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Illiberalism: a conceptual introduction

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ABSTRACT

Illiberalism is an emerging concept in social sciences that remains to be tested by different disciplines and approaches. Here, I advance a fine-grained frame that should help to "stabilize" the concept by stating that we should 1/ look at illiberalism as an ideology and dissociate it from the literature on regime types, 2/ consider illiberalism to be in permanent situational relation to liberalism. To make that demonstration, I advance a pilot definition of illiberalism as a new ideological universe that, even if doctrinally fluid and context-based, is to some degree coherent.

Introduction

There is a rich literature on what went wrong with liberalism, from the seminal *The Light that Failed* by Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes (2020) to Patrick Deneen's *Why Liberalism Failed* (2018) and Edward Luce's *The Retreat of Western Liberalism* (2017). In the midst of debates between those who claim we have entered a post-liberal era, those who think liberalism should genuinely reform, and those who assert that liberalism is fine and that its enemies are simply authoritarian populist leaders or covert fascists, the term "illiberal(ism)" has flourished.

In this recent proliferation, illiberalism is used as a fuzzy and inconsistent classification, an intuitive way to describe ideologies and practices that diverge from liberalism—understood in the same loose and innate way—without being entirely identifiable with authoritarianism or dictatorship: illiberalism would be situated somewhere in the middle of a continuum from democracy to non-democracy, describing a move from the former to the latter. Yet beyond this plasticity, illiberalism has demonstrated some ideological leadership in challenging the purported historical inevitability of liberalism and inviting us to decentre our values and policies therefrom (Snyder 2021).

To this point, illiberalism is an emerging concept in political science and political philosophy that remains to be tested by different disciplines and approaches. There are several reasons for its fluidity. First, in vernacular language, it is used as a misnomer to label political opponents. Second, it is highly polysemic and multicontextual: it is used both by scholars to describe the phenomenon they study, as well as by political actors as a normative descriptor that allows them to either reject or praise certain political

movements, ideologies, and policies. Third, scholarly production on the concept remains scarce (although it is currently undergoing a dramatic increase). Moreover, in the scholarship that does exist, illiberalism often remains a value-laden concept that is defined negatively: its meaning depends on the meaning given to its antithesis, liberalism, in different cultural settings. Fourth, it competes with other, better-studied concepts, such as populism, conservatism, or far right.

Here, I advance a more fine-grained frame that aims to avoid notional and terminological confusion and improve the term's conceptual clarity. I do so by stating that 1/ we should look at illiberalism as a (thin) ideology and dissociate it from the literature on regime types, democratic erosion, authoritarianism, etc.; 2/ we should consider illiberalism to be in permanent situational relation to liberalism; and 3/ illiberalism offers insights that competing notions—such as conservatism, far right, and populism—do not. By approaching illiberalism as an ideology, we can see it as a global but context-dependent movement that varies in intensity across countries, regime types, and constituencies, and features different ideational combinations that create the glue necessary to make it convincing to some segments of the citizenry.

The definition of illiberalism articulated in this article is the following: 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 thanks to them (by winning the popular vote); 3/ it proposes solutions that are majoritarian, nation-centric or sovereigntist, favouring traditional hierarchies and cultural homogeneity; and 4/it calls for a shift from politics to culture and is post-post-modern in its claims of rootedness in an age of globalisation.[1]

The concept's three semantic spaces

Since its emergence, the term "illiberal" has been operationalised in three distinct semantic spaces: the policy/think tank world, in which it was born; the political sphere, where it is used mostly as a label to delegitimize political opponents; and the academic field.

Think tank and media usage

The adjective "illiberal" was first employed by Fareed Zakaria in his famous 1997 *Foreign Affairs* piece on illiberal democracies, which preceded his book *The Future of Freedom* (2003). At that time, many still believed in a Fukuyama-style "end of history" and thought that liberal democracy and market economy were victorious, looking at the model of the "third wave of democratization" (Huntington 1993). In such a context, Zakaria ([2003] 2007) warned that some regimes (especially in Latin America or Eastern Europe) might organise elections and thus nominally qualify as democracies, but without respecting such liberal principles as pluralism, individual freedoms, or checks and balances. Zakaria concluded by inviting international institutions and the United States to focus on promoting *liberalisation* but not *democratisation*: the first, he said, would result in the second, while the reverse might not work.

Zakaria's statements elicited a rich discussion. Some challenged his dissociation between democracy and liberalism: Marc Plattner (1998), for instance, contended that

there is no democracy without liberalism. Others questioned his conception that there was an ongoing *rise* in illiberal democracy: Jørgen Møller (2008), criticising Zakaria's uni-dimensional definition of democracy and his use of the Freedom House index, insisted that "illiberal democracies" represented a very stable share of all "electoral democracies" in the period between 1990 and 1997.

Since Zakaria first crafted the term, the adjective "illiberal" has been widely used in policy circles, especially in think tank reports, as well as in the media, as Table 1 shows. It achieved buzzword status around Donald Trump's election in 2016. The term is now deployed by mainstream U.S. and European think tanks in a very normative way, as a catch-all category for those politicians, parties, and countries that challenge liberalism *and* U.S. supremacy on the international scene (see, for instance, Kenealy et al. 2019; Simonyi 2020; Main 2021). It has thus become the pessimistic reverse of the "democratic optimism" of the 1990s, but shares some of the same assumptions: namely, that democracy in the sense of free and fair elections brings liberal values to a society, economic prosperity for all, and a foreign policy favourable to the United States, and that non-liberalism is synonymous with non-democracy, non-prosperity, and geopolitical antagonism with the US.

In this context, "illiberal" is understood as a *deviation* from what should be the obvious norms of our society and the international community. It is operationalised as a label to delegitimize political opponents, a trend that can only be dismissed and fought against. The fact that this think tank literature rarely differentiates between political, cultural, and economic liberalisms or between democracy and market economy—and that it considers liberal values to be almost synonymous with pro-U.S foreign policy—heavily circumscribes the analytical value of the think tank use of the concept.

Since the #MeToo and Black Lives Matter movements, a new usage of "illiberal" has developed in (mostly conservative) media circles to describe the rise of an "illiberal left"

Table 1. Frequency of Google searches in the US for "illiberal" and "illiberalism", yearly averages of monthly data, with maximum value ("illiberal" in 2006) set to 100.
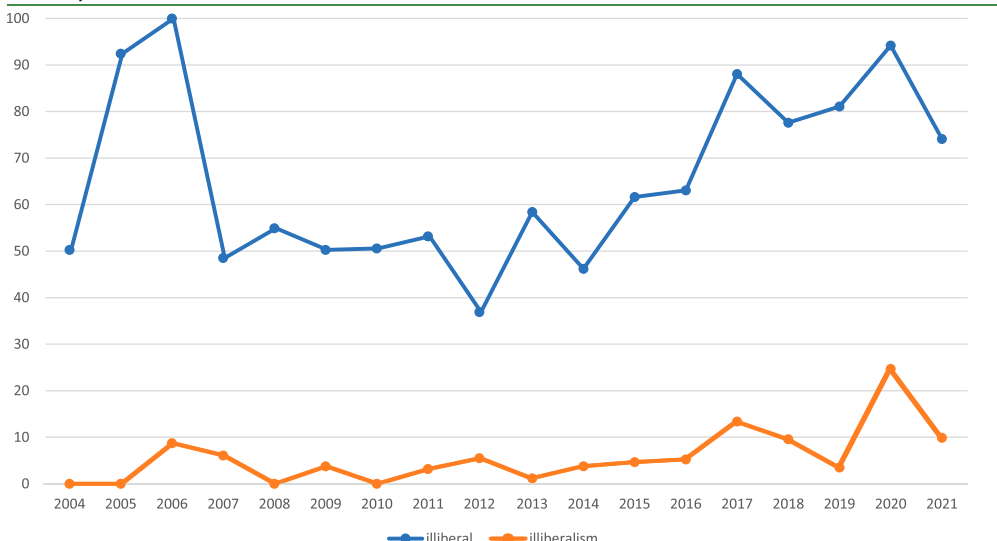
that seeks to shut down freedom of speech in the name of social justice. Specifically, the term has been deployed to describe the danger of student activists silencing conservative speakers on U.S. college campuses and woke culture more broadly (Boyers 2019). This use of the term is particularly visible in the US; it has to date been more marginal in other cultural contexts, though it sometimes appears under other labels, such as the *islamogauchisme* polemics in France (Tharoor 2021). The semantic deployment of the term "illiberal" to describe some forms of leftist activism remains to be studied in greater depth and is not addressed in this article.

Political usage

In a fascinating turn of events, the term "illiberal" was appropriated by Hungary's Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán, in his 2014 Băile Tuşnad speech and is now displayed as a badge of honour by many self-proclaimed illiberal leaders.

Orbán's use of the concept stemmed from the assumption that liberalism promotes individual selfishness and rootless cosmopolitanism, creating a society of atomised and multicultural citizens who claim rights without accepting any duties to the national community and the state (Nyyssönen and Metsälä 2021). To address this problem, he proposed a "work-based" society—in which work determines the worth of the individual—combined with majoritarianism and a strong conservative-values agenda (Bíró-Nagy 2017; Wilkin 2018). In its Orbánian version, illiberalism is the answer to the failure of liberalism as implemented during the previous two decades by elites accused of being disconnected from the "real" nation. He sees the rise of individualism and moral nihilism as intrinsically linked to neoliberalism and global capitalism. Orbán has advanced an agenda of building an "illiberal state"—a formulation borrowed from one of his advisors, Gyula Tellér—within the European Union. He has referred to Singapore, China, Russia, and Turkey as evidence that economic growth does not need to follow the classic, Western-centric liberal parliamentary model (Krekó and Enyedi 2018). Since then, he has regularly presented China and the so-called "Asian model" (more than Russia) as his main inspiration.

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

Orbán can thus claim the paternity of the term as used by politicians, to the point that he has been seen by some as an "innovative ideologist" (Nyyssönen and Metsälä 2021), even if his theoretical embrace of the term remains very contextual (Buzogány 2017; Buzogány and Varga 2018). In 2018–2019, during tensions with the European Union and his party's (Fidesz) suspension by the European People's Party due to rule-of-law concerns, Orbán tried to recraft the term by defining it as "a democracy based on the nation state, or better, on Christian values" (Pech and Scheppele 2017; EPP-European People's

Party 2019). This insistence on Christian values was part of an effort to create a common language with mainstream conservative movements and to anchor his illiberal turn into a broader ideological agenda of traditional values. Russian President Vladimir Putin soon joined him, declaring in an interview to the *Financial Times* that liberalism had become "obsolete" and "outlived its purpose" (see Barber, Foy, and Barker 2019). Nonetheless, Russian officials never used the term "illiberal," preferring terminologies such as those around conservatism and traditional values (Laruelle 2020).

Academic usage

The academic literature has long avoided using the concept of "illiberal." Zakaria's "illiberal democracy" has largely been criticised as an oxymoron: for some, a genuine democracy is more than just mechanical elections and cannot be decoupled from liberalism, as it recognises the legitimacy of pluralism (Müller 2016; Bozóki 2017; Halmai 2019). Müller (2016) summarises well the tension: genuine illiberals can

> criticize materialism, atheism, or even individualism. It is something else altogether to attempt to limit freedom of speech and assembly, media pluralism, or the protection of minorities. The first is a disagreement about different political philosophies that can justify democracy. The second is an attack on democracy's very foundations.

The term "illiberal" was long discussed only in the literature on regime types. Levitsky and Way (2002, 2010) and Collier and Levitsky (1997, 431) have advanced the most structured arguments against "democracy with adjectives," seeing all these regimes as subtypes of authoritarianism rather than of democracy. To date, political scientists have indeed preferred to rely on more classical notions such as "hybrid regimes" (Levitsky and Way 2010), "competitive authoritarianism" (Levitsky and Way 2002), "democratic backsliding" (Bermeo 2016), "de-democratization" (Bogaards 2018), "populist authoritarianism" (Sadurski 2019), or "autocratization" (Kalberer 2021; V-Dem 2021b). V-Dem (2021a) concludes, for instance, that "the median governing party in democracies has become more illiberal in recent decades. This means that more parties show lower commitment to political pluralism, demonization of political opponents, disrespect for fundamental minority rights and encouragement of political violence."

Yet "authoritarianism with adjectives" and all the shades of gray around "hybridity" are problematic for our discussion of illiberalism, first because they limit their understanding of "illiberal" to practices of power and institutional realities without looking at the ideological content, and second because they conflate "illiberal" with "undemocratic." They describe practices of power that diverge from democratic norms but may lack the ideological component needed to qualify for illiberalism: one can be authoritarian without any ideological contents.

As for the notion of hybrid regime, it has long been used to refer to the post-socialist space or certain developing countries but implies a transitological framework—these regimes are hybrid because they are transiting from an authoritarian framework to a potentially democratic one (Menocal, Fritz, and Rakner 2008). Sheri Berman (2017) explained, for instance: "Illiberal democracy is most often a stage on the route to liberal democracy rather than the endpoint of a country's political trajectory. In addition, although democracy unchecked by liberalism can slide into tyrannical majoritarianism,

liberalism unchecked by democracy can easily deteriorate into elitist oligarchy." Berman's point about the risk of unchecked liberalism opens the way for a more granular interpretation of the non-systematic overlaps between liberalism and democracy, even if one may challenge her transitologist frame ("on the route to liberal democracy") and reverse it: illiberalism is also growing in liberal democracies, arguably putting them "on the route" to something less liberal and meaning that well-established democracies also seem to be becoming "hybrid" in some respects. Inglehart and Norris' seminal *Cultural Backlash* (2016), which uses the notion of "authoritarian populism," brought sociology into this picture, giving us a very detailed overview of changing voting patterns, sociocultural identifications, and changes in public attitudes.

It is only very recently that another line of research has developed that no longer uses "illiberal" as an adjective but instead employs its noun form, "illiberalism." This transformation into a noun offers a major advantage: it makes it possible to move away from criticisms about the impossibility of a democracy being illiberal by no longer using the combined formulation of "illiberal democracy."

A key contribution comes from Kauth and King (2020), who note the issue of the term being used to describe both practices and ideology. To avoid that confusion, they propose to divide illiberalism into two conceptual categories: "disruptive illiberalism," i.e. practices opposing procedural democratic norms, and "ideological illiberalism," based on a logic of exclusion of some groups from the citizenry. While their approach helps dissociate authoritarian leaders in power who attack democratic norms from "pockets" of illiberalism within democratic regimes, it remains incomplete in many respects. First, it limits itself to a restricted definition of liberalism, and second, it does not entirely resolve the complex relationship between ideological components and political practices. Yet it offers a great example of the way in which some elements of illiberalism attack democracy while others attack liberalism, thus opening the way for more in-depth dissociation.

The subfield of illiberal politics and religion offers a similar level of nuance: as shown by Anja Hennig and Mirjam Weiber-Salzmann (2021), the deprivatization of religion and its return to public life contribute to an instrumental use of religion to promote illiberal politics. Another emerging subfield relates to illiberalism and the judicial system. Scholars such as Fabio de Sa e Silva (2022) and the Project on Autocratic Legalism (PAL), as well as Tímea Drinóczi and Agnieszka Bien-Kacalai (2020), have been looking in particular at the emergence of a new illiberal legality with its own constitutional principles and arguments. Turning his attention to grassroots movements, Julian G. Waller (2021) has captured illiberalism in the Russian context as ideational production by second-tier institutions and figures who use it to demonstrate ideological loyalty to the regime.

Research on illiberalism is now moving fast and becoming increasingly rich. This article was concluded shortly before the publication of the *Routledge Handbook of Illiberalism* (Sajó, Uitz, and Holmes 2022), the 60 articles in which will play a major role in structuring the field. This will be followed by an *Oxford Handbook of Illiberalism* scheduled for 2023.

Illiberalism: a pilot definition

Here I propose to move away from the discussion of regime types and focus on the ideological underpinnings of illiberalism, looking at its -ism status, its *ex-negativo* relation to

liberalism, and the fact that it cannot be equated to everything non-liberal. I define 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 favour of majoritarianism. This majoritarianism advances a "traditional" vision of gender relations (what is defined as "traditional" covering a vast range of practices depending on the local context) and a vision of the nation that—whether essentialist and nativist or assimilationist—takes from nationalism the division between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* and sees the latter only as the product of the former.
(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.

Illiberalism's status as an -ism

The shift from the adjective "illiberal" to the noun "illiberalism"—rarely noticed by scholars—forces a move from subordinate status (in "illiberal democracy," illiberal merely modifies the broad category of "democracy") to claiming some form of coherence that would legitimate its status as an *-ism*.

A first step towards this *-ism* status is to discuss Freeden's dissociation between thin and thick ideology to see which one applies to illiberalism. Yet illiberalism is still in its infancy and few philosophical figures have so far emerged to give it conceptual depth. It can therefore be classified as a thin ideology, with "a restricted core attached to a narrower range of political concepts," but we should not rule out the future emergence of a thicker illiberalism that would offer a "reasonably broad, if not comprehensive, range of answers to the political questions that societies generate" (Freeden 1996, 750). Thus far, illiberalism has surpassed such light *-isms* as Putinism, Reaganism, or Thatcherism, yet without obviously offering the doctrinal coherence of liberalism, communism, fascism, or Islamism.

Freeden's dissociation, however, poses some conceptual problems. Asladinis (2016) mentions the blurry boundary between thinness and thickness. Fascism has, for instance, often been described as doctrinally weak but aesthetically powerful (Carroll 1992; Ravetto 2001). Here I add that thick ideologies are a product of classical modernity that may not be repeated. Instead, the post-modern world, with its inherent ideological fluidity, may only produce thin ideologies. As such, illiberalism does not necessarily present a unified front with a coherent doctrine in its competition with liberalism.

A key element to bring into the debate over illiberalism's (lack of) coherence is the notion of post-postmodernism. Here I adhere to the idea proposed by the Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman (2000) that with the end of the Cold War, we have entered a postmodern era or a late modern era of "liquid modernity" instead of classic "thick" ideologies. This postmodern era is shaped by media immediacy, economic and cultural globalisation, a fragmented world of competing and contrasting identities, and the idea that knowledge is inter-subjective and self-referential. In opposition to this "liquid modernity" stands post-postmodernism, which rejects this relativist paradigm in favour of a neo-realist view of the world and of human interactions (Kirby 2006, 2009). At the level of nationhood and international affairs, post-postmodernism questions postmodernism's cosmopolitanism, as well as its belief in the abolition of boundaries and the supposed death of the nation.

Post-postmodernism therefore offers an appealing context for thinking about illiberalism as a call for a "return" to modernity against post-modern values or to classic modernity against liquid modernity. Illiberalism sees postmodernism both as the post-1960s morality turn as well as the post-Cold War U.S. unilateralism, right to interference, multinational institutions, and globalisation that have challenged the nation-state as the backbone of the international order. Yet illiberalism functions in a postmodern world where immediacy and eclecticism are the norm, which makes it fit the definition of a post-postmodern phenomenon.

Illiberalism as ex-negativo ideology

Another conceptual issue with illiberalism is its definition *ex negativo*, as what is *not* liberal. This means that the concept is intrinsically *relational*, posing itself as an answer to something else. Depending on how this something else is defined, the contents of illiberalism differ. This places the concept of illiberalism in a subaltern position and gives liberalism a kind of gravitas on today's political/ideological landscape, making it the centre around which all other values orbit.

The solution this article advances is to discuss liberalism as an intrinsic part of the debate over illiberalism and to recognise that liberalism is seen as the default mode of Western societies and the international order. In the realm of political philosophy, one may of course deconstruct the centrality of liberalism, arguing that it is no more legitimate than any other set of moral and political values. In practice, however, liberalism is indeed perceived as the normative set of values—albeit understood in very different ways—for many societies. Liberalism thus posits itself as the starting point for political analysis, at least in a Western—broadly defined as including the Americas, Europe, Eurasia, Israel, Japan, and some developed Asian countries—context. That said, being born *ex negativo* does not preclude the construction of doctrinal content for illiberalism.

Illiberalism is not everything non-liberal

The third conceptual point is that illiberalism is not simply a synonym for all forms of non-liberalism. There are many ways to be non-liberal: fascism and communism in the past, Islamic countries based on Shari'a law today, and dictatorial/ultra-repressive authoritarian

regimes such as China, North Korea, Turkmenistan, or Saudi Arabia can all be described as non-liberal, but that does not mean they qualify for the title "illiberal."

I argue here that illiberalism must be understood only as a form of postliberalism (Gray 2014; Pabst 2021), i.e. an ideology that looks skeptically at liberalism as it exists today in practice and states that it has, in Putin's formulation, become "obsolete." In describing illiberalism as post-liberal, I mean it pushes back against liberalism *after having experienced it*; this "post-" aspect is critical because it explains the disillusioned tone of illiberalism. That is, only countries that have experienced some form of liberalism can be considered to have illiberal constituencies, parties, or regimes. There is thus a "core" in illiberalism: the post-communist countries, Western Europe and the US, Latin America, and then some individual countries such as India, the Philippines, etc.

Thus defined, illiberalism still covers a large part of the world but excludes some countries and regimes. For instance, I do not consider China illiberal because it has not experienced liberalism and has remained an authoritarian single-party system, but some scholars may argue that Xi Jinping's new political order represents a backlash against the liberalisation of the 1980s that resulted in the Tiananmen protests. One could also see the Taliban as an illiberal answer to the modernisation of the 1980s brought about by Soviet domination and now a backlash against the liberalism enforced by the US. New research on the "peripheries" of illiberalism will allow us to confirm or contradict the hypothesis of a non-overlap between illiberal and non-liberal.

Liberalism(s), illiberalism(s), and their inner tensions

The core conceptual issue that has not yet been addressed in discussing the concept of illiberalism is the intrinsic relationship to liberalism, as well as the tensions around the multiplicity of meanings of liberalism itself. Liberalism and illiberalism tend to be more defined by their enemies than by their advocates. Liberalism has always developed in competition with other ideologies (Brinkley 1998), in opposition first to monarchism, then to fascism and communism, and more recently to Islamic fundamentalism. Illiberalism, however, seems to have emerged from *within* the liberal framework: it does not posit itself as the existential opposite of liberalism but denounces liberalism for having failed to achieve its democratic mission. Illiberalism presents itself not simply as anti-liberal, but as post-liberal, thus competing with liberalism using its own conceptual language. Moreover, illiberal figures or movement do not reject liberalism in all its versions: they may repudiate certain aspects while embracing others.

To disentangle that relationship, I consider that liberalism should be understood as in constant flux and with contested boundaries (Manent 1995; Fawcett 2018; Tate 2019), just as there is no definition of Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment as two coherent and unchanging traditions over time and space (McMahon 2017). Liberalism has evolved over time: it was defined differently in the late eighteenth century to how it is today, with the most obvious difference probably being the inclusion of women in the citizenry. "Liberalism" in the 1950s could be conservative in terms of mores (and, in the U.S. context, limit citizens' rights on the basis of race), while liberalism today is largely understood as being inclusive (rights for minorities, migrants, etc.) and "liberal" or "emancipatory" in terms of mores. Liberalism also differs in space: U.S. and Anglo-Saxon understandings of liberalism are quite different from those in continental Europe, not to

mention the diversity of interpretations that exist outside the Western framework. And even more critically, multiple liberal*isms* exist at the same time.

Here, I identify five major liberal "scripts," or metanarratives about the political and social order, that lie hidden under the *-ism* of liberalism. The first is that of classic political liberalism, which states that individual freedoms should be protected as much as possible from state interference and that a genuine democracy is not only about free and fair elections but about checks and balances, limiting majoritarianism by guaranteeing the rights of minorities.

The second script is economic liberalism, which insists on a market economy and private property. This reading has now taken the form of neoliberalism—with the key difference being that neoliberalism is implemented by states and supranational institutions to force liberalisation and therefore no longer reflects the original "laissez-faire" idea. Economic liberalism advocates for privatisation, deregulation, globalisation, free trade, and austerity measures to reduce state intervention in the economy (see Harvey 2007; Eichengreen 2018 and Brown 2019 for neoliberalism's impact on democracy). This script is crucial for the rise of illiberalism, which is in large part a backlash against the neoliberal reforms that have transformed so many countries worldwide (Kalb and Halmai 2011; Rodrik 2018). Illiberalism is so prominent in Central and Eastern Europe (including Russia) "precisely because" the region experimented with the most disruptive features of neoliberalism in a radical way at the end of the communist period —the destruction of the welfare state, the shrinking of the civil service, the rise of social inequality, and of a new elitism, a high level of corruption in the privatisation of the economy, etc. (Berezin 2009; Enyedi 2016; Berman and Snegovaya 2019; Snegovaya 2020, 2021).

The third script is cultural liberalism, which stresses the emancipatory power of individual rights. Born originally from the first script (expanding individual rights as much as possible), the third script is now related not to securing political rights, but to securing identity rights (Fukuyama 2018). This identity politics extends from recognising the diversity of ethnic identities (as with the proliferation of new racial categories in the US for Native Peoples, Asians, and Hispanics, as well as the fight for the recognition of biracial categories) to legalising the right to different sexual orientations (through same-sex marriage) and gender fluidity (the right to change gender or to reject binary gender identification). The race aspect is specific to American culture, but one can find similar debates in Europe between proponents of multiculturalism and those who favour a more classic assimilationist policy (Rodríguez-García 2010). While the legalisation of homosexuality seems to have been accepted in many countries that identify themselves as liberal democracies (even if there continue to be tensions around the issues of adoption and procreation), gender identification has become a new battleground for liberating the individual from collective identifications. The philosophical principle of this cultural liberalism is that collective structures such as the family are in fact reproducing traditional power relations and should therefore be challenged (Kaestle 2016).

The fourth script could be called geopolitical liberalism: as stated by Börzel and Zürn (2020), "the projection of North American power after World War II would have been inconceivable without the attractiveness of the US social and political model as the most significant *mise-en-scène* of the liberal script." This geopolitical liberalism is closely intertwined with the rise of a liberal international world order, even if here, too, there

have always been tensions between U.S. leadership of the so-called "free world" and then U.S. post-Cold War unilateralism, on the one hand, and international institutions where non-liberal and non-U.S.-linked powers can express themselves, on the other hand. Although one tends to think of the association between "the West" and liberal democracy as obvious, the relationship is in fact much more complex: Europe has been the cradle of both communism and fascism, while the US has a long tradition of conflicting political ideologies, with a prominent populist movement and far right (Dueck 2019; Engstrom and Huckfeldt 2020).

The fifth script is that of liberal colonialism. The huge post-colonial/decolonial literature considers that liberalism has essentially been written by Europeans (and, for Central and Eastern Europeans, specifically Western Europeans) and is intimately articulated with non-liberal practices of domination, exclusion, and deculturation (Bhambra 2007; Jefferess 2008). The intuitive conflation of Western/European countries with liberal democracy and modernity/modernisation does not leave room for the notion of "multiple modernities," in the sense of access to modernity that does not follow one of the entanglement of liberalisms described above. As formulated by Jaeger et al. (quoted in Börzel and Zürn 2020, 13), liberalism has been an "external blueprint" of a political order claiming universal validity and positing a line of divide between the "West and the rest," between a centre of modernity and multiple peripheries trying to "catch up."

These five scripts do not exist independently of one another—indeed, they often overlap and reinforce each other—yet differentiating them is critical to our study of illiberalism. The relationship between the first and second scripts is central. Snyder (2021) insists on the mismatch between free markets and institutions for political participation. One could, for instance, state that today's economic liberalism directly conflicts with political liberalism and endangers it due to its lack of socioeconomic inclusion (Piketty 2014; Brown 2017, 2019). Another aspect of the discussion is the one advanced by Hendrikse (2018), working on the notion of "neo-illiberalism." According to him, illiberalism such as Brexit *is* the new wave of neoliberal transformations and does not represent a rupture of the status quo but a neoliberal continuity. This view is echoed by Swyngedouw (2021), who explains how "neoliberal governance arrangements pioneered post-truth autocratic politics/policies in articulation with the imposition of market rule and, in doing so, cleared the way for contemporary illiberal populisms." Taking this one step further, one could argue that neoliberalism, through its commodification of every aspect of human (and animal) life, diminishes citizens' rights and the sense of belonging to a community, or that the involvement of big corporations in identity politics is threatening—more than reinvigorating—democratic and liberal commitments (Rhodes 2021). Neoliberalism can also be read as endangering many forms of life on our planet, making these liberal scripts anti-liberal in the sense of not respecting the sustainability of human life, which should be among the basic rights of human beings.

Another tension existing around liberalism that directly impacts our understanding of illiberalism is the discrepancy between philosophical ideals and realities. The core countries embodying liberal democracy—such as the US or, after the Second World War, the countries of Western Europe—have always engaged in practices that have questioned the validity of an all-encompassing liberalism, whether the exclusion of women, racial segregation, or the marginalisation of minorities. It would be more accurate, therefore, to speak of liberal systems that contain pockets of non-liberal practices. King (1999)

argues, for instance, that liberal democracy provides the foundations for illiberal policies to develop. The simplistic dichotomy between liberalism and illiberalism no longer functions: both are intertwined and there are illiberal trends *inside* liberalism itself.

This element is crucial to comprehending the rise of illiberalism within so-called established democracies today. Illiberal practices and ideas are now being propagated not only by illiberal/populist/far-right movements, but by state structures: Behrend and Whitehead (2016) observed illiberal practices in federal entities, while Kauth and King (2020) identified illiberal anti-migrant policies. Here, I see at least three broad illiberal pockets in liberal democracies: the "war on terror" narrative and its replication in different Western countries, which allowed for extensive infringements of privacy in the name of security (Bigo and Tsoukala 2008; Bogain 2017); anti-migrant legislation and practices, such as detention camps, that have put states at odds with their own human rights declarations (Triadafilopoulos 2011; Galston 2018; Kauth and King 2020); and the broader and more structural transformation of the relationship between private and public life as a result of IT and social media. This last point is crucial because it has both economic and political impact, endangering political rights or at least deeply transforming our political landscape despite not being under democratic supervision (Tucker et al. 2017; Bennett and Livingston 2018; Foroohar 2021). It has created what Shoshanna Zuboff (2019) has called "surveillance capitalism," an economic system centred around the commodification of personal data with the core purpose of profit-making, and the tendency of state institutions such as law enforcement to push for the development of a vast suite of surveillance IT (street cameras, AI facial recognition, etc.).

These nuances of the otherwise loosely defined liberalism are necessary to capture what illiberalism claims. Depending on country, context, or leader, illiberalism offers a refutation in different "packaging" of the five liberal scripts.

Illiberalism often challenges the first script by trying to decouple liberalism from democracy. It offers a mechanical reading of democracy limited to elections and majoritarianism, but partly denies the institutional aspect of democracy. Illiberalism almost systematically refutes the second neoliberal script, even if many illiberal parties and regimes themselves implement neoliberal policies. Illiberal leaders often have an affairist dimension and networks in the business world (Körösényi and Patkós 2017; Buštíková and Guasti 2019). One may say that illiberalism reorganises the redistributive aspect of the state (or calls for such reorganisation when not in power) by reducing the number of groups that can receive state public support while increasing the number of those left alone in the face of harsh neoliberal reforms.

Illiberalism vocally opposes the third liberal cultural script and denounces the post-1960s morality turn that has liberalised attitudes toward religion, family, gender, and sexual relations—probably the easiest script against which to secure a large consensus, especially in those countries with a strong conservative tradition (the US, Poland, etc.). In Central and Eastern Europe, illiberalism explicitly associates neoliberalism and cultural liberalism, seeing them as twins born of the post-communist transition, and pushes back against both simultaneously (Dawson and Hanley 2016; Bustikova and Guasti 2017; Krastev and Holmes 2020; Vachudova 2020; Bluhm and Varga 2021).

Illiberalism positions itself differently on the fourth geopolitical script depending on the country: for the PiS in Poland, for instance, supporting the US constitutes one of

the cornerstones of the country's foreign policy and is decoupled from criticisms of the "decadent West," while for Russia, the fourth script is dominant. When Vladimir Putin denounces liberalism as "obsolete," he largely means that U.S. domination is obsolete, even if this is coupled with a denunciation of the first and third scripts. Outside of the Western framework, the fifth script is part of almost every illiberal statement, implying that Western normative ambitions impose a new colonialism that rejects other forms of accession to modernity. Interpreting illiberalism as a call for decolonisation therefore appears to be a promising framework for the Global South and even for Europe: we know, for instance, that in Central and Eastern Europe, "anti-gender discourse is a right-wing language of resistance against existing material and symbolic East–West inequalities in Europe" (Kováts 2021; see also Lewicki 2020).

Gaps and overlaps with other concepts

In the academic space, illiberalism interacts with neighbouring and often overlapping concepts. Indeed, conservatism, far right, populism, nativism, and illiberalism exist along a continuum, and the distinctions between them may depend on time and space, as well as disciplinary approach. I argue here that when well defined, illiberalism advances a more granular approach and makes it possible to dissociate different phenomena with greater nuance.

Illiberalism and conservatism

A first intersection occurs between illiberalism and conservatism, terms that are often used interchangeably in the contemporary vernacular. Is illiberalism merely a revamping, in today's conditions, of conservative ideologies? Some might argue that illiberalism is nothing more than a new notion designed to encompass all the conservative ideologies that have existed since the eighteenth century. As I explained earlier, I do not support such an extended definition, instead limiting the term "illiberalism" to those countries that 1/ have both experienced today's liberalism and then backlashed against it; and 2/ are shaped by a broad post-modern context.

On this definition, what is the relationship between illiberalism and conservatism? Conservatism, too, is a very loose intellectual concept that is defined in relation to its ideological opponent, the notion of progress (Fawcett 2020). Like illiberalism, it can be studied only in relation to its opposite. Illiberalism and conservatism share a similar set of philosophical values: humanity has ontological features that cannot easily be challenged or denied in the name of individual will; identity (national, sexual, and gender) is not purely a social construct that can be changed if an individual feels dissatisfied with it. Both therefore believe in some forms of morality, authority, conformity, and hierarchy, and maintain a pessimistic view of human nature in which "progress" may sometimes mean "decadence" and "emancipation" may bring "chaos." One of the central ideational "glues" today is the shared rejection of what I define as the third liberal script, cultural liberalism (Robin 2013; Kováts and Põim 2015), with gay rights and multiculturalism as its flagship.

Yet the key element that dissociates illiberalism from conservatism is its relationship to political liberalism. Classical conservatives—such as the Christian Democrats in Europe or

the Republican Party in the US before Donald Trump—are/were fervent supporters of political rights and constitutionalism, while illiberalism challenges them. For classical conservatives, the political order is a reflection of the natural and family order, and therefore commands some submission to it. For illiberals, today's political order is the enemy of the natural order and should be fought against. Illiberalism thus includes a rebellious aspect that is not obvious for classical conservatism. Yet that distinction is far from absolute: historically, some movements that have emerged from conservatism have taken a revolutionary turn, fascism being probably the most obvious example.

Moreover, the distinction is gradually being blurred today by the electoral success of illiberal leaders in the face of classical conservative parties. The struggle of the European People's Party to win concessions from Orbán's Fidesz or the Polish PiS (Kelemen 2020), as well as the subjugation of the Republican Party by Donald Trump (White 2017), have revealed how attractive illiberal leaders may be to the more mainstream right. As Marc Plattner (2019) has stated, the future of liberal democracy will largely depend on how successful or unsuccessful the classical conservative right is at resisting illiberalism.

Illiberalism and the far right

If illiberalism is not classical conservatism, is it a synonym for the revamped far right that has been gaining new visibility in the last two or three decades? This new far right has rebranded some of its fringe theories into "smoother" versions more adaptable to today's public audiences, and, in some cases, even blended them with the acceptance of some principles of democratic representation. In Western Europe—the region of the world where the transformation of the far right has been the most advanced—far-right leaders may even present themselves as defenders of values that the old-fashioned far right previously rejected, for instance secularism (against the supposed Islamization of Europe) and women's rights (against supposed migrant aggression against women) (Brubaker 2017a; Moffitt 2017). They may also position themselves as pro-Israeli, despite the far right's tradition of antisemitism (Grzebalska and Pető 2018; Nattrass 2021).

These transformations are of such scale that a large part of the literature agrees on the fact that the term "far right" may no longer apply and that these new trends should instead be analyzed as "populist," "national populist", "radical right populist," or "nativist" (see below for some nuances that differentiate these terms), with the term "far right" to be reserved for the more radical and fringe groups (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017). Indeed, at the same time as we are facing the mainstreamization of the (former) far right, we also note a resurgence of the ultra-right in the sense of the most radical groups and ideologists advocating White supremacy/nationalism in the name of accelerationist theories (among a rich literature, see Hermansson et al. 2020; Miller-Idriss 2020a; McAdams and Castrillon 2022).

However, it remains critical to dissociate these more mainstream illiberal forces from the ultra-right: while there are mutual borrowings in terms of ideological products and personal connections between the two (as in Israel between the illiberal Netanyahu government and far-right Jewish radical parties—Benn 2016), the two phenomena have different constituencies, audiences, rhetorical and ideational tools, and political strategies. Some sociological and cultural milieux seem to act as go-betweens, for instance paramilitary groups, militia, survivalist clubs, some video game subcultures, the military, and law-

enforcement agencies (German 2020; Parreira 2020; Miller-Idriss 2020b). Like their far-right counterparts, illiberal movements tend to believe in "metapolitics" and have adopted a Gramscian approach that advocates for conquering the cultural scene before accessing the political one. Accordingly, they invest in think tanks and new para-academic institutions such as the newly created Intermarium Collegium in Warsaw, which presents itself as a counterweight to the liberal Central European University.

Varga and Buzogány (2021) have offered the most granular view to date of illiberalism's dual intellectual genealogy: it blends "revolutionary conservatives" (part of the far right revolving around the New Right and the rehabilitation of the German Conservative Revolution) and "national conservatives" (closer to Catholic or Protestant conservatives but rejecting the fusion of conservatism with defense of the free market). They argue that the two genealogies differ in their relationship to liberalism (the former calls for a fundamental break therewith and refers to the mythology of a thousand-year-old European identity, while the latter shares with liberalism a focus on the Enlightenment, modernisation, and emancipation but takes a critical view thereof) and in their memory of the fascist currents of the interwar years (the former more openly rehabilitates these than the latter).

Here, too, forthcoming research on political philosophy and the history of ideas will be able to add nuance to the ideational construction of illiberalism. This will entail understanding illiberalism as an intellectual trend and not only as a political movement. Studying the work of political philosophers such as Patrick Deneen in the US (2018), Michel Omfray in France, Ryszard Legutko in Poland (Behr 2021), or Mikhail Remizov in Russia (Laruelle 2021), as well as literary versions of illiberalism such as those suggested by Houellebecq (2016), will help to capture illiberalism as an intellectual construction that may or may not be articulated with practices of power.

Illiberalism and populism

The concept of populism has seen the most theoretical developments in recent years and appears to be illiberalism's main competitor. Many of the arguments made here for illiberalism have been elaborated under the label of populism. Cas Mudde and Yascha Mounk have, for instance, described populism as an illiberal democratic response to undemocratic liberalism (Mudde 2004; Mudde 2016; Brubaker 2017b; Mounk 2018). Takis S. Pappas (2019) framed the idea of *democratic illiberalism*—thus reversing Zakaria's original notion—by dissociating democracy as a practice from liberalism as an ideological norm. Yet none of them has articulated the place of illiberalism in their definition of populism. What this article claims is that illiberalism is a better fit than populism and offers a more refined conceptual tool to capture a largely (yet not entirely) similar object, because it put back liberalism into the picture as the core enemy.

Here, I side with Paris Asladinis (2016), who challenges the definition of populism as an ideology, even a "thin" one, instead inviting readers to see it as a discursive frame that is based on opposing the people to the elite and relies on immediacy and direct communication that involves deliberate violations of rules of polite speech and behaviour (Wodak, Culpeper, and Semino 2021). Weyland (2001) and Betz (2002) have already defined populism as a political strategy, but Asladinis brings into the debate Laclau (2005, 33), who

states that "a movement is not populist because in its politics or ideology it presents actual contents identifiable as populistic, but because it shows a particular logic of articulation of those contents—whatever those contents are." Asladinis argues convincingly that looking at populism as a discursive frame provides a solid methodological framework for empirical research.

Dissociating populism as a frame from illiberalism as an ideology allows us to highlight where the two concepts do not overlap. Whereas populism can be inspired by both rightist and leftist ideologies, this is not true of illiberalism, at least as defined here, which limits itself to calling for the restoration of some traditional hierarchies and culturally homogenous solutions. These two features exclude today's leftist movements, which almost systematically defend cultural liberalism and largely advance an inclusive definition of the nation. Even if one looks only at right-inspired populism, several differences from illiberalism should be noted. There are, for instance, many movements that are populist without being illiberal (Bickerton 2018; Bickerton and Accetti 2018). Conversely, there are illiberal movements or leaders that are not populist: Vladimir Putin qualifies for this second category, as he does not play the rhetorical card of identifying the elite as external to the nation and believes that it is the state, not the people, that is sovereign (Robinson and Milne 2017).

Last but not least, I see at least two other central differences that dissociate illiberalism from populism: 1/ illiberalism does not automatically require a charismatic leader, which is often seen as a necessary condition for populism (Pappas 2019); and 2/ illiberalism is not anti-intellectual and can, on the contrary, posit itself as an elitist production. Here, too, new venues for research into the articulations between illiberalism and populism (and between illiberalism and nationalism/nativism) will help refine these conceptual gaps and overlaps.

Conclusion and agenda for future research

This article hopes to contribute to the growing but still conceptually confused literature on illiberalism by giving some clarity to the concept and offering insight into its utility and its limits.

First, it pushes for separating the study of illiberalism from the literature on regime types and "authoritarianism diffusion" and moving it closer to political philosophy. Ideational constructs cannot be studied only under the instrumentalist assumption that they are no more than discursive tools hiding who holds the reins of power. Obviously, illiberalism can play a pivotal role in legitimising the efforts of political elites to weaken institutions and has a lot to tell us about the decay, erosion, swerving, turning, and backsliding of liberalism and democratic norms today—yet it cannot be limited to that. There is a whole understudied intellectual world of illiberalism that is not directly related to regime types and public policies.

The concept of illiberalism allows for a more granular analysis than the notion of democratic backsliding. It explains, for instance, that citizens continue to believe in democracy as the best possible political regime (Norris 2017; Voeten 2017) while challenging some of the ways in which it is currently practiced or the liberal assumptions that usually accompany it. The rise of illiberalism is a backlash *against* liberalism that is *facilitated by* democratic principles—with illiberal parties able to legitimately win democratic elections. Yet

once in power, illiberalism tends to correlate with infringements on media freedom and judicial independence; it may therefore weaken democratic practices and institutions. However, this democratic backsliding is a product of illiberal leaders' arrival in power, not of the way in which they won it. Illiberalism as an ideology offered to the electorate *precedes* democratic backsliding, which may follow once illiberal parties gain power. Moreover, the relationship may be more complex than it appears at first glance, and the causality less obvious than one may think. Kyle and Mounk (2018) identified, for instance, 46 populist leaders across 33 democratic countries and concluded that of the 13 right-wing populist governments elected, only five caused significant democratic backsliding.

Second, this article advocates for studying illiberalism and liberalism in context and, as two relational phenomena, in tension with each other. Not only does illiberalism see itself as the answer to what it reads as liberalism's failure, but many proponents of today's "liberal values" seem to have been reinvigorated by constructing illiberalism as the new absolute enemy—replacing Communism in this role—endangering the survival of liberal democracies. This "Other-ization" of illiberalism confirms the degree to which the two concepts exist in a mirror game.

Moreover, a growing body of research devoted to the transformations happening inside so-called liberal democracies shows the rise of illiberalism *from the inside*. Decades-long policies of depoliticisation and deideologization of public life, which sought to remove political decisions from contestation in the name of a technocratic and therefore unavoidable rationality, are now facing a backlash from both the right and the left. The failure of neoliberal policies and globalisation to provide a fair and equal improvement of standards of living for all, as well as the destabilising effect of social media and AI, have reinforced distrust in classical institutions, politics, the mainstream media, and science. Another direction would be to compare (which does not mean equate) the rise of the Identitarian Left with that of illiberalism, as proposed by Gray (2018; see also Schwartzkopff 2017), including discussing the possible existence of a left so focused on emancipation that it becomes illiberal toward those who oppose its values—an argument advanced by conservative polemicists but not yet rigorously tested by the academic literature.

The second direction has a direct policy impact. The norm in liberal democratic societies is contestation and debate between different political forces and visions of the world: between continuity and change, between majoritarian popular sovereignty and minority groups. As stated by Doppelt (2001, 661) 20 years ago already, "the phenomenon of illiberal groups constitutes the most powerful litmus test for any viable multicultural liberalism." Illiberal groups do destabilise liberalism's assumption that it is the only path forward, but they do not necessarily or definitively undermine democracy, instead inviting it to re-invent itself. Pappas sees populism/democratic illiberalism as a double-headed Janus figure: "Remove its democratic ethos and populism will turn into authoritarianism, but reverse its illiberal dispositions and whims, and liberal democratic order is likely to be reinstituted" (2019, 3–4). We should therefore accept that liberalism may be contested and pushed to reinvent itself.

Third, approaching illiberalism as an ideology opens venues for investigating its contextual variety. So far, illiberalism has mostly been studied in Europe and the US, and to a lesser degree in Latin America, but its rise in the "Global South" offers fascinating

insights into different cultural and economic contexts, as well as different views of what the world order should be. Countries experience liberalism differently, and illiberal elites can mobilise segments of their populations equally well in diverse geographical locations. Are there different subcategories of illiberalisms depending on what liberalism means? How does the fact that liberalism is often seen, outside the "West," as a foreign import and not necessarily something indigenous, impact illiberal narratives and strategies? Can we, for instance, see Islamism—in its political or pietist version—as an illiberalism adapted to a Muslim context? How might this diversity affect the (im-)possibility of an illiberal international? The solid literature on the growing contestation between the liberal world order and its institutions constitutes a central corpus of scholarship on that aspect (Cooley 2013; Lewis, Heathershaw, and Megoran 2018; Bettiza and Lewis 2020; Cooley and Nexon 2020; Costa Buranelli 2020; Snyder 2021).

Last but not least, scholarship has to date focused on the supply side of illiberalism rather than the demand side. It situates itself within studies of political institutions and practices rather than thinking of them as a manifestation of culture that can grow outside of—and enable—political institutions and practices. Without understanding the cultural products and social practices that are embedded within illiberal values, we cannot grasp the popular support given to illiberal political projects and leaders. So far, this new illiberal grassroots culture has remained largely unnoticed or unconsidered by scholarship (with some major exceptions, such as the US case—see Hochschild 2016) because non-fringe right-wing movements exist in a blind spot for the fields of political science and political anthropology and are almost never conceptualised as producing culture and sparking political change. Yet the existence of such culture contributes to the mainstreaming of illiberalism and therefore to a new cultural normal that may over time facilitate the legitimisation of illiberal political projects and policies—a whole new subfield of illiberal grassroots to be investigated by cultural anthropology remains to be harnessed.

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Disclosure statement

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