



Book Review: *Routledge Handbook of Illiberalism*, edited by András Sajó, Renáta Uitz, Stephen Holmes (Routledge, 2022, ISBN 9780367260545)

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In recent years, challenges to the liberal order have mounted as civil and political liberties around the world have deteriorated to their lowest point in over a decade. Understanding this dynamic is crucial for ensuring stability of liberal democracies across the globe. The *Routledge Handbook of Illiberalism* represents an admirable and much-needed attempt to explore, conceptualize and analyze illiberalism, its theoretical and empirical dynamic, and the factors that brought about the unravelling of the current illiberal wave.

Many great scholars have contributed to this impressive endeavor. A particularly commendable approach by the book's creators is to bring together scholars from different methodological fields, ranging from philosophy and legal studies to political science and sociology. This approach allows us to explore the phenomenon of the rising illiberal trends across the world in its complexity and from different cross-disciplinary angles. This approach is particularly important for the notion of illiberalism, whose complexity "as a social, political, legal, and mental phenomenon calls for posing research questions and building frames of analysis across disciplines from the start."¹ This much-needed endeavor is very intellectually stimulating, and every reader interested in this topic will undoubtedly find something valuable for her research in this collection.

In the context of my own work on related issues, I particularly liked the insight by Leonardo Morlino in the chapter on "Hybrid regimes" in which he subdivides illiberal regime types based on their emergence into three groups: (a) the deterioration of democracy, (b) the deterioration of authoritarianism with the break of limited

1 András Sajó, Renáta Uitz, and Stephen Holmes, eds., *Routledge Handbook of Illiberalism* (New York: Routledge, 2021), 976, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780367260569>.

non-responsible authoritarianism, or (c) the weakening or transformation of the personal rule that is typical of traditional regimes.² I think it is a helpful approach to categorize the various non-democratic trends by nature of the regime that precedes them. Nenad Dimitrijević's chapter on "Illiberal regime types" was also instrumental in conceptualizing non-democratic regime types. In addition, Part 4 on "Illiberal practices," in which scholars explore how illiberal leaders across different contexts manipulate and destroy the institutional framework of democracy, such as elections, parliaments, constitutions, and media, was also particularly instrumental in my research on concepts of majoritarian and pluralist democracy.

Yet the book's strengths are also its weaknesses. The ambitiousness of the initial goal and a variety of definitions of "illiberalism" used by the contributors creates confusion in the structure and content of the collection, which needs to be addressed in future publications that take on this challenging endeavor. In general, the variety of non-democratic regimes (or one can say "deviations from democracy") are notoriously difficult to explore. Essentially, when talking of non-democracies one is dealing with a residual category (everything that is not a liberal democracy), which incorporates a continuum of concepts and regime types. Some such regimes are located closer to democracies, others are closer to autocracies. One could easily rephrase the famous Leo Tolstoy quote to say, "liberal democracies are all alike, but every non-democracy is unhappy in its own way." Given that liberal democracy as a form of government has only been known to humanity for several centuries if not decades, an attempt to analyze all forms of government across human history other than liberal democracy becomes a daunting task.

While there is no one standard definition, by contemporary spread of illiberalism scholars usually tend to mean democratic backsliding over the last two decades. Illiberalism is "situated somewhere in the middle of a continuum from democracy to non-democracy, describing a move from the former to the latter."³ Hence, the real focus of the collection should predominantly be on the current illiberal trends that are undermining political and civil liberties across the world. Yet the book's multiple authors appear to disagree on definitions of "illiberalism." Instead, many chapters lump together in the analysis all sorts of non-democratic regimes. This leads to a huge variation in regimes under analysis of different colors, shapes and time periods ranging from Ancient Rome's tyranny (Nenad Dimitrijević) or theocratic regimes (Ran Hirschl) to contemporary US democracy under Trump (Samuel Issacharoff and J. Colin Bradley). Similarly, scholars treat both Russia under Putin and Russia under Yeltsin as separate examples of illiberalism. Some chapters deal explicitly with "hybrid" cases (Leonardo Morlino), others focus on full-fledged autocracies (Nam Kyu Kim) and even totalitarian regimes (Nenad Dimitrijević). Some case selections, like mentioning China in the list of cases of deteriorating democratic regimes through executive aggrandizement are questionable (Helena Alviar García and Günter Frankenberg). Many analyses do not even define what they interpret as "illiberalism" at all.

While there is an analytical value in exploring and comparing such variation of non-democratic regime types, it also makes it more complicated to identify parallels in the illiberal dynamic across contemporary regimes.

² Sajó, Uitz, and Holmes, *Routledge Handbook of Illiberalism*, 145.

³ Marlene Laruelle, "Illiberalism: a conceptual introduction," *East European Politics* 38, no. 2 (2022), 303-327, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2022.2037079>.

In addition, one unfortunate omission of this collection is the fact that many chapters do not speak to each other. Given the variety in country cases, regime types and temporal periods under analysis, it would be a good idea for each part of this collection to begin or end with an introductory or conclusive summary of its chapters. This would help structure the amount of information being poured at the reader, as well as identify parallels and common trends across these cases. For example, in Part 5 on Government and Governance many scholars make very interesting and nuanced observations about ways in which illiberal leaders undermine checks and balances to their authority. But many of the points different scholars make are repetitive, as apparently illiberal leaders often lack creativity in undermining institutions of liberal democracy. And when reading through these cases there emerges a need for some sort of a review that would help putting all these valuable observations into perspective. For example, why do some illiberal leaders focus on dismantling media (Eileen Culloty and Jane Suiter) while others go after courts (Miroslaw Wyrzykowski and Michal Ziółkowski)? Is that a function of constraints such leaders face, a need to push forward their agenda or are there other reasons? Similarly, Part 7 on the Regional and National Variations exposes many parallels in the ways that different illiberal leaders from Montenegro (Dimitri A. Sotiropoulos) to India (Arun K. Thiruvengadam) accumulate control (including parallels in rhetorical styles, economic policies and so on). However, these differences are not summed up and contrasted against each other, which would be very helpful for readers. For example, is cooptation of religious community organizations under an illiberal leader's control specific to Turkey's type of Islamist populism (Halil Ibrahim Yenigun) or does one also notice similar patterns in, say, Hungary (Gábor Halmai)?

Another limitation is the tendency to focus on the supply side. Most chapters tend to explore primarily the considerations and strategies used by liberal actors to dismantle democracy, consolidate control and so on, i.e., they tend to look at the regime's dynamic predominantly from an incumbent's position. However, a question that often remains unaddressed is why do people in respective societies tolerate dismantling of checks and balances? Why do they (passively) accept democratic backsliding in their countries? And why in some instances do they not? Does it all come down to an incumbent's ability to deceive them or are there other considerations as well? Adding a more in-depth exploration of structural factors and demand-side dimensions would also make the analysis more causal and less descriptive.

Last but not the least, in terms of this collection's format I would recommend a bigger font. The current format is difficult for eyes, as the font is too small, and one wants to read as much as possible of this meritable collection's one thousand pages.

Overall, this collection represents an impressive and much-needed endeavor for understanding the dynamics of illiberalism across regions, countries, and time periods. Given its scope and cross-disciplinary approach, I am sure it will generate a great interest from scholars of this topic as well as wider audiences.

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Illiberalism has developed into populism's main competition for capturing political contestation in the 21st century. Compared to populism, illiberalism seems to offer the advantage of capturing a larger geographical space and also time period. Furthermore, it can be traced over two centuries and can seemingly find representative political currents on all continents. *The Routledge Handbook of Illiberalism* seeks to bring order to this diversity and approaches the concept via 61 chapters grouped in ten parts, covering theoretical issues, social preconditions, national variations, global perspectives and many more.

While the book's main aim is to explore the opposition between liberalism and illiberalism, the volume further sets out to work with a distinction between illiberalism and anti-liberalism, and between illiberalism and populism. While Stephen Holmes sees anti-liberalism as a "mindset"⁴ or "mentality"⁵ the editors locate illiberalism at the level of "political practices" of government, while in the concluding chapter illiberalism is a "social mentality or culturally entrenched pattern," or "world view."⁶ By opposing liberal individualism and universalism, according to the editors, anti-liberalism has an egalitarian stance posed against the elites and in favour of the people or nation. Illiberalism seems more extreme, denying not only universalism and individualism (as Holmes outlines in the Introduction to Part 1), but also "reason," "the Enlightenment," "truth," and "values." Although the editors also see anti-liberalism as emerging in opposition to the Enlightenment's legacy, anti-liberalism seems to have little to do (according to them) with illiberalism, whose precursors are "ideologies like populism, religious values, or communitarianism."⁷ The readers are also told that illiberalism is not authoritarianism and also not (only) populism. However, the extent to which the contributors throughout the volume can work with these distinctions varies strongly, and as outlined below they use these concepts – illiberalism, anti-liberalism, populism, authoritarianism – interchangeably.

The distinction between illiberalism and anti-liberalism is understandably difficult to work with since it would require looking for illiberalism's ideational precursors among populists and communitarians and not among anti-liberals. Instead, Helena Rosenblatt, in her chapter on the history of illiberalism, clearly identifies an intellectual tradition to precede illiberalism in Europe's inter-war generation of right-wing thinkers, from Charles Maurras to Giovanni Gentile and Carl Schmitt attacking liberal individualism and relativism. Andy Hamilton identifies important precursors of illiberalism in conservative thinkers rejecting liberalism as "insufficiently pragmatic."⁸ This perspective complicates the editors' distinction between liberalism and anti-liberalism/illiberalism since it allows for identifying illiberal versions that hardly contradict liberal constitutional principles. Nor are they necessarily opposing the Enlightenment, but "false Enlightenment," based on abstract principles rather than critical judgement.⁹ Importantly, Ulrich Wagrandl reminds us in his *Theory of Illiberal Democracy* (Chapter 8) that liberalism is not necessarily a conceptual

4 András Sajó, Renáta Uitz, and Stephen Holmes, eds., *Routledge Handbook of Illiberalism* (New York: Routledge, 2021), XXII, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780367260569>.

5 Sajó, Uitz, and Holmes, *Routledge Handbook of Illiberalism*, 3.

6 Sajó, Uitz, and Holmes, *Routledge Handbook of Illiberalism*, 975-976.

7 Sajó, Uitz, and Holmes, *Routledge Handbook of Illiberalism*, XXIII.

8 Sajó, Uitz, and Holmes, *Routledge Handbook of Illiberalism*, 70.

9 Sajó, Uitz, and Holmes, *Routledge Handbook of Illiberalism*, 78.

ingredient of democracy. He outlines the contours of an illiberal democracy, anti-pluralist and anti-institutionalist but allowing free elections, even though such a democracy is hardly stable without liberal elements protecting pluralism and would slip into authoritarianism.

Note that neither anti-liberalism nor illiberalism deserve, according to the editors, the status of “theories” or coherent ideologies, as illiberalism is – if articulated via ideas and not only practices – nothing more but a collection of “fragmented rallying cries such as getting rid of elites.”¹⁰ Approaching illiberalism in this way brings it close to populism, although the editors argue that populism is but one possible “ideological” route to a non-ideological outcome – illiberalism. As pointed out further above, the two others are “religious values” and “communitarianism,” although it is highly questionable to call these two ideologies. Furthermore, the concluding chapter contradicts these claims by finding that “the sources of intellectual illiberalism are manifold,” from “antiliberal” Catholic integralists to “Nietzschean elitists” like Peter Sloterdijk, to Critical Race Studies and new left thinkers such as Chantal Mouffe.¹¹

Part III also returns to the relationship between illiberalism and populism in a chapter by Paul Blokker, who, like Hamilton, points out the conservative precursors of contemporary illiberal political formations in Europe. However, rather than seeing populism as a route to illiberalism, he reverses the editors’ perspective to see illiberal ideas as dimensions of populism. Here too, in the intellectual and political currents studies by Blokker, the main issue with liberalism for right-wing populists across the European continent is its individualism, with a conservative current and communitarian alternative to liberalism running through these populist formations. Similarly, Andrea Pető and Mabel Berezin find a common denominator among illiberal formations, Pető in “gender,” and Berezin in “identity.” Berezin explores the relationship between illiberalism and identity, reminding us that politics turns illiberal when “the cultural dimension of national belonging merges with the contractual dimensions of national organization.”¹² Just like in the Preface, however, there is a tendency to define illiberalism in such a broad way as to include very different ideologies; for Berezin, “illiberalisms” are “nationalism, populism, fascism and identitarianism.”¹³ Some of these – populism and nationalism – are “thin” ideologies, as Michael Freeden and Cas Mudde argue, and are difficult to place next to fascism; as Freeden showed, nationalism for instance can combine with any ideology, whether liberal or not.

An alternative strategy to the one of seeing how identity – or gender, in Andrea Pető’s chapter – as a concept unites variegated “illiberalisms,” is to trace the politicization of specific issues, by illiberal as well as liberal actors. Leila Hadj-Abdou follows this approach in her chapter on the politicization of immigration, while Aziz Huq performs a similar analysis of Islam. He argues that anti-Islamic discourse emerges out of liberalism’s internal conflicts “to alchemize a liberal polity into an illiberal one.”¹⁴ Depending on the perspective, liberalism and illiberalism are not as easy to separate as when assuming that what separates them is their relationship to principles such as individualism, universalism, or constitutionalism. The point of anti-Islamic discourse is that both liberal and illiberal actors participate in othering Islam; even

10 Sajó, Uitz, and Holmes, *Routledge Handbook of Illiberalism*, XXIII.

11 Sajó, Uitz, and Holmes, *Routledge Handbook of Illiberalism*, 978.

12 Sajó, Uitz, and Holmes, *Routledge Handbook of Illiberalism*, 245.

13 Sajó, Uitz, and Holmes, *Routledge Handbook of Illiberalism*, 238.

14 Sajó, Uitz, and Holmes, *Routledge Handbook of Illiberalism*, 333.

though they come from different perspectives, they fuel a similar dynamic and might even build on each other.

Frank Furedi returns to this idea in part 6 to criticize liberalism precisely for its proponents' stance vis-à-vis those not sharing its principles. This opens the topic of getting a better picture of the support for illiberalism or illiberalism's social preconditions, leaving aside discussions of whether and how to differentiate illiberalism from anti-liberalism. Gábor Scheiring highlights the connections between socio-economic inequalities and illiberalism and shows the importance of national capitalists' support for illiberal politicians such as Viktor Orbán. Others – Stanley Feldman, Vittorio Mérola, and Justin Dollman – look at the “psychology” of illiberal supporters. However, the analysis turns here into a study of authoritarianism and its sources of popular support, prompting the question of where the line between illiberalism and authoritarianism runs and what to gain from replacing the latter with the former. In fact, many authors seem to operate with a working definition of illiberalism as contradicting or rejecting any or some liberal principles. There is a great deal of variation across the contributions about what those principles are. This would have required a more systematic treatment of the contradictions and dynamics between liberalism and illiberalism, pointing out more clearly where illiberalism slips into authoritarianism.

The work throughout Part VI nevertheless is highly relevant for a readership taking interest in the support base for specific political campaigns, from Trump voters to Brexit or pro-Orbán elites. In the case of Trump voters, the chapter by Bjarki Gronfeldt, Aleksandra Cichocka, Marta Marchlewska, and Aleksandra Cislak argues that these voters were unique in their “desire to dominate outgroups,” even though they did not differ from other voters on “other traditional conservative values.”¹⁵ The chapters dealing with economic policies of illiberal governments deliver a clearer picture of what could be specifically illiberal, documenting a strengthening interventionist – and therefore illiberal – trend, mostly in Eastern Europe's European Union (EU) member states, Russia, and China. László Csaba documents a clear break with marketization as a development policy, while Paula Ganga shows how even in EU-member states Hungary and Poland the government seeks to bring the banking sector under its control by buying up foreign-owned banks or targeting these with “special fees and taxes.”¹⁶

One observation that stands out from the book is that if one asks what the representative regions and actors of illiberalism are, then there seems to be a firm focus on Eastern Europe and Viktor Orbán, Hungary's prime minister since 2010. Throughout several parts, most chapters mention or focus on Orbán, Hungary, or Eastern Europe, turning the region – as Scheiring correctly notes – into illiberalism's main present-day experimentation site. This is understandable, as both Poland and Hungary offer the advantage for research of having illiberal politicians in power. However, a clear avenue for research would be to integrate the insights from other cases more strongly, as Csaba does by extending the analysis to include Russia and China in his study of economic policies. Bringing Russia into focus would enrich the analysis by considering concepts such as “sovereign democracy,” “managed democracy,” or “power vertical” to clarify illiberalism's contours.

In this context, one needs to ask whether the focus on Eastern Europe and Hungary is entirely warranted, and if warranted, then why did illiberalism strengthen there

¹⁵ Sajó, Uitz, and Holmes, *Routledge Handbook of Illiberalism*, 665.

¹⁶ Sajó, Uitz, and Holmes, *Routledge Handbook of Illiberalism*, 696.

and not elsewhere? A comparison with illiberalism in Western Europe or the US would have helped clarify this point, if one conceptualizes illiberalism not only at the level of practices breaking with liberalism, but as various ideas and theories taking issue with different components of liberalism. This can uncover a circulation of ideas and models between world regions. To give an example, one should not treat Russia's far-right thinker Alexander Dugin's work as the "locus classicus of the 'totalitarian liberalism' thesis."¹⁷ Instead, one should place this idea in the broader European context that produced it, from the earlier works of New Right theorist Alain de Benoist in France to the conservative Eric Voegelin in Germany and the United States.

In sum, caution is warranted, when arguing for clear distinctions between liberalism and illiberalism, or when singling out certain places or regions as illiberal experimentation sites. The quest for research can hardly be the delimitation of liberalism from illiberalism. Numerous contributions to the volume and elsewhere show that illiberal regimes still have liberal components. Even Russia, a case presented as paradigmatically different from anything liberal, had a fiscal and monetary policy similar to liberal economic policy elsewhere. Rather than clear separations, what is needed is a better assessment of the possible combinations and dynamic relationship between liberalism and illiberalism.

¹⁷ Sajó, Uitz, and Holmes, *Routledge Handbook of Illiberalism*, 180.

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The recent *Routledge Handbook of Illiberalism* provides a thorough review of many theoretical and empirical elements that are constitutive of and related to the new social science concept of illiberalism. In doing so, the volume attempts to make coherent an inherently difficult and multifaceted conceptual space.¹⁸ The *Handbook's* considerable merits are clear, given that it makes up one of the very first efforts to comprehensively approach what a growing body of scholarship means by 'illiberalism' from a definitional perspective, how it interacts with other conceptual terms of art from social science, political theory, and the political humanities, and how it fits with the empirical record of individual country-cases of interest. The *Handbook* is thus a very welcome addition to a burgeoning sub-genre of academic research on ideology, political movements, and regime conceptualization, as well as area and country-level studies.

As with any collected volume intermeshing a variety of conceptual frameworks, theoretical lenses, and empirical backgrounds, coherence is an inherently tricky thing. This is most evident in the undeniable conceptual incongruence of what 'illiberalism' is taken to mean across sixty-one chapters. This is an understandable and expected shortcoming, and the *Handbook* wisely foregrounds an extensive conceptual discussion in the first sections of the volume, with differing understandings of illiberalism – ranging from tighter conceptualizations to residualized 'NOT-liberalisms' to temporally- or spatially-bound variations all emerging quickly from the chapter set. The tricky problem of defining illiberalism in relation to a poorly defined liberalism (which the majority of contributors also place themselves within from a normative perspective) is present throughout, although this remains less a problem so long as authors remain honest about these potential confounding elements.

As primary-level conceptual debates are and will surely remain central to the field of illiberalism studies, it is worthwhile paying attention to contributions to the volume beyond the conceptual, which are well-handled by other reviewers in this short series.¹⁹ Here, we find a varied panorama of illiberalism in the empirical world, both at the country-case level as well as through a sizeable toolbox of differing theoretical and methodological frames. Surveyed individually, the bulk of the chapters are well-written and will helpfully appeal to other researchers and students looking to explore specific interactions between illiberalism and a given case or framework context. Yet taken as a whole, some of the weaknesses of current scholarly approaches to and assumptions about illiberalism also come into view.

For example, a great deal of work concerns the country-cases of Hungary and Poland, with many other chapters that focus elsewhere seeming to still derive fundamental understandings about or patterns of illiberalism from those specific experiences. This may indeed be accurate, and there is considerable merit to understanding illiberalism as an inductively-produced concept taken from specific Eastern European political experiences. Many thematic chapters in Section V, especially

18 András Sajó, Renáta Uitz, and Stephen Holmes, eds., *Routledge Handbook of Illiberalism* (New York: Routledge, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780367260569>.

19 See Varga and Snegovaya here, as well as Marlene Laruelle, "Illiberalism: A Conceptual Introduction," *East European Politics* 38, no. 2 (April 3, 2022): 303–27, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2022.2037079>; Jasper Theodor Kauth and Desmond King, "Illiberalism," *European Journal of Sociology / Archives Européennes de Sociologie* 61, no. 3 (December 2020): 365–405, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003975620000181>.

those focusing on constitutionalism and the rule of law, especially rely on these cases (Landau; Uitz; Wyrzykowski and Ziolkowski; Krygier) or extrapolate to uncertain events in the Trump-era United States. Yet this does not accord particularly well with the conceptual foregrounding of the field at present, which claims far broader and more generally applicable conceptual roots.

Another point of interest is that the *Handbook* editors attempt to also address “the arguments, reasons, and facts (as reflected in scholarship) *in favor of* illiberalism” [emphasis in original].²⁰ This aspiration, however, is very uneven for most of the chapters. To their credit, they include a chapter on Christian – really American Catholic – opposition to liberalism written by a notable academic postliberal (Pappin), as well as an overview on the “Asian values” debate (Chen), and the relationship between illiberalism and democracy itself (Wagrandl). Multiple non-liberal understandings of “the people” are assessed in a nuanced way (Oklopcic) as well as culturally sensitive justifications for illiberalism in non-Western societies (Lottholz).

The failings of liberalism – defended or assumed in many chapters – are aired effectively in several key chapters (Smilova; Issacharoff and Bradley; Greene; Furedi). Furedi in particular is quite open about the potential for systematic bias in the academic literature related to the construction of the “authoritarian personality” and the possibility of motivated reasoning in ascribing illiberalism to political opponents. A chapter on psychological support for illiberal policies also very usefully provides a substantial critique of the “right-wing authoritarianism” scale commonly misused in the political psychology literature, which is often deployed in quantitative research articles on illiberalism (Feldman, Merola, and Dollman). Yet opportunities to provide a ‘steelman’ argument for illiberal approaches are missing in some fairly open spaces, such as in chapters related to the lure of theocracy (Hirschl), illiberal multiculturalism (Chin), immigration (Hadj-Abdou), or non-progressive understandings of gender (Peto; Mancini and Palazzo).

Many of the most nuanced arguments seeking to complicate a pejorative account of illiberalism across the chapters, however, are far more effective in doing so for the distinct concept of authoritarianism, which is often confused with illiberalism (see the excellent chapter on the “ideational core of democratic illiberalism” for example, in Smilova, or the discussion of “authoritarian structures in democracy” in Garcia and Frankenberg, alongside Wagrandl and others). In an exceptional chapter, “illiberal practices” are helpfully disentangled from “authoritarian practices” (Glasius), but elsewhere these are often conflated.²¹ One chapter, for example, makes the claim that parliaments in illiberal states do not have real separation-of-powers, yet ignores the fact that parliamentarism in liberal and illiberal regimes alike have structurally-fused functions as a core element to the system (Schneiderman).

The conflation of illiberalism and authoritarianism becomes even more apparent in later sections of the *Handbook*, which deal with a variety of regional and country-cases outside of the European context. Many of these chapters, such as those on China (Lai), Indonesia (Mudhoffir and Hadiz), Latin America (Gargarella), the Balkans (Sotiropoulos), and Turkey (Yenigun) are explicitly about authoritarianism itself, rather than illiberalism in any substantive way. Only a subset, such as those

20 Sajó, Uitz, and Holmes, *Routledge Handbook of Illiberalism*, xxii.

21 For a full treatment of “authoritarian practices,” see: Marlies Glasius, “What Authoritarianism Is ... and Is Not: A Practice Perspective,” *International Affairs* 94, no. 3 (May 1, 2018): 515–33, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiyo60>.

on East Asia (Ginsburg), India (Thiruvengadam), and East-Central Europe (Halmai) make a sustained effort to bring in the substantive theoretical claims about what illiberalism fully entails without recourse to regime issues proper.

Similarly, in later thematic chapters, illiberalism is often understood primarily as populist challenges within the EU (Bertoncini and Reynie), Brazil (Queiroz, Bustamante, and Meyer), or in relation to free trade and economic conditions (Ganga; Lee). Many of these chapters are indeed fine explorations of such issues, but they veer further away from the conceptualization efforts that introduce the volume and often have bespoke definitions fitted within, rather than relying on definitions found elsewhere.

Furthermore, the role of civil society and illiberalism is explored in a small set of cases – and is implicit in many other accounts (Bolleyer). While there is little critical space for current understandings of civil society as “NGO-ocracy,” some revealing work on the “damage” done by international organizations to national-level institutions which has engendered illiberal backlash is quite relevant (Meyerrose). Later chapters often view illiberalism as akin to “hybrid regimes” in a regime-spectrum sense (Garcia-Holgado and Perez-Linan), which replicates the strong focus on forms of authoritarianism throughout the volume. This reliance on associating illiberalism with variations on authoritarianism or populism leads to insufficient time paid to the shifting meaning of what official liberalism entails in the modern West. This leaves us with a variety of policies and attitudes being coded as illiberal (for example in regard to sexual minorities, gender understandings and relations, and non-autonomic social cohesion) that would have sat plausibly in the liberal camp only two decades prior. These sorts of operationalization assumptions would be better to be dealt with explicitly, which is in general beyond the scope of many chapter discussions.

The *Handbook* concludes with an attempt to assign future scholarly directions for the study of illiberalism, which is a useful closing marker for a heterogeneous volume (Sajo and Uitz). Here we find helpful mention of some of the key absences in the volume, including postliberal critical theory and left-oriented ‘studies’ disciplines that seem very relevant to illiberalism. This is in contradistinction with the volume’s overall focus on an empirical approach mostly dealing with right-wing coded movements, political leadership, and regime orientation. Indeed, a major lacuna of the volume is the conceptual possibilities of applying illiberalism to left-wing and critical approaches, not only within activist scholarly disciplines but also within key “reckoning” mass movements and elite tendencies that have grown substantially in the West over the last decade.

As a minor note of interest, this final chapter also includes a very brief remark defending the “human dignity” pro-life policy orientations in Poland as “not impermissible *per se* in liberal theory,” – exactly the sort of innovative, discipline-challenging argument that is otherwise absent in the substantive discussion across most volumes. While only a short example, the reticence to admit multiple non-progressive readings of liberalism means that these sorts of globally commonplace views are almost uniformly assigned to the illiberal conceptual bucket. This assignation may be appropriate, but it leaves the reader wondering whether there really is any difference between the conceptual space of illiberalism and the general political right or traditionalist side of nearly all modern societies. This is an unfortunate omission, given the overwhelming regime-level focus for many authors on connecting illiberalism to authoritarianism or at best to hybrid regimes elsewhere. If policy positions that diverge from the modern progressive consensus are illiberal,

and illiberalism is authoritarianism, this potentially leaves us (unintentionally) at a strange conceptual position indeed.

For all these criticisms, the *Routledge Handbook of Illiberalism* is a major achievement and should be widely used as a collected bloc of excellent and insightful scholarship for future research. As many authors make clear, the future is unlikely to return easily to the unchallenged liberal hegemony of the immediate post-Cold War period, and there remains a great deal of ground still to cover. The editors should be commended for their work, and many of these chapters will stand the test of time as important, foundational arguments upon which new research will surely build.