nation and the ultimate embodiment of Frenchness. His Judaism helps to neutralize the claim that the far right is antisemitic and provides cover for his direct Islamophobia. It is a way for him to express his vision of an assimilationist policy: Jews were the first to be given equal rights (first by the French Revolution and then by Napoleon) and have completely integrated into Frenchness—which Muslims, in his view, would not.⁶³

Memory of his childhood gives Zemmour a rhetorical tool to argue for the lost “happy days” when Algeria was French and colonizers and colonized lived happily together. While Zemmour has remained discreet on his positioning on the Israel-Palestine conflict, he seems supportive of Israel and the idea of moving the capital to Jerusalem. His judeo-christianism makes him in tune with the American Christian Right, for whom Israel’s destiny is an integral part of the Christian world. Yet Zemmour has simultaneously been advocating historical revisionism, arguing that the Holocaust was not a major event of the Second World War, its memory should not be protected by state laws, and the collaborationist Vichy regime of Marshal Pétain successfully protected French Jews from Nazi Germany.⁶⁴ Zemmour thus represents a rare case of antisemitic Jewishness, inspired by the leading figure of French antisemitism of the late nineteenth century, Edouard Drumont (1844-1917).⁶⁵ His paradoxical statements fit well with the New Right’s trend of decoupling antisemitism at home from pro-Israeli positions.⁶⁶

61 “Éric Zemmour : Discours de Villepinte,” YouTube video, 1:37:08, posted by “Éric Zemmour,” December 6, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iBBtuSOEQCo>.

62 Cécile Alduy, *La Langue du Zemmour* (Paris: Seuil, 2022).

63 Mitchell Abidor and Miguel Lago, “The Politically Expedient Jewishness of Éric Zemmour,” *Jewish Currents*, December 6, 2021, <https://jewishcurrents.org/the-politically-expedient-jewishness-of-eric-zemmour>.

64 Zemmour, *Le suicide français*, 89-90.

65 Gérard Noiriel, *Le venin dans la plume: Édouard Drumont, Éric Zemmour et la parte sombre de la République* (Paris: La Découverte, 2019).

66 Jelena Subotic, “Antisemitism in the Global Populist International,” *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1177/136914812110066970>.

Rewriting France's Roman National

Since his teenage years, Zemmour has been a connoisseur of French history and literature, to which he devotes a lot of his spare time.⁶⁷ He sprinkles references to French history and French literature throughout his speeches to give himself the appearance of being well-read. These carefully chosen references allow him to tell an attractive story of French history in a nineteenth-century romantic style, full of historical misinterpretations and presentisms. Zemmour positions himself as the heir of Charles Maurras (1868-1952), the central figure of the French “blood and soil” tradition, who inscribes French identity into reactionary Catholicism and the monarchist tradition (Maurras was the founder of the *Action française*). This legacy is visible in Zemmour’s support among French monarchist circles, both on the Legitimist side, where he has received a declaration of support⁶⁸ from the heir of the House of Bourbon, Prince Charles-Emmanuel of Bourbon-Parma, a descendant of King Louis XIV; and on the Orleanist side, where he is backed by Antoine Berth, the spokesperson for *Action Française*, who was a member of Zemmour’s electoral campaign team, and several other members.⁶⁹

Zemmour reads history as the history of national heroes, imbued with the energy of the nation, but adds elements of autobiography: his own life experience is paralleled by France’s national moments of heroism. His video announcing his candidacy for the presidency was a real *mise en scène* in a vintage style inspired by de Gaulle’s June 18, 1940, London speech calling for resistance to Nazi Germany—an implicit parallel that would present Zemmour as the savior of France in the face of a new (Muslim) invasion. In the video, Zemmour reads a long text full of cultural references, explaining to viewers why they “no longer feel at home in their own country.” He then offers an arch-view of French history:

You remember the country found in films and books. The country of Joan of Arc and Louis XIV. The country of Bonaparte and General de Gaulle. The country of knights and ladies. The country of Victor Hugo and Chateaubriand. The country of Pascal and Descartes. The country of the fables of La Fontaine, the characters of Molière, and the verses of Racine. The country of Notre Dame de Paris and of village church towers. The country of Gavroche and Cosette. The country of barricades and Versailles. The country of Pasteur and Lavoisier. The country of Voltaire and Rousseau, of Clemenceau and the soldiers of '14, of de Gaulle and Jean Moulin. The country of Gabin and Delon; of Brigitte Bardot and Belmondo, of Johnny and Aznavour, of Brassens and Barbara; of the films of Sautet and Verneuil.⁷⁰

67 Étienne Girard, *Le Radicalisé. Enquête sur Éric Zemmour* (Paris: Seuil, 2021).

68 “[Vidéo] Charles-Emmanuel et Amaury de Bourbon-Parme, descendants de Louis XIV, apportent leur soutien à Eric Zemmour,” *Valeurs Actuelles*, February 17, 2022, <https://www.valeursactuelles.com/societe/video-les-bourbon-parme-descendants-de-louis-xiv-apportent-leur-soutien-a-eric-zemmour/>.

69 Lucie Delaporte, “Dans les comités locaux, des factieux derrière Zemmour,” *Mediapart*, October 21, 2021, <https://www.mediapart.fr/journal/france/211021/dans-les-comites-locaux-des-factieux-derriere-zemmour?onglet=full>.

70 The video is no longer available on YouTube due to copyright violation. See “Présidentielle 2022 : la vidéo de campagne d’Éric Zemmour bloquée par la plateforme YouTube,” *ladepeche.fr*, March 10, 2022, <https://www.ladepeche.fr/2022/03/10/presidentielle-2022-la-video-de-campagne-deric-zemmour-bloquee-par-la-plateforme-youtube-10160520.php>.

Zemmour stated that there is a “real history of France” that is hidden to the public and no longer taught in school because the multiculturalist elites and the professional community of historians are working against genuine history. This “real history” re-mythologizes the *roman national*, from king Clovis’ Christian baptism in 506 and the Poitiers battle of 1356 that halted the expansion of Islam in France to, of course, Joan d’Arc and her militant patriotism. But Zemmour also comments frequently on twentieth-century history, especially on the collaboration era, trying to rehabilitate Marshal Petain; affirming that the Vichy regime protected French Jews; and supporting Maurice Papon, one of the key figures of French collaboration, who was tried in 1996. He also refers regularly to the still-raging memory wars over the Maghreb and especially Algeria, painting colonization as a civilizing mission that helped the colonized nations and complaining about the latter’s lack of gratitude for everything France did for them.⁷¹

Neoliberal Illiberalism

Economically, Zemmour partially fits the definition of an “authoritarian neoliberalism”⁷² or “neoliberal illiberalism,”⁷³ promoting exclusionary social protection or welfare chauvinism through the concept of “national preference.” Indeed, Zemmour defends neoliberalism in the sense of austerity measures and reducing government regulation, celebrates the business elites, and calls for halting redistributive measures. His only criticism of neoliberalism relates to globalization, which he sees as destructive of the nation; he therefore proposes a deglobalization project that would reindustrialize France.

Here too, Zemmour copies and pastes the Trump brand of neoliberal deglobalization/protectionism, yet with less success, as French public opinion is much more favorable to state redistributive mechanisms than its American counterpart. But his neoliberalism allows him to accuse his competitor Marine Le Pen of being too leftist—read: generous—when it comes to her economic political program⁷⁴ and to secure support among the free-marketeers, such as big French corporations and the traditional French bourgeoisie. And indeed, we know—thanks to the investigative journalists of *Mediapart*—that the main donors to Zemmour’s electoral campaign were senior figures in major investment funds, hedge funds, real estate companies, financial advising firms, and industrial groups.⁷⁵

Conclusion

Zemmour did not succeed at capturing support from French voters. His radicality, especially in relation to women, abortion, the LGBT+ community, and the Vichy regime cost him at the ballot box. When they vote, French citizens prefer to go with well-known figures who are trusted as pragmatic and efficient and not purely

71 Aglan Alya et al., *Zemmour contre l'histoire*, Tracts no. 34 (Paris: Gallimard, 2022).

72 Noemi Lendvai-Bainton and Dorota Szelewa, “Governing New Authoritarianism: Populism, Nationalism and Radical Welfare Reforms in Hungary and Poland,” *Social Policy & Administration* (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1111/spol.12642>.

73 Erik Swyngedouw, “Illiberalism and the Democratic Paradox: The Infernal Dialectic of Neoliberal Emancipation,” *European Journal of Social Theory* (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1177/13684310211027079>.

74 Barthélémy Philippe, “Eric Zemmour Et Marine Le Pen... Leurs Différences Flagrantes Sur L'économie,” *Capital.fr*, November 16, 2021, <https://www.capital.fr/economie-politique/eric-zemmour-et-marine-le-pen-leurs-flagrantes-differences-sur-leconomie-1420130>.

75 Sébastien Bourdon, Ariane Lavrilleux, and Marine Turchi, “Révélation sur les grands donateurs de la campagne d'Eric Zemmour,” *Mediapart*, January 20, 2022, <https://www.mediapart.fr/journal/france/200122/revelations-sur-les-grands-donateurs-de-la-campagne-d-eric-zemmour>.

ideological (a brand that Marine Le Pen has gradually built). Yet Zemmour's electoral failure should be contrasted with his political success at becoming a key figure on the French public landscape. He continues to access major media outlets, including the most respectable ones, overwhelming them with provocative soundbites that meet the need of the whole media ecosystem, especially the 24/7 television channels, for clickbait content that can attract an audience. He also benefits from the support of the Bolloré media empire, and more globally from the corporate world, which needs new voices to defend neoliberal economic politics, even if under a Trump-style antiglobalization narrative.

Zemmour embodies a global, transnational trend of decomplexified language that aims to break the norms of dialogue by insulting and polarizing, and which builds its moral ground on the notion of fighting political correctness—what Ruth Wodak, Jonathan Culpeper, and Elena Semino have called the “shameless normalization of impoliteness” à la Trump or Berlusconi.⁷⁶ When asked about the xenophobic nature of Zemmour's discourse, CNews responded that they “bring pluralism to life, without being afraid of polemics.”⁷⁷ The myth of the crisis of free speech has been the far right's favorite battle horse lately. The purpose of the myth is not to secure freedom of speech—that is, the right to express one's opinions without censorship or restraint—but rather to allow people to speak with impunity and to destigmatize racism and prejudice. Or, as Nesrine Malik puts it, “not freedom of expression, but rather freedom from the consequences of that expression.”⁷⁸

Zemmour benefits from other systemic changes, such the collapse of the French center-right, now absorbed by Macron's La République en Marche and unable to maintain its own political identity: Les Républicains' candidate, Valérie Pécresse, failed to reach even the threshold of 5 percent of voters, a first for the party and a financial disaster. Zemmour may also represent a change in the far-right realm, namely a new battle emerging between supporters of the “normalization” strategy embodied by Marine Le Pen and those following Marion Maréchal in assuming their far-right identity and ideological genealogy. It is indeed likely that Zemmour will gradually have to share his segment of the ideological market with Marion, whose ambitions to develop her own brand closer to that of her grandfather Jean-Marie than to that of her aunt Marine are well-known.⁷⁹

Whatever Zemmour's future will be, his newly acquired stunning visibility on the French public landscape confirms the revival of the figure of the *intellectual engagé*, historically on the left of the political spectrum but now conquered by the (far) right. This shift confirms that illiberal thinkers and doers have been able to position themselves at the forefront of the current cultural wars and no longer allow the progressivist side to dominate. In that sense, Zemmour represents the French version of a transnational trend that has been rising for more than a decade. The decreased profile and partial delegitimization of these illiberal figures due to

76 Ruth Wodak, Jonathan Culpeper and Elena Semino, “Shameless Normalisation of Impoliteness: Berlusconi's and Trump's Press Conferences,” *Discourse & Society* (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1177/0957926520977217>.

77 Sandrine Cassini et Mouna El Mokhtari, “CNews, la télé du clash permanent,” *Le Monde*, October 26, 2019, https://www.lemonde.fr/economie/article/2019/10/26/cnews-la-tele-du-clash-permanent_6016977_3234.html.

78 Nesrine Malik, “The Myth of the Free Speech Crisis,” *The Guardian*, September 3, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/sep/03/the-myth-of-the-free-speech-crisis>.

79 Lucie Delaporte, “Marion Maréchal derrière Éric Zemmour: une candidature peut en cacher une autre,” *Mediapart*, March 5, 2022, <https://www.mediapart.fr/journal/france/050322/marion-marechal-derriere-eric-zemmour-une-candidature-peut-en-cacher-une-autre>.

Eric Zemmour, The New Face of the French Far Right

Russia's war against Ukraine is only a short interlude, not a long-term decline, as the structural elements of their success have yet to be addressed.



Illiberal Liberalism: A Genealogy

FRANK FUREDI

Abstract

Illiberalism is invariably associated with right-wing authoritarian or populist movements. Yet at times liberalism itself can take an illiberal turn. This essay explores the historical and philosophical origins of contemporary illiberal liberalism. It suggests that illiberal liberalism was and remains motivated by a powerful anti-democratic impulse that is often expressed as disdain for people's capacity to act with reason.

Keywords: illiberal liberalism, individual reasoning, political philosophy, democracy, elitism

In contemporary discussions, illiberalism tends to be associated with right-wing populism, authoritarianism or conservatism. Now and again, concern about the growth of illiberalism in Anglo-American higher education and about some of the anti-universalistic impulses driving identity politics has led some liberal academics and commentators to raise concerns about a strikingly different form of illiberalism: the “creeping illiberalism” influencing university campuses.¹ However, although this trend has rightly been perceived as illiberal, there has been a reluctance to elaborate its relationship to contemporary forms of liberalism.

The acquiescence of individuals who perceive themselves as liberals to the policing of dissenting viewpoints suggests that far from being confined to the authoritarian right, manifestations of illiberalism are evident within the ranks of self-defined liberals. In her discussion of the history of illiberalism, Helena Rosenblatt suggests that those who highlight this development are likely to be enemies of liberalism because they “claim that liberalism is *itself* illiberal or, at least, that it breeds illiberal sentiments and practices.”² In contrast to such claims, we argue that illiberal liberalism is antithetical to the spirit and values of liberalism. This phenomenon expresses the failure to act in accordance with liberalism’s foundational values.

Illiberal liberals often think of themselves as liberals. But their version of liberalism has little to do with the classical Enlightenment version of this doctrine. Classical liberalism asserts the primacy of the status of the individual and supports its autonomy. It upholds the value of tolerance and freedom in its different forms—from the freedom to own property to the freedom of speech. By upholding the moral worth of all humans, it is both egalitarian and universalistic. Illiberal liberalism, particularly in its current version of identity politics, calls into question the value of these principles and often shows itself to be as intolerant as the authoritarian movements it criticizes.

By adopting a perspective based on the sociology of history, this contribution explores the genealogy of the convergence of liberalism with illiberal attitudes toward public life. We argue that illiberal liberalism stems from liberalism’s uneasy relationship with public opinion, majoritarianism, and democracy. This sentiment is underpinned by the conviction that most individuals, especially when they are part of a wider public, lack the moral and intellectual resources to act as reasoning people. As a result, often illiberal conclusions are drawn about the status of individual reasoning, individual autonomy, and the exercise of freedom.

As noted by the editors of *Routledge Handbook of Illiberalism*, anti-liberalism should not be confused with illiberalism. Anti-liberal theories blame liberalism for the corruption of society, the decline of its culture, and a variety of social ills.³ Anti-liberal theories are classically associated with the conservative reaction to liberalism in the nineteenth century. By contrast, illiberalism is represented as a manifestation of relatively incoherent, populist political practices that challenge the norms of liberal democracy. As I have noted elsewhere, this concept of illiberalism is incomplete and one-sided.⁴ Its emergence as a focus of academic interest is closely linked to the growing influence of populist movements and the emergence of political regimes that are critical of the practices and values of contemporary liberal democracy. Yet this representation of illiberalism fails to engage with the historical tendency for liberal thought itself to fall prey to illiberal ideas and practices.

1 This development is discussed by Helena Rosenblatt, “The History of Illiberalism” in *Routledge Handbook of Illiberalism*, ed. András Sajó, Renáta Úitz, and Stephen Holmes (London: Routledge, 2021), 25.

2 *Ibid.*, 25.

3 András Sajó, Renáta Úitz, and Stephen Holmes, “Preface,” in *Routledge Handbook of Illiberalism*, ed. András Sajó, Renáta Úitz, and Stephen Holmes (London: Routledge, 2021), xxii.

4 Frank Furedi, “The Psychological Construction of the Illiberal Subject,” in *Routledge Handbook of Illiberalism*, ed. András Sajó, Renáta Úitz, and Stephen Holmes (London: Routledge, 2021), 617.

As Marlene Laruelle suggests, illiberalism should be conceived as being “in a permanent situational relation to liberalism.”⁵

Illiberal liberalism offers not so much a “thin” version of the liberal doctrine as an incoherent and unsystematic orientation that can be interpreted as a form of “bad-faith” liberalism. As we argue, over the centuries, illiberal liberalism has become increasingly estranged from—and in some cases even hostile to—such classical liberal values as freedom, tolerance, individual reasoning, autonomy, and universalism. In his *Liberalism and Its Discontents* (2022), Francis Fukuyama refers to the authors of these attacks on classical liberal values as progressive or left-wing critics of liberalism.⁶ However, these attacks, often by self-designated liberals, on such values as tolerance or autonomy should be interpreted as emanating from within liberalism—an expression of illiberal liberalism.

Conceptually, it is possible to identify different motives for the crystallization of illiberal liberalisms. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, anxiety about public opinion and the expansion of the electorate led many liberals to draw illiberal conclusions about people’s capacity to exercise autonomy and behave rationally. Their fear of majority opinion led them to support measures that restricted the freedom of the press and limited the franchise to the middle class and educated members of the public. In his discussion of what he characterized as “aristocratic liberals,” Alan Kahan drew attention to their ambiguous relation to freedom. While they all favored a free press in the abstract, they “grew dubious about its effects” in practice.⁷

At that point in time, anti-majoritarian sentiments were justified on the ground that the individual needed protection from the potential despotism of the majority. Even John Stuart Mill, author of *On Liberty*, one of the most important statements of liberal principles in the nineteenth century, was worried on this score. He wrote that “where public opinion is sovereign, an individual who is oppressed by the sovereign does not, as in most other states of things, find a rival power to which he can appeal for relief.”⁸

Concern about the suppression of the individual by majority despotism was in some cases accompanied by skepticism about the capacity of the majority to reason. In the eighteenth century, liberalism was associated with an optimistic view of individual reasoning. Yet by the nineteenth century, the tendency to perceive the masses as irrational was coupled with a growing skepticism about the exercise of individual reason. One of the earliest pioneers of irrationalist liberalism was the French historian and social critic Hippolyte Taine. Taine’s work illustrates a fundamental change of focus “within Liberalism from rationalism towards the emphasis on the power of the unconscious.”⁹

Disenchantment with the principle of individual reasoning had important implications for the development of liberal thought. It is worth recalling that modern utilitarian and liberal theory emerged in the eighteenth century on the supposition that the “foundation of order in society is reason in individuals.”¹⁰ The celebration of individual reasoning was an important feature of Enlightenment liberal thought. The belief that persuasion, rather than force, constituted the foundation of order had as

5 Marlene Laruelle, “Illiberalism: A Conceptual Introduction,” *East European Politics* (2022): 1.

6 Francis Fukuyama, *Liberalism and Its Discontents* (London: Profile Books, 2022).

7 Alan S. Kahan, *Aristocratic Liberalism: The Social and Political Thought of Jacob Burckhardt, John Stuart Mill and Alexis de Tocqueville* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2001), 66.

8 Cited in Kahan, *Aristocratic Liberalism*, 65.

9 Alan Pitt, “The Irrationalist Liberalism of Hippolyte Taine,” *The Historical Journal* 41, no. 4 (1998): 1035, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X98008152>.

10 Leon Mayhew, “In Defense of Modernity: Talcott Parsons and the Utilitarian Tradition,” *American Journal of Sociology* 89, no. 6 (1984): 1285, <https://doi.org/10.1086/228016>.

its premise the belief that, through free speech and communication, the public could be influenced to act in accordance with reason and their own interest. Moreover, the liberal utilitarian theories of the eighteenth century regarded the “development of public opinion as a constituent component of social order.”¹¹ Such optimistic views of public opinion were antithetical to the subsequent psychological turn in political thought, with its claim that order was founded on irrational and non-rational sentiments. As we shall see, this pessimistic reorientation toward human subjectivity led many liberals to draw illiberal conclusions.

A Half-Hearted Commitment to Human Reasoning

One of the most poignant historical illustrations of an emergent liberalism’s difficulty reconciling majoritarian passions with the liberal ideal of human reasoning is the dilemma that confronted the Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza. One of the founders of modern liberal philosophy, he stands out as the only seventeenth-century philosopher to take a positive view of democracy, to the point that he has been described as “the first democrat in the history of philosophy.”¹² In this respect, Spinoza was a genuine pioneer. In opposition to the consensus among every school of political philosophy at the time, Spinoza held the view that democracy possessed advantages over other forms of rule. His belief in the natural equality of all men provided the normative foundation for this attitude.

Spinoza had another, more instrumental, justification for democracy, namely his belief that a democratic electorate and assembly provided a safeguard against arbitrary rule. To some extent, Spinoza shared Machiavelli’s belief in the wisdom of the masses. In anticipation of the crystallization of nineteenth-century radical liberal attitudes toward free speech and debate, he argued that a democratic assembly is likely to make sounder decisions than a monarch or an oligarchy because people will make better judgments in an assembly than if they have to make decisions without the opportunity “to have their wits sharpened by discussing, listening to others, and debating.”¹³ He concluded that popular assemblies tend to deliberate and legislate more wisely than more restricted political bodies.

Spinoza tended to have a hopeful view of people’s potential: he disagreed with the assertion that there is “no truth or judgment in the common people” and believed that all “men share in one and the same nature.”¹⁴ Spinoza wrote that “the true aim of government is liberty” and embraced democracy as the medium through which the objective of freedom could be realized. One study of Spinoza’s life contends that the philosopher’s “social feelings led him to sympathy with the common man; as a social scientist, however, he noted that common men were often irrational and hostile to freedom.”¹⁵

From his writings and behavior, Spinoza comes across as a man divided between his democratic sympathies and his concern that people could be manipulated and misled by the anti-liberal Calvinist monarchist establishment in seventeenth-century Holland. Writing at the time of the establishment of the first Republic in the Netherlands, Spinoza was anxious about the behavior of what he saw as the “superstitious Calvinist monarchist masses.” Along with his friend John de Witt, the head of the Republic, Spinoza feared the capacity of the Calvinist Establishment to stir up opposition to the new regime.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 1282.

¹² Lewis S. Feuer, *Spinoza and the Rise of Liberalism* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1987 [1958]), 139.

¹³ Baruch Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, ed. Jonathan Israel, trans. Michael Silverthorne and Jonathan Israel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 18.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 181.

¹⁵ Feuer, *Spinoza and the Rise of Liberalism*, ix.

In writing his most important study, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (*Theological-Political-Treatise*), Spinoza was preoccupied with such questions as:

Was the Republic then a form of government ahead of its time for the Netherlands? Could men of reason persuade the ordinary people that a republic would make for their greater happiness? Could men of reason undermine the irrational authority which benighted Calvinist divines exercised upon their congregations? How could the multitude be taught that freedom was their highest virtue?¹⁶

In the end, Spinoza's worst fears were realized when the Dutch lower classes turned against the Republic and played an active role in its overthrow. The savage lynching of John de Witt had a profound impact on Spinoza's view of the world, and his apprehension mutated into a sense of bitterness about what he perceived as the irrationality of the masses. The man who once stated that "in a free state, every man may think what he likes and say what he thinks" went on to argue that his *Theological-Political-Treatise* was not written for ordinary people because they were too prejudiced to give his ideas a hearing:

To the rest of mankind I care not to commend my treatise; for I cannot expect that it contains anything to please them: I know how deeply are the prejudices embraced under the name of religion; I am aware that in the minds of the masses superstition is no less rooted than fear....they are led to praise or blame by impulse rather than reason.¹⁷

Evidently, he now answered his question "Could men of reason persuade the ordinary people that a republic would make for their greater happiness?" in the negative.

Spinoza's disenchantment with the ability of the man of reason to triumph over the forces of irrationality led him to draw pessimistic conclusions about the conduct of public life. His belief in man's potential to play a public role diminished, and instead of relying on reason he looked to the politics of fear to maintain social order. He wrote that the "multitude becomes a thing to be feared if it has nothing to fear."¹⁸

The evident tension within Spinoza's outlook can also be found in the outlook of many Enlightenment thinkers. Immanuel Kant's contribution is paradigmatic in this respect. More than any other thinker, Kant personified Enlightenment thought. His motto, "Dare to Know," challenged his contemporaries to take charge of their lives and use their ability to reason to advance human development. "Have the courage of your understanding," he exhorted his audience,¹⁹ claiming that enlightenment "requires nothing but freedom." At the same time, Kant opposed the rule of the majority, asserting that "democracy is, properly speaking, necessarily despotism because it establishes an executive power in which 'all' decide for or even against one who does not agree."²⁰ From his standpoint, democracy contradicted freedom.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 64.

¹⁷ Cited in Feuer, *Spinoza and the Rise of Liberalism*, 80.

¹⁸ Cited in Feuer, *Spinoza and the Rise of Liberalism*, 87-88.

¹⁹ See Immanuel Kant, "What Is Enlightenment?," trans. Mary C. Smith, <http://www.columbia.edu/acis/ets/CCREAD/etscc/kant.html>.

²⁰ See Immanuel Kant, *Perpetual Peace* (Oxford: FQ Classics, 2007), 37.

Ambivalence toward Individual Reasoning

That liberalism often had an uneasy relationship with public opinion in its majoritarian form is well known. But what is far less discussed is its ambivalence toward placing trust in individual reasoning. Despite its defense of the individual against the so-called despotism of the majority, liberalism was far from consistent in its advocacy of the individual and of individual reasoning.

Elitist theories of liberalism did not explicitly reject the principle of individual reasoning. Instead, they claimed that the capacity to reason was confined to a minority of educated individuals like the theorists themselves. However, once the human capacity for reasoning was called into question, it was only a matter of time before some would query the moral primacy of the individual.

In a sweeping generalization, Marx stated that the eighteenth century was defined by the “principle of individualism.”²¹ This was indeed the century where the individual became an object of veneration. As Zeev Sternhell notes, the “Enlightenment wished to liberate the individual from the constraints of history, from the yoke of traditional unproven beliefs.”²² Historians of the eighteenth century frequently represent the rise of liberalism as the political expression of the principle of individualism. As Glen Morrow explained:

The political liberalism, the religious liberalism, and the economic liberalism of the eighteenth century were merely separate manifestations of one and the same attempt to break down the older institutional forms and set free human energies and allow satisfaction to human aspirations that could no longer find expression in those forms. Liberalism in all its manifestations was essentially a doctrine of the rights of the individual, and a criticism of the claims of existing institutions to regulate his activity. Individual liberty, in politics, in religion, in industry, was felt to be the first and sometimes the only thing necessary for the introduction of a better social and political order. Other ages have perhaps appreciated more fully the meaning of individuality, but no age ever desired or fought for it with greater zeal than the century of Voltaire, Rousseau, and Adam Smith.²³

While these thinkers did indeed endorse the principle of individuality, they were also concerned with granting individual subjectivity too much latitude. That is why they felt the need to limit people’s involvement in democratic decision-making.

Today, when the individual’s capacity to reason and exercise autonomy is so frequently deprecated by self-described liberals, it is easy to overlook their foundational role in the emergence of modern liberalism. Even conservative-liberal figures such as Francois Guizot, a leading political figure in post-Napoleonic France, upheld the sovereignty of reason.²⁴ However, during the second half of the nineteenth century, with the expansion of the franchise, the growth of public pressure on parliaments and assemblies, and the radicalization of political life, concern with the behavior of the public gained momentum.

21 Karl Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1955), 125.

22 Sternhell, Z (2010) *The Anti-Enlightenment Tradition*, Yale University Press : New Haven, p.7

23 Glenn R. Morrow, “Adam Smith: Moralist and Philosopher,” *Journal of Political Economy* 35 (1927): 325-326, <https://doi.org/10.1086/253854>.

24 Aurelian Craiutu, “Guizot’s Elitist Theory of Representative Government,” *Critical Review* 15, no. 3-4 (2003): 270, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08913810308443583>.

Anxieties regarding the behavior of the public were legitimated by drawing on the claims of the new science of crowd psychology, which in effect repudiated the Enlightenment ideal of the autonomous reasoning citizen. The new narrative did not formally repudiate democracy but questioned the capacity of people to behave as responsible citizens. Its dominant theme was the alleged irrationality of the masses. The emerging discipline of psychology, with its theories of the “crowd,” played an important role in providing a narrative through which the alleged mismatch between rational institutions and an irrational public were systematically expressed.

Crowd psychologists diagnosed the new collectivities of the masses in a language that “contrasted unfavourably with the liberal ideas of the rational and conscious human individual.”²⁵

The psychology of collective irrationality became an expression of both the conservative and the liberal reaction to the democratization of public life. As Robert Nye stated, “collective psychology thus articulated a liberal critique of democratic tendencies in industrial societies with a facade of ‘scientific’ and clinical terminology that lent a certain respectability to its pronouncements.”²⁶ The historian Reba Soffer noted that psychology should be seen as a constituent element of a new liberal elitist theory that developed as a response to the “unreasonable and unpredictable behaviour of the new democracy” in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.²⁷ Soffer suggests that psychology provided liberal elitist theory with “scientific” arguments about the incompatibility of democracy with the reality of people’s behavior. Notably, censure of public behavior as motivated by unconscious and irrational motives continues to be used by critics of mass society to this day.²⁸

Stephen Holmes rightly argues that “hostility to liberal individualism” constitutes an “enduring core of the antiliberal mindset.”²⁹ However, what has rarely been commented on is the uneasy relationship of liberalism with its original version: individual rationality. By the turn of the twentieth century, the ideal of individual reasoning gradually gave way to its pessimistic representation within liberal thought. It was increasingly argued that the discovery of the power of the unconscious called into question the Kantian model of autonomy.³⁰ It was as if psychology had seriously undermined one of the fundamental assumptions of classical liberalism. In the twentieth century, the reorientation away from the foundational principle of individual reasoning was not confined to the more conservative wing of liberalism. John Dewey, arguably the leading American progressive liberal thinker of the twentieth century, played an important role in executing a major revision of this principle.

Dewey’s downgrading of the significance that liberals should attach to the individual was integral to a more fundamental rethink, which led to the emergence of a new liberalism. In *The Future of Liberalism*, a monograph published in 1935, Dewey drew a clear distinction between what he referred to as the old and the new liberalism.³¹ While he conceded that the “earlier liberal philosophy rendered valiant service,” he

²⁵ Robert A. Nye, *The Anti-Democratic Sources of Elite Theories: Pareto, Mosca, Michels* (London: Sage Publications, 1977), 12.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 13.

²⁷ R.N. Soffer, “New Elitism: Social Psychology in Prewar England,” *Journal of British Studies* 8, no. 2. (1969): 111, <https://doi.org/10.1086/385573>.

²⁸ Pitt, “The Irrationalist Liberalism of Hippolyte Taine,” 1049.

²⁹ Stephen Holmes, “The Antiliberal Idea,” in *Routledge Handbook of Illiberalism*, ed. András Sajó, Renáta Uitz, and Stephen Holmes (London: Routledge, 2021), 4.

³⁰ On the influence of the unconscious in early twentieth-century European culture, see the magisterial study of H. Stuart Hughes, *Consciousness and Society* (London: Routledge, 2017).

³¹ John Dewey, “The Future of Liberalism,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 32, no. 9 (1935), <https://doi.org/10.2307/2015856>.

claimed that it had now become irrevocably irrelevant.³² According to him, one of the defects of the old version of liberalism was its conceptualization of the individual. Dewey dismissed old liberalism's tendency to depict the individual as "something given, complete in itself, and of liberty as a ready-made possession of the individual."³³

The claim that the old liberalism depicted the individual as "complete in itself" is a caricature that is frequently attributed to Enlightenment liberalism. It is worth recalling that this argument was integral to the doctrine advanced by the Counter-Enlightenment and to nineteenth-century conservative thought, which was dominated by hostility both to reason and to the rights of the individual.

As far as Dewey was concerned, old liberalism—which was in fact another name for Enlightenment liberalism—had turned into "pseudo liberalism." His aim was to distance his revised concept of liberalism from the old version, which he denounced for its support of the small state and its individualistic orientation. He added, "I shall identify what I mean by this spurious liberalism," which he indicated was comprised of the "kind of social ideas 'represented by the 'Liberty League' and ex-President Hoover.'" Dewey's alternative was a liberalism that relied on the state to realize its goals. As he observed:

The historic tendency to conceive the whole question of liberty as a matter in which individual and government are opposed parties has borne bitter fruit. Born of despotic government, it has continued to influence thinking and action after government had become popular and in theory the servant of the people.³⁴

Dewey's anti-individualistic philosophy relied on state intervention and institutional support to cultivate responsible citizens. He believed that the corrosive impact of market forces on people would be corrected through institutional intervention.

Dewey's critique of the principle of the individual was justified by representing the latter in a caricatured form. In his *The Public and Its Problems* (1927), Dewey denounced the old conception of individual for being anti-social and hostile to the state. He criticized John Locke, one of the founders of liberalism, for limiting role of state to the "protection of individuals in the rights which were theirs by nature."³⁵ He took exception to Locke and other classical liberals' affirmation of a limited state and asserted that this view led to the "celebrated modern antithesis of the Individual and Social" and to celebration of individualism.

In Dewey's account of the rise of liberalism, the principle of individual reasoning possesses merely a pragmatic and instrumental character. He explained that the status accorded to the individual was motivated by the goal of providing an alternative source of authority to that of the early modern absolutist establishment. He argued that since democracy needed an intellectual justification for its revolt against established authority,

the natural recourse was appeal to some inalienable sacred authority resident in the protesting individuals. Thus "individualism" was born, a theory which endowed singular persons in isolation from any associations, except those which they deliberately formed for their own ends, with native or natural rights.³⁶

³² Ibid., 226.

³³ Ibid., 226.

³⁴ Ibid., 227.

³⁵ John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1954), 87

³⁶ Ibid., 86.

Since Dewey's time, the supposed authorization of the isolated individual by classical liberalism has served as a straw man to demolish by proponents of communitarian and collectivists thinkers. Over the decades, the cumulative effect of this representation of individualism has been to legitimate new liberalism's distance from the principle of individual reasoning.

At the same time, Dewey wished to rescue the word "liberal," which he conceded is "still employed to designate a progressive in political matters."³⁷ Dewey's progressive liberalism was implicitly anti-individualistic and oriented toward promoting state intervention in social and economic life. The dramatic reversal of the meaning of liberalism overseen by Dewey codified the tendency to detach it from its classical version. Dewey recognized that the meaning of liberalism had been reversed, but he tended to ascribe this shift to its supposed capture by right-wing capitalist interests. He stated that:

In most other countries, the "liberal" party is that which represents established and vested commercial and financial interests in protest against governmental regulation. The irony of history is nowhere more evident than in the reversal of the practical meaning of the term "liberalism" in spite of a literal continuity of theory.³⁸

One of the consequences of Dewey's revision of liberal doctrine was to forge an association between a version of an individuality-oriented account of liberty and right-wing ideology. He wrote that whereas before "progressives were for liberty now it is the watch word of the 'standpatter and reactionary.'" As it happens, Dewey's progressive reformulation of liberalism rendered it susceptible to an illiberal orientation toward public life.³⁹

Dewey's revision of the liberal doctrine has had an enduring influence, particularly in the United States. In her study *Individualism in the United States: A Transformation in American Political Thought* (2015), Stephanie Walls echoes Dewey's views on the individual and blames individualism, particularly in its economic form, for the erosion of social bonds and solidarity.⁴⁰ She identifies the "strength of society" with an interventionist state that protects people. Yet history shows that community and social solidarity emerge through the shared experience of individuals collaborating with one another, often in opposition to the state.

In Dewey's philosophy, the individual appears in a morally downsized form. It lacks agency and the capacity for self-determination. People require public institutions to cultivate their individuality. As he explained:

Liberalism knows that social conditions may restrict, distort, and almost prevent the development of individuality. It therefore takes an active interest in the working of social institutions that have a bearing, positive or negative, upon the growth of individuals who shall be rugged in fact and not merely in abstract theory. It is as much interested in the positive construction of favorable institutions, legal, political, and economic, as it is in the work of removing abuses and overt oppressions.⁴¹

37 *Ibid.*, 134.

38 *Ibid.*, 134.

39 For a discussion of progressivism's illiberal turn, see Thomas C. Leonard, *Illiberal Reformers* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016).

40 Stephanie M. Walls, *Individualism in the United States: A Transformation in American Political Thought* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015), 154.

41 Dewey, "The Future of Liberalism," 227.

Dewey's advocacy of building social institutions to oversee and influence the growth of individuals assumed that through education and resocialization, the distortions of the people's individuality could be overcome.

Dewey regarded the public as an unreliable agent of decision-making. Adopting the paternalistic tone of a social engineer, he claimed the public lacked the knowledge and expertise necessary to make decisions.⁴² Dewey and other progressive commentators justified this approach on the ground that new technology and rapid change had created a world where people's affairs were dominated by "remote and invisible organizations" too complex to be apprehended by laymen.⁴³

Dewey went so far as to blame an irrational public for the political crisis faced by the liberal creed in the interwar era. He claimed that mass society was inhospitable to the workings of a rational democracy. Although Dewey avoided the explicit contempt that the elite theories of his time directed toward the masses, he still characterized the emotional life of the American public as "undiscriminating, lacking in individuality and in direction by intellectual life." His diagnosis of the problem was that "our pronounced trait is mass suggestibility."⁴⁴ In his discussion of the public and of public opinion, Dewey assumed that citizens lacked the expertise necessary for deliberation on the political issues facing society and therefore required experts and managers to provide them with guidance for decision-making. In contrast to classical liberal philosophers such as John Locke, who criticized paternalistic political power, Dewey embraced a form of technocratic paternalism to promote his progressive ideals.⁴⁵ At times, Dewey referred to education as a form of "moral engineering."⁴⁶ Elsewhere, as in his 1922 essay "Education as Engineering," Dewey presented "educational practice as a kind of social engineering."⁴⁷ Dewey extolled the virtues of "constructive social engineering," which relied on the adoption of the techniques of scientific inquiry in the classroom.

Dewey's interest in education through social engineering was reinforced by the conviction that children played a critical role in the realization of social change. As one commentator explained, "Dewey argued that the most fruitful breeding ground for social improvement was to be found in the relatively flexible and immature, rather than in adults whose 'habits of thought and feeling' were more or less fixed, and whose environment was relatively rigid."⁴⁸ Dewey's tendency to belittle the capacity of adults to yield to new experience reflected his paternalistic instincts. These paternalistic instincts—which synthesized skepticism toward the principle of individual reasoning with a degree of disdain toward public opinion—became one of the hallmarks of the "new liberalism." In his *Liberalism* (1911), the British liberal political theorist L.T. Hobhouse communicated this paternalistic sensibility by supporting the ideal of the state as an "over-parent":

I would, however, strongly maintain that the general conception of the State as Over-parent is quite as truly Liberal as Socialistic. It is the basis of the rights of the child, of his protection against parental neglect, of the equality of opportunity which he may

42 Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, 123.

43 *Ibid.*, 98.

44 John Dewey, *Individualism: Old and New* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1931), 36.

45 On Locke's views, see John Locke, "Locke on Parental Power," *Population and Development Review* 15, no. 4 (1989), <https://doi.org/10.2307/1972599>.

46 See the discussion in John Dewey, "Reconstruction in Moral Conceptions," in *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (New York: H. Holt, 1920), 160), <https://archive.org/details/reconstructioninoodeweuoft/page/160>.

47 John Dewey, "Education as Engineering," *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 41, no. 1 (2009): 1-5, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220270802169345>, <http://middlegradescurriculum.yolasite.com/resources/Education%20Engineering-Dewey.pdf>.

48 See Mats Bergman, "Minimal Meliorism: Finding a Balance between Conservative and Progressive Pragmatism," *Action, Belief and Inquiry* 2 (2015): 2.

claim as a future citizen, of his training to fill his place as a grown-up person in the social system.⁴⁹

As I argue in my study *100 Years of Identity Crisis: The Culture War Over Socialization*, social engineering and illiberal paternalistic ambitions continue to influence liberal policymaking to this day.⁵⁰

In recent times, the social-engineering ambitions of new liberalism have assumed their most systematic form in the doctrine of “libertarian paternalism.” Cass Sunstein and Richard Thaler, the most influential advocates of libertarian paternalism, claim that since people lack the ability to make rational decisions for themselves, the state should step in and “nudge” people to make good choices. Cass Sunstein coined the term “nudge” to describe the policy of using paternalistic, psychologically informed measures to protect people from themselves. His objective is to replace the unreliably formed moral judgments of individuals with the wisdom of behavioral science.⁵¹ With nudging, the ideologically informed paternalism implicit in the practice of new liberalism becomes far more explicit than heretofore.

Commentaries on *Nudge* rarely note its intellectual distance from the philosophical tradition associated with Enlightenment Liberalism. Locke’s critique of paternalism was integral to the crystallization of modern liberal thought. As one commentator explained, for Locke:

The very vocabulary of paternalism betrays its anti-political character. It is not the language of individuality—“choice,” “liberty,” “industry”—but of childhood—“protection,” “tutelage.” Its purpose when extended into adult life can only be the destruction of individuality by taking matters out of the hands of individuals where they belong.⁵²

Kant used the “imagery of paternal authority” to heap scorn on it. As one summary of Kant’s contention outlines, “accepting guidance from another was to remain at the level of the child; short of intellectual deficiency, the only reasons for doing so were lethargy and cowardice.”⁵³

In his *Why Nudge*, Sunstein relies on the supposed insights of science to authorize government to adopt paternalistic measures to protect people from themselves. Sunstein argues that the “unifying theme” of such paternalistic approaches is that “government does not believe that people’s choices will promote their welfare, and it is taking steps to influence or alter people’s choices for their own good.”⁵⁴

Sunstein tends to present his version of “libertarian paternalism” as a relatively mild and benign corrective to the otherwise unpredictable chaos of human choice-making. He argues that his idea of “nudging” people constitutes a comparatively moderate form of coercing human behavior. Sunstein claims that he is not interested in forcing people to alter their ends, only the means through which they seek to realize their objectives. He distinguishes between “ends paternalism” and “means paternalism,” and he is clearly in favor of the latter.

49 See “Modern History Sourcebook: L. T. Hobhouse: from Liberalism, 1911,” *Fordham University Modern History Sourcebook*, <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/mod/1911hobhouse.asp>.

50 See Frank Furedi, *One Hundred Years Of Identity Crisis: Culture War Over Socialisation* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021).

51 See Cass R. Sunstein, *Why Nudge? The Politics of Libertarian Paternalism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014).

52 Geraint Parry, “Individuality, Politics and the Critique of Paternalism in John Locke,” *Political Studies* 12, no. 2 (1964): 174, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9248.1964.tb00715.x>.

53 Peter M.R. Stirk and David Weigall, *An Introduction To Political Ideas* (London: Pinter, 1995), 42.

54 Cass R. Sunstein, *Why Nudge? The Politics of Libertarian Paternalism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014), 55.

It is worth noting that the authoritarian and illiberal implications of abandoning a commitment to the ideal of individual reasoning are rarely noted. But as Geraint Parry reminds us, “self-reliance, the readiness, in Rousseau’s phrase, to ‘think one’s own thoughts’ were to be the marks of the emancipated individual of the Enlightenment.”⁵⁵ Once the capacity of individuals to reason is displaced in favor of paternalistic social engineering, the liberal valuation of autonomy is itself called into question.

Sunstein explicitly argues for reframing autonomy as a second-order ideal. In his writing, he distinguishes between a “thick version of autonomy,” which is the belief that the freedom to choose is an end in itself, and a “thin version of autonomy,” where freedom of choice does not enjoy the status of a fundamental principle or what he calls an “exalted” value. Sunstein opts for the thin version on the ground that individual autonomy is not a good in itself. His casual attitude toward the ideal of moral autonomy means that the freedom to choose is subordinated to the imperative of what he calls the “master concept of social welfare.” According to Sunstein, when social welfare is at issue, “harder forms of paternalism are not off-limits.”

Loss of Respect for Moral Autonomy Renders Liberalism Illiberal

Enlightenment liberalism in its most influential variants—including those of Locke, Kant, and Mill—placed a high value on individual autonomy and self-governance as central goals of political life. It recognized that liberalism works best when a society combines a robust moral sensibility with an unyielding commitment to the flourishing of individual autonomy. In contrast, historically, conservative opponents of autonomy claimed that it had a corrosive impact on community and social solidarity. In the contemporary era, however, critics of autonomy are frequently associated with viewpoints that are perceived as liberal. Yet today, as in the past, autonomy is questioned from an elitist and paternalistic standpoint that insists that people lack the capacity, time, resources or opportunity required for self-determination.

Sunstein’s argument for a paternalistic form of governance has been criticized by the legal scholar Steven Gey, who has pointed out that Sunstein thinks “government should be given the authority both to sort out the ‘actual’ from the merely ‘subjectively perceived’ individual preferences and to correct for ‘bad’ social conditioning by creating an elaborate system of social controls and value instructions intended to produce individuals imbued with a range of government-dictated ‘actual’ preferences.”⁵⁶ Sunstein’s appointment by President Obama to run the White House’s Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs indicates that his paternalistic approach to governance resonates with what passes for mainstream liberalism in the United States.

Sunstein’s call to use state intervention to regulate private preference is motivated by his conviction that enlightened policies formulated by experts and government could influence people to make the kind of positive choices that benefit society as a whole. Ironically, he seems unaware of the contradictions between government intrusion into the domain of private choice and the workings of a democratic society. Typically, he applauds dissent, but only as long as it is constructive! “Sometimes dissenters lead people in bad directions,” he warns. Dissenting views can confuse and disorient people. However, from the standpoint of liberalism, the tolerance of dissent is not predicated on critics always being right. As J.S. Mill and other liberals noted, even dissent that is totally erroneous can be valuable for assisting the process of intellectual clarification. Unfortunately, once people are perceived as likely to be irrational about making the “right” choices, dissent itself is rejected as a risky luxury. Sunstein echoes this sentiment when he states that “when conformists are doing the

55 Parry, “Individuality, Politics and the Critique of Paternalism in John Locke,” 176.

56 Steven G. Gey, “The Case against Postmodern Censorship Theory,” *University of Pennsylvania Law Review* 145, no. 2 (1996): 214, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3312658>.

right thing, there is far less need for dissent.” But who gets to decide what is the “right thing”? Certainly not the citizenry.

Proponents of *Nudge* often delude themselves into believing that their paternalism is liberal and that their policies are neither authoritarian nor coercive. However, their objectives are far-reaching and resemble ambitions usually associated with totalitarian regimes. The UK’s former Deputy Prime Minister, the Liberal Democrat Nick Clegg, casually remarked that his Government’s Nudge Unit “could change the way citizens think.”⁵⁷ But since when has it been a democratic government’s brief to alter its citizens’ thoughts? The project of remolding the way people think and act requires a significant erosion of people’s right to assent or reject policies.

This approach clearly presupposes the elimination of a two-way process of discussion between citizens and their rulers.

Lack of respect for autonomy and individual choice inexorably encourages an instrumental orientation toward the exercise of free speech. It is therefore unsurprising that Sunstein wishes to change or reform the ideals embodied in the U.S. Constitution’s First Amendment. The free speech doctrine as expressed by the First Amendment regards the state’s regulation of speech with suspicion. In his book *Democracy and the Problem of Free Speech*, Sunstein calls for a New Deal for “free speech under which government would be authorized to intervene dramatically in aid of weak speakers and vulnerable hearers.”⁵⁸ Sunstein’s displacement of free speech with managed speech is no doubt well-intentioned, but it opens the door for the kind of illiberal censorship practices that flourish on campuses and many cultural institutions in the Anglo-American world.

Free Speech and Tolerance Become Negotiable Commodities

Sunstein’s call for protecting “weak speakers and vulnerable hearers” echoes an argument for the policing of language frequently made by censorious liberal and leftist academics. His conceptual leap from people who lack the rationality to make good choices to ones who lack the maturity and confidence to deal with strong views and offensive words is underpinned by a belief that people have to be protected not only from themselves, but also from other people’s speech acts. The advocacy of therapeutic censorship on the ground of protecting people from offence of harm is widely echoed by illiberal advocates of identity politics.

Widespread skepticism about people’s capacity to respond to dangerous ideas with maturity correlates with a disposition that finds it difficult to take seriously the value of moral autonomy. Autonomy is an attribute of a person who engages with the world as an active, reasoning, and conscious individual. The etymology of this word—*autos* (self) and *nomos* (rule or law)—conveys the meaning of self-rule. The term was first used in the Greek city-states: according to one account, a “city has *autonomia* when its citizens make their own laws, as opposed being under the control of some conquering power.”⁵⁹

An autonomous person is presumed to possess moral independence—in other words, to act with moral responsibility. It is a moral value that protects and upholds people’s capacity to express themselves and to be themselves. Through the exercise of autonomy, people can develop their personality by assuming responsibility for their life.

57 Cited in Patrick Wintour, “David Cameron’s ‘Nudge Unit’ Aims to Improve Economic Behaviour,” *The Guardian*; September 9, 2010.

58 See a review of Sunstein’s book on free speech by Burt Neuborne, “Blues for the Left Hand: A Critique of Cass Sunstein’s *Democracy and the Problem of Free Speech*,” *The University of Chicago Law Review*, vol. 62.

59 Gerald Dworkin, “Autonomy and Behaviour Control,” *Hastings Center Report* 6, no. 1 (1976): 23, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3560358>.

Frank Furedi

The cultivation of moral independence requires that people be free to deliberate and come to their own conclusions about the views and opinions they hear. As the liberal political philosopher Ronald Dworkin explained:

Government insults its citizens, and denies their moral responsibility, when it decrees that they cannot be trusted to hear opinions that might persuade them to dangerous or offensive convictions. We retain our dignity, as individual, only by insisting that no one—no official and no majority—has the right to withhold an opinion from us on the ground that we are not fit to hear and consider it.⁶⁰

According to this argument, it is by reflecting freely on opinions and deciding for ourselves on what is good and bad that we learn to behave as responsible and independent citizens. In the course of such deliberations, people not only forge their own opinions, but also influence the views of others.

Freedom of expression is one of the foundational values of liberalism. As Holmes observed, “that public disagreement is a creative force may have been the most novel and radical principle of liberal politics.”⁶¹ Unfortunately, in recent times there has been a spectacular decline in the valuation of free speech among people who perceive themselves as liberals. As an editorial in *The New York Times* reminded its readers:

The full-throated defense of free speech was once a liberal ideal. Many of the legal victories that expanded the realm of permissible speech in the United States came in defense of liberal speakers against the power of the government.⁶²

The New York Times’ use of the past tense regarding liberals’ “full-throated defense of free speech” reflected its recognition that “many progressives appear to have lost faith” in the principle of free speech.

That free speech may no longer be an ideal that inspires many self-ascribed liberals was shown by a *New York Times*-sponsored poll. The poll found that 30 percent of those surveyed agreed that “while I support free speech, sometimes you have to shut down speech that is antidemocratic, bigoted or simply untrue.” The survey indicated that those “who identified themselves as Democrats and liberals showed a higher level of support for ‘sometimes shutting down such speech.’”

The attitude highlighted by *The New York Times* can be summed up by the frequently repeated illiberal assertion “I believe in free speech, but.....” This selective approach to its application renders free speech a second-order value, leading to what one commentator has described as “The Great Free-Speech Reversal,” whereby it is conservatives and not liberals who appear to be most worried about protecting the First Amendment.⁶³ Yet when liberalism devalues one of its foundational principles, it ceases to be liberal. An apparent tendency to regard robust debate and opponents’ views with suspicion is one of the hallmarks of illiberal liberalism in the current era. It is underwritten by a variant of the same paternalistic outlook that dismissed the public as irrational and immature in the nineteenth century.

60 Ronald Dworkin, *Freedom’s Law: The Moral Reading of the American Constitution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 200.

61 Holmes, “The Antiliberal Idea,” 4.

62 The New York Times Editorial Board, “America Has a Free Speech Problem,” *The New York Times*, March 18, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/18/opinion/cancel-culture-free-speech-poll.html>.

63 Genevieve Lakier, “The Great Free-Speech Reversal,” *The Atlantic*, January 27, 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/01/first-amendment-regulation/617827/>. For a discussion of the free-speech reversal from a conservative perspective, see Wayne Batchis, *The Right’s First Amendment: The Politics of Free Speech and the Return of Conservative Libertarianism* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016).

The ambivalence—and, at times, hostility—of illiberal liberalism toward the principle of free speech is often justified on therapeutic grounds. The rise of therapeutic censorship is underwritten by a radically pessimistic account of personhood. Powerlessness, fragility, and vulnerability are the characteristics that resonate with the current therapeutic representation of personhood. As I have argued elsewhere, contemporary accounts of personhood often convey the assumption that vulnerability constitutes the essence of what it means to be human.⁶⁴ Such sentiments are conveyed in a therapeutic language that suggests that people are “fragile,” “damaged,” “scarred for life” or “broken.” From this it follows that people need to be protected from the harm caused by words that they find offensive. In effect, by downsizing adults’ capacity to deal with offensive words, they become infantilized. Therapeutic censorship expands the paternalistic rhetoric of “not in front of the children” to the domain of adulthood.

The principal premise of the case for the devaluation of the freedom of speech is the supposition that people lack the intellectual or moral independence to evaluate critically the views to which they are exposed. Unfortunately, the transmission of this message by well-meaning educators, intellectuals, and policymakers has had the effect of discouraging people from discovering their own road to moral independence. The inference to be drawn from this negative assessment of people’s mental capacities is that because citizens cannot exercise independent judgment, they require someone else to do it for them. Like the “nudgers,” those who espouse therapeutic censorship assume that people lack the capacity to know what is in their best interest.

Illiberal liberals do not attack the principle of free speech outright. The “I believe in free speech...but” argument is premised on the assumption that a consistent and unwavering commitment to tolerance and free speech can clash with—and undermine—people’s well-being and self-worth. This is the argument adopted by the political theorist Bhiku Parekh to justify the banning of “hate speech.” Parekh accepts that “free speech is an important value,” but states that “it is not the only one.” He counterposes the value of free speech to that of human dignity and insists that “since these values conflict, either inherently or in particular contexts, they need to be balanced.” For Parekh, tolerance and freedom of speech ought not to be perceived as stand-alone principles that are inherently valuable. Instead, their moral worth is relative, hence “free speech needs to be balanced against other great political values.”⁶⁵

Assertions about the necessity of trading off freedoms for alleged benefit have been used frequently by critics of liberty, and these benefits have turned out to be illusory. The belief that human dignity and the sense of self-worth require protection from the pain inflicted by hurtful speech is possibly the most counterproductive example of the trade-off argument. People acquire dignity and esteem by dealing with the problems that confront them rather than by relying on the good will of the censor or the police. As Dworkin argued, “in a culture of liberty,” the public “shares a sense, almost as a matter of secular religion, that certain freedoms are in principle exempt” from the “ordinary process of balancing and regulation.” He fears that “liberty is already lost” as “soon as old freedoms are put at risk in cost-benefit politics.”⁶⁶

Yet far too many liberals have signed up for the trading-off of freedom for some alleged benefit. Influenced by Dewey’s social engineering ambitions, many liberals are committed to trading freedom for what they suppose is equality. As one of America’s leading liberal thinkers, Francis Fukuyama, has argued:

64 See Frank Furedi, *Therapy Culture: Cultivating Vulnerability in an Uncertain Age* (London: Routledge, 2004).

65 Bhikhu Parekh, “Hate Speech: Is There a Case for Banning?” *Public Policy Research* (2006): 216, 220.

66 Dworkin, *Freedom’s Law*, 354.

If you have more liberty, the fact that people have different resources and that they are born with different talents and social endowments means they're not going to end up equal in terms of outcomes. Some people are going to be rich, and some people are not going to succeed, and I think that in order to correct that and equalize outcomes, you need to restrict people's liberty.⁶⁷

Such an instrumental view of the exercise of liberty is widespread among contemporary representatives of liberalism.

Conclusion: Reducing Democracy to a Second-Order Principle

Despite its positive reforming impulses, classical liberalism always possessed an elitist dimension. Its elitist sensibility was often expressed through a quasi-aristocratic disdain for what it perceived as the corrupting influence of mass culture and society. Elitist disdain for public opinion continues to be communicated by many twenty-first-century liberals. The American "liberal" philosopher Jason Brennan wrote a hard-hitting invective against democracy. In his book *Against Democracy*, he wrote that "Most citizens are not doing us any favors by voting," adding, "asking everyone to vote is like asking everyone to litter." When the casting of a ballot is analogized to littering, you know that the democratic way of life is in serious trouble.⁶⁸

In recent years, skepticism toward the value of democracy has mutated into its outright condemnation. For the philosopher A.C. Grayling, the author of *Democracy and its Crisis* (2017), the results of the Brexit referendum and the 2016 U.S. presidential election served as proof that "something has gone seriously wrong in the state of democracy." Grayling's sentiment is widely articulated by many supporters of liberal democracy, for whom the liberal principle of the rule of law is a first-order principle, and democracy a second-order one. This sentiment is forcefully expressed by Grayling, who claims that "democracy is not just elections, and can sometimes even exist de facto without them," but it cannot exist without the rule of law. This legalistic model of a democracy that exists without elections is one that assigns citizens to the role of a stage army that can periodically be mobilized to acclaim the decisions arrived at by its superiors.

Grayling's disenchantment with democracy coexists with an unswerving faith in rules and procedures. This is a sentiment that is shared by many supporters of liberal democracy, who are nevertheless skeptical of the value of democracy. Fareed Zakaria, who⁶⁹ originated the concept of illiberal democracy in 1997, conveyed not only a sense of anxiety about illiberalism, but also a profound sense of mistrust toward democracy.⁷⁰ One of the aims of Zakaria's contribution was to highlight the tension between liberalism and democracy. He argued that liberalism was "theoretically different and historically distinct from democracy." The manner in which Zakaria drew the distinction between democracy and liberalism inflated the tension between the two and transformed it into a potentially antagonistic relationship. In his view, democracy is about procedures to select a government, whereas liberalism is about the promotion of goals such as the protection of individual autonomy, individual liberty, and constitutionalism. According to this schema, liberalism is endowed with normative content, whereas democracy possesses only procedural qualities.

Zakaria's account of illiberalism is coupled with a distinct lack of enthusiasm for democracy. He seems to suggest that in the modern era, democracy is something that

67 Francis Fukuyama, *After the End of History* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2021), <https://www.perlego.com/book/2359649/after-the-end-of-history-pdf>.

68 Jason Brennan, *Against Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016).

69 Fareed Zakaria, "The Rise of Illiberal Democracy," *Foreign Affairs* 76 (1997): 42.

70 *Ibid.*, 22.

we have to put up with. With a hint of resignation, he notes that “there are no longer respectable alternatives to democracy; it is part of the fashionable attire of modernity.” His mistrust of democracy is most strikingly affirmed in the statement “democracy without constitutional liberalism is not simply inadequate but dangerous.”⁷¹ Unlike Woodrow Wilson, who aspired to make the world *safe for democracy*, Zakaria hopes to protect the world from the threat *posed by* democracy: “As we approach the next century, our task is to make democracy safe for the world.”⁷²

It seems that despite his concern with the “spreading virus of illiberalism,” Zakaria is unaware of—and certainly unconcerned with—its illiberal liberal variant.⁷³ Yet it could be argued that in the contemporary era, illiberal liberalism constitutes a significant threat to the authority of liberal values. Its historical indifference toward the principles of individual reasoning, autonomy, freedom of speech, and democracy has found a contemporary manifestation in the cultural politics of identity.

Identity politics, which displaces the principal of individualism with that of the group and downgrades Enlightenment universalism in favor of the particular, has been seamlessly internalized by many who perceive themselves as liberals. Some American liberals go so far as to represent identity politics as the apotheosis of liberal thinking. In a plea for renewing liberalism, the commentator Zack Beauchamp writes that “identity politics isn’t hurting liberalism. It’s saving it.”⁷⁴ Beauchamp’s sentiment is shared by numerous liberal academics and commentators. The Canadian philosopher Cressida Heyes notes that “Increasingly, it is difficult to see what divides anything called ‘liberalism’ from anything called ‘identity politics.’”⁷⁵

The attempt to forge a rapprochement between liberalism and identity politics calls into question the foundational values of liberalism. Holmes has commented on the “centrality of identity politics to antiliberal movements.” He adds that when identity politics is turned into a worldview, it is “just another name for antiliberalism.”⁷⁶ Nevertheless, there have been relatively few liberals who have been prepared to challenge identity politics. Indeed, it often seems that their criticism is restricted to the identity politics of the right, while the identity politics of the left is given a free pass. Even Fukuyama, who is concerned about the need to revitalize liberalism, makes concessions to identity politics. He draws a distinction between two versions of identity politics, one of which he claims should be interpreted as “the completion of liberal politics.”⁷⁷ Holmes recognizes this tension when he writes that “the identity politics of the left, although more morally decent and generous than the identity politics of the right, must still be classified as exemplifying the antiliberal spirit of the age.”⁷⁸

To draw a moral distinction between the illiberal temper of the left and that of the right is to underestimate the authoritarian impulse and justify it on the ground of “moral decency.” “Liberals who repress speech to prevent harm risk inviting authoritarianism,” warned Claire Fox of the Academy of Ideas in 2018.⁷⁹ The identity politics of the left is no less alien to the tradition of Enlightenment liberalism than that of the right. As I have argued elsewhere, it is hostile to the values of tolerance,

71 Ibid.

72 Ibid., 43.

73 Ibid., 42.

74 Zack Beauchamp, “Identity Politics Isn’t Hurting Liberalism. It’s Saving It.” *Vox*, February 20, 2020, <https://www.vox.com/2020/2/20/20954059/liberalism-identity-politics-defense>.

75 Cressida Heyes, “Identity Politics,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2020 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2020/entries/identity-politics>.

76 Holmes, “The Antiliberal Idea,” 7

77 Fukuyama, *Liberalism and Its Discontents*, 97.

78 Holmes, “The Antiliberal Idea,” 7.

79 Claire Fox, “The Dangers of Illiberal Liberalism,” *The Economist*, August 17, 2018, <https://www.economist.com/open-future/2018/08/17/the-dangers-of-illiberal-liberalism>.

autonomy, and freedom of expression.⁸⁰ The embrace of identity politics inevitably leads to the mutation of liberalism into an illiberal worldview.

Responding to the illiberal turn of liberalism, professor of humanities Mark Lilla has warned about what he sees as the danger of liberalism becoming wedded to illiberal identity politics. He observes that “In recent years American liberalism has slipped into a kind of moral panic about racial, gender and sexual identity that has distorted liberalism’s message and prevented it from becoming a unifying force capable of governing.”⁸¹ Lilla is right to highlight the illiberal temper of liberal identity politics. Through its embrace of identity politics, liberalism risks being emptied of the values that led to its historical emergence.

In their overview of illiberalism research, András Sajó and Renata Uitz note that “liberalism as a competitive movement develops illiberal, even antiliberal traits along the way.” They raise the possibility that liberalism might have been “tainted by illiberalism both politically and theoretically all along.”⁸² From our perspective, illiberal liberalism emerged from a tendency to underestimate the public’s capacity to reason and to act in accordance with its own interest. A pessimistic and even paternalistic outlook on public opinion has encouraged the downgrading of democracy and the perception of this ideal in instrumental terms. Unfortunately, too often, liberals have uncritically accommodated to illiberal anti-democratic influences. Moreover, their commitment to the core principles of the Enlightenment has tended to be selective, especially in relation to the valuing of individual reasoning and autonomy. To free itself from its illiberal influences and renew its commitment to the values of the Enlightenment is the challenge facing twenty-first-century liberalism.

80 See Frank Furedi, *Tolerance: A Defence of Moral Independence* (London: Bloomsbury Press, 2011).

81 Mark Lilla, “The End of Identity Liberalism,” *The New York Times*, November 20, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/20/opinion/sunday/the-end-of-identity-liberalism.html>.

82 András Sajó and Renata Uitz, “A Compass for Illiberalism Research,” in *Routledge Handbook of Illiberalism*, ed. András Sajó, Renáta Uitz, and Stephen Holmes (London: Routledge, 2021), 978.



Karl Polanyi's *The Great Transformation*: The Critique of Liberalism and the Emergence of Illiberalism

TUĞBERK SAMUR

Abstract

Nineteenth-century Western civilization was based on four institutions: the balance of power, the international gold standard, the liberal state, and the self-regulating market. For Polanyi, the source and “matrix of the system” was the self-regulating market, which was the governing law of a liberal economy. The latter was a stark utopia that annihilated the substance of society. In his view, society would react to this by attempting to protect itself. Polanyi called this process, which destroyed nineteenth-century Western civilization, double movement. The origin of the destruction is rooted in “the utopian endeavor of economic liberalism to set up a self-regulating market system.” Fascism and socialism were responses to that self-regulating market. Polanyi’s thesis and analysis look very similar to the resurgence of illiberalism today. The expansion of neoliberal ideology brought about the “countermovement” of radicalism, which, at its root, is a reaction to the liberal utopia Polanyi mentioned. How can we understand Polanyi’s critique of liberalism and its relevance to contemporary liberalism in the sense of “double movement”?

Keywords: Liberalism, Illiberalism, Polanyi, Neoliberalism, The Great Transformation

Karl Polanyi was born in Vienna in 1886 but grew up in Budapest in a liberal-minded upper-class family. He studied Law (PhD.) at the universities of Budapest and Kolozsvár. After a serious illness caused him to move to Vienna, a counterrevolution took place in Hungary. Owing to the downfall of the Communist regime, the invasion of Romania, and the establishment of an anti-communist and antisemitic government, he did not return to Hungary.¹ Instead, in “Red Vienna,” he experienced a social-democratic municipality that implemented social policies. He wrote that the city “achieved one of the most spectacular cultural triumphs of Western history” and made an “unexampled moral and intellectual rise in the condition of a highly developed industrial working class which, protected by the Vienna system, withstood the degrading effects of grave economic dislocation...”² During the years he lived in Vienna, Polanyi was influenced by the Guild Socialism of G. D. H. Cole and Otto Bauer. This was basically freedom of the individual through the self-government of the masses, most importantly workers. Under this theory, economic associations aim to meet individual material needs, while guilds function as cooperatives and the state provides equality and justice.³

Polanyi also engaged in debates with members of the Austrian School, such as Ludwig von Mises, a prominent liberal economist who became, in 1933, an advisor of the Austro-fascist government.⁴ That same year, as the new government suspended the existing parliament and established a fascist regime, Polanyi left Austria. He moved to London, where he worked as a lecturer and journalist and wrote *The Essence of Fascism*, published in 1935. He subsequently moved to the US. By 1940, he was working at Bennington College, where he penned his magnum opus, *The Great Transformation*, published in 1944. His initial title for the book was “The Liberal Utopia: Origins of the Cataclysm, or Freedom from Economics,” but the publisher thought that *The Great Transformation* would sell better.⁵ In this work, he criticized economic liberalism and liberals and sought to explain the collapse of “19th century civilization,” or the liberal world order.

Polanyi’s critique of liberalism in *The Great Transformation* represents the origin of the new cataclysm about rising illiberal populist movements. When one reads the book, one feels a sense of déjà vu, as if the book contains warnings for today. The emergence of neoliberalism—with its marketization, globalization, and financial domination of the contemporary world order—has striking similarities to the initial establishment of the self-regulating market in the nineteenth century. For their part, the emerging populist reactions seem to oppose the liberal hegemony. Notably, some scholars make almost the same assessments as Polanyi, yet without being aware of his work.⁶ Nevertheless, even the illiberal right acknowledges his critique of liberalism. What does Polanyi tell us in his magnum opus, and how is it relevant for us today?

1 Gareth Dale, *Karl Polanyi: A Life on the Left* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 71.

2 Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* (Beacon Press, 2001), 299.

3 Dale, *Karl Polanyi*, 85-86.

4 *Ibid.*, 102.

5 *Ibid.*, 170.

6 Jan Zielonka, *Counter-Revolution: Liberal Europe in Retreat* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); Yael Tamir, *Why Nationalism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020).

The Great Transformation

Self-Regulating Market

A market is a place where buyers and sellers come together. However, it is not only a place in the literal sense; it is also the process through which the exchange of goods and services occurs. The market pattern (encounter of buying and selling), with its motive of exchange, creates the market institution.⁷ Without such a pattern, the propensity to exchange could not produce prices. The creation and spread of the market by the market pattern has a significant consequence for society: From that point on, instead of the economy being embedded in social relations, social relations are embedded in the economy.⁸ Polanyi states that “self-regulation implies that all production is for sale on the market and that all incomes derive from such sales.”⁹ In order to maintain its effectiveness (self-regulation), society must be shaped in a way that allows this system to function from within; otherwise, social relations would interfere with its pattern and it would lose effectiveness. For Polanyi, therefore, “such an institutional pattern could not have functioned unless society was somehow subordinated to its requirements.”¹⁰ In other words, “a market economy can only function in a market society.”¹¹ Polanyi’s critique of liberalism is that liberalism has a “mystical readiness” to accept the social consequences of progress and change regardless of their magnitude.¹²

Polanyi argued that the self-regulating market did not develop naturally by abolishing artificial restrictions. Instead, and contrary to popular belief, it was brought about artificially. Taking Bentham’s ideas and their influence on the British government as an example, Polanyi claimed that such a self-regulating market was realized by a centrally organized series of interventions and that the political authorities had to keep ensuring its functioning.¹³ Economic liberalism, which was born as a just inclination toward “nonbureaucratic methods,” evolved into a “faith in man’s secular salvation through a self-regulating market.”¹⁴

For Polanyi, the emergence of economic liberalism dated back to the 1820s. In his view, only after this date did economic liberalism advocate three elements: the emergence of a labor market (labor finding its price in the market); money as the object of an “automatic” process (the gold standard); and the free flow of goods without hindrance (free trade).¹⁵ By the 1830s, economic liberalism became increasingly passionate about its claims. The liberals in England pushed for a series of reforms to achieve these three tenets, and following the Reform Act of 1832, they had the power to implement them. These reforms imagined a working class tamed by hunger whose wage would be regulated by the price of grain.

7 Polanyi, *The Great Transformation*, 60.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid., 72.

10 Ibid., 74.

11 Ibid., 60.

12 Ibid., 35.

13 Ibid., 146. One can also find such a notion in Ludwig von Mises, *Human Action: A Treatise on Economics* (Bradford, UK: Fox & Wilkes, 1996), 257: the state “employs its power to beat people into submission solely for the prevention of actions destructive to the preservation and the smooth operation of the market economy... the state creates and preserves the environment in which the market economy can safely operate.”

14 Polanyi, *The Great Transformation*, 141.

15 Ibid., 143-144.

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A self-regulating market could only function on a global scale. Economic liberalism became almost a religion when the problems of this system appeared: “The market is supreme. The market alone puts the whole social system in order and provides it with sense and meaning.”¹⁶

This utopianism, and the neglect of consequent social dislocations, is the primary target of Polanyi’s critique, which also addresses fictitious commodities.

Fictitious Commodities

For Polanyi, in practice, a commodity is an object “produced for sale on the market,” while markets are contracts between buyers and sellers.¹⁷ In this context, every element of industry is considered a product for sale, thus rendering it subject to supply-and-demand and price mechanisms. All the elements are organized according to supply and demand, and each one has a price interacting in this mechanism. Polanyi says that various “markets are interconnected and form One Big Market.”¹⁸ The most fundamental dimension of this “One Big Market” is that it includes land, labor, and money. The extension of the market to land, labor, and money was the consequence of an emerging factory system, which involved long-term investments with risks.¹⁹ Without sustainable production, the risk of investing in this system would not be bearable. To assure the continuation of production, all the inputs had to be ready for sale, which necessitated the commodification of these three elements. However, they are not commodities by the definition of a commodity. They are not “products” for sale. Labor is a human activity, while land is nature and money is a token of purchasing power.²⁰ Therefore, defining these elements as commodities would be “fictitious”—yet through this fiction, they are organized for market, buying and selling, and interacting with the supply-and-demand mechanism. This was made possible by liberal hegemony at the time.

This fiction became the “organizing principle of society.”²¹ Any interference with their inclusion in the market would cripple the market’s self-regulation. Consequently, the commodity fiction creates a significant organizing principle that affects the whole of society and its institutions because any behavior or action that might impede the functioning of the market system must be prohibited. Polanyi claims that such a postulate cannot be practically and morally upheld: “To allow the market mechanism to be sole director of the fate of human beings and their natural environment indeed... would result in the demolition of society.”²² Using labor power or leaving it unused affects the “human individual” who is the bearer of this, and the system disposing labor power would also dispense with “the physical, psychological, and moral entity” of a human individual.²³ To separate labor from other activities by freedom of contract also meant the liquidation of its noncontractual relations, such as profession, kinship, or neighborhood.²⁴ While liberals claimed they were defending noninterference, this imposition of contractual relations represented

¹⁶ von Mises, *Human Action*, 257.

¹⁷ Polanyi, *The Great Transformation*, 75.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 78.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 75.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 79.

²² *Ibid.*, 76.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 171.

another interference—with society.²⁵ With the self-regulating market logic, human beings would be ripped from their protective cultural institutions and would perish due to social exposure. Eventually, “they would die as the victims of acute social dislocation through vice, perversion, crime, and starvation.”²⁶ Polanyi’s vision for nature under these conditions is quite similar: Through division into their elements, landscapes and neighborhoods would be spoiled, waters would be polluted, and food production would be destroyed.²⁷ Money, as a commodity in the market, would “periodically liquidate business enterprise” through shortages or abundance, similar to how natural disasters destroy primitive societies. Society cannot withstand the “commodification” of these elements unless they are protected from “the ravages of this satanic mill.”²⁸

Double Movement

Having discussed the defining elements of Polanyi’s theory—namely the self-regulating market and fictitious commodities—let us turn to Polanyi’s concept of double movement:

The extension of the market organization in respect to genuine commodities was accompanied by its restriction in respect to fictitious ones... While the organization of world commodity markets, world capital markets, and world currency markets under the aegis of the gold standard gave an unparalleled momentum to the mechanism of markets, a deep-seated movement sprang into being to resist the pernicious effects of a market-controlled economy. Society protected itself against the perils inherent in a self-regulating market system.²⁹

Polanyi indicates that two organizing principles of society can be explained in relation to double movement: the economic liberalism that is advocated by the trading classes, who push for establishing self-regulation by free trade and laissez-faire methods; and the social protection that is supported by those who are negatively affected by the market, who seek to conserve human, natural, and productive organization through “protective legislations, restrictive associations,” and other intervention tools.³⁰ For Polanyi, the landed class, middle class, and working class shaped the social history of the nineteenth century.³¹ The middle classes pushed for a market economy, and their interests conformed with the general interests of society when it came to production and employment. However, they had no awareness of the negative effects of the market on society’s and nature’s social and cultural disposition: They believed that profits benefitted everyone. The landed class and peasantry pushed back, defending the general interests of a society that depended on labor and soil. The laborers were, for Polanyi, the representatives of common human interests, as to some extent, each class stands for “interests wider than its own.”³² Their interests overlap with the general interests of society. In the course of history, universal suffrage increased the influence of the working class in the state, while the trading classes became more

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid., 76—as one could understand from conditions in Victorian industrial cities...

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid., 77.

29 Ibid., 79-80: the first movement is marketization, the second is the countermovement.

30 Ibid., 138-139.

31 Ibid., 139.

32 Ibid.

aware of their political power, which is rooted in industry. This was not a problem as long as the market economy was functional. However, when the market system became dysfunctional, tensions between classes increased. This threatened society because the various classes made “government and business, state and industry, respectively, their strongholds.”³³ The political and economic functions of society were used as weapons in this conflict of sectional interests. This led to an institutional deadlock through which fascism gained power. The historical significance of double movement showed itself in its two-faceted consequence: “The one was given by the dash of the organizing principles of economic liberalism and social protection which led to deep-seated institutional strain; the other by the conflict of classes which, interacting with the first, turned crisis into catastrophe.”³⁴

The Collapse of the Liberal World Order

The nineteenth-century separation of economics and politics in Europe was experienced through the establishment of a competitive labor market (the Poor Law Reform, which caused suffering to poor people) and the (limited) democratization of the state (which gave power to the bourgeoisie³⁵). The Poor Law reform differentiated the physically unable poor from the working poor. Polanyi claimed that it created a new category: the unemployed.³⁶ The working poor had to be tamed by workhouses if they did not work. In order for the wage system not to collapse, the laborer had to be threatened with hunger. Providing relief to “innocent victims” (victims of social dislocations) became immoral and violated the rule of law. The Chartist movement in England, which demanded popular government, was one type of reaction to this. Liberals objected to the Chartists’ demands as a breach of the Constitution.³⁷

Polanyi claims that previously, constitutionalism entailed safeguarding private property from the arbitrary intervention of the monarch.³⁸ Long after the emergence of constitutionalism in the seventeenth century, the protection of “industrial property” was not against the monarch but against the people.³⁹ The separation of powers also entailed separating people from power over their economic fate. Only after adjusting to the new system were the majority were allowed to vote in England. Currency had a similar story: Inflation and deflation were considered as interference with private property.⁴⁰ The elite were afraid of giving power to the people, which could lead to such policies as “unrestricted employment benefits” with unbalanced budgets, which would cause inflation (and thus decrease exports and put pressure on exchanges), just as they were afraid of low-interest-rate policies.⁴¹ Therefore, social protection of labor and interfering with currency were considered interlinked, especially in the 1920s.

Polanyi gives the example of the Labour government’s dilemma in the UK after the 1930s: The government had to cut social services or there would be a decline in

33 Ibid.

34 Ibid., 140.

35 Ibid., 231.

36 Ibid., 232.

37 Ibid., 232. Examples of such liberals include Lord Macaulay (a Whig) and Sir Robert Peel (a Tory).

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid., 233.

40 Ibid., 234. Jeremy Bentham was one of the first intellectuals to recognize this.

41 Ibid., 235.

exchanges.⁴² The former was against Labour's trade union mentality, while leaving the gold standard would be "sacrilege." While the Labour party tore itself apart, traditional parties were able to win the next election; the latter both cut social services and left the gold standard.⁴³ Labor parties were also made to leave government in other European countries—including Austria (1923), Germany (1931), and France (1926)—"to save the currency."⁴⁴ In these countries, social services were also cut, and trade unions were undermined to adjust wages downwards, helping employers to reduce their costs. The tension between currency and budget can, for Polanyi, be mapped onto the tension between employers and employees, while the general population supported one or the other.⁴⁵ The currency was an effective weapon for decreasing wage levels because trade union policies had negative effects on the self-regulating market and the people paid attention to the "currency indicators."⁴⁶

Naturally, the strike—a logical choice of bargaining method for the working class—increasingly came to be seen as a threat to the community, such that the working class lost voters' sympathy. The restoration of the monetary system was more important than addressing social issues such as providing minimum living standards to the public due to international capital's important role in unregulated markets and unstable exchanges. Furthermore, credits were extended to governments for political reasons such as reparations rather than solid economic considerations. Financial balances (such as the balance of payments) were maintained artificially. All of these were based on an expectation of a return to stable exchanges (that is, to the gold standard). In Polanyi's view, between 1923 and 1930, Geneva used the international credit mechanism to shift the burden of unstable Eastern economies to the victorious Western powers, then eventually to the US.⁴⁷ By that time, the financialization of the world was taking place.

Moreover, Geneva saw social matters as subordinate to the restoration of currencies. The postwar return to the free market and liberal states was delayed due to Geneva's insistence on the adaptation of domestic economies to deflation.⁴⁸ Governments had to intervene to reduce prices for monopoly goods, services, and rents. Such an ideal required deflation "under free economy with strong government." In reality, such a strong government entailed restrictions on public freedoms and the use of emergency power. Liberalism thus sacrificed its own pillars. This still did not work, however: "In the course of these vain deflationary efforts free markets had not been restored though free governments had been sacrificed."⁴⁹ The liberals chose the currency over nonintervention, which created a financial burden of massive economic dislocation and increased the deficit to the point of explosion. In the course of deflation policies, liberals advocated "authoritarian interventionism," and in consequence, weakened democratic forces.⁵⁰ Had this not been the case, the fascist catastrophe could have been prevented. The US and UK escaped only by leaving the gold standard. Since

42 *Ibid.*, 236.

43 *Ibid.*, 237.

44 *Ibid.*

45 *Ibid.*

46 *Ibid.*, 238.

47 *Ibid.*, 241.

48 *Ibid.*

49 *Ibid.*, 242.

50 *Ibid.*; Ludwig von Mises, *Liberalism: The Classical Tradition*, ed. Bettine B. Greaves (Carmel, IN: Liberty Fund, 2005), 30: "It cannot be denied that Fascism and similar movements aiming at the establishment of dictatorships are full of the best intentions and that their intervention has, for the moment, saved European civilization. The merit that Fascism has thereby won for itself will live on eternally in history."

they were the major powers in world trade, they could escape the burden; other countries were not as lucky.

The separation of politics and economics only fueled the tensions between classes. On the one hand, the employers were responsible for production (they owned the means of production). On the other hand, they had an interest in the functioning of industry: In the political arena, the majority were employees, and they represented wider social interests.⁵¹ Their number was the source of their influence on the political scene. The deadlock of legislation with these clashes prevented legislation from performing its functions, thus contributing to the paralysis of “the organs of industry or state” and creating a social crisis.⁵² “Fear would grip the people, and leadership would be thrust upon those who offered an easy way out at whatever ultimate price. The time was ripe for the fascist solution.”⁵³

Fascism was, thus, a solution to the dead end created by liberal capitalism. It was the “reform of market economy achieved at the price of... all democratic institutions...”⁵⁴ This was not to be confused with local reasons, historical differences, or national character. It also had little to do with the Treaty of Versailles. Instead, it appeared in many places: Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Finland and Norway, Italy and Spain, England, Ireland, Belgium, Japan, Hungary, France, the US, and Latin American nations.⁵⁵ In some countries, fascism was even antipatriotic (as in the case of Quisling in Norway). In Polanyi’s view, this was because “fascism, like socialism, was rooted in a market society that refused to function. Hence, it was worldwide, catholic in scope, universal in application; the issues transcended the economic sphere and begot a general transformation of a distinctively social kind.”⁵⁶ Evidently, the market system played an important role in fascism. In the power struggle, fascists used issues at their will, establishing alliances with Catholic pacifists at one time, focusing on national and international issues at another time. The fascist period, which is related to the condition of the market system, can be broken into three stages:⁵⁷

Between 1917 and 1923, fascism was merely an instrument for counterrevolutions; between 1924 and 1929, fascism was marginalized; and after 1929 fascism emerged as an alternative to industrial society. In the first period, counterrevolutions were directed against the working class and socialist influence gained power in Europe. The instigators of these counterrevolutions (heavy industry, the church, the aristocracy, etc.) used fascists to restore the status quo wherever necessary. The second period witnessed an economic boom, the return to the gold standard, Mussolini’s glorification of liberal capitalism, and the failure of fascist mobilization. In the last period, fascism emerged as an alternative to the institutional deadlock of the market system. A series of events undermined the world economy and led to rebellion against the status quo and the disruption of peace by Germany, Italy, and Japan. Two-party systems started to disappear; liberal capitalism was undermined in the UK and the US.

Different countries started taking their own approaches to dealing with economic and international problems. In other words, the political and economic systems

⁵¹ Polanyi, *The Great Transformation*, 243-244.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 244.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 245.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 246.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 248.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 251-252.

disintegrated simultaneously, and the liberal world order collapsed.⁵⁸ This collapse was fundamentally caused by countermovements emanating from society, which sought to protect itself from being destroyed by the consequences of the self-regulating market. The contradictions and tensions between market and vital social interests caused strain that led to the eventual destruction of market society. The liberal misunderstanding of moral values, humanity and history, utopianism, and authoritarianism played a key role in this.

Contemporary Relevance

Neoliberalism

In 1977, a Nobel Prize-winning economist visited Chile, a Latin American country then ruled by a military dictatorship. During his visit, he remarked “that unlimited democracy cannot work because, in his opinion, it creates different forces that end up destroying democracy.”⁵⁹ He praised the military government, as it was not dependent on “popular commitments” and its painful market reforms were a “necessary evil that will soon be overcome.”⁶⁰ Four years later, he explained that “a dictatorship may be a necessary system during a transitional period.”⁶¹ Liberalism did not contradict authoritarianism. Rather, he believed, “it is possible for a dictator to govern in a liberal way...,” and he preferred “a liberal dictator to a democratic government lacking liberalism.”⁶² That economist’s name was Friedrich Hayek. A student of Mises, he was one of the pioneers of neoliberalism.

Neoliberalism is a theory and political project that advocates “new political, economic, and social arrangements within society that emphasize market relations, re-tasking the role of the state, and individual responsibility.”⁶³ There is an agreement among scholars that this basically entails the extension of the market to all areas of society.⁶⁴ Strikingly, the definition of neoliberalism is very similar to Polanyi’s definition of economic liberalism, which advocates a self-regulating market. The essential neoliberal policies are deregulation, such as abolishing control over banking activities; the privatization of state enterprises; and the liberalization of trade and capital. All of these policies are rooted in faith in the self-regulating market.

The emergence of neoliberal policies coincided with the end of the Bretton Woods system: President Nixon’s announcement that the dollar was no longer convertible to gold, the rise of economic competitors such as Germany and Japan, the increase in financial integration, and the multiplication of new unregulated economic areas faster than international management could keep up with them.⁶⁵ The sudden breakdown of fixed exchange rates, recession, inflation, and unemployment (stagflation)—induced by the oil shock of 1973 and following failed efforts by European countries to find a solution—led to protectionism and “new protectionism” (such as non-

58 *Ibid.*, 252.

59 Bruce Caldwell and Leonidas Montes, “Friedrich Hayek and His Visits to Chile,” *The Review of Austrian Economics* 28, no. 3 (2015): 279, <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2488106>.

60 *Ibid.*, 280.

61 *Ibid.*, 298.

62 *Ibid.*

63 Simon Springer, Kean Birch, and Julie MacLeavy, eds., *The Handbook of Neoliberalism* (London: Routledge, 2016), 2.

64 *Ibid.*

65 Joan Edelman Spero and Jeffrey A. Hart, *The Politics of International Economic Relations* (Wadsworth: Cengage Learning, 2010), 1-71.

tariff barriers and standards).⁶⁶ This is similar to a Polanyian countermovement to protect society from the effects of “free trade.” However, in the end, the Western countries were aware that the new protectionism had to be dismantled in order to prevent the collapse of the market system. The US, Germany, and the UK started to eliminate capital controls from the mid-1970s. This was accompanied by domestic political and economic turbulence that pressured their governments to make tough choices. For instance, the Conservative government in the UK had conflicts with striking miners, declared a state of emergency, and called elections.⁶⁷ Eventually, it lost power. However, the Labour government, like its leftist contemporaries across Europe, had to deal with the crisis through budget deficits. Faced with bankruptcy, the government of the UK had to settle matters with the IMF by implementing budget cuts, even though this was opposed by Labour’s supporters.⁶⁸ Eventually, the strikes and media criticism of the unions and the Labour government led to the latter’s downfall.⁶⁹ A new government was established by Margaret Thatcher.

In the US, Reagan was elected; in France, Mitterand’s leftist government shared the fate of Labour in the UK, except that it did not lose power. The Latin American left steered to the right (becoming the “new left”): Nothing that challenged neoliberal policies was permitted. Democratic transition (as advocated by Hayek) was only possible in Latin American countries on the condition that neoliberal policies remained untouched.⁷⁰ In Turkey, the transition to neoliberalism would not have been possible had there not been a coup that suppressed democracy for some years. One of the first decisions of the military regime was to confiscate leftist labor organizations, seize the management, and arrest many union members.⁷¹ Moreover, union engagement in politics and striking were banned, while unionization was hindered. The deadlock could be overcome by suppressing wages in favor of the bourgeoisie.⁷²

In other words, the mobility of international money (capital mobility) and foreign investments were considered more important than regulations protecting society from the dangers of the market. The most significant priority of the military regime in Turkey was to convince the international financial elite that “structural adjustment” policies were secure.⁷³ For all neoliberals’ talk of a “minimal state,” they were using the state to establish a self-regulating market, impeding the state from protecting society from commodification. “Salvation” through the self-regulating market was back, and “there was no alternative” but to go forward with it. International capital was more important than the interests of society. Society had to adapt to the almighty market solving everything. Ironically, this almighty market was unable to self-regulate.

66 Ibid., 82.

67 David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 57-58.

68 Ibid., 58.

69 Ibid.

70 José Gabriel Palma, “Why Did the Latin American Critical Tradition in the Social Sciences Become Practically Extinct?” In *Routledge Handbook of International Political Economy: IPE as a Global Conversation*, ed. Mark Blyth (London: Routledge, 2009), 256.

71 Türkiye Devrimci İşçi Sendikaları Konfederasyonu, “DİSK Etkinlikler Dizini (1964-1996),” <http://disk.org.tr/disk-etkinlikler-dizini/>.

72 “How Did the September 12 Military Coup Destroy Labor Rights in Turkey?” *Bianet*, September 14, 2020, <https://bianet.org/english/economy/230825-how-did-the-september-12-military-coup-destroy-labor-rights-in-turkey>.

73 Galip Yalman, “The Turkish State and Bourgeoisie in Historical Perspective: A Relativist Paradigm or a Panoply of Hegemonic Strategies,” in *The Politics of Permanent Crisis*, ed. Neşecan Balkan and Sungur Savran (New York: Nova, 2002), 39.

Common under neoliberalism—including in developed countries—were debt crises, the stagnation of real wages, unemployment cycles, and the growth of income inequality. The “flight of capital,” which Polanyi mentioned, was also back. Any action that could lead to suspicion had the potential to prompt capital to leave the country and produce a crisis. The evolving international trade regime (the summits that led to the transformation of the GATT into the WTO) included “liberalization” of agriculture, suppressing many health-and-safety standards, and interfering with domestic regulations that sought to protect society.⁷⁴

Of course, the story of neoliberalism continued with the Washington Consensus, the European Union’s common market, the integration of Eastern European countries with the collapse of the Communist bloc, and a series of crises (including the Mexican, Russian, Asian, Turkish, 2008, and Eurozone financial crises) that are beyond the scope of this article. What matters is that neoliberalism—comprising financialization, privatization, deregulation, and globalization; restructuring the state in a way that protects big business (such as bailouts); and undermining democratic functions—altered the global balance of power in favor of the richer classes. These classes enjoyed more freedom than other parts of society. This is the first part of double movement: Whether by force or hegemony, self-regulating markets with new dimensions have been re-established; markets have once again encompassed labor, land, and money again, a fiction that creates incompatibilities; and countermovements have started to emerge as a reaction to this “great transformation.”

Illiberalism as a Countermovement

It would be an absurd generalization to reduce all the illiberal movements gaining ground to a conscious reaction to the “perils” of neoliberal marketization. They also include reactions to such issues as migration and declining local cultural elements. However, the liberal elite considered liberal hegemony as a salvation from all ills. They advertised the free market as such in many countries. Especially in Central and Eastern Europe, the liberal elite saw marketization as a means to reach the standard of living attained by Western countries.⁷⁵ Illiberal movements have responded to marketization’s failure to achieve this. One example is Poland. Although its GDP had grown by 20% since the early 2000s, in 2015, the majority of voters elected an illiberal candidate. Zielonka claims that this was due to the precarity of Poland’s employment system, in which zero-hour contracts are prevalent.⁷⁶ As Polanyi stated, it was not “growth” statistics, but cultural degradation and the eradication of those institutions that shielded society from uncertainty that mattered to voters.

Over the years, populist and far-right parties in many countries have gained ground thanks to the consequences of neoliberalism,⁷⁷ openly taking stances opposed to neoliberal values. An obvious example is Trump’s protectionist policies and his promise to bring jobs back to the US.⁷⁸ Radical right-wing parties in Europe position

74 Dani Rodrik, *The Globalization Paradox: Democracy and the Future of the World Economy* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2011), 79.

75 Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2005), 95.

76 Zielonka, *Counter-Revolution*, 59.

77 See the figures in Dani Rodrik, “Populism and the Economics of Globalization,” *Journal of International Business Policy* 1, no. 1 (2018): 12-33, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s42214-018-0001-4>; see also Daphne Haikiopoulou, “A Right-Wing Populist Momentum: A Review of 2017 Elections across Europe,” *Journal of Common Market Studies* 56 (2018): 63-73., <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.12769>.

78 Paul Davidson, “Has Trump Fulfilled His Pledge to Turbocharge Job Growth, Revive Manufacturing? Many Say No,” in *USA Today*, December 4, 2019, <https://eu.usatoday.com/story/money/2019/12/04/jobs-creation-trump-goal-has-fallen-short/4249422002/>.

themselves fairly similarly: Even though they are called radical right, they move toward the left on economic policies.⁷⁹ They criticize free trade and globalization; praise “hardworking people;” and support increasing social spending, redistribution, and lowering the retirement age.⁸⁰ Alongside increasing support for right-wing populist parties, countries such as Spain and Greece also saw increasing support for left-wing populist parties at one point, although some of them have lost some ground in recent years. Their support was linked to the Eurozone crisis: The illiberal argument was that liberal elite were ignoring the majority and even using undemocratic methods in order to maintain a self-regulating market.

Moreover, some liberal or neoliberal populists have, since gaining power, turned out to be illiberal, among them Viktor Orbán in Hungary and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey (even if his politics did previously contain illiberal elements). Erdoğan, who had many meetings with George Soros during his early days in power, subsequently started to talk about the “interest lobby” and “protest financiers” and increased his protectionist policies.⁸¹

Perhaps one of the most striking examples of a countermovement to neoliberalism is Brexit. The policies of New Labour, which had already steered in a neoliberal direction, were not effective at implementing comprehensive social reforms (which would damage the functioning of the self-regulating market).⁸² The Great Recession further depressed wages, and an austerity program (such as cutting grants and social spending) was implemented, while the financial system responsible for the crisis was bailed out and did not face comprehensive reform.⁸³ Migration to the UK may have been salient—there was a growing reaction against immigration and negotiations with the EU—but “leave” voters were most influenced by unemployment, low wages, the low quality of “public services,” and the austerity program. Those negatively influenced by these factors and those in the manufacturing sector (which is negatively influenced by rising competition) were more likely to vote “leave.”⁸⁴ Significantly, these areas actually had less immigration than other areas.⁸⁵ Yet the perception of immigrants taking British jobs played an important role. It is possible to conclude that the correlation between socioeconomic problems and immigration might have caused “leave” voters to perceive causation. “Taking back control” can be seen as one of the most visible countermovements of our decade, just as the UK leaving the gold standard was in the 1930s.

Illiberal Reception of Karl Polanyi

Not only do we see Polanyian countermovements emerging as a reaction to liberal hegemony and self-regulating market utopia, but we can also find explicit recognition

⁷⁹ Gilles Ivaldi, “Populism in France,” in *Populism around the World: A Comparative Perspective*, ed. Daniel Stockemer (New York: Springer, 2019), 5–6.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁸¹ Fehim Taştekin, “How Soros Turned from Friend to Foe for Erdogan,” *Al-Monitor*, November 28, 2018, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2018/11/turkey-open-society-foundation-pulls-out.html>.

⁸² Jonathan Hopkin, “When Polanyi Met Farage: Market Fundamentalism, Economic Nationalism, and Britain’s Exit from the European Union,” *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 19, no. 3 (2017): 469, <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1369148117710894>.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ Sascha O. Becker, Thiemo Fetzer, and Dennis Novy, “Who Voted for Brexit? A Comprehensive District-Level Analysis,” *Economic Policy* 32, no. 92 (2017): 633, <https://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2976254>.

⁸⁵ Caelainn Barr, “The Areas and Demographics Where the Brexit Vote Was Won,” *The Guardian*, June 24, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/2016/jun/24/the-areas-and-demographics-where-the-brexit-vote-was-won>.

of Karl Polanyi in general academic studies and among “rightist” illiberals alike. One example of the latter is the Nouvelle Droite intellectual Alain de Benoist, who made almost the same criticism of liberalism as Polanyi.

Nouvelle Droite is a right-wing movement with anti-egalitarian positioning; it focuses on homogenizing society in the face of a multicultural society. Its base is intimately connected to the German Conservative Revolutionaries of the inter-war era, who held ultra-nationalist ideas and promoted an authoritarian state.⁸⁶ However, de Benoist and other antiliberal right thinkers claim that the Nouvelle Droite offers a perspective that transcends traditional ideologies. This can be seen in the 2000 manifesto of de Benoist and Charles Champetier, in which they wrote that the French Right borrows from what is “valuable in all currents of thought.”⁸⁷ In its criticism of the social order, this movement appears “to have more in common with the left rather than right.”⁸⁸ It is in this context that de Benoist references Polanyi.

In his criticism of market incompatibility with democracy and separation of economics from politics, Benoist explicitly references Polanyi.⁸⁹ According to the French thinker, the substance of modern society is “hypertrophy of free market exchange, leading from an economy with a market, to a market society.”⁹⁰ Liberalism has translated the idea of progress into a religion of growth.⁹¹ This is exactly Polanyi’s criticism of liberal beliefs in the nineteenth century; it has found a voice among the French Right against neoliberalism in the twenty-first century. For de Benoist, liberalism guarantees individual liberties above everything and undermines the collective notion of freedom; it promotes the law of protecting the individual against the collective.⁹² For Polanyi, liberals see freedom to regulate as unfreedom and try to hinder it. Freedom is misunderstood by liberals, who go so far as to defend the freedom of “comfortable classes” to enjoy “leisure in security” even as society experiences anxieties related to insufficient incomes and enjoys only minimal freedom.⁹³ He claims that liberals must accept the role of compulsion and power in politics. Of course, “regulation both extends and restricts freedom”: in order to extend the general freedom of society, there must be some reduction of freedom among the comfortable classes.⁹⁴

Alain de Benoist’s criticism of civil society also resonates with this: for him, civil society “only defends categorical interests, which prevents it from replacing the state by formulating an authentic collective project or exercising a comprehensive regulation of society.”⁹⁵ The difference between the two is that Polanyi did not see an inherent contradiction between collective and individual rights in politics. Instead,

86 Tamir Bar-On, “Intellectual Right-Wing Extremism—Alain de Benoist’s Mazeway Resynthesis since 2000,” in *The Extreme Right in Europe: Current Trends and Perspectives*, ed. Uwe Backes and Patrick Moreau (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2012), 333-334.

87 Alain de Benoist and Charles Champetier, *Manifesto for a European Renaissance* (Budapest: Arktos, 2012), 24.

88 Tamir Bar-On, “Fascism to the Nouvelle Droite: The Dream of Pan-European Empire,” *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 16, no. 3 (2008): 328, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14782800802500981>.

89 Alain De Benoist, “The Current Crisis of Democracy,” *Telos-New York* 156 (2011): 7-23; Arthur Versluis, “A Conversation with Alain de Benoist,” *Journal for the Study of Radicalism* 8, no. 2 (2014): 79-106, <https://doi.org/10.14321/jstudrad.8.2.0079>.

90 de Benoist and Champetier, *Manifesto*, 24.

91 Ibid.

92 de Benoist, “The Current Crisis of Democracy.”

93 Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation*, 262.

94 Ibid.

95 de Benoist, “The Current Crisis of Democracy,” 14.

he thought that they were compatible and that every restriction must create a space for individual rights (for instance, the right to nonconformity must be institutionally guaranteed). Every regulation, integration, and planning effort must at least increase the freedom of individuals even to an arbitrary level.

Polanyi's work also found a place in Marine Le Pen's book. In that work, she refers to Jacques Delors and French Minister of the Economy Pierre Mauroy as the great organizers of "the great transformation."⁹⁶ She quotes from Polanyi's *The Great Transformation* in the section "Globalization and Globalism:" "Our thesis is that the idea of a self-adjusting market implied a stark utopia. Such an institution could not exist for any length of time without annihilating the human and natural substance of society. It would have physically destroyed man and transformed his environment into a desert."⁹⁷

Another Polanyi aficionado from the same radical-right political circle is Hervé Juvin, a French member of the European Parliament who represents the National Rally. Juvin criticizes capitalism from an "ecological" perspective. He stresses "the collective freedom of human societies to shape their destiny" and refers to Polanyi in support of the position that politics should prevail over the economy.⁹⁸ A report by the far-right European Parliament faction Identity and Democracy (Europe of Nations and Freedom at the time of the report), prepared by Hervé Juvin, incorporates ideas borrowed from Polanyi into its critique of globalization and neoliberalism. According to Juvin, "we are at the heart of a new great transformation, similar to what Karl Polanyi analyzed."⁹⁹ The same critique—that Europe has lost its unity to globalization—appears in the faction's manifesto,¹⁰⁰ alongside the claims that "economy replaced politics and the market replaced democracy" and that all the failures of the European Union have come since the liberal turn of the 1990s.¹⁰¹

To prevent these failures, Juvin believes, we should learn from the twentieth century and Karl Polanyi.¹⁰² However, does he really learn any lessons from Karl Polanyi? He deploys Polanyi's ideas to support his criticism of globalism and neoliberalism, as well as his anti-immigrant and anti-democratic arguments. In a radical-right world, Polanyi's vision of a free society would never come to fruition. Thus, Polanyi is used by the radical right only instrumentally. Ironically, these antiliberal thinkers and politicians use Polanyi's criticism as an instrument against market society with a similar reason to the fascists of Polanyi's day. This was precisely the danger that Polanyi emphasized at the time of writing *The Great Transformation*. Radical right populists—like fascists, part of a countermovement—benefit from the crises of liberal capitalism and offer easy solutions: they would like to reform market society at the cost of diversity and democratic institutions. Such a destruction of democratic institutions would, in their view, restore "the primacy of politics, the authority of

96 Marine Le Pen, *Pour que vive la France* (Paris: Editions Jacques Grancher, 2012), 41.

97 Ibid., 26; the original book uses the term "wilderness" instead of "desert."

98 Hervé Juvin, "Hervé Juvin: A Quest for Survival: About the Fourth World, or the Comeback of Politics," <https://www.geopolitica.ru/en/article/herve-juvin-quest-survival-about-fourth-world-or-comeback-politics>.

99 Hervé Juvin, *Le coup d'Etat du droit: De l'extraterritorialité du droit américain à l'offensive globaliste L'avènement d'un droit universel, menaces et réalités pour les Nations européennes* (Fondation pour une Europe des Nations et des Libertés, 2017), 40.

100 The Identity and Democracy Foundation, "The Situation in Europe," <https://www.manifesteavenireurope.eu/en/la-situation-de-leurope/>.

101 Ibid.

102 Juvin, *Le coup d'Etat du droit*, 83.

the State above the law and of collective national interest above the rights of the individual.¹⁰³

Conclusion

Polanyi's fundamental critique of liberals can be understood in the sense of rationalization. Rationalization is organizing material and social reality through specific rationality. It is imposing one's specific rationality on the outside world and making an effort to preserve its construction. The commodity fiction and self-regulation are the specific rationalities of economic liberals. For them, the market is an automatic, natural, and self-regulating mechanism, and abolishing artificial (political) "restrictions" on its elements of production is necessary. In other words, the separation of politics and economics is possible, while the market is (internally, independent of interference) a natural and perfect organism that always reaches its own equilibrium. However, neither of these assumptions actually work without disruptions; in practice, liberals have to use the state to force and sustain these assumptions. Economic liberals first imposed this rationality on the social system through political authority, and when its perils started to accumulate, they used this political authority to sustain it so that the system would work according to their rationality. In order to maintain the self-regulation of the market, they had to organize society as a whole.

Yet since the system is not actually such a "liberal utopia," society demands protection when broad social interests are damaged by dislocations or other tensions, using political influence to achieve this. In other words, tensions in land, labor, or money spill over into politics, because issues like unemployment do not belong solely to the realm of "oikonomia" but are the problem of the "polis"—they are social problems that involve different classes depending on the distribution of the burden. Because the majority has legitimacy to influence the political outcomes in democracy, it is natural that if widely held social interests are damaged by the market, the social classes will do whatever is necessary to protect themselves.

According to Polanyi, liberal support for authoritarianism in order to keep the self-regulating market functioning created an opportunity for fascism, which stormed the remaining weak democratic institutions in the interwar period as crises in the economy and politics produced institutional deadlock. Although the fascist revolution has not repeated itself in our age, the double movement of neoliberal marketization and countermovements is worrying. For Polanyi, the existence of fascism is not a necessary precondition for approaching a fascist phase. Instead, it is important to recognize the signs: "the spread of irrationalistic philosophies, racialist aesthetics, anticapitalistic demagogy, heterodox currency views, criticism of the party system, widespread disparagement of the (democratic) regime...."¹⁰⁴

103 *Ibid.*, 2.

104 Polanyi, *The Great Transformation*, 246.



Regimes of Cheating and the (A)morality of Illiberalism

ANDRÁS SAJÓ

Abstract

In their exercise of power, illiberal democracies—as plebiscitarian leader democracies—rely on systematic falsification of facts and ideas and rule by cheating. This type of governance is related to state-centered domination over the public sphere and society. The illiberalism of these regimes is partly related to the needs of domination and partly responds to the regimes' constituencies' clear authoritarian predispositions and historically determined collective narcissism. These factors contribute to the inherent anti-rationality of the regime, which precludes liberal public discourse. The institutionalization (normalization) of cheating has serious moral consequences: moral indignation in the context of public affairs is numbed.

Keywords: democracy, illiberalism, Caesarism, moral outrage, cheating

“The totalitarian regime is founded on the *primacy of the lie*.”
- Alexandre Koyré

Illiberal Democracy: Oxymoron or Plebiscitarian Leader Democracy?

The standard wisdom holds that emerging illiberal democracies are authoritarian regimes¹. One should thus clarify what the populist power-grab does *not* entail. It has not centered on taking over the armed forces or secret services as tools of violent oppression or total domination; changes in these domains have been more or less within the standard of controlling personnel.² Instead, having obtained power through elections, the populist forces carry out radical personnel changes in the state apparatus; their new phalanx of cadres in the civil service and in the higher echelons of the administration of justice are central to their exercise of power and control over society. Even without changes to the law, the new cadres' personal dependence on and loyalty to the leader guarantee that his or her will is carried out, even though this requires twisting the law and the facts. “Workarounds,” or institutionalized cheating, are essential to the leader's exercise and increase of power.

Academics commonly treat the term “illiberal democracy” as an oxymoron, like an “atheist pope”³ or a travesty of democracy. This is, in part, because these regimes are not considered to respect the values and forms of operation of democracy; it is also claimed that genuine modern democracy cannot be constitutional and illiberalism and democracy are incompatible. Undeniably, illiberal democracies drift toward despotism, and as they do so, their authoritarian (illiberal) characteristics become increasingly obvious. But to call them authoritarian does not do justice to the brutality of the oppression that characterizes authoritarian regimes, nor to the arbitrariness of the personal rule of the authoritarian leader. Moreover, it is worth noting that such regimes are willingly and enthusiastically supported by relative majorities.

Referring to their considerable popular support, illiberal governments claim that their regimes are constitutional and democratic—period. In their view, they

- are as democratic and constitutional as any other regime, only more popular and therefore more genuine;
- represent merely one among variations within the family of constitutional democracies, even if the constitutional values they cherish are more conservative, plebeian, and patriotic than liberal-universalists would like; and
- observe the rule of law.

1 This paper relies on the author's *Ruling by Cheating: Governance in Illiberal Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

2 Turkey represents a special case. Notwithstanding the AKP's electoral victories, topping the almighty military took time. See Murat Somer, “Understanding Turkey's Democratic Breakdown: Old vs. New and Indigenous vs. Global Authoritarianism,” *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 16, no. 4 (2016): 481-503, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683857.2016.1246548>; Cemal Burak Tansel, “Authoritarian Neoliberalism and Democratic Backsliding in Turkey: Beyond the Narratives of Progress,” *South European Society and Politics* 23, no. 2 (2018): 1-21, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13608746.2018.1479945>.

3 Zoltán Farkas, “Vulnerable Democracies—An Interview with János Kornai,” *Heti Világgazdaság*, October 13, 2016, 10-13. Jan-Werner Müller claims that the term undermines efforts to rein in would-be autocrats. See Jan-Werner Müller, “The Problem with ‘Illiberal Democracy,’” *Project Syndicate*, January 21, 2016, www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/the-problem-with-illiberal-democracy-by-jan-werner-mueller-2016-01?barrier=accesspaylog. Jeffrey C. Isaac finds the label applicable but with qualifications: “[T]o claim that these bad things are not ‘really’ democracy at all is to play [an] essentialist semantic game.” Jeffrey C. Isaac, “Is There Illiberal Democracy? A Problem with No Semantic Solution,” *Eurozine*, August 9, 2017, www.eurozine.com/is-there-illiberal-democracy/.

Regimes of Cheating and the (A)morality of Illiberalism

The constitutional structures of those regimes that came to power through the election of populist leaders are rightly called illiberal democracies. Indeed, this is what Viktor Orbán, the Hungarian Prime Minister and father of the most characteristic and successful example of democratic backlash, calls his creation.⁴ Thus, not only is this term the one preferred by actors in these regimes, but it also captures the reality of such regimes. Hungary is an electoral democracy: the outcome of its elections is not fully predetermined. True, the odds of the incumbent of losing an election are minimized, but there is no proof that the incumbent would not accept an electoral loss, which is one possible definition of democracy.⁵ Elections are regular, free, but not fair.⁶ But of course, electoral fairness is a matter of degree: gerrymandering is less widespread in Hungary than it has been in the US since 1901, while voter suppression is rare in East Central Europe and Singapore.

The illiberal regime is democratic in a plebiscitarian sense. According to Max Weber, leader democracy counts as democracy, but like every mass democracy, it tends towards Caesarism.⁷ (Bonapartism is the modern version of Caesarism: for popular endorsement against constitutional elites, it relies on plebiscite.) Furthermore, the quality of the democracy is undermined by its populist illiberalism. The regime is illiberal in two senses of the word. These are: its officially preferred values and its disregard for limiting power.

The existence of such a “rudely stumped” freak of nature insults the prevailing democratic theodicy. That illiberal democracies—with their power-domesticated populism—can be placed (however uncomfortably) in the democracy family indicates that constitutional democracy (liberal or otherwise) remains far from the idealized and even apologetic description used for normative (and political) considerations. Of course, illiberal political regimes, after traversing a grey area, reach a point when they can rightly be called antidemocratic or despotic (and, after a while, even authoritarian).

It does nothing for analytical clarity and political action to uncritically adore and adulate democracy. Instead, it is more fruitful to follow Pierre Rosanvallon’s advice: “Behind a facade of clarity, the word ‘democracy’ conveys modern society’s perplexities concerning its ultimate political foundations.”⁸ Of course, fuzzy realities are hardly compatible with most expectations of democracy, namely “popular political self-government,” where people themselves (i.e., not the people, but the citizens, in their empirical majoritarian reality) decide “the contents ... of the laws that organize and regulate their political association.”⁹ The admission of illiberal democracy into this sacred hall of popular self-government (a Holy Grail that serves normative and apologetic purposes) is understandably disconcerting:

4 Viktor Orbán, “Speech at the 30th Bálványos Summer Open University and Student Camp” (speech, Băile Tușnad, July 27, 2019), About Hungary, www.abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/prime-minister-viktor-orbans-speech-at-the-30th-balvanyos-summer-open-university-and-student-camp/.

5 Municipal election losses in large cities are accepted but revenge is swift: powers and financial resources are rescinded while loyal cities are compensated through fiscal redistribution.

6 Andreas Schedler, *The Politics of Uncertainty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). Schedler claims that elections are relevant in hybrid regimes because the political fight is not fully determined.

7 Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1978), 1451. Based on his experience with President Jackson’s patronage-democracy, Tocqueville came to the same conclusion.

8 Pierre Rosanvallon, “The Political Theory of Democracy,” in *Pierre Rosanvallon’s Political Thought. Interdisciplinary Approaches*, ed. Oliver Flügel-Martinsen, Franziska Martinsen, Stephen W. Sawyer, and Daniel Schulz (Bielefeld: Bielefeld University Press, 2019), 27.

9 Frank Michelman, *Brennan and Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 5-6.

the possibility that illiberal democracy reflects the potential pitfalls of democracy (including its illiberalism) is difficult to stomach.

Such regimes are popularly endorsed, though in a problematic and illiberal plebiscitarian way. Democracy, in a substantive sense, is nearly absent: the illiberal regime fails to recognize the legitimacy of compromise because it denies the legitimacy of the opposition, although in the usual twilight zone of the plebiscitary regime, the opposition remains legal. More than the shallowness of electoral democracy, the nature of policy deliberation is troublesome: “Outcomes are democratically legitimate if and only if they would be the object of an agreement arrived at through a free and reasoned consideration of alternatives by equals.”¹⁰ Government decisions in illiberal democracies regularly reflect agreements that supposedly exist (or could have been made) among a sizable majority (e.g. “keep ‘migrants’ out!,” “reduce bank creditors’ mortgage burden!,” “provide benefits to families with many children!,” etc.). However, such “agreements” are not “free and reasoned.”

The legitimacy of illiberal democracy originates partly from its popular endorsement: power emanates from the people, and the people choose who will carry out their will. This is legitimate as popular self-determination, but it results in personal rule. Movement populism needs a leader, a hero of the people’s cause who senses ordinary people’s distress. He is accepted because he can articulate popular resentment. Once victorious, the populist leader turns into a Bonaparte, using his sovereign power for personal, Caesaristic rule.

The illiberal plebiscitarian turn of democracy is quintessential of populism but in many respects only continues existing democratic practices: “even in the stable democratic countries, the collapse of the traditional political parties turns elections into a vote of approbation.”¹¹ In a plebiscitarian regime, elections are about choosing the person of the leader. The people’s role is acclamation, the voicing of support. And if even voice is too demanding (or risky), the supportive gaze of the spectator-citizen will do.¹² Parliamentary elections also form part of the acclamation: (re)election affirms the leader, expressing agreement with—and trust in—Caesar.¹³ The citizens vote for or against him, as the only issue on the agenda; there is nothing to represent, only the question of *who* will represent this nothingness.

Plebiscitary leader democracy (PLD) owes its scholarly reputation to Max Weber.¹⁴ According to Weber, the plebiscite primarily selects and confirms the leader, whose personal rule is legitimized by permanent popular support. This popular affirmation is

10 Joshua Cohen, “The Economic Basis of Deliberative Democracy,” *Social Philosophy and Policy* 6, no. 2 (1989): 32, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S026505250000625>.

11 Samuel Issacharoff and J. Colin Bradley, “The Plebiscite in Modern Democracy,” in *Routledge Handbook of Illiberalism*, ed. Andr s Saj , Ren ta Uitz, and Stephen Holmes (New York: Routledge, 2021), 505-517. Latin American populist leaders continue to apply personal rule, which is characteristic of *caudillismo*. See John Lynch, *Caudillos in Spanish America 1800-1850* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

12 Jeffrey Edward Green, *The Eyes of the People: Democracy in an Age of Spectatorship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

13 Max Weber, “Parliament and Government in Germany under a New Political Order,” in *Weber: Political Writings*, ed. Peter Lassman and Ronald Speirs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 226-27. The prime minister in a parliamentary system can be a Caesaristic leader supported by acclamation and “Parliament acquiesces (with considerable inner reluctance).” Weber, *Economy and Society*, 1452.

14 Weber’s scholarly and political writings use diverging concepts of leader (plebiscitarian) democracy. See Peter Baehr, *Caesarism, Charisma, and Fate—Historical Sources and Modern Resonances in the Work of Max Weber* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2008).

irrational, as opposed to institutional affirmation in a democracy, which is rational.¹⁵ “Plebiscitary democracy—the most important type of *Führer-Demokratie*—is a variant of charismatic authority, which hides behind a legitimacy that is formally derived from the will of the governed. The leader (demagogue) rules by virtue of the devotion and trust which his political followers have in him personally.”¹⁶ The leader “responds to his electorate’s psychic, physical, economic, ethical, religious, or political needs; he knows no supervisory or appeals body, no technical jurisdiction.”¹⁷ Charisma is routinized and serves as the basis of legitimate rule in mass democracy.¹⁸ Illiberal regimes, true to their populist origins, accept majoritarianism enthusiastically; disregard moderating institutions; pursue homogeneity instead of pluralism; and claim a moral mission. In continental European and Latin American societies, “a ‘charismatic nationalist outburst’ [...] has brought in a ‘Caesaristic’ breakthrough.”¹⁹ The Caesaristic regime’s shift toward illiberal democracy, and from there to possible despotism, is inherent in the charismatic and unmediated power of the plebiscitarian leader, who rules in the name of popular sovereignty.

Roots of Illiberalism

Unleashed democracy liberates illiberalism (and illiberalism unleashes the totalitarian potential of democracy). Illiberalism here means disrespect of the institutional limits on the concentration of power, intolerance, submissive acceptance of constituted authorities,²⁰ and the imposition of illiberal values (i.e., values that disregard individual freedom). Illiberalism enables a concentration of power that restricts electoral choices. Illiberal democracies function within the formal requirements of the democratic process but without the constitutional commitment and democratic culture that would restrict the totalitarian potential of democracy.

The substantive illiberalism (choice of illiberal social values) of the plebiscitarian regime is often described as illiberal mission creep. In Turkey, for example, the primary interest of the political power turned out to be not simply its own perpetuation, but a perpetuation in the service of the greater Cause of Islam, which could not be served by any other government. The leader is ready to save, enhance, impose, and perpetuate illiberal ways.

Raw democracy knows no bounds (except to sustain the power of the leader). It will claim that it only answers to the will of the majority, which would allow its expression of any fleeting desire. In reality, the momentary whim is under the strict control not of procedures and forms, but of the concerns of the plebiscitarian ruler. He will select the passion that serves the regime, and if no such passion exists, he will generate it.

15 Francisco Panizza, “Introduction,” in *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy*, ed. Francisco Panizza (London: Verso, 2005), 18, with reference to Juan Pablo Lichtmajer.

16 Weber, *Economy and Society*, 268. Führer (leader) democracy is not to be confused with Hitler’s *Führerstaat*, as the mainstream press misleadingly called Orbán’s regime as early as 2010. Leader democracy is criticized today as elitist and a “denigration of the masses” with dictatorial potential—see Jeffrey Edward Green, “Max Weber and the Reinvention of Popular Power,” *Max Weber Studies* 8, no. 2 (2008): 187–224, <https://www.muse.jhu.edu/article/808844>. See further Alan Scott, “(Plebiscitary) Leader Democracy: The Return of an Illusion?” *Thesis Eleven* 148, no. 1 (2018): 3–20, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0725513618800120>.

17 Gerhard Casper, “Caesarism in Democratic Politics: Reflections on Max Weber,” *SSRN* (2007): 15, <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1032647>. Kurt Weyland uses a similar definition to describe populism as a political strategy. See Kurt Weyland, “Clarifying a Contested Concept: Populism in the Study of Latin American Politics,” *Comparative Politics* 34, no.1 (2001): 12, <https://doi.org/10.2307/422412>.

18 Weber, *Economy and Society*, 1455.

19 Gabriel A. Almond, “Comparative Political Systems,” *The Journal of Politics* 18, no. 3 (1956): 406, 408, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2127255>.

20 On the role of authoritarianism as submission to the leader, see below.

The state relies on a civil service, expecting obedience and loyalty therefrom. The bureaucratic state organization has inherited a clearly authoritarian tradition:²¹ the civil services of France and Prussia were originally conceived as hierarchical, quasi-military, centralized organizations.²² Efficiency considerations (the merit system), the rule of law (in the early form of legality review), and the constitutionalization of the administration and modern management effected a sea-change, yet the state bureaucracy is still expected to operate according to the rules of subordination, and a sort of authoritarian subordination can be detected in the relationship between the authorities and the public.

“We know at least since Plato’s seminal treatise on the ‘Republic’ that all political systems rise or fall depending on their goodness of fit to the mental requirements of their citizens.”²³ When plebiscitarian regimes enhance illiberal elements of the existing constitutional order, or introduce such features into a new constitution, this satisfies popular sentiment among regime supporters. Such responsiveness is a must, given the need for democratic emotional endorsement of the leader.

Populist voters often cherish authoritarian values, and a good number have nothing against being led by a strongman. One should not underestimate the importance, sincerity, and legitimacy of support for the leader and his regime. As O’Donnell observed in Latin America:

The people with whom I spoke were not crooks, or at least did not respond as if they were: they were trying to contribute to some kind of common good even as they trespassed against republican boundaries. They were not alone; their families, fellow party and clique members, and business associates assumed that the officials would behave in this way and would have strongly condemned them had they not. Everyone matter-of-factly assumed that informal rules trumped formal ones; I could detect no signs of bad conscience. Formal rules retained significance, but basically as hurdles that officials had to learn to circumvent without provoking damaging consequences for themselves or their affiliates.²⁴

In many respects, this kind of understanding characterizes those who say that the nation’s interest remains above the law or constitution.²⁵ From Singapore to Venezuela, as well in Hungary and Poland, government action is legitimate (even if

21 On the despotic and infrastructural powers of the state, see Michael Mann, *The Sources of Social Power: A History of Power From the Beginning to A.D. 1760* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 169–70.

22 Prussian civil servants were trained in a feudal and authoritarian tradition, developing an attachment to an abstract concept of the state and its authority. Martin Broszat, *The Hitler State* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 12–13.

23 On Hungary, see Joseph P. Forgas and Dorottya Lantos, “Collective Narcissism and the Collapse of Democracy in Hungary,” in *Applications of Social Psychology: How Social Psychology Can Contribute to the Solution of Real-World Problems*, ed. Joseph P. Forgas, William D. Crano, and Klaus Fiedler (London: Routledge, 2020), 268.

24 Guillermo A. O’Donnell, “Horizontal Accountability in New Democracies,” *Journal of Democracy* 9, no. 3 (1998): 118, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.1998.0051>.

25 In a November 2015 speech, MP Kornel Morawiecki, the father of the Polish Prime Minister, argued that “The good of the nation is above the law.” See “Kornel Morawiecki w Sejmie: Nad prawem jest dobro Narodu! ‘Prawo, kt re nie służy narodowi to bezprawie!’ Reakcja? Owacja na stojąco,” *Wpollytce*, November 26, video, www.wpollytce.pl/polityka/273101-kornel-morawiecki-w-sejmie-nad-prawem-jest-dobro-narodu-prawo-ktore-nie-sluz-y-narodowi-to-bezprawie-reakcja-owacja-na-stojaco-wideo. This oft-quoted sentence is, however, only a political slogan, not a constitutional theory, and it corresponds to the old Roman adage *Salus populi suprema lex*. In the last few years, Orb n’s main justification for his policy choices is that a given measure serves the *good* of Hungarian men and women. He relies much less these days on Hungarian national traditions.

Regimes of Cheating and the (A)morality of Illiberalism

for most people it comes from believing that “this is the only way”). In this credo, the Nation is above the law, and the majority is entitled to determine the common good.

The numerous supporters of the illiberal regime are not simply victims of globalization who are manipulated by populist leaders and dictatorial regimes. Many of them are convinced that by cherishing authoritarian ideas and solutions, they affirm a democracy that finally cares for country and nation—and for them. Illiberal democracy is democracy for illiberals.

In this spirit, the laws enacted in illiberal democracies rely upon and reflect the inclinations of authoritarian social stock. In other words, there are enough authoritarians among supporters of the charismatic leader to make authoritarian legal positions welcome. The leader will select and construe the values and institutions that cater to persons with authoritarian predispositions, who constitute a sufficiently large *minority* to win elections. The plebiscitarian regime is illiberal precisely because it is democratic.

The message that has mobilized populist voters (in Europe, primarily right-wing populists) has offered an answer to social resentment. Given the level of this resentment, rule in the illiberal state must be an exercise in enhancing self-esteem. As early as 1941, Eric Fromm indicated that where a sense of social insecurity, national humiliation, etc., prevails, self-esteem can be restored through group supremacy.²⁶ By lending his admirers respectability, the leader provides in-group self-esteem, and by offering a charismatic authoritative figure, he enables subordination-based conformity.

Where the plebiscitarian leader plays the ethno-nationalist tune, authoritarian-minded persons will dance joyfully in the streets. Others will join them; not all supporters of populism score high on an authoritarianism scale. There are many reasons other than personality traits to support populist movements, including nationalism as a cultural fact.²⁷ Many fellow travelers of the regime do not share its illiberal values but accept it because this is the way to make a living, often a very good one. Others are simply too dependent for their existence on the government and its cronies, who control jobs and benefits. For yet another group, the official recognition of illiberal values merely corresponds to the populist *Zeitgeist* (the culture of narcissism).²⁸ Collective narcissism is prevalent in the identity of populist movements. It is common among Hungarians and Poles, especially supporters of the governing illiberal parties.²⁹ In this type of nationalist identity, collective narcissism makes one believe “that one’s own group is exceptional and entitled to privileged treatment, but that it is not sufficiently recognized by others.”³⁰

26 Eric Fromm, *Escape from Freedom* (New York: Rinehart & Winston, 1941).

27 Kris Dunn, “Preference for Radical Right-Wing Populist Parties among Exclusive-Nationalists and Authoritarians,” *Party Politics* 21, no. 3 (2013): 367–80, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068812472587>.

28 Cas Mudde, “The Populist *Zeitgeist*,” *Government and Opposition* 39, no. 4 (2004): 541–63, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1477-7053.2004.00135.x>.

29 Dorottya Lantos and Joseph P. Forgas, “The Role of Collective Narcissism in Populist Attitudes and the Collapse of Democracy in Hungary,” *Journal of Theoretical Social Psychology* 5, no. 2 (2021): 65–78, <https://doi.org/10.1002/jts5.80>.

30 Agnieszka Golec de Zavala, Karolina Dyduch-Hazar, and Dorottya Lantos, “Collective Narcissism: Political Consequences of Investing Self-Worth in the Ingroup’s Image,” *Political Psychology* 40 (2019): 37–74, <https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12569>.

Countries such as Hungary suffered from a traumatic past that provides few reasons for citizens to derive genuine positive identity and distinctiveness from their flawed history. Centuries of oppression produced a pessimistic victim mentality, and the ideology and mental habits of robust individualism have not had a chance to establish themselves Victim mentality, lack of agency, negative emotions combined with unrealistically positive self-evaluation and a fundamentally conservative outlook amount to a propensity to endorse a collective narcissistic mindset that eventually produces voting preferences for an illiberal regime.³¹

The relatively high level of predisposition toward authoritarianism among the populations of successful illiberal regimes is another factor contributing to the illiberalism of the regime and its success. As the regime is plebiscitarian, it must respect and reflect the authoritarian predispositions of the pro-government electorate. Authoritarian predisposition is understood here as a personality trait, one of intolerance toward the other.³² Persons disposed toward authoritarianism favor “suppression of difference and achievement of uniformity necessitate autocratic social arrangements”³³ To quote Adorno’s classic formula, the authoritarian personality has a “general disposition to glorify, to be subservient to and remain uncritical towards authoritative figures of the ingroup and to take an attitude of punishing outgroup figures in the name of some moral authority.”³⁴ It is easy to see why a person with such characteristics would be the foundation of “the authentic people” who support the illiberal leader and why is there little resistance to authoritarian drift. Note too that narcissistic culture and personal authoritarianism are likewise present among opposition voters.

Karen Stenner and Jonathan Haidt have argued that all (Western) societies have a pool of basically authoritarian people, amounting to an estimated one-third of the population.³⁵ Under most electoral systems, this suffices to win election after election. Empirical data indicate that people with authoritarian predispositions are overrepresented in victorious populist movements. Among the 2016 U.S. Republican candidates, Trump-supporters represented a significantly different authoritarianism compared to the electoral bases of other candidates.³⁶ A survey in 10 European

31 Lantos and Forgas, “The Role of Collective Narcissism in Populist Attitudes and the Collapse of Democracy in Hungary,” 75.

32 Karen Stenner, *The Authoritarian Dynamic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

33 Karen Stenner, “Three Kinds of ‘Conservatism,’” *Psychological Inquiry* 20, no. 2-3 (April-September 2009): 142, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10478400903028615>. Bert N. Bakker, Matthijs Rooduijn, and Gijs Schumacher, “The Psychological Roots of Populist Voting: Evidence from the United States, the Netherlands and Germany,” *European Journal of Political Research* 55, no. 2 (2016): 313, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12121>. They argue that “populist voters do not have an authoritarian personality such as supporters of fascist outfits” (p. 304), but they refer to a different kind of authoritarianism.

34 Theodor W. Adorno et al., *The Authoritarian Personality* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1950), 228. In a modern restatement, Bob Altemeyer, *Enemies of Freedom: Understanding Right-Wing Authoritarianism* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1988), claims that the core traits of the authoritarian disposition are aggressiveness, conventionalism, and submissiveness.

35 Karen Stenner and Jonathan Haidt, “Authoritarianism Is Not a Momentary Madness, but an Eternal Dynamic Within Liberal Democracies,” in *Can It Happen Here? Authoritarianism in America*, ed. Cass R. Sunstein (New York: HarperCollins Publishers 2018), 192.

36 Matthew MacWilliams, *The Rise of Trump: America’s Authoritarian Spring* (Amherst, MA: Amherst College Press, 2016), 26-7.

countries found high rates of authoritarianism among populist voters, although “[t] here are more authoritarian populists than right-wing populist voters.”³⁷

In illiberal plebiscitarian regimes, democracy is not about common deliberation that produces temporary, reasonable compromises acceptable to all citizens, but represents an opportunity to express agreement with the leader, who has the power to support “us,” our identities and interests, and who serves the collective of supporters. The leader can count on authoritarian submission and excessive fear of the “other.” The acceptance of authority is either compelled or embraced as the normal state of affairs: government authority is respected because the state and its leader have higher standing, as in Singapore, where the authority of the regime stems from the ruling party’s consecutive electoral victories,³⁸ which have created both the impression and the reality of “no alternative.”

Plebiscitarian government, i.e., permanent acclamation that gives continuous legitimacy to the leader and his government, is possible if and when the leader can assume that the citizenry will be deferential to state authority. With enough authoritarian-minded or conformist people who will obey and endorse without further demand for legitimacy, the leader can afford the risks of a contested election: as long as his routinized charisma remains effective (thanks to, among other things, his control over mass media and social media), the deferential relative majority will endorse him. So too will the mass of people who are simply dependent on the resources controlled by the state and other power centers supervised by the leader and his cronies (e.g., state-provided employment, welfare, and other benefits). Beyond dependence, legitimacy is also an important factor: people will accept commands from the state simply because they originate from the state and because the leader maintains legitimate authority not only in the sense of legality, but also in the plebiscitarian sense of being popularly authorized. For other supporters of illiberal regimes, conformism will suffice, especially where civic resilience does not form part of the local culture.³⁹

Authoritarianism and serf mentality are likely more common (or more easily “liberated”) where these are part of the historically determined culture of a country; there will be less resistance thereto where the prevalent culture does not support autonomy or republican citizenship, where (as in Hungary) the prevalent social strategy of survival is traditionally the acceptance of the given, and where the resources necessary for independent citizenry with agency (and models of successful independent agency) are scarce.⁴⁰ In other words, where society is short on democratic and liberal experience, and learned acquiescence constitutes the cultural legacy (a characteristic of the *homo sovieticus*), social resistance to illiberalism and hegemonic domination is less likely. With such cultural experience, social interactions will likely reinforce acquiescence (conformism) and elevate intolerance and exclusion of the other as enemy to the new social norm.

37 John Bartle, David Sanders, and Joe Twyman, “Authoritarian Populist Opinion in Europe,” in *Authoritarian Populism and Liberal Democracy*, ed. Ivor Crewe, David Sanders (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 63.

38 Jaclyn L. Neo, and Andrea Ong Hui Xian, “Making the Singapore Constitution: Amendments as Constitution-Making,” *Journal of Comparative Law* 14, no. 1 (2019): 76.

39 This is what makes Poland different: the country has a strong tradition of civic resilience that is shared by more engaged PiS and opposition supporters.

40 It is noteworthy that Hungary is the only EU member state with a Catholic tradition that is close to countries with a Greek Orthodox background. Hungary was low on the values of self-expression (social toleration, life satisfaction, public expression, and aspiration to liberty). “Inglehart-Welzel Cultural Map, WVS wave 6 (2010-2014),” World Values Survey, accessed May 23, 2022, <https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSCContents.jsp>.

Ruling by Cheating and its (A)moral Consequences

“There are two ways in which injustice may be done, either through force or through deceit; and deceit seems to belong to a little fox, force to a lion. Both of them seem alien to a human being; but deceit deserves a greater hatred.”⁴¹ This was Cicero’s view. Machiavelli, by contrast, held that the wise commander should “never attempt to win by force” what he “was able to win by fraud.”⁴²

Indeed, despite the moral depravity of deceit, ruling by cheating is all too common. Manipulations with/of institutions, ideas, facts, education, and the law are constitutive elements of a potentially self-perpetuating political system (a regime) that claims to satisfy the formal requirements of a constitutional democracy. Plebiscitarian leader democracies (PLDs) of a populist stamp are ruled by cheating—and by all the progeny of the concealment of truth in order to mislead: lying, deceit, fraud, spin, tricks, etc. Illiberal democracy manipulates what and who the people are; it twists and bends the law to resemble a system that faithfully observes the constitution and the rule of law; it cheats to enable the favoritism that it needs to dominate in a patronage system and perpetuate its power. A constitutional democracy cannot exist amid constant misinformation that deprives its citizens of the facts and honest norms needed for rational discourse.⁴³ A legal system that claims to empower people when it only caters to their bias and prejudice becomes a cheater: it will deprive people of the rational capacity needed for democracy while increasing its own legitimacy fraudulently by making deceived people and innocent bystanders believe that the system is democratic, constitutional, etc.

While lying is not uncommon in illiberal governance, cheating is more characteristic. *Cheating* entails pretending to observe a rule in order to depart from it, most often reaping undeserved benefits from the cheated persons or from the “system” in the process: “in violating a rule that others follow, and thereby breaching an obligation to restrict his liberty in a manner agreed, the cheater gains an unfair advantage.”⁴⁴ In the act of cheating, the cheater (mis)represents himself as conforming to norms. European PLDs import authoritarian leftovers from “beyond-criticism” Western democracies in a strategic, *mala fide* way. They rely on “the fallacy of composition,” which assumes “that if the components of an aggregate ... have a certain property, the aggregate ... must also have that property.”⁴⁵

This is possible, among other reasons, because there remain too many authoritarian leftovers in constitutional democracies. These do not undermine democracy in their original country, but when bundled together in illiberal democracies, the cumulative effect proves lethal to constitutional democracy. “Each step, legal in itself, might

41 Marcus Tullius Cicero, *On Duties (De Officiis)* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1913), 41.

42 J. Bowyer Bell and Barton Whaley, *Cheating and Deception* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1991), 35.

43 Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (New York: Crown, 2018), 198 et seq. on President Trump’s systematic use of lies and its devastating consequences for democracy.

44 Stuart P. Green, *Lying, Cheating, and Stealing: A Moral Theory of White-Collar Crime* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 55. See further Michael Sean Quinn, “Practice-Defining Rules,” *Ethics* 86, no. 1 (1975): 76–86, <https://doi.org/10.1086/291982>.

45 Adrian Vermeule, *The System of the Constitution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 9.

undermine liberal democracy a little bit more.⁴⁶ Difference of degree turns into difference of kind. The result is the Frankenstate,⁴⁷ an entire system of illiberal fakes. However, this is not ordinary arbitrariness, which would deprive the regime of the blessings of the rule of law; such cheating is not the illiberal unconstitutionality described in Fraenkel's *Dual State*, where the "law as applied has no relation to the stated law."⁴⁸

Instead, plebiscitarian leaders tend to replace accountability with the semblance of responsive government, turning spin doctors into key players in communications and replacing governance with rhetoric about governing. Spin-doctored democracy has reached new levels of fraud in illiberal democracies. Notably, however, the officially articulated goals do not differ from what is acceptable in any constitutional democracy. In the currently prevailing deferentialism (aka legal defeatism), the standard assumption is that the purpose of the government and law must be taken at face value and that the people's choice is correct (as there is no higher standard).

How to explain the success of the patent legal falsity used by illiberal regimes? These regimes rely on "willful ignorance."⁴⁹ Of course, all contemporary democracies operate in a world of heightened manipulation ("fake news") that makes it less likely that legal cheating will be unmasked. Even if unmasking occurs, there are no legal or social consequences. Intellectual and moral revisionism makes legal (and underlying political) cheating hardly a matter of outrage. Cheating is not even a matter of concern for the PLD: it flies under the radar, increasingly unnoticed. The typical public reaction is: "So it goes." A lack of constitutional honesty and morality matters little in a cynical world that questions the very possibility of truth—particularly moral truth—and where being economical with the truth is a sign of power. In a context where politicians of a mature democracy can shamelessly and publicly claim that electoral redistricting is about maximizing seats for the party, irrespective of actual majorities and equal voting power (as in North Carolina, without any legal action by the Supreme Court⁵⁰), one can hardly claim that value-based standards matter. For illiberal democracies, shameless lying is normal. They can lie with impunity once the population is convinced that there is no truth and that claims of truth are the ultimate manipulation, especially in matters of what is good or bad (except when it comes to agreement with the nation or the "true people").

The constitutional regime of illiberal democracy is a regime of cheating. At times, it is close to the inventiveness of Orwell: it calls itself a constitutional system of checks and balances, yet the separation of powers serves only one-man rule. It claims to respect freedom of expression, not even punishing those who insult the government, but critical coverage cannot compete with monopolized and state-dependent private and so-called public media, which operate as government brainwashing machines in the service of the nation and its authentic people. This characteristic feature

46 David A. Strauss, "Law and the Slow-Motion Emergency," in *Can It Happen Here? Authoritarianism in America*, ed. Cass R. Sunstein (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2018), 365–66; Mark Tushnet, "Authoritarian Constitutionalism," *Cornell Law Review* 100, no. 2 (2015): 409–10; Renata Uitz, "Can You Tell When an Illiberal Democracy Is in the Making? An Appeal to Comparative Constitutional Law Scholarship from Hungary," *International Journal of Constitutional Law* 13, no. 1 (2015): 279–300, <https://doi.org/10.1093/icon/mov012>.

47 Kim Lane Scheppele, "The Rule of Law and the Frankenstate: Why Governance Checklists Do Not Work," *Governance* 26, no. 4 (2013): 559–62, <https://doi.org/10.1111/gove.12049>.

48 Mark Tushnet, "The Possibility of Illiberal Constitutionalism," *Florida Law Review* 69, no. 6 (2017): 1373.

49 "In law [t]he 'willful ignorance doctrine' refers to the rule that juries may convict a defendant of a knowledge crime even if he was only willfully ignorant of the inculpatory proposition." Alexander Sarch, *Criminally Ignorant* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 12.

50 *Rucho v. Common Cause*, 139 U.S. 2484 (2019).

of Bonapartism, the state of pseudo-liberty, was long ago observed by Benjamin Constant: “Despotism banishes all forms of liberty; usurpation needs these forms in order to justify the overturning of what it replaces; but in appropriating them it profanes them.”⁵¹

In many respects, the illiberal regime has reached near-perfection via counterfeit. The counterfeiter can proudly sell his product as lawful.

Vaclav Havel described communism as a system where citizens live in lies. He hoped that one day they would step out of “living with the lie” and that would be the end of communism.⁵² Today, however, we are “living in lies” again. The government’s lies go beyond law; they permeate politics, business, and culture. The arbitrary regime that rules by cheating disrespects its citizens and makes them complicit in its deceit.⁵³ Regardless, they are treated as dupes to be manipulated. The government claims that it observes the rule of law when it only rules by law; it claims democracy is observed as opposition parties regularly contest elections, although what they offer is plebiscitarian acclamation and not common decision developed through discourse.

The trickster is modest. This is one reason for his success. The strategy is “not cheating *all* of the people *all* of the time, for the ideology must be believed, [therefore] it should ... actually seem to be just.”⁵⁴ Illiberal democracy knows how to behave itself, and contrary to communism or even contemporary Russia, it cheats only to the extent necessary—at least for a while. Democracy and respect for the law remain *the* prevailing language of power, even if this moves to a rhetoric of some common (national) good or interest.⁵⁵ At the same time, nationalism and identitarianism are key to public mobilization and provide a *source* of plebiscitarian support for power.

A system based on cheating and lies can be efficient for the survival of the regime, but at considerable cost: “Why would you not try to evade taxation since the fiscal authorities will most likely not punish your evasion; or not make a practice of fraudulently collecting a pension; or not even decide to illegally build a home on public land in the knowledge that the government will eventually legalize it for a small fee.”⁵⁶ What Hale noted with respect to Russia applies to most illiberal regimes (Singapore excepted): where official cheating is the norm rather than the rare exception, it will be accepted even if people abhor corruption. “And when they expect virtually everyone to practice corruption and nepotism and believe that they cannot rely on others to obey or enforce the law, then they face very strong incentives to engage in the very same practices themselves if they want to get anything done—

51 Benjamin Constant, *Constant: Political Writings*, ed. Biancamaria Fontana (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 95.

52 “Living within the lie can constitute the system only if it is universal...everyone who steps out of line denies it in principle and threatens it in its entirety ...” Vaclav Havel, “The Power of the Powerless,” in *Vaclav Havel: Living in Truth*, ed. Jan Vladislav (London: Faber & Faber, 1986), 55-6.

53 The politically unconnected businessman will participate in a public procurement tender, deliberately presenting a losing offer, only to become one of the subcontractors of the winner.

54 Martin Krygier, “The Rule of Law and State Legitimacy,” in *Legitimacy: The State and Beyond*, ed. Wojciech Sadurski, Michael Sevel, and Kevin Walton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 118. The internal quote comes from Edward Palmer Thompson, *Whigs and Hunters: The Origins of the Black Act* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1975). In a part omitted from the quote, Thompson requires one additional thing: the law “should display an independence from gross manipulation.” This element is the least satisfied in illiberal democracies, but the standard is *display*, and not an actual lack of manipulation, a sort of cheating. Once again, this is *constitutional chicanery*, which is difficult to capture in rule-of-law terms. See András Sajó and Renáta Uitz, *The Constitution of Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 4.

55 See the PiS’ slogan from 2015 onwards: “good change.”

56 Takis S. Pappas, *Populism and Liberal Democracy: A Comparative and Theoretical Analysis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 206.

even good things.⁵⁷ In Hungary, cheating is tolerated socially as being “cagey.”⁵⁸ Such tolerance enjoys a long tradition in Hungary, as well as in a number of other less robust democracies. To survive in an oppressive regime, norm-breaking was essential; the hero of folktales was a smart, dirt-poor country boy who won over the local lord with tricks and cheating. In Hungary, “trickiness” is a sign of cleverness. It is accepted as a norm, part of the survival strategy of ordinary citizens. It is part of a serf mentality inherited from feudalism and very apt in neo-feudal dependency.

The (a)morality of officials becomes that of subjects. Moreover, there is a generalized loss of trust both in the authorities and in fellow citizens.⁵⁹ Faith in the possibilities for rational discourse disappears in the false contrast between friend and enemy. This means the end of substantive democracy, as there is no democracy without reason-based deliberation. This is what regimes of usurpation achieve. As Benjamin Constant, our Virgil in the inferno of Caesarist regimes, tells us, the authorities will “have to strive to banish all logic from the spirit” of citizens: “all words would lose their meaning.”⁶⁰

Public morality, like that of officials, will become cynical, although the regime will flourish in the hypocrisy it enforces through its institutions: “this hypocrisy will prove still more corrupting still no-one believes in it. It is not only when they confuse and deceive people that the lies of authority are harmful: they are no less so when they do not deceive them in the least.”⁶¹

Unsurprisingly, ruling by cheating is socially accepted in PLDs. On the road to despotism, Hannah Arendt warns, “totalitarian movements conjure up a lying world of consistency which is more adequate to the needs of the human mind than reality itself; in which, through sheer imagination, uprooted masses can feel at home and are spared the never-ending shocks which real life and real experiences deal to human beings and their expectations.”⁶²

A political system based on an intermingling of lies, deceit, and misrepresentation cannot be authentic, but paradoxically, it is the inauthenticity—the respect of law and democracy in their breach—that renders it efficient in the sense of stability. The institutions fall in line first, but after a while, a growing number of citizens accept the lies and become accomplices⁶³ of the regime—some of them cynical, others enthusiastic. Even if the cheating is obvious and the statements of the government or the decisions of the authorities are fake (for example, regarding the legality of a procurement that results inevitably in the victory of the same people), the public

57 Henry E. Hale, “Russian Patronal Politics Beyond Putin,” *Daedalus* 146, no. 2 (2017): 35, https://doi.org/10.1162/DAED_a_00432.

58 According to a 2019 Eurobarometer survey, corruption is more accepted in Hungary than in any other EU member state, though 80 percent of respondents consider that high-level corruption is not pursued sufficiently. The Poles remain far more sensitive to corruption. “Special Eurobarometer 502: Corruption,” European Commission, June 9, 2020, http://data.europa.eu/88u/dataset/S2247_92_4_502_ENG.

59 Wojciech Sadurski, *Poland’s Constitutional Breakdown* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

60 Constant, *Political Writings*, 66.

61 *Ibid.*, 66.

62 Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (San Diego, CA: Harcourt, Inc., 1994), 353.

63 In the imaginary community, “the members of the audience are turned into accomplices of the regime.” Günter Frankenberg, “Authoritarian Constitutionalism: Coming to Terms with Modernity’s Nightmares” in *Authoritarian Constitutionalism*, ed. Helena Alviar García and Günter Frankenberg (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2019), 25.

reaction may not change.⁶⁴ The logic of illiberalism and the attachment to cheating will drive even unwilling leaders to become less and less modest in their autocracy, and yet the same minority will keep the leader in power democratically even after he becomes despotic.

Any exercise of power that relies on systemic cheating has morally devastating consequences. One of the consequences of this state of affairs is loss of moral capacity among the population, at least in public affairs. As a rule, norm-breaking, i.e., departure from the status quo or *reference state*, results in outrage, a form of anger. Moral indignation is generally understood as an emotional reaction (feeling) to an action perceived as violating social norms. Outrage triggers condemnation and even actual sanction and sends a message to the community about commitment to the norm.

There is less and less place for moral outrage or indignation in the empire of cheating and lying. Norm-violation is normalized, even if people still have a vague idea of what is right and wrong, good and bad.

The absence of moral outrage and indignation is most visible in matters of corruption (and pillage and plunder of public goods), but what I find particularly troubling is the denial of support for Ukraine among Hungarians who accept the frame imposed by government-controlled media.⁶⁵ Because of the irrelevance of public morality in a world of cheating and lying, where immorality is normalized, the propaganda can build upon the moral vacuum and lack of rational reflection that prevails in society.

The current Russian aggression violates a very basic rule that applies even at the level of the childhood sandbox. War as aggression is a clear example of the breach of a fundamental norm of peace in a civilization that rejects aggressive behavior. Even small children know that it is impermissible to attack the other violently, except in self-defense. However, most Hungarians, especially government supporters, are not morally troubled by the Russian aggression. Even if many individuals are ready to provide some kind of support to Ukrainian refugees, a clear majority are not ready to make even minimal personal sacrifices to diminish the prospects of the Russian war effort in Ukraine. To wit, one question in a representative survey conducted in late March 2022 concerned willingness to pay slightly more for heating to diminish consumption of Russian gas. Two-thirds of Hungarians were not prepared to spend a penny more on heating to reduce Russia's gas and oil revenue.⁶⁶ Another survey found that less than one-third of Hungarians supported sanctions against Russia,⁶⁷ even though nearly two-thirds considered Hungary too close to Russia.⁶⁸ Hungary

64 Even if people acknowledge that the information is incorrect, their feelings toward the source of the misinformation can remain unchanged. Briony Swire-Thompson et al., "They Might Be a Liar but They're My Liar: Source Evaluation and the Prevalence of Misinformation," *Political Psychology* 41, no. 1 (2020): 21-34, <https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12586>; Brendan Nyhan, et al., "Taking Fact-Checks Literally but Not Seriously? The Effects of Journalistic Fact-Checking on Factual Beliefs and Candidate Favorability," *Political Behavior* 42 (2019): 939-960, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-019-09528-x>.

65 The Polish public reaction is different, as the Polish identity is determined by a historical experience that supports fear of Russians.

66 "Two-Thirds of Hungarians Are More Concerned about Their Utility Bills than Punishing Putin," *Napi.hu*, March 25, 2022, <https://www.napi.hu/magyar-gazdasag/energia-koltseg-energiafuggetlenseg-oroszorszag-rezsisokkentes-magyar-kormany.748958.html>.

67 "Hungarians Are Divided by the Sanctions against Russia," *G7.hu*, April 15, 22, <https://g7.hu/kozelet/20220415/megosztjak-a-magyarokat-az-oroszorszag-elleni-szankciok/>.

68 "Hungary Has Become Too Close to Russia, According to the Majority of Hungarians," *Napi.hu*, March 3, 2022, <https://www.napi.hu/magyar-gazdasag/orosz-ukran-haboru-megiteles-felmeres-magyarorszag-gaz.747398.html>.

Regimes of Cheating and the (A)morality of Illiberalism

stands alone among the surveyed European Union nations in denying support to Ukraine; as in Saudi Arabia, the opinion that “the problems of Ukraine are none of our business and we should not interfere” prevails.⁶⁹ This lack of solidarity seems to be a purely private-interest-driven choice unaffected by either empathy-based solidarity or identification with the Western political alliance. It could also be read simply as reflecting insecurity-induced anguish. The fact remains that collective or moral-value-driven choices are not decisive for the majority.⁷⁰

One explanation is that Russian aggression is framed cognitively in a way that overrides or displaces intuitive moral outrage. Mass manipulation certainly contributes to this event. But the brainwashing and the identification with the amoral, pseudo-rational position of the Leader would not work without a general disrespect for moral positions.

Amoralism is part of the dominant culture and it builds on a path-dependent, inherited behavioral strategy that has its roots in serf mentality, politely called peasant mentality. This mentality does not challenge authorities but follows a strategy of rule-avoidance in which workarounds are praised as the ultimate smartness. This is coupled with a desire not to get personally involved in decisions regarding fellow citizens, except where conformism requires it.

Serf mentality was documented in Hungary as early as the eighteenth century. But its most elegant formulation is offered by Benjamin Constant as a general rule of political psychology: “Subjects who suspect their masters of duplicity and perfidy, themselves develop a like duplicity and perfidy. ... Truth seems to him stupidity, deception an index of skillfulness.”⁷¹

The serf mentality is reinforced today by social dependency. Those who feel powerless do not imagine themselves to have agency and feel no responsibility for external events. *Moral outrage is an unaffordable luxury*. Given that people live in lies, there is simply no place for public morality. Moral truth does not exist.

It would be unfair to state, without further research, that this egoistic instrumentalism indicates that Hungarian society’s moral compass is missing. What one can say with some certainty is that this seemingly rational, self-interest-based position—which excludes morality from one’s preferences—corresponds to the passive, almost Byzantine-Orthodox mentality repeatedly observed in World Values Surveys of Hungary. It is also more than likely that the social relations of domination have reinforced this subordinate, survival-oriented Orthodox mentality.⁷²

Based on historical experience, we should not be surprised. Moral outrage quickly disappeared in 1933 in Germany or, more precisely, was directed such that the outrage *supported* outrageous acts, as in matters of antisemitism. There was moral outrage, at least among convinced Nazis and anti-Semites, but the moral frame was

69 “The World’s Response to the War in Ukraine: A 27-Country Global Advisor Survey,” Ipsos, April 2022, <https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2022-04/Global%20Advisor%20-%20War%20in%20Ukraine%20-%20April%202022%20-%20Graphic%20Report.pdf>.

70 This is not a matter of general poverty among respondents who cannot afford any further increase in the cost of living. When a pensioner was asked about the idea of turning the heating temperature down by one degree, he responded that he was too old to live in the cold.

71 Constant, *Political Writings*, 65. Imposture was characteristic of the rule of Napoleon, the quintessential plebiscitarian leader before democracy.

72 “Inglehart-Welzel World Cultural Map (2020),” World Values Survey, accessed May 23, 2022, <https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/photos/EV000190.JPG>.

shifted with surprising speed and efficiency. The Nazis relied upon and mobilized a cognitive frame where intuitively self-evident dictates of not harming others were irrelevant; the distinction between good and bad was based on group identity and belonging. Moral duty meant loyalty to one's community even if the representatives of the community were actually committing outrageous bestialities in the name of the group.

In Hungary today, to the extent moral outrage is still relevant, it does not follow the morality of the Enlightenment. It works primarily where *ressentiment*, i.e., a fixation on alleged past collective injustice, can mobilize it. Injustice against Transcarpathia (which has not been Hungarian territory for the past century) is what matters in the Ukraine war. While it is blatantly stupid and self-destructive to compare Orbán & Co. to Hitler, the morality of tribalism is relevant in what we observe in Hungary.

The denial of norm-violation (in this case the Russian violation of international law) and the rejection of moral indignation, shocking as it is, should not surprise. Humans are not built to live in psychological tension. One way out of this is psychic numbing, a term coined by Lifton to describe the “turning off” of feeling that enabled rescue workers to function during the horrific aftermath of the Hiroshima bombing.⁷³

The numbing of moral outrage—i.e., the elimination of anger and indignation by normalizing the norm violation—seems to follow a comparable pattern. Feelings are temporary and hard to sustain over time, while cognition is capable of mental overwrite to reduce cognitive dissonance. There are emotions that militate against the moral intuitions dictated by moral outrage. Identity-based emotions can counter or even prevent indignation. The centering of nationalist identity around the leader counters the moral indignation that would result in action contrary to what the leader dictates or suggests. Where cheating is normalized, liberal morality no longer makes any sense. Authenticity seems to be an elitist impossibility and therefore there is no place for morality in illiberal regimes: moral intuitions are numbed. This (a) morality is key to the success of illiberal democracy.

The moral perspective first became irrelevant, then suspicious, and finally a matter of heroism.

“...unhappy is the land that needs a hero.”
- Bertolt Brecht

⁷³ Robert Jay Lifton, *Death in Life: Survivors of Hiroshima* (New York: Random House, 1967).



Economic Nationalism Goes Global: Illiberal Governments Instrumentalizing Globalization in Eastern Europe

PAULA GANGA

Abstract

What are the consequences of electing illiberal leaders for the liberal international order? Traditional responses suggest they either want to increase their influence or change it radically. By understanding the illiberal domestic agenda of economic nationalism and statism in a world of increased financialization, I argue that the economic concentration taking place domestically will result in illiberal leaders instrumentalizing globalization for their political survival. This means these leaders have learned to selectively pick those parts of globalization most likely to sustain their regime—for example, criticizing multilateral organizations such as the European Union while reaping the benefits of EU membership. In this article, I begin by examining the trend of illiberal governments adopting economic nationalism and statism. I then theorize the nuanced ways in which illiberal leaders still use the liberal order for their political survival—in spite of espousing an illiberal economic agenda. I examine this phenomenon with an emphasis on illiberal leaders in Hungary and Poland and provide evidence from the last two decades of economic and political developments in Eastern Europe, as well as explore the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and the recent war in Ukraine on the future of illiberal leaders' approach to globalization.

Keywords: illiberalism; economic nationalism; globalization; Eastern Europe; Hungary; Poland

In the last two decades, as increasing numbers of illiberal leaders have been occupying the highest seats of power across the globe, systematically analyzing their time in government has become a policy necessity. While many scholars have examined the consequences of illiberalism on domestic political processes¹ and more work is being done on the economic implications of illiberal governments,² the next step is to investigate the impact of these increasingly vocal leaders on the international arena.

To understand how illiberal leaders might interact with or change the international arena, it is essential to know that the liberal international order that has been organizing relations between states since the late 1940s has never been an uncontested concept,³ with scholars predicting its demise for years.⁴ Rising illiberalism in particular represents a crucial recent challenge.⁵

However, in this article, I argue that illiberal leaders do not want the failure of the current international order, nor do they necessarily want it to be remade in their image.⁶ Because of their statist and economic nationalist domestic stances, the way illiberal leaders approach the international arena will be one of instrumentalizing globalization to further their own political survival. While loud criticism will dominate the statements of these leaders regarding various international organizations, countries, companies, or investors, this rhetoric can be explained as part of their economic nationalism and statism espoused in the economic arena. However, in practice, illiberal governments will continue their previous international engagements to stay relevant in the international arena and its many organizations and to continue reaping the benefits of this participation. These benefits range from direct financial help like that which Hungary and Poland receive from the EU as part of the accession process, loans, grants from multilateral financial or development institutions, or even foreign investment facilitations.

Yet other benefits can be less direct though just as significant. Access to larger markets and extensive trade remain important benefits of globalization. But access also matters for the ability to gain entry to the international financial sector. As world economies have become increasingly financialized, leaders' ability to both

1 Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (New York, NY: Broadway Books, 2018); Yascha Mounk, *The People vs. Democracy: Why Our Freedom is in Danger and How to Save It* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018).

2 Paula Ganga, "Economic Consequences of Illiberal Governments," in *The Routledge Handbook of Illiberalism*, eds. András Sajó, Renáta Uitz, and Stephen Holmes (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2021): 691–709.

3 David A. Lake, Lisa L. Martin, and Thomas Risse, "Challenges to the Liberal Order: Reflections on International Organization," *International Organization* 75, no. 2 (2021): 225–257, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818320000636>; Joseph S. Nye Jr., "Will the Liberal Order Survive?: The History of an Idea," *Foreign Affairs* 96, no. 1 (January/February 2017): 10–16.

4 John J. Mearsheimer, "Bound to Fail: The Rise and Fall of the Liberal International Order," *International Security* 43, no. 4 (2019): 7–50, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00342; Alexander Cooley and Daniel H. Nexon, "How Hegemony Ends," *Foreign Affairs* 99, no. 4 (July/August 2020): 143–156.

5 Lake, Martin, and Risse, "Challenges," 235; Alexander Cooley and Daniel H. Nexon, "The Real Crisis of Global Order: Illiberalism on the Rise," *Foreign Affairs* 101, no. 1 (January/February 2022): 103–118; Alexander Cooley and Daniel H. Nexon, "The Illiberal Tide: Why the International Order is Tilting toward Autocracy," *Foreign Affairs* 100, no. 1 (January/February 2021): 103–118.

6 Only illiberal regimes in countries like Russia and China would have the international clout to make this sort of change, but even when they are inclined to reshape the international order, their recent strategy has been to set up authoritarian regional organizations of their own. See Alexander Libman and Anastassia V. Obydenkova, "Understanding Authoritarian Regionalism," *Journal of Democracy* 29, no. 4 (October 2018): 151–165, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2018.0070>; Maria J. Debre, "Clubs of Autocrats: Regional Organizations and Authoritarian Survival," *Review of International Organizations* 17, no. 3 (2022): 485–511, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11558-021-09428-y>.

access these markets and hide assets within them has been extensively documented.⁷ Therefore I argue that illiberal leaders have learned to selectively pick those parts of globalization that are most likely to sustain their regime while continuing to criticize these institutions and processes to domestic audiences as a way to further their project of building statism and economic nationalism.

This instrumentalization does not mean that illiberal leaders analyzed here are just neoliberals with nationalist rhetoric. These leaders' statism and economic nationalism run deep. The domestic dimension reveals that not only is their commitment to democracy shallow, but the economic dimension shows the instrumentalization of state policy toward power consolidation. It is no surprise that the actions they take abroad follow this line of reasoning. Whether it is the liberal international order or a Chinese alternative, I argue that Eastern European economic nationalists will make use of the available foreign instruments for their domestic survival.

A significant challenge to this argument is that all states do this: it is called foreign policy, and trying to extract as much as possible from all situations for the benefit of one's own state is what all good politicians should do. Moreover, the "logic of political survival" dictates this behavior in both democracies and autocracies.⁸ However, the decades that have seen the liberal international order in action have also experienced increased levels of cooperation in the international arena from states all around the world. What is new from the illiberal trend is the questioning of long-established international commitments and the portrayal of previous governments taking on those commitments as going against national sovereignty and even amounting to a betrayal of the country by those elites to foreign interests. In this setting, the illiberal leader claims to be breaking away from these disastrous arrangements, or to be trying to get better deals while continuing to participate in the international arena and getting the benefits of that participation. I show this trend in the contentious relationship with the EU that Hungary and Poland have experienced since they have begun sliding further down the de-democratization path.

By examining the international dimension of the domestic economic policies enacted by illiberal governments in two Eastern European governments with an eye toward a comparative analysis, this article builds an initial theoretical framework for the illiberal approach to the international arena. By focusing on Hungary and Poland, two important countries in Europe, this paper's conclusions could find applicability for future European illiberal governments and, to a large extent, for countries outside the EU framework such as Brazil, Turkey, or India.⁹

In this article, I begin by assessing how illiberalism is linked to statism and economic nationalism, as well as the trend toward economic nationalism, and statism in Eastern Europe and elsewhere. Then I theorize the nuanced ways in which domestic economic nationalism and statism have translated into the instrumentalization of globalization by illiberal leaders for their political survival. I examine this

7 Juliet Johnson and Andrew Barnes, "Financial Nationalism and Its International Enablers: The Hungarian Experience," *Review of International Political Economy* 22, no. 3 (2015): 535–569, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09692290.2014.919336>; James O'Donovan, Hannes F. Wagner, and Stefan Zeume, "The Value of Offshore Secrets: Evidence from the Panama Papers," *Review of Financial Studies* 32, no. 11 (2019): 4117–4155, <https://doi.org/10.1093/rfs/hhz017>.

8 Bruce Bueno de Mesquita, Alastair Smith, Randolph M. Siverson, and James D. Morrow, *The Logic of Political Survival* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005).

9 For an examination of economic populism and sovereigntism with a similar argument that focuses on 5 Western European political parties, see Gilles Ivaldi and Oscar Mazzoleni, "Economic Populism and Sovereigntism: The Economic Supply of European Radical Right-Wing Populist Parties," *European Politics and Society* 21, no. 2 (2020): 202–218.

phenomenon with an emphasis on concrete cases of illiberal leaders in Eastern Europe and provide evidence from the last two decades of economic and political developments in the region. I also analyze the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and the recent war in Ukraine as new instances of instrumentalization of international events by illiberal leaders.

Illiberalism, Statism, and Economic Nationalism in the Era of Globalization

Much of the work on illiberalism is relatively new, as the concept itself only emerged in 1997 with Fareed Zakaria's argument that many political regimes appeared democratic on the surface by virtue of their conducting elections and going through the motions of democratic practice, but that this was done without respecting liberal principles such as pluralism, the rule of law, or individual freedoms.¹⁰ Since this early definition, the debate around illiberalism has intensified both in academic circles and think tanks.¹¹ Still, the term has also possibly been rendered toxic¹² by its adoption by politicians claiming the mantle of "illiberal democracy."¹³ Even now, the consensus is that there is no consensus and no minimal, easy-to-identify definition,¹⁴ with illiberalism sometimes still associated with conservatism,¹⁵ the far right,¹⁶ populism,¹⁷ or nationalism.¹⁸

Substantial work is being done to disentangle these concepts and carve out more precise definitions. For example, Marlene Laruelle suggests a more fine-grained framework to avoid this terminological confusion.¹⁹ While the definition is quite extensive in scope,²⁰ I focus here on a few key elements where I expand upon and

10 Fareed Zakaria, "The Rise of Illiberal Democracy," *Foreign Affairs* 76, no. 6 (November/December 1997): 22–43; Fareed Zakaria, *The Future of Freedom: Illiberal Democracy at Home and Abroad* (Revised Edition) (W.W. Norton & Company, 2007).

11 Marlene Laruelle, "Illiberalism: A Conceptual Introduction," *East European Politics* 38, no. 2 (March 2022): 303–327, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2022.2037079>.

12 Günter Frankenberg, "Exploring the Topography of the Authoritarian: Populism, Illiberalism, and Authoritarianism," *Journal of Illiberalism Studies* 2, no. 1 (Spring 2022): 10, <https://doi.org/10.53483/VDIU3531>.

13 Viktor Orbán, "Speech at the 25th Bálványos Summer Free University and Student Camp," July 26, 2014, http://2010-2015.miniszterelnok.hu/in_english_article/prime_minister_viktor_orban_s_speech_at_the_25th_balvanyos_summer_free_university_and_student_camp.

14 Helena Rosenblatt, "The History of Illiberalism," in *The Routledge Handbook of Illiberalism*, eds. András Sajó, Renáta Uitz, and Stephen Holmes (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2021): 16–32.

15 Andy Hamilton, "Conservatism as Illiberalism," in *The Routledge Handbook of Illiberalism*, eds. András Sajó, Renáta Uitz, and Stephen Holmes (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2021): 70–81.

16 Marc F. Plattner, "Illiberal Democracy and the Struggle on the Right," in *The Emergence of Illiberalism*, eds. Boris Vormann, and Michael D. Weinman (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2022): 43–57.

17 Paul Blokker, "Populism and Illiberalism," in *The Routledge Handbook of Illiberalism*, eds. András Sajó, Renáta Uitz, and Stephen Holmes (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2021): 261–279.

18 Mabel Berezin, "Identity, Narratives, and Nationalism," in *The Routledge Handbook of Illiberalism*, eds. András Sajó, Renáta Uitz, and Stephen Holmes (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2021): 237–249.

19 Laruelle, "Illiberalism," 2.

20 Laruelle defines *illiberalism* as follows: "(1) Illiberalism is a new ideological universe that, even if doctrinally fluid and context-based, is to some degree coherent. (2) It represents a backlash against today's liberalism in all its varied scripts—political, economic, cultural, geopolitical, civilizational—often in the name of democratic principles and by winning popular support. (3) It proposes solutions that are majoritarian, nation-centric or sovereigntist, favouring traditional hierarchies and cultural homogeneity. It proposes to restore national sovereignty in various spheres: internationally, by rejecting supranational and multilateral institutions in favour of the sovereign nation-state; economically, by denouncing neoliberal orthodoxy and promoting protectionism at the nation-state level (while at the same time, when in power, sometimes implementing neoliberal reforms); and culturally, by rejecting multiculturalism and minority rights in favor of majoritarianism. ... (4) Last but not least, it calls for a shift from politics to culture and is post-postmodern in its claims of rootedness in an age of globalisation." (Laruelle, "Illiberalism," 309).

nuance Laruelle's insights. I agree that illiberalism "proposes solutions that are majoritarian, nation-centric or sovereigntist," focusing on "traditional hierarchies and cultural homogeneity."²¹ The focus on national sovereignty in opposition to the dislocations of globalization, and on the promotion of protectionism at the nation-state level while bashing supranational and multilateral institutions, is an important dimension of illiberalism's economic and international agenda. Illiberalism exacerbates the process of de-democratization and the weakening of property, political, and civil rights. Additionally, the approaches promoted by illiberal leaders (respect for authority and tradition in society, criticizing Western-style individual freedom, and praise of organic collectives) go hand in hand with increased consolidation of political power and, in the end, economic power.

However, while these characteristics are true, the actual behavior of illiberal regimes shows important nuance in its extreme instrumentalization of the international arena. While state sovereignty is a cornerstone of illiberal politics, these governments have not abdicated *en masse* from their place in the international system nor indiscriminately abandoned neoliberalism. As Laruelle herself points out, when in power, these regimes have even implemented neoliberal reforms.²² While illiberal leaders criticize multilateral organizations they already happen to belong to, they usually stay put—not because they are committed to neoliberalism, but due to the benefits of membership. This makes the instrumentalization of the tools provided by the international system a novel development and a key to the survival of these leaders.

It is important to specify which part of the international liberal agenda is most prone to criticism from illiberal regimes. Globalization and the alternative terms that could describe international politics toward the end of the 20th century—the liberal international order, neoliberalism, the Washington Consensus—offer a big menu of policies and illiberal leaders more vocally object to some of them while benefitting from the others. Moreover, accepting certain benefits does not make them neoliberals but politicians. However, the term *globalization* is just as contested as *illiberalism*.²³ Anthony Giddens is cited as saying that "there are few terms that we use so frequently but which are in fact as poorly conceptualized as globalization."²⁴ The *Blackwell Companion to Globalization* opts for a wide definition of the concept as "an accelerating set of processes involving flows that encompass ever-greater numbers of the world's spaces and that lead to increasing integration and interconnectivity among those spaces."²⁵

Although less precise, this definition allows for the political, economic, and social dimensions of globalization to resonate with the integration and interconnectivity underlined here. Despite multiple disciplines having made important contributions to the study of globalization, a major lens of study is the economic one, which suggests that the phenomenon is produced by the expansion of capitalism over the past century.²⁶ Therefore the economic processes at the core of globalization take

21 Laruelle, "Illiberalism," 304.

22 Laruelle, "Illiberalism," 309.

23 George Ritzer, ed., *The Blackwell Companion to Globalization* (John Wiley & Sons, 2016).

24 Cited in Jan Aart Scholte, "Defining Globalization," *World Economy* 31, no. 11 (November 2008), 1473, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9701.2007.01019.x>.

25 Ritzer, *Blackwell*, 1.

26 Harold James, *The End of Globalization: Lessons from the Great Depression* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009); Roland Robertson and Kathleen E. White, "What Is Globalization?," *The Blackwell Companion to Globalization*, ed. George Ritzer (John Wiley & Sons, 2016): 54–66.

precedence in the analysis. This explains why globalization and neoliberalism are often associated with one another.

The term *neoliberalism* itself has evolved to mean many things depending on the perspective used. It can mean a set of economic reform policies that encompass deregulation of the economy, liberalization of trade, and privatization of state-owned enterprises. However, as the 1980s and 1990s brought more of these reforms to various regions of the world, neoliberalism also came to signify an ideology that focuses on market exchange as the primary value or a mode of governance guided by the self-regulating market ruled by competition and self-interest.²⁷ The set of policies that came to be known under this name was initially proposed by John Williamson as a way to help indebted Latin American countries in the 1980s,²⁸ but was later widely adopted by many reforming countries either by their own leadership as part of a transition process that would result in more foreign investment, or—more prevalently in Eastern Europe—as part of a reform package demanded by international institutions to access loans and grants²⁹ or to be granted membership in the EU or other international bodies.³⁰ It is this conditionality that illiberal leaders everywhere, but particularly in Eastern Europe, object to the most.³¹ Their rise to power comes on the heels of the economic dislocations caused by the openness of globalization, deeply questions the commitments of previous governments to these international arrangements, and promises economic relief to those most affected.³²

In previous work, I argue that to accomplish their promises, illiberal leaders end up consolidating economic power and increasing the presence of the state in the economy.³³ These policies are a natural consequence of illiberalism espousing a worldview that emphasizes authority and tradition over individual freedom. A strong state becomes the natural defender of authority and tradition not only in political matters but also in economic ones. I refer to these economic policies as “statism” and “economic nationalism,” though they might appear under various names. For example, in Hungary and Poland, such policies have been called “unorthodox

27 Tejaswini Ganti, “Neoliberalism,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 43 (October 2014): 89–104. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-092412-155528>; Rajesh Venugopal, “Neoliberalism as Concept,” *Economy and Society* 44, no. 2 (2015): 165–187. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03085147.2015.1013356>.

28 John Williamson, “The Washington Consensus Revisited,” in *Economic and Social Development into the XXI Century*, ed. Louis Emmerij (Washington DC, Inter-American Development Bank, 1997): 48–61.

29 Randall W. Stone, “The Scope of IMF Conditionality,” *International Organization* 62, no. 4 (October 2008): 589–620. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818308080211>.

30 Ulrich Sedelmeier, “Is Europeanisation through Conditionality Sustainable? Lock-in of Institutional Change after EU Accession,” *West European Politics* 35, no. 1 (January 2012): 20–38.

31 For example, integration into the European Union’s structures can be seen as a modified version of the globalization process. However, the requirements for accession to the EU are much more stringent than the economic reforms needed to access International Monetary Fund money or foreign direct investments. Even though, as a matter of principle, the EU does not get involved in the domestic politics of its candidate or member states, the accession process nevertheless thoroughly restructures the politics of a country. For example, a governing party that enacts EU reforms might become so unpopular following those reforms that it might never be competitive in subsequent elections. A political party that enacted reforms required by the EU that later proved unpopular might lose the next elections and never be able to recover from that defeat.

32 Dani Rodrik, “Populism and the Economics of Globalization,” *Journal of International Business Policy* 1, no. 1 (June 2018): 12–33. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s42214-018-0001-4>.

33 Ganga, “Economic Consequences.”

economic policies,”³⁴ “Orbanomics,”³⁵ and “repolonization.”³⁶ These policies have received similarly evocative names in the academic literature, such as “conservative developmental statism,”³⁷ “economic populism and economic sovereigntism,”³⁸ “authoritarian-ethnicist neoliberal fusion,”³⁹ and “populist paternalism.”⁴⁰

These names only partly capture the departure in terms of economic policy represented by the actions of illiberal governments in Hungary and Poland. The policies associated with globalization, neoliberalism, and particularly the Washington Consensus include 10 sets of broad economic policies: fiscal discipline, the reordering of public expenditure priorities, tax reforms, liberalizing interest rates, a competitive exchange rate, trade liberalization, foreign direct investment (FDI) liberalization, privatization, deregulation, and property rights.⁴¹ In other work, I delve into some of these policies that have either been reversed (fiscal discipline, property rights)⁴² or used for electoral gains (tax reform, reordering of public expenditure priorities).⁴³ However, all these policies have been directed toward rebuilding the power of the state and in the process supporting the party in power. By using the more traditional understandings of the terms *statism* and *economic nationalism* for the economic policies of illiberal governments in Hungary and Poland, it becomes easier to see the similarities across cases as these leaders intensify their pursuit of economic nationalism.

34 Gábor Oblath, “Economic Policy and Macroeconomic Developments in Hungary, 2010–2015,” *mBank - CASE Seminar Proceedings* no. 143 (2016), http://www.case-research.eu/sites/default/files/publications/mBank-Case_Seminar_Proceedings_no143%20Gabor_Oblath.pdf; Dariusz Kalan and Michael Durlik, “Central Europe’s Limping Tigers: Hungary’s Unorthodox Policy vs. Romanian Austerity,” *Foreign Affairs*, October 20, 2015, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/hungary/2015-10-20/central-europes-limping-tigers>; Edith Balazs, “Unorthodox Economics Gets Sentiment Wake-Up Call in Hungary,” *Bloomberg Business*, August 21, 2016, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2016-08-21/unorthodox-economic-plan-gets-sentiment-wake-up-call-in-hungary>; László Csaba, “Unorthodoxy in Hungary: An Illiberal Success Story?” *Post-Communist Economics* 34: no. 1 (2019): 1–14, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14631377.2019.1641949>.

35 Andrew Byrne, “‘Orbanomics’ Confounds Critics as Hungary’s Economy Recovers,” *Financial Times*, June 9, 2015, <https://www.ft.com/content/027eaf9a-05e9-11e5-b676-00144feabdco>.

36 “Polish Government to ‘Repolonize’ Media in Next Term, Deputy PM Says,” Reuters, June 20, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-poland-media/polish-government-to-repolonize-media-in-next-term-deputy-pm-says-idUSKCN1TL1EX>; Annabelle Chapman, “‘Repolonization’: Poland Again Hints at Limiting Foreign Media Ownership,” International Press Institute, October 5, 2020, <https://ipi.media/repolonization-poland-again-hints-at-limiting-foreign-media-ownership/>; Irena Pyka and Aleksandra Nocoń, “‘Repolonization’ Process of Domestic Banks: Analysis of Conditions and Opportunities,” in *Contemporary Trends in Accounting, Finance and Financial Institutions*, eds. Taufiq Choudhry and Jacek Mizerka, (Cham, Germany: Springer, 2018): 139–154, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-72862-9_11.

37 Katharina Bluhm, and Mihai Varga, “Conservative Developmental Statism in East Central Europe and Russia,” *New Political Economy* 25, no. 4 (July 2020): 642–659, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13563467.2019.1639146>; Mitchell A. Orenstein, and Bojan Bugarić, “Work, Family, Fatherland: The Political Economy of Populism in Central and Eastern Europe,” *Journal of European Public Policy* 29, no. 2 (2020): 1–20, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2020.1832557>.

38 Ivaldi and Mazzoleni, “Economic Populism and Sovereigntism.”

39 Adam Fabry, *The Political Economy of Hungary: From State Capitalism to Authoritarian Neoliberalism* (London: Palgrave Pivot, 2019).

40 Zsolt Enyedi, “Paternalist Populism and Illiberal Elitism in Central Europe,” *Journal of Political Ideologies* 21, no. 1 (2016): 9–25, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569317.2016.1105402>; Zsolt Enyedi, “Right-Wing Authoritarian Innovations in Central and Eastern Europe,” *East European Politics* 36, no. 3 (2020): 363–77, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2020.1787162>.

41 John Williamson, “A Short History of the Washington Consensus,” *Law & Business Review of the Americas* 15 (2009), 7.

42 Paula Ganga, *Privatization, Nationalization and Back Again: The Politics of Economic Policy Reversal*, book manuscript, (forthcoming), 162–173.

43 For example, property rights are still upheld in Hungary, but my research has shown that a domestic economic agent operating in a sector that the Orbán government considered either strategic or too lucrative would find themselves under the increased scrutiny of financial auditing institutions, with the most frequent result being either selling the company to the state or another economic actor close to the ruling party, or the company going bankrupt due to fines imposed by state authorities (Ganga, *Privatization, Nationalization and Back Again*, 151).

Traditionally the concept of statism is linked to the processes of nationalization and expropriation experienced under Communist regimes. However, with the end of the Cold War, a new form of statism has emerged where a similar phenomenon is now linked to market processes under the banner of “state capitalism.”⁴⁴ Under this version of capitalism, private ownership and extensive market processes coexist with state ownership and control of significant segments of the economy. The policy of economic nationalism has been present not just in recent years under slogans such as “America First,” but since the 19th century⁴⁵ and across various geographic locations.⁴⁶ This approach sets the state on a path to protectionism and anti-globalization, emphasizing national unity, autonomy, and the augmentation of national power—a natural extension for illiberal leaders focused on authority, tradition, and the concentration of that power under state institutions.

While often associated with protectionism, economic nationalists may also favor free trade if it increases national power.⁴⁷ Therefore, economic nationalists may promote either pro- or anti-globalization policies depending on their particular conceptions of national identity and their beliefs about which economic policies will promote the nation as a sovereign political and economic force.⁴⁸ This approach is in line with the argument of this paper on the instrumentalization of international interactions.

The dynamics described by the concepts of illiberalism, statism, and economic nationalism have been present in the countries of this study for some time. For example, in Hungary, Fabry finds a “fusion between authoritarian state practices and neoliberal economic policies.”⁴⁹ In contrast, in Poland the role of the state has been gradually increasing since 2015⁵⁰—despite those in government declaring that they “don’t believe in ‘statism.’”⁵¹

Illiberal Economics in Practice: Hungary and Poland

Leaders who describe themselves as illiberal get started by touting the advantages of “illiberal democracy,” returning power to “the true people,” and not following the Western style of democracy promoted by a globalized elite.⁵² Promising increased welfare spending and standing up to international institutions and foreign investors by using economic nationalist rhetoric, these leaders and political parties came to power propelled by discontent against those seen as having caused the 2008 financial crisis⁵³—usually previous governments and the rapid process of economic

44 Joshua Kurlantzick, *State Capitalism: How the Return of Statism is Transforming the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Aldo Farias Musacchio, and Sergio G. Lazzarini, *Reinventing State Capitalism: Leviathan in Brazil and Beyond* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).

45 Eric Helleiner, “Economic Nationalism as a Challenge to Economic Liberalism? Lessons from the 19th Century,” *International Studies Quarterly* 46, no. 3 (2002): 307–329, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2478.00235>.

46 Italo Colantone, and Piero Stanig, “The Surge of Economic Nationalism in Western Europe,” *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 33, no. 4 (2019): 128–151, <https://doi.org/10.1257/jep.33.4.128>.

47 Takeshi Nakano, “Theorising Economic Nationalism,” *Nations and Nationalism* 10, no. 3 (2004), 224, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1354-5078.2004.00164.x>.

48 Eric Helleiner, and Andreas Pickel, *Economic Nationalism in a Globalizing World* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005).

49 Fabry, *Political Economy of Hungary*, 127.

50 Piotr Kozarzewski and Maciej Baltowski, “Change in the Ownership Policy Paradigm in Poland: State Control vs. Privatisation,” *Acta Oeconomica* 67, no. 1 (2017): 1–20, <https://doi.org/10.1556/032.2017.67.1.1>.

51 Mateusz Morawiecki, “The Polish Case for Less Economic Liberalism,” *Politico*, October 21, 2016, <https://www.politico.eu/article/the-polish-case-for-economic-illiberalism-stability-development/>.

52 Orbán, “Speech at the 25th Bálványos Summer Free University and Student Camp.”

53 Hanspeter Kriesi and Takis Pappas, eds., *European Populism in the Shadow of the Great Recession* (Colchester, UK: ECPR Press, 2015).

liberalization—and globalization as promoted by international organizations.⁵⁴ The promoters of illiberal democracy today attempt to speak particularly to those perceived as “the losers of globalization” and sharply criticize the elites who have gained from liberalization and globalization.⁵⁵ Particularly in Eastern Europe, the contentious privatization process has engendered a backlash that illiberal leaders have managed to capitalize on at the ballot box.⁵⁶

Even though the countries now confronting illiberal leadership were also countries that experienced so-called successful transitions, with their economies surpassing those of some of their neighbors, the local population still bore the brunt of the economic dislocations caused by globalization.⁵⁷ In the early 2000s, financial support from the EU to aid in the accession process came with stringent rules that left little room for economic populism.⁵⁸ Yet, even with the extensive democracy-promotion elements of the EU accession process, democracy has shallower roots in the region, and citizens have low levels of trust in political parties.⁵⁹ While the region experienced the shocks of integration into the global economy, the ability of a large section of the population to work abroad and relieve some of the initial domestic labor surpluses played an important role in helping its people through this transition period. Remittances and EU funding also helped the people weather this difficult economic period.⁶⁰ Despite rapid economic growth, the vast majority of voters cannot find respite from the economic anxiety that fuels protest votes there and in other parts of the world. Economic considerations are a leading explanation for why illiberal leaders get elected in countries that freed themselves from autocracy only 30 years ago.⁶¹

The *Magyar Polgári Szövetség* (Hungarian Civic Alliance, or Fidesz) and its leader, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, have been a staple of Hungarian politics since the first days of post-Communism. Over the course of its time in power and in opposition, Fidesz morphed from an anti-Communist liberal movement full of alternative ideas⁶² into a “national-liberal” mainstream party and, later, into a national populist party

54 Elenor Neff Powell and Joshua A. Tucker, “Revisiting Electoral Volatility in Postcommunist Countries: New Data, New Results and New Approaches,” *British Journal of Political Science* 44, no. 1 (2014): 123–147, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123412000531>.

55 Teun Pauwels, *Populism in Western Europe: Comparing Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2014), 7.

56 Kriesi and Pappas, *European Populism*.

57 Hilary Appel, *A New Capitalist Order: Privatization and Ideology in Russia and Eastern Europe* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2004).

58 Cas Mudde, “In the Name of the Peasantry, the Proletariat, and the People: Populisms in Eastern Europe,” *East European Politics and Societies* 15, no. 2 (2000): 33–53.

59 Milada Anna Vachudova, *Europe Undivided: Democracy, Leverage, and Integration after Communism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Grigore Pop-Eleches, “Throwing Out the Bums: Protest Voting and Unorthodox Parties after Communism,” *World Politics* 62, no. 2 (2010): 221–260, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0043887110000043>; Grigore Pop-Eleches and Joshua A. Tucker, *Communism’s Shadow: Historical Legacies and Contemporary Political Attitudes* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017).

60 Marilena Giannetti, Daniela Federici, and Michele Raitano, “Migrant Remittances and Inequality in Central-Eastern Europe,” *International Review of Applied Economics* 23, no. 3 (2009): 289–307, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02692170902811710>; Mihály Fazekas, and Lawrence Peter King, “Perils of Development Funding? The Tale of EU Funds and Grand Corruption in Central and Eastern Europe,” *Regulation and Governance* 13, no. 3 (2019): 405–430, <https://doi.org/10.1111/rego.12184>.

61 Alexandru Cojocaru, “Fairness and Inequality Tolerance: Evidence from the Life in Transition Survey,” *Journal of Comparative Economics* 42, no. 3 (2014): 590–608, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jce.2014.01.003>.

62 Takis Pappas, “Populist Democracies: Post-Authoritarian Greece and Postcommunist Hungary,” *Government and Opposition* 49, no. 1 (2014): 1–23, <https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2013.21>.

occupying all of Hungary's political space.⁶³ Moreover, since 2010, Hungary has been described as exhibiting a "peculiar form of populism"⁶⁴ or a "mix of nationalism and neoliberalism."⁶⁵

In Poland, *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* (the Law and Justice party, or PiS) scored its first major electoral victory in 2005, when it was the main partner in a two-year governing coalition. Yet its short time in office and attendant coalition dynamics did not result in major illiberal policies. As with Fidesz, PiS' time in opposition resulted in a sharpening of the populist messaging of the party's leaders. The illiberal actions of the Law and Justice government, such as thoroughgoing changes to the functioning of the judiciary and restrictions on civil rights, began in earnest following the 2015 elections⁶⁶ and attracted mass protests and scrutiny from the European Union.⁶⁷

In this context, many illiberal leaders will engage in statist and economically nationalist policies to deliver on their electoral promises to shield voters from the uncertainties of the international markets. Whether they call it "Hungary First" (a riff on former US President Donald Trump's "America First") or "re-Polonization," or describe it as the desire to "run the country as a family firm," behind these nationalistic and technocratic terminologies, leaders hide a different political project: one centered on the concentration of political power within the executive branch, to the detriment of constitutional checks and balances that had been created during the transition to democracy.

Such a concentration of political power is followed by a concentration of economic decision-making power within the country, and thereby an increased statist control over the economy. With Hungary and Poland, we now have examples of governments in Eastern Europe that have concentrated state power and pursued economic nationalism in the name of the people, only to then nationalize this wealth and funnel it into the firms of partisan supporters.⁶⁸ In another work, I examine in detail the renationalization process in Hungary and Poland and the policies these governments have adopted to reach the level of economic nationalism and statism we see today.⁶⁹ These actions support my argument that the leaders in charge are not simply neoliberals espousing nationalistic rhetoric, but that economic nationalism is

63 András Bozóki, "The Illusion of Inclusion: Configurations of Populism in Hungary," in *Thinking through Transition: Liberal Democracy, Authoritarian Pasts, and Intellectual History in East Central Europe after 1989*, eds. Michal Kopeček and Piotr Wećslik (Budapest/New York: Central European University Press, 2015): 275–311.

64 Zsolt Enyedi, "Plebeians, Citoyens, and Aristocrats or Where is the Bottom of Bottom-Up? The Case of Hungary," in *European Populism in the Shadow of the Great Recession*, eds. Hanspeter Kriesi and Takis Pappas (Colchester, UK: ECPR Press, 2015), 231.

65 András Bozóki, "Broken Democracy, Predatory State, and Nationalist Populism," in *The Hungarian Patient: Social Opposition to an Illiberal Democracy*, eds. Péter Krasztev and Jon Van Til (Budapest/New York: Central European University Press, 2015): 3–36.

66 Wojciech Przybylski, "Explaining Eastern Europe: Can Poland's Backsliding Be Stopped?," *Journal of Democracy* 29, no. 3 (2018): 52–64, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2018.0044>; Wojciech Sadurski, *Poland's Constitutional Breakdown* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019); Onvara Vadhanavisala, "Democracy towards Authoritarianism under Illiberal Populist Leaders in Hungary and Poland," *Central and Eastern European Review* 13, no. 1 (2019): 31–48, <https://doi.org/10.2478/caeer-2020-0002>.

67 Kriszta Kovács and Kim Lane Scheppele, "The Fragility of an Independent Judiciary: Lessons from Hungary and Poland—and the European Union," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 51, no. 3 (2018): 189–200, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.postcomstud.2018.07.005>.

68 Miklós Szanyi, "Privatization and State Property Management in Post-Transition Economies," *Centre for Economic and Regional Studies*, Hungarian Academy of Sciences 211 (2014): 1–38; Kozarzewski and Baltowski, "Change"; Bálint Magyar, *Post-Communist Mafia State* (Budapest/New York: Central European University Press, 2016); Éva Voszka, "Nationalisation in Hungary in the Post-Crisis Years: A Specific Twist on a European Trend?" *Europe-Asia Studies* 70, no.8 (2018): 1281–1302, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2018.1457137>.

69 Paula Ganga, *Privatization, Nationalization and Back Again*.

at the core of the agenda. I now turn to how this domestic concentration of economic power explains international behavior exhibited by these and other illiberal regimes.

Instrumentalized “Economic Nationalism” in the International Arena

Illiberal leaders have learned that criticizing globalization and liberalization is a winning strategy. Oftentimes the campaigns of illiberal leaders in Hungary and Poland have featured heavy criticism of the EU,⁷⁰ and both in these countries and elsewhere additional criticism is directed toward international organizations and “the West,” broadly defined, as well as specific governments, institutions, companies, and individuals.⁷¹ However, once in power, these leaders tend to embark on a process of selectively picking those parts of globalization that they like best—or that work best with economic nationalism and their continued stay in power. In the same breath, Eastern European leaders can criticize the EU while promising new infrastructure projects, without mentioning that these projects will happen thanks to transfers from that very institution.

Economic nationalists can still champion globalization, just as long as they promote the nation as a sovereign political and economic force.⁷² But more often than not, illiberal leaders portray globalization negatively and decry policies that have opened up local economies to other markets as having disproportionately impacted citizens negatively. For example, Viktor Orbán engaged in extensive attacks on the EU as a significant promoter of difficult reforms by highlighting Hungary’s “freedom fight” against the shackles of European Union regulation. In a March 2011 speech commemorating the 1848 revolution, Orbán said: “we did not tolerate Vienna dictating to us in [18]48, and we did not tolerate in [19]56 and 1990 that Moscow dictates to us. We won’t allow it now either that anyone from Brussels or anyone else dictates to us.”⁷³

Yet, despite these critiques, neither Poland nor Hungary has considered following the path of Brexit. One of the main reasons is the continued infusion of EU structural funds after the accession of these countries to the organization. These funds contribute important sums to state budgets in the region. According to Kelemen, cohesion funding is one of three factors supporting the EU’s “authoritarian equilibrium.”⁷⁴ Funding, combined with a hesitancy to interfere in the domestic politics of its member states and the free movement of people, which generates remittances and siphons off possible supporters for opposition movements, together create a situation wherein EU membership is sustaining the illiberal regimes in

70 Lars Vogel, “Illiberal and Anti-EU Politics in the Name of the People? Euroscepticism in East Central Europe 2004–2019 in Comparative Perspective,” in *Illiberal Trends and Anti-EU Politics in East Central Europe* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2021): 29–55; Robert Csehi and Edit Zgut, “We Won’t Let Brussels Dictate Us’: Eurosceptic Populism in Hungary and Poland,” *European Politics and Society* 22, no. 1 (2021): 53–68.

71 Peter Plenta, “Conspiracy Theories as a Political Instrument: Utilization of Anti-Soros Narratives in Central Europe,” *Contemporary Politics* 26, no. 5 (2020): 512–530, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569775.2020.1781332>.

72 Helleiner and Pickel, *Economic Nationalism*; Johnson and Barnes, “Financial Nationalism.”

73 Cited in Ágnes Batory, “Populists in Government? Hungary’s ‘System of National Cooperation,’” *Democratization* 23, no. 2 (2016), 289, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2015.1076214>.

74 Daniel Kelemen, “The European Union’s Authoritarian Equilibrium,” *Journal of European Public Policy* 27, no. 3 (2020): 481–499, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2020.1712455>.

power with resources they would not otherwise have access to.⁷⁵ However, as these countries are transitioning out of the “recently-integrated” category, this will limit the lines of funding they are entitled to.

A second way illiberal governments in the EU take advantage of their membership in this multilateral organization despite continued criticism is as a “gateway” to the EU. Many companies investing in places such as Hungary and Poland choose them for their combination of cheap labor and office space with easy access to the wider EU market. For example, Hungary saw important investments from US-based GE Capital, which invested in a large innovation center that it uses for its accounts support; American hedge fund firm Blackrock also opened a major office in Budapest, whereas American car rental service Avis has based its largest office outside the US in Hungary and uses it to manage its entire European fleet. Similarly, German automakers Audi and Mercedes use their Hungarian offices for customer support.⁷⁶ These investments follow active government policy. To boost foreign direct investment, Orbán’s government lowered the corporate income tax to 9% in 2017, from the previous levels of 10% for yearly corporate profits below 500 million forints (\$1.7 million) and 19% above this amount.⁷⁷ This measure came on top of already existing generous investment incentives in the form of tax breaks, low-interest loans, and land available for free or at reduced prices, as well as subsidy opportunities for investments greater than €10 million that can be negotiated on a case-by-case basis.⁷⁸ In Poland, the PiS government rolled out a new system of special economic zones, where investing companies could be exempt from paying income tax for a period of 10 or 15 years.⁷⁹

The prospect of ever-decreasing support from the EU has forced the illiberal governments in the region to seek out other like-minded actors that could act as political or economic supporters. Due to the contentious place Russia occupies in the region, one important supporter has been China. While Beijing seems invested in several countries, including Poland and Hungary in particular, so far the results have been underwhelming.⁸⁰ China appears to be more interested in lending rather than investing. Eastern European governments in general would prefer greenfield investments to loans, and Chinese companies dislike EU rules for public tenders.⁸¹ While these countries are not in the Eurozone, they are still in the EU, which means they must abide by the extensive *acquis communautaire*, or cumulative body of EU

75 Not only were the leaders supported by EU money, but actual leaders and members of their inner circles benefitted from EU subsidies they could access thanks to their political connections. See Magyar, *Post-Communist Mafia State*; Matt Apuzzo, “We Just Wanted to Talk EU Farm Policy: Why Was Someone Always Looking Over Our Shoulders?” *New York Times*, November 3, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/03/reader-center/eu-farm-subsidy-reporting.html>; Matt Apuzzo and Selam Gebrekidan, “Who Keeps Europe’s Farm Billions Flowing? Often, Those Who Benefit,” *New York Times*, December 11, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/11/world/europe/eu-farm-subsidy-lobbying.html>; Selam Gebrekidan, Matt Apuzzo, and Ben Novak, “The Money Farmers: How Oligarchs and Populists Milk the EU for Millions,” *New York Times*, November 3, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/03/world/europe/eu-farm-subsidy-hungary.html>.

76 Ganga, *Privatization, Nationalization, and Back Again*, 124.

77 AP News, “Hungary to Cut Corporate Taxes to EU-Low of 9 Percent in 2017,” November 17, 2016, <https://apnews.com/article/26e235e5d4cb4f04b7342a0f8e03c6af>.

78 Alan Toplišek, “The Political Economy of Populist Rule in Post-Crisis Europe: Hungary and Poland,” *New Political Economy* 25, no. 3 (2020), 396.

79 Jacopo Dettoni, “Poland’s SEZ Overhaul Remains Work in Progress,” *FDI Intelligence*, July 7, 2020, <https://www.fdiintelligence.com/content/feature/polands-sez-overhaul-remains-work-in-progress-77813>.

80 Michal Lubima, “Big Words, Little Results: The Chinese Investments in Poland from the Political Perspective,” *Polish Political Science Yearbook* 46, no. 2 (2017): 150–171, <https://doi.org/10.15804/ppsy2017210>.

81 François Godement and Abigaël Vasselier, “China at the Gates: A New Power Audit of EU-China Relations,” European Council on Foreign Relations, December 1, 2017, https://ecfr.eu/publication/china_eu_power_audit7242/.

legislation and case law. Chinese loans come with specific strings attached—not only are the terms for loans less favorable than those offered by the European Investment Bank, but they also require hiring Chinese companies or creating links to other deals. A recent study of Chinese contracts shows that these contracts use “creative design to manage credit risk and overcome enforcement hurdles,”⁸² and that the lending terms of these contracts “go beyond maximizing commercial advantage.”⁸³

What is maximized could be political influence. For example, over 90% of the recorded contracts include a clause that allows for the termination of the contract and immediate repayment in case of law or policy change in the borrowing country. Policy stability is not an uncommon clause, but as the lender is a state entity and not a private firm, this demand now takes on a political dimension. Additionally, the contracts were found to contain very strict confidentiality clauses, require priority for Chinese state banks over other creditors, and if collateral has to be deposited in an escrow account, these sums will also be held in Chinese state-owned banks. Finally, severing diplomatic relations with China could classify as a default and a breach of contract, which would require the immediate repayment of the entire loan.⁸⁴

In addition to easier access to FDI, European countries have also leveraged their appeal for Chinese investments through citizenship and residency incentives. Directed at individuals, these “golden visas” require a specific sum to be invested in a country for the investor to receive a residency permit, giving that individual access to the entire Schengen Area. This has created fierce competition among European countries, with some countries in Eastern Europe leading the way. In December 2012, Hungary adopted the Hungarian Investment Immigration Law, granting residency to those investing at least €250,000 in government bonds.⁸⁵ Hungary has been actively selling itself as the “gateway to Europe.” The sale of 6,500 Hungarian residence permits under this “golden visa” program amounted to €1.95 billion in a little over three years.⁸⁶ Additionally, Chinese telecom giant Huawei has made Hungary its leading partner in Europe, where it employs over 2,500 people. Since 2015 this company has had an official “strategic partnership” with the Hungarian government, which has resulted in Huawei being entrusted with the government’s mobile phone network after acquiring MVM Net in 2015.⁸⁷ As another sign of goodwill, Hungary has even issued bonds in Chinese currency and is financing major infrastructure projects with Chinese money.

Since 2012, China has intensified its influence within countries in Central and Eastern Europe through the “16+1” framework. Annual summits focused on infrastructure projects have resulted in initial hopes for extensive cooperation, as well as fears that this is part of a Chinese effort to “divide and rule” Europeans.⁸⁸ However, results have been disappointing. This situation has resulted in local complaints about EU

82 Anna Gelpern, Sebastian Horn, Scott Morris, Brad Parks, and Christoph Trebesch, “How China Lends: A Rare Look into 100 Debt Contracts with Foreign Governments,” (2021): 2 <https://www.ifw-kiel.de/publications/journal-article/2021/how-china-lends-a-rare-look-into-100-debt-contracts-with-foreign-government-16100/>.

83 Gelpern et al., *How China Lends*, 7.

84 Konstantin Eggert, “Lithuania’s Challenge to China Is Risky, but Clever,” *Deutsche Welle*, April 5, 2021, <https://www.dw.com/en/opinion-lithuanias-challenge-to-china-is-risky-but-clever/a-57071394>.

85 Sophie Meunier, “Beggars Can’t Be Choosers: The European Crisis and Chinese Direct Investment in the European Union,” *Journal of European Integration* 36, no. 3 (2014): 283–302, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2014.885754>.

86 Godement and Vasselier, “China at the Gates.”

87 Godement and Vasselier, “China at the Gates.”

88 Martin Hala, “China in Xi’s ‘New Era’: Forging a New ‘Eastern Bloc,’” *Journal of Democracy* 29, no. 2 (2018): 83–89, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2018.0028>.

processes. In the wake of the “16+1” summits in Budapest and Warsaw, criticism from the newer EU members highlighted the much broader scale of Chinese investments in France, Germany, Italy, and the UK, as well as the compromises made by these countries to further their relationships with China, while pointing out that EU action against Chinese investments is only being discussed after investments were sought out by Eastern European governments.⁸⁹

Finally, another way illiberal leaders have leveraged the international arena is through the deep interconnectedness of the international financial system. While they criticize this system, not only do their countries benefit from continued participation, but even authoritarian leaders who consistently break their international commitments are still welcome in certain parts of the international system, particularly to safeguard their money.⁹⁰ Investigative reporting as part of the Panama and Pandora Papers shows the ubiquity of this trend, with leaders from authoritarian and illiberal regimes using the international financial system to hide their assets.⁹¹ In Eastern Europe, for example, Hungary’s government was linked to business allies with large offshore accounts,⁹² whereas in the Czech Republic, the revelations from the Pandora Papers were partly responsible for the electoral defeat of Andrej Babiš.⁹³

Covid and War in Ukraine: New Arenas of International Illiberal Contestation

The selective way in which illiberal leaders engage internationally as they instrumentalize the international arena to continue their stay in power is evident in recent developments. Further evidence for the argument in this paper comes from how illiberal leaders have used the Covid-19 pandemic to extend their hold on power, or how the war in Ukraine has been instrumentalized for additional leverage in broader European negotiations.

The Covid-19 pandemic has put immense strain on politics across the world. Illiberal leaders, however, have found this to be an opportunity to expand their executive powers⁹⁴ (even as many of the more vocal autocrats kept on denying the reality of the virus).⁹⁵ At the same time as these leaders accepted the reality of the pandemic and embraced public health measures based on medical expertise, this acceptance came at the expense of democratic processes, with leaders “hiding behind experts and ...

89 Godement and Vasselier, “China.”

90 Alexander Cooley and John Heathershaw, *Dictators without Borders: Power and Money in Central Asia* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017); Alexander Cooley, John Heathershaw, and J.C. Sharman, “The Rise of Kleptocracy: Laundering Cash, White Washing Reputations,” *Journal of Democracy* 29, no. 1 (2018): 39–53, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2018.0003>.

91 Lawrence J. Trautman, “Following the Money: Lessons from the Panama Papers: Part 1: Tip of the Iceberg,” *Penn St. L. Rev.* 121 (2016), 807.

92 András Pethő and Blanka Zöldi, “Prominent Business Allies of Viktor Orbán’s Government Had Secret Offshore Businesses, Pandora Papers Reveal,” October 4, 2021, <https://www.direkt36.hu/en/rogan-antal-es-meszáros-lorinc-bizalmasainak-titkos-kulfoldi-üzleteire-is-fény-derül-a-legujabb-offshore-kiszivargasban/>.

93 Rick Noack and Ladka Bauerova, “After the Pandora Papers Ensnared the Czech Prime Minister, Voters are Having Their Say: But Will They Care?,” *Washington Post*, October 7, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/czech-babis-pandora-election/2021/10/07/7d486dd4-26cf-11ec-8739-5cb6aba30a30_story.html.

94 Jelena Kostic and Marina Matic Boskovic, “How COVID-19 Pandemic Influences Rule of Law Backsliding in Europe,” *Regional Law Review* (2020): 77, https://doi.org/10.18485/iup_rlr.2020.ch6; Caress Schenk and Paula Ganga, “The Coercive Capacity of COVID-19 Policies: The Rule of Law and the Rule of Fear?” International Studies Association Annual Meeting, Nashville, TN, April 2022.

95 Thomas Carothers and David Wong, *Authoritarian Weaknesses and the Pandemic* (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2020) https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Carothers_Authoritarianism_Pandemic.pdf.

shifting decisions on pandemic responses outside of the parliamentary arena.”⁹⁶ The instrumentalization of technocratic expertise during the global pandemic could then be used to justify executive aggrandizement,⁹⁷ as has happened in both Hungary and Poland.

In Hungary, executive aggrandizement started on March 11, 2020, when the government declared a state of emergency, which usually lasts 15 days unless there is parliamentary approval for extension.⁹⁸ The state of emergency was later extended indefinitely on March 30, giving the government the ability to govern by decree while postponing any scheduled elections during the emergency and punishing with up to 5 years in prison the dissemination of “fake news” and disinformation.⁹⁹ The bill was widely opposed both domestically and by European institutions until the Hungarian Parliament abolished the state of emergency on June 16, 2020.¹⁰⁰

In Poland, the Law and Justice party continued the pre-pandemic trend of adopting policies that inhibit an independent judiciary. The government created a new Disciplinary Chamber that would punish judges in case of misbehavior. European institutions immediately criticized the move, but the government refused to back down and declared Polish domestic law superior to European law.¹⁰¹ These actions resulted in a daily fine of €1 million.¹⁰² Since joining the EU Poland has received more than €213 billion,¹⁰³ with an additional €36 billion¹⁰⁴ as part of the Covid-19 recovery program. Yet, since PiS returned to power in 2015, Poland’s relationship with the EU has been very adversarial, in spite of popular support for EU membership among the Polish public.¹⁰⁵

As the world starts to focus on pandemic recovery, policies made under conditions of Covid by illiberal leaders could affect the pace of recovery as well as future prospects for democracy.¹⁰⁶ Already the battle lines have been drawn as the EU is trying to

96 Petra Guasti and Lenka Buřtková, “A Marriage of Convenience: Responsive Populists and Responsible Experts,” *Politics and Governance* 8, no. 4 (2020), 470, <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v8i4.3876>.

97 Nancy Bermeo, “On Democratic Backsliding,” *Journal of Democracy* 27, no. 1 (2016): 5–19, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2016.0012>.

98 András Kádár, “In Its Nature—How Stealth Authoritarianism Keeps Stealing Along During the Pandemic, and How Can It Be Stopped?,” *Journal of Human Rights Practice* 12, no. 2 (2020): 293–300, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jhuman/haaa034>.

99 International observers noted that the vague phrasing of what constituted disinformation could result in dissent to government action possibly being classified as such and used in order to overwhelmingly punish the opposition.

100 Petra Guasti, “The Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic in Central and Eastern Europe: The Rise of Autocracy and Democratic Resilience,” *Democratic Theory* 7, no. 2 (2020): 47–60, <https://doi.org/10.3167/dt.2020.070207>.

101 Mujtaba Rahman, “Europe’s Next Rule of Law Problem: Angela Merkel,” *Politico*, October 26, 2021, https://www.politico.eu/article/europe-rule-of-law-angela-merkel-poland-hungary/?utm_campaign=wp_todays_worldview&utm_medium=email&utm_source=newsletter&wpsrc=nl_todayworld.

102 Zosia Wanat, “Poland Hit with Record €1M Daily Fine in EU Rule-of-Law Dispute,” *Politico*, October 27, 2021, <https://www.politico.eu/article/Poland-record-1-million-euros-daily-fine-eu-rule-of-law-dispute/>.

103 Nathaniel Copsey, and Karolina Pomorska, “The Influence of Newer Member States in the European Union: The Case of Poland and the Eastern Partnership,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 66, no. 3 (2014): 421–443, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2013.855391>.

104 Reuters, “Polish PM Says Chances of Deal on EU COVID Cash Have ‘Slightly Improved,’” February 18, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/polish-pm-says-chances-deal-eu-covid-cash-have-slightly-improved-2022-02-18/>.

105 Andrew Higgins, “Poland’s Heartland Would Rather Keep EU Money Than Break With Bloc,” *New York Times*, October 26, 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/26/world/europe/poland-eu-aid.html?campaign_id=2&emc=edit_th_20211027&instance_id=43854&nl=todaysheadlines®i_id=70199183&segment_id=72731&user_id=eee67043992ee86612b2329f71fd5ad.

106 Stephen Thomson and Eric C. Ip, “COVID-19 Emergency Measures and the Impending Authoritarian Pandemic,” *Journal of Law and the Biosciences* (2020): 1–33, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jlbb/lsaa064>.

make pandemic funding conditional on upholding the rule of law, with Hungary and Poland promising to block any attempts from Brussels to withhold possible funding.¹⁰⁷

Another way in which Hungary and Poland show the variety of ways through which illiberal leaders can instrumentalize their foreign policy became evident after the start of the war in Ukraine. As the war began, Hungary was in the middle of its national elections. Although initially the Fidesz government joined in the Europe-wide wave of support for Ukraine, the day after winning his fourth term in office,¹⁰⁸ Prime Minister Viktor Orbán gave the first speech of the new government in which he called President Volodymyr Zelenskyy of Ukraine one of the “opponents” he had to defeat during the campaign.¹⁰⁹ Additionally, Budapest is now a major supporter of the continued purchase of Russian oil and gas, while the rest of Europe is focused on a joint response to shun Russian energy.¹¹⁰ In the end, although most of the EU agreed to stop buying Russian crude oil, Hungary, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic were exempted from this measure.¹¹¹ This exemption was granted even while just days beforehand democracy was further eroded, with Orbán being granted new emergency powers due to security concerns arising from the war in Ukraine.¹¹²

Poland, on the other hand, has focused on extensive collaboration with the EU. Not only has the country welcomed over 3 million refugees fleeing the war, but when the EU was moving to ban Russian oil, Warsaw agreed to stop importing Russian energy in spite of its dependence on this source.¹¹³ Shortly thereafter, it seemed that the pandemic transgressions in matters of the judiciary were at least partly forgiven. The EU agreed to unfreeze about €36 billion in pandemic aid that had been held up by rule-of-law violations, whereas Hungary’s funds remained blocked.¹¹⁴ Though taking different paths, both Hungary’s and Poland’s illiberal governments arrived in the same place. They managed to instrumentalize the pandemic to expand their powers, and the war in Ukraine to get concessions from the EU, which are then used to continue propping their governments.

107 Matina Stevis-Griddle and Benjamin Novak, “Hungary and Poland Threaten EU Stimulus over Rule of Law Links,” *New York Times*, November 16, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/16/world/europe/eu-stimulus-poland-hungary.html>; David M. Herszenhorn and Lili Bayer, “EU in Crisis over Hungary and Poland’s €1.8T Hold-Up,” *politico.eu*, November 16, 2020, <https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-in-crisis-over-hungary-poland-budget-hold-up/>.

108 Charlie Campbell, “Viktor Orbán Is Set for a Fourth Term as Hungary’s Prime Minister: That Could Be a Boost for Putin,” *Time*, April 3, 2022, <https://time.com/6164091/hungary-elections-results-2022/>.

109 Rob Picheta and Balint Bardi, “Viktor Orbán, Hungary’s Authoritarian Leader and Key Putin Ally, Calls Zelenskyy an ‘Opponent’ after Winning Re-election,” *CNN*, April 3, 2022, <https://www.cnn.com/2022/04/03/europe/hungary-election-results-viktor-orban-intl/index.html>.

110 Sam Fleming, Javier Espinoza and Marton Dunai, “EU ‘Determined’ to Sway Hungary over Russian Oil Sanctions,” *Financial Times*, May 13, 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/abbao00b-992a-45a3-941a-3616e335cccc>.

111 Kate Abnett, Jan Strupczewski, and Ingrid Melander, “EU Agrees Russia Oil Embargo, Gives Hungary Exemptions; Zelenskyy Vows More Sanctions,” *Reuters*, May 31, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/best-we-could-get-eu-bows-hungarian-demands-agree-russian-oil-ban-2022-05-31/>.

112 *Deutsche Welle*, “Hungary’s Orbán Extends Emergency Powers, Points to Ukraine,” May 25, 2022, <https://www.dw.com/en/hungarys-orban-extends-emergency-powers-points-to-ukraine/a-61918348>; Reuters, “Hungary’s Government Gets Emergency Powers Due to Ukraine War, PM Orbán Says,” May 24, 2022, <https://www.voanews.com/a/hungary-s-government-gets-emergency-powers-due-to-ukraine-war-pm-orban-says/6587450.html>.

113 Abnett, Strupczewski, and Melander, “EU Agrees Russia Oil Embargo.”

114 Monika Pronczuk, “In Concession to Poland, EU Opens Door to Frozen Funds,” *New York Times*, June 1, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/01/world/europe/poland-eu-ukraine-coronavirus.html>.

Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that the behavior of illiberal leaders in international settings is creating new challenges to the liberal international order. These leaders come to power criticizing previous international commitments for not protecting the country and its citizens. However, once they have consolidated political and economic power, the international arena becomes a venue for them to further the interests of the government. The result is that illiberal leaders instrumentalize globalization for their own political survival by selectively choosing which parts of the international system are of greatest benefit to them. I explored this dynamic in Hungary and Poland through their selective engagement with the EU—actively maximizing the funding received while dismantling domestic institutions that are at the core of the European project.

The use of the international financial system and seeking out alternative sources of economic support, as well as taking advantage of the Covid-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine are further examples of this pattern of selective international engagement. These actions do not suggest that these leaders are neoliberals with nationalistic rhetoric but rather that, lacking—so far—the ability to change the international structure from within or at least to prevent the EU from continuously criticizing the rule-of-law abuses in these countries, they are left to make the most of what the international arena has to offer while domestically continuing their economic nationalist projects.

This trend of seeking the benefits of international participation while going against the spirit of cooperation has already impacted arenas such as pandemic recovery and the ongoing war in Ukraine. The roles that illiberal governments play in these and other sensitive matters can indirectly reshape the international order even if these leaders do not aim for system-wide change.¹¹⁵ As the world faces increased pressures in areas such as climate change and the role of data and technology in society, illiberal leaders can leave an indelible mark on how future regimes of cooperation in these areas are organized. Many illiberal leaders are not willing to make firm commitments to fighting climate change and, based on the pattern of behavior highlighted in this article, might not engage in meaningful action unless they receive tangible benefits.

Similarly, future debates on data, technology, and “surveillance capitalism”¹¹⁶ might be dramatically reshaped by the interests of illiberal leaders, with personal data being used to benefit these regimes as they seek to extend their hold on power even in the event they find themselves faced with declining popularity at home. Future research should actively engage in examining how these issue areas are being impacted by illiberal forces, both in Eastern Europe and in other illiberal democracies across the world, as well as within illiberal movements in advanced Western democracies. Illiberal tendencies continue to be on the rise and the wave does not yet seem to be breaking.

¹¹⁵ Examples abound, but just recently Turkey has signaled opposition to Finland and Sweden joining NATO, possibly reshaping the security of the entire alliance if the two countries do not acquiesce to specific demands.

¹¹⁶ Shoshana Zuboff, “Big Other: Surveillance Capitalism and the Prospects of an Information Civilization,” *Journal of Information Technology* 30, no. 1 (2015): 75–89, <https://doi.org/10.1057/jit.2015.5>.



Liberal Democracy in a Less-than-Liberal Context? The Case of Contemporary Greece

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Abstract

The persistence of democracy in today's Greece may be surprising for two reasons. First, liberal democracy survived an economic crisis in the 2010s that was more severe than the Great Depression of the 1930s. Second, liberal democracy has remained stable despite the fact that the period since the 1974 transition from the Colonels' Regime has witnessed the diffusion of illiberal ideas and an emergence of relatively small yet very active antiliberal parties. Liberal democracy has been resilient in the face of nationalism and populism, even though accountable liberal institutions enjoy limited political trust. The resilience of contemporary Greek democracy can be explained through two sets of factors: a political set and a social set. Political factors include a long history of political liberalism and the robustness of contemporary political-party competition. Social factors include Greece's relatively large middle class and the absence of overlapping social cleavages that could otherwise have led to destructive socio-political polarization and then a slide toward illiberalism. The Greek case shows under what conditions a liberal democracy can flourish in a less-than-liberal context.

Keywords: Greece, liberalism, illiberalism, middle classes, party competition, polarization

The frequency of military interventions in Greek politics in the twentieth century (even if these were relatively short-lived), the Greek Civil War (1946-1949), and the Greek economic crisis of the 2010s may lead to misperceptions about contemporary Greece. Observers unfamiliar with contemporary Greek democracy may regard it as an unfinished project or a frail political regime. They may find it something of a surprise that democracy has survived in the southernmost area of the conflict-ridden Balkan peninsula and may believe that contemporary Greece is just waiting for its democracy to fail again.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Greece went through several acute political and economic crises, from which it nevertheless recuperated.¹ In the early 2010s, at the beginning of the Greek economic crisis, there were plausible arguments that Greece had failed.²

In 2009, the failure of the Greek economy became obvious. The budget deficit was -15.4% of GDP and public debt stood at 127% of GDP, while the country's current account deficit had been 14.4% of GDP in 2008. This left the country, as of 2010, on the brink of sovereign default.³ The European Commission (EC), the European Central Bank (ECB), and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) put together a rescue mechanism. For the vast majority of the decade that followed (2011-2020), the Greek economy was under foreign-monitored Economic Adjustment Programs.

There were also signs of political failure.⁴ In the decades prior to the onset of the economic crisis, there were grave problems with fiscal management and macroeconomic policy, the responsiveness of public administration, and the representativeness of mainstream parties.

In the early 2010s, it came as something of a shock that an advanced European economy could reach the point of sovereign default. While economies in the developing world (e.g., in Latin America or South Asia) had experienced economic failure in the last decade of the twentieth century, such a fate would have been unprecedented for a developed economy.

Another shock—one closer to the topic of this article—was the spectacle of a consolidated democracy facing the challenge of fascism, as reflected in the spectacular rise of the Golden Dawn (GD). For a while, in 2015-2019, this neo-Nazi party was the third-largest party in the Greek Parliament, having obtained seven percent of the total vote and 18 out of 300 parliamentary seats. While there had been fascist parties in other post-war European democracies (including post-war Italy), it was surprising in the 2010s to see a party that believed in Nazi ideology and organized

1 Stathis N. Kalyvas, *Modern Greece: What Everyone Needs to Know* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

2 Kevin Featherstone, "The Greek Sovereign Debt Crisis and the EMU: A Failing State in a Skewed Regime," *Journal of Common Market Studies* 49, no.2, (2011): 193-2017, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5965.2010.02139.x>; Takis S. Pappas, "Why Greece Failed," *Journal of Democracy* 24, no. 2 (2013): 31-45, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2013.0035>.

3 Data for the budget deficit and public debt is drawn from OECD, "Country Notes: Greece," 2011, last accessed August 9, 2022, <https://www.oecd.org/gov/budgeting/47840787.pdf>. Data on the current account deficit is drawn from World Bank, "Current Account Balance - %GDP - Greece," 2022, last accessed August 9, 2022, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/BN.CAB.XOKA.GD.ZS?locations=GR>.

4 Haris Mylonas, "Is Greece a Failing Developed State? Causes and Socio-Economic Consequences of the Financial Crisis" in *The Konstantinos Karamanlis Institute for Democracy Yearbook 2011: The Global Economic Crisis and the Case of Greece*, ed. Konstantina E. Botsiou and Antonis Klapsis (Berlin: Springer Verlag, 2011), 77-88.

itself along paramilitary lines win parliamentary representation in one of the EU's national parliaments.⁵

Today, however, one may argue that the greater surprise has been the resilience of Greek democracy.⁶ In 2010-2018, Greece experienced an economic recession on the scale of the Great Depression of the 1930s, which preceded the breakdown of several European democracies in the inter-war period. Although the Greek party system imploded and the legitimacy of major liberal institutions—including the parliament and political parties—eroded, liberal democracy survived.

This democratic resilience in the face of an acute economic crisis was accompanied by the comparatively wide diffusion of illiberal ideas—including populist and nationalist ones. Even before the economic crisis, liberalism in Greece had been challenged by competing ideologies. There were nationalist-chauvinist fringe political parties and newspapers, as well as intellectuals distrustful of liberal democracy. There was also populist political discourse in the electoral campaigns of mainstream parties in 1974-2009. The personality cult of some leaders, such as Andreas Papandreou, the founder and leader of the Panhellenic Socialist Movement (Pasok) in 1974-1996, went hand in hand with stressing the historical virtues of the Greek people, a theme also popular with other parties.⁷ Yet it would be far-fetched to argue that populism has ever taken center stage in Greek post-authoritarian politics.⁸ Liberal democracy may have been challenged by nationalist and populist ideas, but it has neither broken down nor backslid to the extent observable today in other South East and East European democracies. Despite everything, democracy in post-1974 Greece has remained resilient.⁹

How did Greek democracy manage to weather the economic crisis and function in an illiberal context? And what lessons can be learned from the Greek case? To answer these two questions, the article proceeds as follows.

First, it provides a brief theoretical framework for the linkages between liberal values, the middle class, and liberal democracy. Then it presents a short but critical introduction to liberal political institutions in Greece, followed by a discussion of illiberal values in Greece based on national and comparative attitudinal surveys. The next section contrasts illiberal values with liberal institutions and suggests explanations for this apparent contradiction. The article concludes by identifying the lessons that a resilient liberal democracy like Greece can teach us about illiberalism.

Liberal Values, the Middle Class, and Liberal Democracy

There is abundant research linking liberal values, the middle class, and modern liberal democracy. To start with, the relationship between liberal democratic values and liberal democracy, despite conceptual tensions, is taken here to be straightforward.

5 Antonis Ellinas, "The Rise of Golden Dawn: The New Face of the Far Right in Greece," *South European Society and Politics* 18, no. 4 (2013): 543-565, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13608746.2013.782838>.

6 Pappas, "Why Greece Failed"; Sofia Vasilopoulou and Daphne Halikiopoulou, "Political Culture", in *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Greek Politics*, ed. Kevin Featherstone and Dimitri A. Sotiropoulos (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 337, 347.

7 Dimitri A. Sotiropoulos, *Populism and Bureaucracy: Greece under Pasok Rule, 1981-1989* (South Bend, IN: The University of Notre Dame Press, 1996).

8 Takis S. Pappas, *Populism and Crisis Politics in Greece* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

9 Emmanouil Tsatsanis, Enrico Borghetto, André Freire, and José-Ramon Montero, "Generational and Ideological Gaps in Democratic Support: Seeds of Deconsolidation in Post-Crisis Southern Europe?" *South European Society and Politics* 26, no. 2 (2021): 209-237, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13608746.2021.2016245>.

According to one opinion, one cannot exist without the other.¹⁰ According to another opinion, liberalism and democracy are not identical because in the past, before the rise of the welfare state, liberalism was associated with a particular kind of state, one marked by limited powers and functions. By contrast, democracy denoted a specific type of political regime that was counterposed to oligarchy and monarchy.¹¹ As democracy developed, the powers and functions of the once liberal state were extended, corresponding to additional rights for which citizens had fought. Today, there is a sound and strong basis on which to argue that political liberalism is closely linked to liberal democracy.¹² To put it otherwise, the former is a most suitable armor for the latter.

A specific type of democratic political culture is a precondition for stable liberal democracy.¹³ Liberal democratic values include rationality, accountability, tolerance, and participation in the pursuit of the general interest, as well as support for human rights—including the individual freedoms of expression and religious beliefs, as well as the right to own private property.¹⁴

Self-expression values have also been associated with effective democracy. Such values include liberty, public self-expression, tolerance of diversity, interpersonal trust, and life satisfaction.¹⁵ Liberal values could, however, be different things to different people. As Marlene Laruelle suggests, it is useful to think of liberalism as “multiple liberalisms” that exist simultaneously and to distinguish among “five major liberal scripts”: political, economic, cultural, and geopolitical liberalism and liberal colonialism.¹⁶

Geopolitical liberalism, related to U.S. hegemony in the post-1945 period, and liberal colonialism, pertaining to relations between “the West and the rest,” are less relevant to an analysis of the affinity between liberalism and democracy in domestic politics, which is the focus of this article. The same is true of economic liberalism, or neo-liberalism. The latter, despite provoking fierce debates, has nevertheless been practiced by conservative, social-democratic, and even populist governments in democracies as well as by authoritarian or semi-authoritarian governments in autocracies and hybrid political regimes.

For their part, the remaining two liberalisms—political and cultural—are more salient to the analysis of a European liberal democracy that is pursued below. Political liberalism includes the aforementioned democratic values, which are related to diffuse support of liberal democracy. As is well known, diffuse support may coexist with weak specific support of particular institutions and policies in a democratic regime.¹⁷

10 Marc Plattner, “Liberalism and Democracy: Can’t Have One Without the Other,” *Foreign Affairs* 77, no. 2 (1998): 171–180, <https://doi.org/10.2307/20048858>.

11 Norberto Bobbio, *Liberalism and Democracy* (London: Verso, 1990), 1–2.

12 John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

13 Seymour Martin Lipset, “Some Social Requisites of Democracy: Economic Development and Political Legitimacy,” *American Political Science Review* 53 (1959): 69–105, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1951731>; Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba, *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes in Five Western Democracies* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963).

14 Ronald Inglehart and Christian Welzel, “Political Culture and Democracy: Analyzing Cross-Level Linkages,” *Comparative Politics* 36, no. 1 (2003): 62, <https://doi.org/10.2307/4150160>; Michael Freedman, *Liberalism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 15.

15 Ronald Inglehart, *Modernization and Postmodernization: Cultural, Economic and Political Change in 43 Societies* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997).

16 Marlene Laruelle, “Illiberalism: A Conceptual Introduction,” *East European Politics* (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2022.2037079>.

17 David Easton, *A Systems Analysis of Political Life* (New York: Wiley, 1965).

Cultural liberalism is also crucial for liberal democracy. Today, the concept of human rights has been enlarged to include not only civil, political, and social rights, as was the case in twentieth-century Western European democracies, but also several types of identity rights. These may include ethnic, religious, linguistic, sexual orientation, and gender rights. In contemporary democracies, all these types of rights are much more contested than are civil, political, and social rights. This opens up the possibility of a liberal democracy functioning in a less-than-liberal value setting. In such a context, some of the values of political and cultural liberalism would not be adhered to consistently, yet liberal institutions would still be operational—as is arguably true in the case under study.

A liberal democratic regime in a less-than-liberal democratic value setting is not the same as either an illiberal democracy or a hybrid regime. In an illiberal regime, there is only a democratic façade: elections take place, but “checks and balances” and the other pluralist characteristics of liberal democracies are absent.¹⁸ In hybrid regimes, at least one of the following four aspects of minimal democracy is absent, be it universal suffrage; free, fair, recurrent, and competitive elections; the existence of more than one political party; or alternative media sources from which for citizens to choose.¹⁹

In a liberal regime embedded in a less-than-liberal democratic setting, elections are not the only one of the democratic institutions remaining, nor are any of the four aspects of minimal democracy mentioned above missing. In such a liberal regime, all four aspects of minimal democracy are present, as well as other liberal institutions like a functioning parliament and justice system, and constitutionally guaranteed human rights. What is missing, however, is at least a slice of the liberal values system that theoretically accompanies liberal democracy.

It has been argued by other authors that there exists in the many cases of modern authoritarian or hybrid political regimes a paradox whereby democracy itself is absent, but citizens support democratic values and desire to live in a democracy.²⁰ Here, what is analyzed is the reverse, namely, the case of a democracy in which liberal democratic institutions are more or less alive and well, but citizens are periodically tempted by illiberal political and cultural values.

Liberal Institutions in Greece

While after the Greek War of Independence from the Ottoman Empire (1821-1827) and the establishment of the modern Greek state (1830) liberal values did not become diffused in Greek society, liberal institutions were quickly introduced and consolidated. It is important for the argument of this article to acknowledge that in Greece there is a historical tradition of political liberalism that dates back to previous centuries. For instance, mayors were first elected in the country in 1835.²¹ A national parliament was elected in 1843, while universal suffrage was introduced in 1844 and

18 Fareed Zakaria, *The Future of Freedom: Illiberal Democracy at Home and Abroad* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2003).

19 Leonardo Morlino, “Are There Hybrid Regimes? Or Are They Just an Optical Illusion?” *European Political Science Review* 1, no. 2 (2009): 277, 281, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755773909000198>.

20 Chrisitan Welzel, *Freedom Rising: Human Empowerment and the Quest for Emancipation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 307-331.

21 Nikolaos-Komninos Hlepas, “Local Government and Regional Administration,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Greek Politics*, ed. Kevin Featherstone and Dimitri A. Sotiropoulos (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 190.

implemented in 1864. In other words, the right to vote was an early feature of Greece, at a time when it was absent from many other European countries.

Despite short intervals of military rule (1925-1926, 1936-1940, and 1967-1974), Greece has enjoyed very long periods of parliamentary democracy.²² Since 1843 (the year of the first parliamentary elections), there have been 68 parliamentary elections. Of these, only five have been boycotted by major political parties due to the onset or peak of national political crises (in 1910, 1915, 1923, 1935 and 1946), while the vast majority of elections have been considered free and fair by the parties.²³ This is supported by the fact that voters have turned out to vote in vast numbers: in 1974-2009, turnout ranged from 74 to 85 percent. Turnout subsequently declined due to the destabilizing impact of the recent economic crisis, ranging between 56 and 71 percent in 2009-2019.²⁴ In other words, turnout reflected Greeks' support for free, fair, recurrent, and competitive elections, i.e., the minimum requirement for liberal democracy.

Electoral systems in Greece have frequently been manipulated by governing parties prior to elections so as to favor the incumbent. The overall tendency has been for electoral systems to favor the emergence of a two-party system and to produce relatively strong governments that enjoy single-party parliamentary majorities. For almost three decades after the 1974 transition to democracy, a two-party system prevailed, while there was little change in the total number of parties in parliament.²⁵ The party system changed in content, but not in form, after the eruption of the economic crisis in the early 2010, when the Coalition of the Radical Left (Syriza) replaced the center-left Panhellenic Socialist Movement (Pasok) as the competitor to the center-right New Democracy (ND) party. In view of the above, relatively few parties gained parliamentary seats (in the parliament of 1981-1985, there were only three parties: Pasok, ND, and KKE). The range of political representation may thus have suffered, as small and very small political parties normally did not survive parliamentary elections. On the other hand, the above tendencies of the electoral and party systems eventually contributed to the stability of elected governments and parliaments, two major liberal political institutions.

Moreover, as noted above, political liberalism is not a novelty in Greek politics. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, with few exceptions, the country's constitutional monarchs respected the results of elections and appointed the leader of the political party that had won the elections to be Prime Minister. In 1974 constitutional monarchy was abolished. With the adoption of the post-authoritarian constitution in 1975, Greece became a parliamentary democracy in which the head of state, the President of the Republic, is not elected through direct suffrage, but by enhanced majority in the parliament.

Admittedly, constructive dialogue with and tolerance toward political opponents were established as norms in Greek politics—to an extent—only after the fall of the Colonels' regime (1974). Before this, various measures of political discrimination and political exclusion applied. For instance, after the end of the Greek civil war

22 Nicos C. Alivizatos, "Greek Constitutionalism and Patterns of Government," in *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Greek Politics*, ed. Kevin Featherstone and Dimitri A. Sotiropoulos (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 104-5.

23 *Ibid.*, 105, 107.

24 Yannis Tsirbas, "The Party System," in *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Greek Politics*, ed. Kevin Featherstone and Dimitri A. Sotiropoulos (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 224, 229.

25 Elias Dinas, "The Electoral System," in *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Greek Politics*, ed. Kevin Featherstone and Dimitri A. Sotiropoulos (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 216.

(1946-1949) and the defeat of the communist guerrilla army, voters of the left were either rounded up and imprisoned in concentration camps or subjected to heavy surveillance by security forces. Even though elections took place in the post-civil war period, political parties of the left and the center as well as labor unions and student activists were constrained in their exercise of collective rights. The judiciary and the public administration served the ruling elites, consisting of the conservative political class, the monarchy, and the military. There were weak, if any, checks and balances to constrain the central government. Greece's post-war democracy was a crippled democratic regime.²⁶ This arrangement reflected domestic and international historical legacies, particularly the impact of the Civil War and the Cold War (Greece was a member of the NATO alliance and heavily dependent on U.S. military, economic, and technical assistance).

The non-democratic deviations of Greece's post-war democracy reflected the strength of illiberal values, which—from the birth of the modern Greek state—developed in parallel with liberal ones. This pattern may recall the phenomenon of “cultural dualism,” a term that refers to a complex social and political reality beyond conflicting sets of values. Although it has been contested, this concept aims to capture the tension between a modernizing culture and an “underdog” one and between the different collective actors associated with these two cultures.²⁷ A similar, though not identical, concern about the tense coexistence of liberal and illiberal values informs the analysis that follows.

Illiberal Values in Greece

Greeks prefer democracy over other types of political regime, but they have also long supported political ideologies, such as nationalism and populism, that are not always compatible with liberal democratic values. As a result, some civic values, usually linked with efficient liberal democracy, have remained underdeveloped, as documented below.²⁸

In detail, it has been argued that populism, which believes in the prevalence of the people over institutions (e.g., the parliament, the judiciary) and the alleged moral superiority of the masses over elites, may be a permanent and defining characteristic of post-1974 Greek politics.²⁹ Populism certainly overran the Greek political system during the economic crisis of 2009-2018. The populist vision of democracy became hegemonic.³⁰ Particularly in 2015-2016, the ruling coalition of two populist parties—Syriza and the right-wing nationalist party “Independent Greeks” (Anel)—put liberal institutions, such as the media and the judiciary, to demanding stress tests. The radical left/nationalist right-wing coalition tried to bend democratic processes to its short-term political interests—including by launching a national referendum in 2015—and to compromise institutions, such as state and private electronic media. In 2016 the populist coalition passed legislation to restrict the number of private nationwide channels to just four, but the relevant law was struck down by Greek

26 Nicos P. Mouzelis, *Greece: Facets of Underdevelopment* (London: Macmillan, 1978).

27 P. Nikiforos Diamandouros, *Cultural Dualism and Political Change in Post-Authoritarian Greece* (Madrid: Instituto Juan March de Estudios e Investigaciones, 1994).

28 Vasilopoulou and Halikiopoulou, “Political Culture,” 347.

29 Pappas, *Populism and Crisis Politics in Greece*.

30 Sofia Vasilopoulou, Daphne Halikiopoulou, and Theofanis Exacadyctylos, “Greece in Crisis: Austerity, Populism, and the Politics of Blame,” *Journal of Common Market Studies* 52, no. 2 (2014): 388-402, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.12093>.

courts. The coalition eventually succumbed to the pressure of international creditors and the domestic opposition.³¹

Compared to populism, nationalism may have been a longer-term feature of Greek democracy. In Greek popular culture and the discourse of Greek political parties, one used to find recurrent nationalist themes, such as ethnocentrism, defiance, and resistance against foreigners. Particularly on the far right of the political spectrum, there was an emphasis on national bonds defined by race, blood, and the creed of Orthodox Christianity.³²

Nationalism and populism have had an impact on political values in Greece for a time period exceeding the lifetime of their most ardent supporter, the GD party (the party was essentially eclipsed in 2019 after its leadership was found guilty of the politically motivated assassination of a left-wing rap singer). Indeed, political analysts and recent opinion surveys attest to the co-existence of illiberal and liberal values.

Foreign and Greek analysts alike have observed the tense co-existence of liberal principles and statist beliefs and a tendency to tolerate political extremism instead of trying hard to work in the context of consensual politics. Personal responsibility as a social value coexists with a belief in the omnipotent state to which—with a few exceptions—citizens resort.³³ Volunteerism is anemic, while local social solidarity among neighbors emerges only in instances of grave crisis (earthquakes, wildfires, floods, major economic crises).³⁴ The ease with which Greek politics slipped into anti-democratic extremism during the economic crisis was alarming.³⁵

However, leaving aside periods of crisis, liberal democratic values are generally upheld by the population. A 2020 opinion poll conducted by the Athens Office of the Friedrich Naumann Foundation (FNF) in cooperation with the Greek polling company Kappa Research focused on the liberal values of a random sample of Greeks.³⁶ More than 9 out of 10 respondents declared that democracy is the best system of governance. Asked to choose between two sets of values—namely “individual freedoms-justice-democracy” and “security-strong leadership-stability”—68 percent chose the former and only 31 percent the latter. Moreover, Greeks appreciate liberal values as vehicles to achieve desired societal goals, such as economic growth: 68 percent of respondents valued meritocracy and justice.

However, in a national sample survey conducted in Greece in March 2022, only 19 percent of respondents identified with the political ideology of liberalism. While 17 percent chose no political ideology at all, others subscribed to social democracy (14 percent), socialism (12 percent), environmentalism (8 percent), neoliberalism (7

31 Paris Aslanidis and Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser, “Dealing with Populists in Government: The Syriza/ANEL Coalition in Greece,” *Democratization* 23, no. 6 (2016): 1077-1091, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2016.1154842>.

32 Vasilopoulou and Halikiopoulou, “Political Culture,” 343-346.

33 Ronald Meinardus, “The Malaise of Greek Liberalism,” *The Globalist*, August 16, 2015, <https://www.theglobalist.com/greece-liberalism-politics-syriza/>.

34 Asteris Huliaras, “The Party System,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Greek Politics*, ed. Kevin Featherstone and Dimitri A. Sotiropoulos (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020): 351-365.

35 Sofia Vasilopoulou and Daphne Halikiopoulou, “Greek Politics: Economic Crisis or Crisis of Democracy?” *World Affairs* 178, no. 3 (2015): 13-18, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24888110>.

36 Friedrich Naumann Foundation, “Survey: Liberalism in Greece, Today,” 2020, <https://kaparesearch.com/en/liberalism-in-greece-2020/> (in Greek).

percent), and conservatism (6 percent).³⁷ In other words, only a minority of Greeks openly subscribe to liberalism.

This is not to suggest that most Greeks are anti-liberal. It may mean that there is space in the Greek value system for illiberal values to intrude. For instance, racism in Greece is expressed through hostile attitudes toward and discriminatory actions against minorities residing in the country (e.g., the Roma) and immigrants passing through Greek territory on their way from the Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa to the countries of Northwestern Europe. For example, in a national sample survey on attitudes toward religious and ethnic groups conducted in March 2022, 64 percent of respondents favored the Greek authorities taking a stricter stance on immigrants.³⁸

Xenophobia is also diffused in Greece and takes the form of extreme dislike of the religion and customs of Muslims. For instance, in the same national sample survey mentioned just above, authoritarianism is shown in attitudes and actions against political opponents during electoral campaigns. At times of acute political polarization (for example, during the recent economic crisis), voters of opposing parties are treated not as rivals but—at least to a certain extent—as enemies.

However, a distinction should be drawn between state-driven authoritarianism and authoritarianism exhibited in political-party competition. The former is evident in how the state treats groups of protesters and incoming migrants. At political protests in Greece, the police often treat protesters with brutality, particularly when provoked by the latter. When it comes to checking identity papers of migrants and refugees, government employees are dismissive, while security forces behave in an oppressive, if not violent, manner toward them.

Authoritarianism in the context of political-party competition is exhibited in outbursts of political violence by members of one party against those of another. This second kind of authoritarianism is also problematic. It is an indication that in the eyes of certain groups of voters or party activists, the liberal democratic outlets for non-violent political engagement are non-existent or closed off. The public sphere in Greece does not provide adequate channels of public consultation and deliberation, as civil society itself remains relatively weak.³⁹

Authoritarian attitudes and actions appear in all political camps in Greece, on the right and on the left. For example, political parties of the far right, of which the neo-Nazi GD party is the foremost example, treat not only socialists or communists, but also political liberals, with hostility. The GD has inflicted physical wounds on opponents and even (as noted above) killed a left-wing singer. Other far-right organizations have not collapsed with the fall of GD, but remain active.⁴⁰

Yet without equating the GD's paramilitary organization to social protest by collective movements, nor should one be blind to the use of violence by other political

³⁷ Dianeosis, "What Greeks Believe in," March 2022, full report-Part A, p. 178, Table A38, https://www.dianeosis.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/tpe_2022_part-A.pdf (in Greek).

³⁸ Dianeosis, "What Greeks Believe In," March 2022, summary of the report, Part 2, https://www.dianeosis.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/tpe_2022_part-a_brochure.pdf (in Greek).

³⁹ Dimitri A. Sotiropoulos, "Civil Society in Greece in the Wake of the Economic Crisis," Athens Office of the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung and ELIAMEP Foundation, May 2014, <https://www.eliamep.gr/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/kas.pdf> (in Greek).

⁴⁰ Nicholas Alex Isychos, "Mapping the Greek Far Right One Year After Golden Dawn's Conviction," *IERES Occasional Papers* 12 (January 2022), <https://www.illiberalism.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/IERES-occasional-papers-12-Isychos-Mapping-the-Greek-Far-Right.pdf>.

forces. In settings in which radical left-wing party-controlled associations (student factions, labor unions) have a longstanding presence, such as university campuses or labor union mobilizations, radical left-wing activists have been known to suppress dissenting opinions using force. For instance, on Greek university campuses, academics who have resisted the activities or rejected the opinions of radical or anarchic student factions have been physically attacked, held hostage for hours, or blocked from their offices for days.⁴¹ During the economic crisis, some labor unions physically attacked Greek and foreign government officials.⁴² Nor is it uncommon for labor factions opposing the government of the day to attempt to violently storm and occupy government buildings.⁴³

Naturally, the national General Confederation of Greek Workers of Greece (GSEE) and the corresponding national confederation of civil servants (ADEDY), who officially represent the interests of salaried workers and employees, do not endorse such practices. There have also been outbreaks of violence in other contemporary Western democracies (including the US, France, and Italy). However, liberal democracy in Greece seems to have periodically encountered collective behavior that surpasses the usual limits of conflict in the political, labor, and university arenas. This may be a symptom of the failure of traditional liberal democratic means to manage conflict.

After all, Greeks do not trust major liberal political institutions. Based on Eurobarometer surveys, only 5 percent of Greeks trusted political parties in 2010, at the start of the economic crisis (down from 28 percent in 2003). Trust in parties has not improved over time.

Such distrust is a permanent trend of Greek politics and is not necessarily related to the economic crisis. In 2018-2019, the World Values Survey showed that Greeks had very little trust in the following political institutions (starting with the highest level of distrust): political parties, the press, television channels, the government, and the parliament.⁴⁴

In addition, a 2019 Eurobarometer survey showed that the Greek national government, public administration, and regional and local authorities enjoyed the trust of a minority of respondents (between 23 and 27 percent).⁴⁵ As of January 2022, only 11 percent of Greeks trusted political parties, far below the EU-27 average of 21 percent.⁴⁶

41 Ellie Bothwell, "Greek Scholars Hope New Law Ends Student Anarchy on Campuses," *Times Higher Education*, February 16, 2021, <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/greek-scholars-hope-new-law-ends-student-anarchy-campuses>; Apostolos Lakasas, "Time to End Uni Violence, Says Rector," *He Kathimerini*, November 9, 2020, <https://www.ekathimerini.com/news/258925/time-for-uni-violence-to-end-says-rector/>.

42 Helena Smith, "Greek Protesters Storm Conference Hurling Coffee, Water, Eggs and Abuse," *The Guardian*, November 15, 2012, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/nov/15/greek-protesters-storm-conference-german?CMP=twi_gu.

43 See photos published in *USA Today*, "Labor Protest in Greece Turns Violent," <https://eu.usatoday.com/picture-gallery/news/2017/12/05/labor-protest-in-greece-turns-violent/108334652/>.

44 Anastasia Charalambi, Aggeliki Yfanti, Joanna Tsinganou, and Catherine Michalopoulou, "Investigating Political Trust in Institutions and Organizations: Evidence from the World Values Survey 2017-2018 in Greece" in *Values, Cultural Models and Social Orientations in Contemporary Greece* (in Greek), ed. Sokratis Konioridos (Athens: Papazisis, 2020), 284-285.

45 Nikolaos Zahariades, Evangelia Petridou, Theofanis Exadactylos, and Jorgen Sparf, "Policy Styles and Political Trust in Europe's National Responses to the COVID-19 Crisis," *Policy Studies* (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1080/01442872.2021.2019211>.

46 Standard Eurobarometer no. 96, Winter 2021-2022, fieldwork conducted in January-February 2022, <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2553>.

Liberal Democracy in a Less-than-Liberal Context?

In 2020 the aforementioned FNF survey of liberal values in Greece showed that only 19 percent of Greeks trusted political parties, 14 percent trade unions, 13 percent the mass media, and 12 percent non-governmental organizations. Notably, middle-income groups tend to trust these institutions more than low-income groups (such as workers and farmers) do.

And yet, despite the inhospitable values context sketched above, liberal democracy in contemporary Greece remains relatively predictable and stable. Below, I briefly elaborate on two explanations for this phenomenon.

Reasons for the Resilience of Greek Democracy

There is academic literature claiming that liberal values were never really embedded in Greece: neither during Ottoman rule (1453-1830) over the southern part of the Balkan peninsula nor after the birth of the Modern Greek state (1830). The shallowness of liberal values was attributed to the dominant cultural patterns.⁴⁷ But it is difficult to argue that the incompatibility between liberal institutions and cultural values registered in the nineteenth century has explanatory value today.

Instead, the presence of resilient liberal democratic institutions in a less-than-liberal setting may be explained through an analysis of the contemporary Greek political party system and the social structure of contemporary Greece.

Parties and the Party System

In Greece's two-party system, the center-right New Democracy (ND) party and the center-left Panhellenic Socialist Movement (Pasok) have alternated in government, relying on single-party parliamentary majorities, since the 1974 transition to democracy.⁴⁸ Since 1974, coalition governments have been formed only for relatively brief time periods in which there was either governmental instability (1989-1990) or economic crisis (2011-2018). Both of the aforementioned parties adopted a toolkit approach to liberal democratic institutions. From 1974 to 2014, once in power, the party that had won the elections used the public administration, state-owned enterprises, the state-managed television and radio organizations, and—to the extent possible—the courts as tools to improve its chances of re-election.

The government coalition of the radical left party “Coalition of the Radical Left” (Syriza) with the nationalist right-wing nationalist “Independent Greeks” (Anel) party in 2015-2018 did not alter this utilitarian approach to institutions. Instead, as explained above, that coalition simply put a populist spin on the utilitarian approach.

In 2019-2022, under the single-party majority government of ND, the familiar pattern of executive interference with (if not control over) the legislature continued. As in previous decades, one witnessed the full control of parliamentary processes by the governing majority. It is telling that in Greece, the law-making initiative rests squarely in the hands of the government. The parliament exercises parliamentary scrutiny, for instance, through questions put to ministers. However, parliamentarians almost never succeed in drafting, let alone passing, legislation on their own initiative.

47 Constantine Tsoucalas, “Enlightened Concepts in the Dark: Power and Freedom, Politics and Society,” *Journal of Modern Greek Studies* 91, no. 1 (1991): 1-22, <https://doi.org/10.1353/mgs.2010.0117>; Adamantia Pollis, “The Impact of Traditional Cultural Patterns on Greek Politics,” *The Greek Review of Social Research* 29 (1977): 2-14, <https://doi.org/10.12681/grsr.330>.

48 Yannis Tsirbas, “The Party System,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Greek Politics*, ed. Kevin Featherstone and Dimitri A. Sotiropoulos (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020): 219-238.

Under the ND government, as under previous ones, no bills of law submitted by opposition parties were ever adopted as law. This follows the tendency to render the parliament subservient to the government that was common under Pasok, ND, and Syriza/Anel governments of the past. The inability of the parliament to check the ND government in the early fall of 2022 following allegations that the government-supervised secret services wiretapped in 2021 the cell phones of a prominent opposition politician and an investigative journalist is a case in point. Yet while in Greece today the executive towers over the other institutions, it does not do so in the intense, asphyxiating manner one would witness in an illiberal regime.

To explain in more detail, Greece's liberal democratic institutions have provided a stable context that all players of the democratic game have accepted—without, however, squandering any opportunities to trim these institutions around their edges, as the following examples indicate. Throughout the post-authoritarian period (1974 onward), governments used to hand-pick and appoint higher judges to the posts of presidents and vice-presidents of high-level courts. Thus, the appointment of higher judges was made by the Cabinet on political criteria. This practice continues today, but with an additional filter that partly curbs government bias. The president and vice-presidents of the parliament meet and vote on a short-list of candidates for the presidents and vice-presidents of high-level courts. The short-list is then passed on to the Cabinet to decide.

Recruitment of civil servants to tenured posts was made through entrance examinations or on the basis of measurable educational credentials. Still, promotions to the posts of Director and Director General were orchestrated by government-dominated civil service councils in ministries and public bodies, while recruitment to entry-level, temporary public-sector jobs was organized by governing parties. State television and radio channels granted disproportionate airtime to governing-party candidates, while their news coverage was biased toward government activities. All of the above were common practices under ND, Pasok, and Syriza/Anel governments. In other words, while political parties accepted liberal democratic institutions, they did so in a lukewarm rather than wholehearted fashion. To the extent they could, parties bent such institutions to their own ends.

Meanwhile, within the parties, dissent—let alone organized opposition to the party leader—was rarely tolerated. The management of party finances was often not at all transparent. Party youths became involved in violent incidents, particularly in universities, where opposing student factions made shows of force. In short, parties were only reluctant agents of the political socialization of their card-carrying members and voters into the values of liberal democracy.

That being said, political parties have played a positive role in contemporary Greek democracy. First of all, they helped consolidate democracy after the 1974 transition from authoritarian rule. Many social groups and individuals identified with political parties and mobilized behind the single goal of winning parliamentary elections. Whereas in other European democracies, social movements—such as labor and agrarian movements—have given birth to political parties defending corresponding social interests, in Greece the linkages between parties and movements have been complex, with parties penetrating movements as well as interest groups.⁴⁹ For

49 George Th. Mavrogordatos, "Models of Party-Interest Group Relations and the Uniqueness of the Greek Case" (paper presented to the Workshop "Political Parties and Civil Society," ECPR Joint Sessions, Lisbon, April 14-19, 2009); Dimitri A. Sotiropoulos, "Political Party-Interest Group Linkages in Greece Before and After the Onset of the Economic Crisis," *Mediterranean Politics* 24, no. 5 (2018): 1-21, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2018.1428149>.

instance, after the 1974 transition to democracy, parties of the left dominated labor, student, youth, and feminist movements. Each of the parties created its own front organization within these movements. Party control of social movements had the effect of limiting movements' autonomy. However, it also meant that parties contributed to centripetal tendencies in the post-1974 democratic regime and eventually to the wide political legitimization of liberal democracy, as explained in the previous sections of this article.

The party system contributed to the same positive result in an intriguing manner. Alternating governments meticulously and frequently amended the electoral legislation to boost the electoral chances of the party in power. The electoral playing field was often tilted in favor of the incumbent. However, successive governments' toying with the electoral system never reached the point after which democracy would start backsliding. Multiple government turnovers—in 1981, 1990, 1993, 2004, 2009, 2012, 2015, and 2019—attest to the fact that the rules of political competition were never so biased as to prevent the overthrow of an unpopular government, which is the sign of a functioning, if not necessarily robust, liberal democracy.

The Middle Class and Non-Overlapping Social Cleavages

The link, in economically developed societies, between the existence of a strong middle class and democratization is well-known in the mainstream sociology and political science literature.⁵⁰ The middle class considers liberal democracy to be the appropriate institutional setting to seek political representation, promote its business interests, and benefit from political stability. For these reasons, the entrepreneurial segment of the middle class bears democratic credentials. Intellectuals influenced by the democratic ideas of Enlightenment and political liberalism also belong to the middle class. Recent scholarship has cast doubt on the democratic credentials of the state-dependent segment of the middle class (namely public employees) in post-communist autocracies, but not in other regimes.⁵¹ The middle class continues to offer its diffuse support to liberal democracy, a pattern that holds for contemporary Greek democracy, which is embedded in a basically middle-class society.

Greece's social structure is characterized by the presence of a large and fragmented middle class. This consists of public-sector employees (22 percent of total employment in 2020),⁵² professionals (20 percent of total employment), shopkeepers, and small and very small entrepreneurs. It is telling of middle-class fragmentation that 85 percent of Greek businesses employ 5 people or less.⁵³

Since the 1974 transition to democracy, these middle strata have consistently voted for mainstream parties, namely parties of the center-right and center-left. Explicitly

50 Seymour Martin Lipset, *Political Man: The Social Bases of Politics* (New York: Anchor Books, 1960); Barrington Moore, Jr., *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*, (New York: Beacon Press, 1966); Ronald M. Glassman, *The New Middle Class and Democracy in Global Perspective* (London: Macmillan, 1997).

51 Bryn Rosenfeld, "State Dependency and the Limits of Middle-Class Support for Democracy," *Comparative Political Studies* 54, no. 3-4 (2021): 411-444, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414020938085>.

52 For the figure of public employees, including civil servants and employees of state-owned enterprises, see the official website of the Ministry of Interior: <http://interops.ydmed.gov.gr/month/monthlyen.php>. See also Stavros Mavroudeas and Costas Passas, "The Level and Evolution of Greek Public Sector Salaries from the Crisis of 2009-2010 until Today" (Athens: ADEDY Koinoniko Polykentro, 2022) (in Greek), p.20, https://kpolykentro.gr/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/exelixa-misthon-it_mavroudeas.pdf.

53 For information on employment, see European Commission, "Labor Market Information: Greece," 2020, https://ec.europa.eu/eures/public/living-and-working/labour-market-information/labour-market-information-greece_en.

anti-liberal parties, such as the neo-Nazi GD and the pro-Soviet KKE, have attracted voters from various electoral pools.

GD was an explicitly anti-liberal party. Its leadership wanted to abolish the democratic political regime and replace it with a totalitarian state, while in 2015 76 percent of its supporters agreed with the statement “Parliamentary democracy is a camouflaged authoritarian regime” (compared to 45 percent of all voters).⁵⁴ The party was strong in all social strata other than the middle-class ones. During the economic crisis of the previous decade, the following categories were over-represented among the voters of the GD: farmers, the unemployed, private-sector employees, and pensioners. Its supporters also included artisans and craftsmen with very low educational credentials.⁵⁵

The KKE explicitly stands against liberal democracy and for state socialism.⁵⁶ The party’s voters include people from all socio-professional groups⁵⁷ and particularly wage workers,⁵⁸ although the latter—as well as the unemployed—have tended to vote more for Syriza than for the KKE.

For their part, typical middle-class strata have remained in favor of liberal democracy. They voted for the two main protagonists of party competition, which did not challenge liberal democracy, namely ND and Pasok, until 2010 and have voted for ND and Syriza since 2010. Regardless of its radical-left platform, which at the start of the economic crisis was strongly anti-austerity, Syriza eventually took over the center-left spot once occupied by Pasok in the Greek party system.

As the largest parties in a two-party system, the center-right and center-left political parties poll strongly across all social strata and particularly among the middle class. The pattern of middle-class support for the two parties is borne out by exit poll results in the three most recent national parliamentary elections (January 2015, September 2015, and July 2019).

The elections of January 2015 signaled the rise of Syriza to government, replacing the ND-Pasok coalition (2011-2014). The largest share of autonomous employees, including those in the liberal professions and business, voted for either ND or Syriza (29 percent for Syriza vs. 34 percent for ND). Public-sector employees also voted disproportionately for these two parties (38 percent for Syriza vs. 24 percent for ND).⁵⁹

In the snap elections of September 2015, which Syriza called after reversing its anti-austerity policy, the largest share of autonomous employees voted for either ND or Syriza (29 percent apiece). Public-sector employees voted disproportionately in

54 Vasiliki Georgiadou, “The Far Right,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Greek Politics*, ed. Kevin Featherstone and Dimitri A. Sotiropoulos (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 249, 251.

55 “The Profile of Voters of the Golden Dawn Party,” *He Kathimerini*, October 13, 2013 (in Greek), <https://www.kathimerini.gr/politics/56337/poio-einai-to-profil-ton-psifoforon-tis-chrysis-aygis/>; Myrto Laliouti, “Golden Dawn: Voters’ Profile,” *To Vima*, October 18, 2020 (in Greek), <https://www.tovima.gr/2020/10/18/society/xyysi-aygi-to-profil-ton-psifoforon/>.

56 Giorgos Charalambous, “The Communists,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Greek Politics*, ed. Kevin Featherstone and Dimitri A. Sotiropoulos (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 322.

57 Metron Analysis polling company. Exit poll results of elections of July 7, 2019. See also “The Ballot Box under the Microscope: What Exit Polls Reveal,” *To Vima*, July 8, 2019 (in Greek), <https://www.tovima.gr/2019/07/08/politics/i-kalpi-sto-mikroskopio-ti-apokalyptoun-ta-exit-poll/>.

58 Charalambous, “The Communists,” 328.

59 Metron Analysis polling company. Exit poll results of elections of January 25, 2015.

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favor of Syriza (37 percent vs. 28 percent for ND). The same held for private-sector employees, including workers (37 percent for Syriza vs. 22 percent for ND).⁶⁰

In the most recent parliamentary elections (in 2019), ND performed far better among autonomous employees than it did nationally (44 percent among professionals vs. 40 percent of the total vote). It competed with Syriza for the vote of public-sector employees (37 percent voted for Syriza vs. 32 percent for ND).⁶¹

In sum, it is possible to argue that in contemporary Greece the middle class is far more supportive of liberal parties than anti-liberal ones.

Conclusion

In Greece, diffuse support for liberal democracy as a political regime has long coexisted with persistent racism, xenophobia, and intolerance toward political opponents and social minorities, coupled with very low trust in accountable political institutions such as the parliament and political parties. The steadfast diffuse support of liberal democracy as a political regime has not prevented the emergence and survival of distinct anti-liberal political parties, including the communist KKE and the neo-Nazi GD.

On the basis of the above (unavoidably brief) analysis of the Greek case, general lessons could be drawn about the performance of liberal democracy. These lessons pertain to the conditions required for liberal democracy to survive in what may seem—at first glance—like inhospitable circumstances. The lessons summarized below may provide research hypotheses to be tested in other cases.

Based on the case of Greece, it can be argued that for liberal democracy to be resilient, it is necessary for the electorally strongest parties to support that type of regime in at least a tool-kit, utilitarian manner—that is, to use liberal democratic institutions to ascend to and remain in power, even if they do not fully subscribe to the institutions in an ideological sense. Moreover, it is necessary for the middle classes to support liberal democracy as a political regime, even if they may be dissatisfied with the way in which democracy functions.

To conclude, the main argument of the article is that despite the diffusion of illiberal ideas in a given society (here, contemporary Greece), liberal democracy is sustainable if there are conducive conditions in two fields: first, the party system; and, second, the social class structure in which liberal democracy is embedded.

60 Metron Analysis polling company. Exit poll results of elections of September 20, 2015.

61 *To Vima*, “The Ballot Box under the Microscope.”

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