



I Was Gonna Fight Fascism... The Need for a Critical Approach to Illiberalism

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Abstract

Illiberalism, much like populism, has become a buzzword. While some excellent research has been done on the matter, helping us make sense of our current political moment, much of the discourse around the term has made it blurrier and been outright counterproductive in the defence of democracy. Often, the use of illiberalism has led to a flattening and simplification of the complex nature of politics, pitting an ideal, fantasised version of liberalism against a caricatural, homogenous and exceptionalising version of illiberalism. While those defending the former are widely considered not only unable to respond to, but at the origin of the many crises our societies and planet are facing, they are justified if only through the comparison with the latter: we are bad, but they are worse.

This has not only been counterproductive with regards to addressing said crises, but it has legitimised certain illiberal alternatives, found on the far right in particular, both as alternatives to the status quo, and through the false equivalence it constructs with alternatives on the left which seek to explore beyond the liberal fantasy. To address this vicious circle, it is essential to take a critical approach to illiberalism as a concept. This short piece outlines three essential starting points: 1. Liberalism should not be constructed as an innate good, as homogenous and as above critique; 2. Critical takes on liberalism should not be automatically equated with siding with the reactionary kind of illiberalism; 3. There should be an unequivocal denunciation of far right/reactionary politics with no compromise or absorption.

Keywords: illiberalism, liberalism, populism, fascism, far right

I was gonna fight fascism . . . I just didn't want to be rude.¹

“Illiberalism,” much like “populism,” has become a buzzword in elite public discourse (see figure 1).² While Viktor Orbán’s Hungary is most often described as “illiberal” (including by Orbán himself), the term has also been used increasingly over the past few years to describe diverse kinds of politics. To cite but a few examples, a *Guardian* editorial described Giorgia Meloni’s victory in Italy in 2022 as “a victory for illiberalism,” even though her far-right views on immigration appear increasingly compatible with the European Union.³ The same year, *The New York Times* opinion pages warned of “a crisis of illiberalism” that was spreading “from Moscow to Tehran.”⁴ Yet it is not only far-right or typically authoritarian politics that are subsumed under “illiberalism”: in a model construction of a false equivalence, an opinion piece in *The Washington Times* warned of the illiberal threat to democracy coming from both the right and the left, comparing the far right with the social-democratic left’s apparent “unwillingness to recognize and praise those aspects of the United States that should be conserved.”⁵ Therefore, while some useful research has been done on the matter, helping us make sense of our current political moment, much of the wider discourse around the term has made it blurrier, and some has been outright counterproductive for the defense of democracy.⁶ Often, the use of “illiberalism” has led to a flattening and simplification of the complex nature of politics, pitting an idealized, fantasized version of liberalism against a caricatural, homogeneous, and exceptionalizing version of illiberalism. While those defending the former are widely considered both unable to respond to, and at the origin of, the many crises our societies and planet are facing, they are justified only through the comparison with the latter: we are bad, but they are worse.

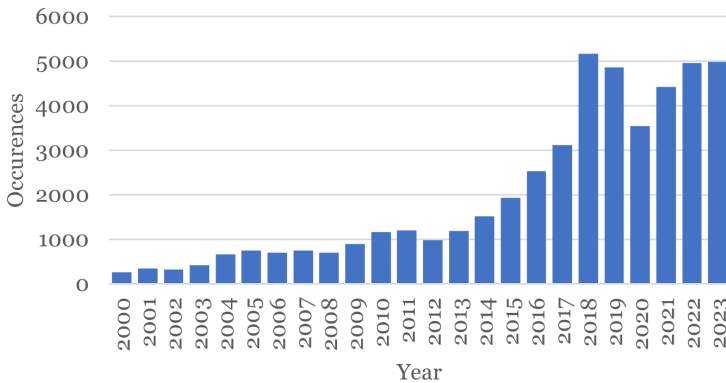


Figure 1. Uses of “illiberal*” in newspapers or newswires and press releases (based on the Lexis database)

1 Soccer 96 and Alabaster DePlume, “I Was Gonna Fight Fascism” (Moshi Moshi Records, 2020).

2 On the definition of “the elite,” see Teun A. van Dijk, “Principles of Critical Discourse Analysis,” *Discourse & Society* 4, no. 2 (April 1993): 249–83, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0957926593004002006>.

3 Nikolaj Nielsen, “Far-Right Meloni Praises von der Leyen’s Migration Stance,” *EuroObserver*, October 26, 2023, <https://euobserver.com/migration/157613>.

4 Ross Douthat, “From Moscow to Tehran, a Crisis of Illiberalism,” *New York Times*, October 8, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/10/08/opinion/russia-iran-china-putin.html>.

5 Theodore R. Johnson, “Illiberalism Is a Threat to Democracy—On the Right and Left,” *Washington Post*, May 4, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/05/04/democracy-challenged-right-left/>.

6 See, for example, Marlene Laruelle, “Illiberalism: A Conceptual Introduction,” *East European Politics* 38, no. 2 (2022): 303–27, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2022.2037079>.

This flattening and simplification not only has been counterproductive with regard to addressing said crises, but has also legitimized certain illiberal politics, found especially on the far right, both as alternatives to the status quo and through the false equivalence it constructs with alternatives on the left that seek to explore beyond the liberal fantasy.⁷ To address this vicious circle, this short, reflective article argues that it is essential for researchers in this fledgling area to take a critical approach to both liberalism and illiberalism as concepts, and avoid mistakes made in similar fields such as populism studies. After discussing the issue with “illiberalism,” I outline three starting points essential to a critical study of both liberalism and illiberalism: 1. liberalism should not be constructed as innately good, homogeneous, or above critique; 2. critical takes on liberalism should not be equated with siding with the reactionary kind of illiberalism; and 3. far-right/reactionary politics should be unequivocally denounced.

The Illiberal Hype: Illiberalism as the New Populism

It was tempting to start this article with a spin on the *specter-haunting-Europe* metaphor. Much like the many articles and books on populism starting with this tired trope, it may sound good, but does very little to explain not only what the current threats facing democracy are but also, and more importantly, how to counter them. Engagement on the emerging literature on illiberalism bears striking resemblance to that on populism, although it is yet to explode in the way “populist hype” has. Indeed, countless scholars have jumped on the populist bandwagon, regardless of how little they know about or are interested in the concept or what the consequences of misusing it could be.⁸ Similarities extend beyond academia, as the term has become widely used in public discourse. There it not only tends to obscure more than explain but also borrows directly from the vocabulary of reactionaries, thus following their lead and allowing them to set the agenda. This is reminiscent of attempts by the Le Pens, Matteo Salvini, and Nigel Farage to impose “populist” as a key definer of their politics to distance themselves from more stigmatizing labels.⁹ Similarly, Viktor Orbán has claimed illiberalism as a positive, diverting attention from the true dangers of his politics. It is not so much the “illiberal” in his “illiberal democracy” that should be scrutinized but rather the use of “democracy.” Indeed, “illiberal” for Orbán could be counterposed to a weakened and (rightly or wrongly) disliked liberal hegemony, while “democracy” lent him a legitimacy and somewhat progressive veneer, despite his time in power having eroded most of the democratic safeguards

7 Aurelien Mondon and Aaron Winter, *Reactionary Democracy: How Racism and the Populist Far Right Became Mainstream* (London: Verso, 2020).

8 On the misuses of populism in academia, see the excellent overview by Sophia Hunger and Fred Paxton, “What’s in a Buzzword? A Systematic Review of the State of Populism Research in Political Science,” *Political Science Research and Methods* 10, no. 3 (July 2022): 617–33, <https://doi.org/10.1017/psrm.2021.44>. On populist hype and its consequences, see Jason Glynos and Aurelien Mondon, “The Political Logic of Populist Hype: The Case of Right-Wing Populism’s ‘Meteoric Rise’ and Its Relation to the Status Quo,” in *Populism and Passions: Democratic Legitimacy after Austerity*, ed. Paolo Cossarini and Fernando Vallespin (London: Routledge, 2019); Jana Goyvaerts, “The Academic Voice in Media Debates on Populism” (POPULISMUS working paper 12, School of Political Science, University of Thessaloniki, October 2021), <http://www.populismus.gr/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/working-paper-12.pdf>; Benjamin De Cleen, Jason Glynos, and Aurelien Mondon, “Critical Research on Populism: Nine Rules of Engagement,” *Organization* 25, no. 5 (September 2018): 649–61, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350508418768053>; Jana Goyvaerts et al., “The Populist Hype,” in *Research Handbook on Populism*, eds. Giorgos Katsambekis and Yannis Stavrakakis (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2024); Bice Miguasheca, “Resisting the ‘Populist Hype’: A Feminist Critique of a Globalising Concept,” *Review of International Studies* 45, no. 5 (December 2019): 768–85, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210519000299>; and Katy Brown and Aurelien Mondon, “Populism, the Media and the Mainstreaming of the Far Right: The Guardian’s Coverage of Populism as a Case Study,” *Politics* 41, no. 3 (2020): 279–95, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263395720955036>.

9 Annie Collovald, *Le populisme du FN : un dangereux contresens* (Bellecombe-en-Bauges: Editions du Croquant, 2004).

that would normally make a system worthy of the name.¹⁰ As such, “illiberal” is a diversion, a decoy, a sleight of hand.

This echoes the work Jason Glynos and I have done on populist hype, which has since been developed and sharpened by many others.¹¹ Far from denying the rise of the far right or the very real threat posed by such politics, a focus on populism as a key signifier and populist hype as a political logic has served to highlight how the powerful discontent with the current liberal hegemony (and “really existing liberalism”) can be interpreted in a way that not only forecloses any attempt to address its shortcomings but can also end up legitimizing reactionary politics by setting them as an exceptional threat.

What matters, therefore, is how we understand “illiberalism.” In a similar fashion to populism, illiberalism too

can function as both a concept and a signifier. Approached as a concept, populism [and illiberalism in this case] should be judged by its capacity to capture a particular dimension of social and political reality, a capacity that relies heavily on analytical precision.¹²

Approached as a signifier, on the other hand, what matters is how, how much, and to what purpose it is used in the wider political space. This distinction also ties into literature on anti-populism and how certain uses of the term can end up delegitimizing all types of illiberal politics rather than focusing on those that directly threaten particular values, rights, or politics.¹³

As the concept of illiberalism takes off, there is a real risk that similar issues will arise; based on the populist-hype template, this can therefore have predictable consequences. For example, we have witnessed a euphemization of certain kinds of politics under the illiberal label. Indeed, if liberalism is contested for good reasons, then an unqualified “illiberalism” can appear a valid alternative to an unsatisfying or failing system. For this reason, it is no surprise that Orbán uses the term rather than another such as authoritarian.¹⁴ Illiberalism can also be used to disguise and euphemize far-right politics or more stigmatizing terms such as racism, which are also more precise and build on more sophisticated literature.¹⁵ Another consequence of the potential misuse of illiberalism is the creation of false equivalences. Much as

10 Seongcheol Kim, “‘Illiberal Democracy’ after Post-Democracy: Revisiting the Case of Hungary,” *The Political Quarterly* 94, no. 3 (July/September 2023): 437–44, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-923X.13255>.

11 See, among others, Maiguashca, “Resisting the ‘Populist Hype’”; and Benjamin De Cleen and Juan Alberto Ruiz Casado, “Populism of the Privileged: On the Use of Underdog Identities by Comparatively Privileged Groups,” *Political Studies*, published ahead of print, March 20, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00323217231160427>.

12 Goyvaerts et al., “The Populist Hype.”

13 See, for example, Seongcheol Kim, “Populism and Anti-Populism in the 2017 Dutch, French, and German Elections: A Discourse and Hegemony Analytic Approach” (POPULISMUS working paper 7, School of Political Science, University of Thessaloniki, April 2017), <http://www.populismus.gr/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Kim-WP-7-upload.pdf>; Emmy Eklundh, “Excluding Emotions: The Performative Function of Populism,” *Partecipazione e conflitto* 13, no. 1 (2020): 107–31, <https://doi.org/10.1285/i20356609v13i1p107>; Goyvaerts, “The Academic Voice in Media Debates on Populism”; and Yannis Stavrakakis, “The Return of ‘the People’: Populism and Anti-Populism in the Shadow of the European Crisis,” *Constellations* 21, no. 4 (December 2014): 505–17, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8675.12127>.

14 Giorgos Katsambekis, “Mainstreaming Authoritarianism,” *Political Quarterly* 94, no. 3 (July/September 2023): 428–36, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-923X.13209>.

15 See Aurelien Mondon, “Epistemologies of Ignorance in Far Right Studies: The Invisibilisation of Racism and Whiteness in Times of Populist Hype,” *Acta Politica* 58 (October 2023): 876–94, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41269-022-00271-6>.

it risks legitimizing and euphemizing reactionary politics by framing them as the alternative to liberalism, it also risks conflating very different kinds of politics under a broad and even meaningless banner. This could reinforce far-right politics as discussed, but also discredit more progressive alternatives that are in fact striving to achieve many of the ideals we commonly consider as liberal, such as the rule of law, equality, democracy, and pluralism. This is based on a misunderstanding of liberalism and, in particular, really existing liberalism.¹⁶ Indeed, much of what we think of as core to liberal democracy today does not necessarily come from the liberal tradition, and in fact it was often won from the liberal elite of the time, who viewed equal rights and democracy with suspicion. Conversely, much of what is done in the name of liberal states today (think of the militarization of borders, the curtailing of protest rights, or the failure to take a decisive stand against genocidal regimes) could fall under definitions of illiberalism.¹⁷ “Illiberalism” as a simplistic qualifier could thus flatten opposition to the flaws of the current liberal order and quash valid critiques of such shortcomings that link them to reactionary politics.

What we see, therefore, is both a strengthening of the liberal hegemony, as any criticism of it is portrayed as illiberal and thus dangerous, and a legitimization of reactionary politics, as they can claim to be the alternative to a deeply distrusted status quo yet also increasingly count on the more or less tacit support of the liberal elite.

Of course, this does not mean that illiberalism as a concept should be entirely discarded. Much like populism, it can shed light on our current political moment. Yet, if used carelessly, “illiberalism” can just as well obscure this moment and play a part in strengthening the very politics those who use the concept seek to oppose. As academics, we therefore have a responsibility beyond our own use of terms to think about the way said words are taken up in public discourse and how our work may be legitimizing potentially harmful discourse and politics. As such, my argument is not about policing this burgeoning field, nor is it about imposing a particular definition of the term. As with critiques of populism studies, it is about considering illiberalism in a broader context.¹⁸ As Benjamin De Cleen and Jason Glynos note, going “beyond populism studies”

implies that populism be treated as a useful but modest concept that needs to be integrated into a broader conceptual framework, the precise ingredients of which depend on the characteristics of the populist politics under study and the nature of the research questions asked.¹⁹

The same applies to studies of illiberalism, as the illiberal nature of a particular political project only tells us so much about it, and ignoring the broader politics that feed it only creates more confusion. Building on De Cleen and Glynos’s argument, we must be aware of “the performative effects of discourses about” illiberalism: for

16 Aurelien Mondon, “Really Existing Liberalism, the Bulwark Fantasy, and the Enabling of Reactionary, Far Right Politics,” *Constellations*, (2024): 1-12, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8675.12749>.

17 See “More than 2,500 Dead, Missing as 186,000 Cross Mediterranean in 2023,” *Al Jazeera*, September 29, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/9/29/more-than-2500-dead-missing-as-some-186000-cross-mediterranean-in-2023>; Daniel Boffey, “Why Are European Governments Clamping Down on the Right to Protest?” *Guardian*, November 17, 2023; and Nesrine Malik, “It’s Not Only Israel on Trial. South Africa Is Testing the West’s Claim to Moral Superiority,” *Guardian*, January 15, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2024/jan/15/israel-trial-south-africa-icj-palestine>.

18 Benjamin De Cleen and Jason Glynos, “Beyond Populism Studies,” *Journal of Language and Politics* 20, no. 1 (January 2021): 178–95, <https://doi.org/10.1075/jlp.20044.dec>.

19 De Cleen and Glynos, “Beyond Populism Studies.”

example, why does Orbán use it? What happens when we also use it in positions of discursive power? Much like De Cleen and Glynos's call about populism studies, we must question whether there is a need for a field studying illiberalism and the risks attached to it. While my inclination would be to suggest there is not and that research on illiberalism could, and in fact should, take place within existing fields so as not to exist in a silo, I believe that at the very least the study of the concept should be guided by three considerations in an effort to avoid participating in the illiberal hype.

Liberalism Should Not Be Constructed as Innately Good, Homogeneous, or Above Critique

The liberal hegemony continues to hold a strong grip, including within academia, which often leads to a naïve assessment of the state of politics. For example, it is common to hear from scholars in the field that liberalism is or remains a bulwark against reactionary politics. This assessment is often made without any need to evidence it, yet it remains clearly based on a political and ideological assessment of the situation. In fact, it would be difficult to substantiate such a claim either historically or in our current context. Therefore, such a statement requires a suspension of disbelief and asks the reader or listener to ignore the shortcomings and contradictions of really existing liberalism. It requires instead an uncritical embrace of ideal versions of liberalism. The plural is key here, as, while it is often ignored in public discussions around illiberalism, those who seek to oppose “illiberalism” tend to do so from very different understandings of what liberalism actually is or means. As Marlene Laruelle points out, illiberalism “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.”²⁰ Laruelle's “five major illiberal scripts” make it clear that if anything, liberalism only exists as ideal forms yet to be attained (if attainable at all, considering the tensions between each principle).²¹ This awkward assemblage often feels contradictory, as if exceptions to these scripts are more often the rule than not. As I explore elsewhere,

the fuzziness of liberalism is thus key to defining “illiberalism” and requires us to see it as an empty signifier rather than the hegemonic good we tend to accept it as, even in academic circles. Despite much evidence to the contrary, post racial, post patriarchal, post totalitarian fantasies have become uncritically accepted as reality and their positive aura has led to the strengthening of the liberal hegemony through the naturalisation of their relationship.²²

As pointedly noted by Domenico Losurdo, the “liberal revolution” can only be understood as “a tangle of emancipation and dis-emancipation.”²³ As such, scholars interested in illiberalism must reckon with the fact that much of what is currently considered at the positive heart of their version of liberalism has, in fact, not always been at the heart of the liberal tradition as it has *really* existed: various types of exclusion generally associated with (or more precisely, perceived as) part of illiberal politics today have not been overcome painlessly within the liberal tradition, and that progress has not been linear—“to put it simply, emancipation was often to be

²⁰ Laruelle, “Illiberalism.”

²¹ Laruelle, “Illiberalism”: 312–13.

²² Mondon, “Really Existing Liberalism, the Bulwark Fantasy, and the Enabling of Reactionary, Far Right Politics.”

²³ Domenico Losurdo, *Liberalism: A Counter-History* (London: Verso, 2016), 301.

found against the liberal elite and outside of the ‘liberal world’”.²⁴ This could not be made clearer than by the way the inclusion of communities within the liberal social contract has always been precarious, limited, and subject to conditions. As Charles W. Mills explored in *The Racial Contract*, the original social contract concealed “the ugly realities of group power and domination” and conveniently ignored the many people and communities who were excluded from “the people” and considered unworthy of signing or living under this contract.²⁵ Exclusion of said communities was fought against and at times overturned, at a great cost to those communities. Inclusion, when achieved even partially, remains precarious: consider the rights to vote or protest, or those of trans people, women, people of color, or the poor, all under threat today in so-called liberal democracies. Crucially for academics here, such fantasies play a central role in justifying inaction and consolidate a status quo that should appear unfair and undemocratic (and potentially even illiberal) by its very own claimed standards. Much as Mills’s racial contract provides “for its signatories an inverted epistemology, an epistemology of ignorance; a particular pattern of localized and global cognitive dysfunctions (which are psychologically and socially functional), producing the ironic outcome that whites [or men, or anyone holding a privileged identity] will in general be unable to understand the world they have made,” the liberal contract offers the opportunity to overlook clear shortcomings in terms of race, gender, disability, class, and so on and to ignore the hierarchies of power that undermine any pretense of democracy.²⁶ In this twisted logic, illiberalism becomes the only name for all exclusionary practices, and anything that is not illiberal must therefore be good and blindly defended. This way of thinking could not be clearer than in the aftermath of the terrorist attack on *Charlie Hebdo*, when speech was curtailed and securitization increased in the name of free speech.²⁷

Critical Takes on Liberalism Should Not Be Equated with Siding with the Reactionary Kind of Illiberalism

Building on the previous section, it is essential to posit that the liberal order and its progressive outlook has always depended on the forces it has had to contend with—as Losurdo highlights, liberalism’s flexibility as an ideology has been central to its success.²⁸ Should the ante be on the side of progress, then liberalism would more or less willingly accommodate new demands for equal rights and justice, as was the case in the postwar period. However, should the balance shift back toward reaction, liberalism could just as well adapt, as it often has. This means that not only is it essential not to take the benevolence of really existing liberalism as a given, but also, perhaps more importantly, we should not paint all opposition to liberal practice as reactionary or against some of what we falsely assume to be liberalism’s core principles.

Challenges to the exclusionary practices of the liberal hegemony have always been painted as radical and dangerous. What is telling, of course, is that those who have succeeded in gaining (partial) rights and acceptance within the liberal contract were often portrayed as dangerous radicals when demanding such acceptance, only subsequently being welcomed as natural parts of the liberal contract (until their

²⁴ Mondon, “Really Existing Liberalism, the Bulwark Fantasy, and the Enabling of Reactionary, Far Right Politics.”

²⁵ Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 3.

²⁶ Mills, *The Racial Contract*, 3.

²⁷ Gavan Titley, Des Freedman, Gholam Khiabany, and Aurelien Mondon, eds., *After Charlie Hebdo: Politics, Media and Free Speech* (London: Zed Books, 2017).

²⁸ Losurdo, *Liberalism*.

rights are undermined again when power shifts). This could not be clearer than in the struggle against slavery, the fight for women's rights, or through the civil rights movement. It could also be witnessed in the liberal elite's long-held distrust and fear of "the masses" and their refusal to grant basic democratic rights to those it has deemed or continues to deem unworthy or untrustworthy. Take the example of the climate crisis in our current setting: are protesters' means—often painted as illiberal in much of our public discourse—in any way similar to the reactionaries' illiberalism? Are the states who crack down (in an increasingly extreme and openly violent manner) on the basic right to protest lobbies destroying the planet really keepers of liberal values? The naïve assumption that liberalism will automatically protect us from the rise of reaction would suggest that this is the case.

Refusing to face the uneven record of the liberal experiment means that we cannot properly assess the present, particularly the threat posed by the resurgence of reactionary politics. The flawed and naïve idea that liberalism will act as a bulwark against the far right cannot sustain basic scrutiny, as it is increasingly clear that many self-appointed liberal elites and institutions are absorbing rather than resisting so-called illiberal politics. The work on the mainstreaming and normalization of far-right politics should have put an end to such fantasies, and yet it continues to grip the imagination of many, including scholars of the far right. As I argue elsewhere, "creating too tight a border between liberalism and illiberalism risks making actions deemed illiberal an exception that ends up legitimising others deemed liberal by comparison, even if they participate in the slide toward exclusion or authoritarianism."²⁹

There is therefore a risk that painting all critiques as illiberal will equate them automatically with the illiberal far right (which receives most, and in fact disproportionate, attention in public discourse). This not only whitewashes the capacity of liberalism to absorb reactionary politics, as already discussed, but also prevents the exploration of politics that would offer progressive and democratic alternatives. Much like populism again, illiberalism should not be considered as monolithic. Nor should we accept a simplistic dichotomy between liberalism and illiberalism as the political horizon. Much of what was once considered illiberal has since been accepted as liberal, just as what was once considered liberal is now seen as illiberal. As such, liberalism should not be reified as a coherent ideology, as its history simply cannot sustain such a claim.

Far-Right/Reactionary Politics Should Be Unequivocally Denounced

Where does this leave us? As already noted, this reflective piece is not about policing the use of illiberalism or even rejecting its usefulness, but we must question it in the current discursive setting. My aim here is to use my expertise and experience with populist hype to highlight a series of pitfalls the field has faced. Indeed, much like populism, while there are some fascinating discussions taking place within small circles around the term, they tend to be drowned out by the unhelpful noise created by the illiberalism hype. Unfortunately, as with populism, it is the latter that has the most impact on public discourse.

This context thus requires us to first acknowledge that whether we want it to or not, our work on the concept participates in these wider public discussions and power struggles and we cannot shy away from engaging in and with them. As such, we must

²⁹ Mondon, "Really Existing Liberalism, the Bulwark Fantasy, and the Enabling of Reactionary, Far Right Politics."

critically engage and challenge epistemologies of ignorance. These epistemologies have not only served the perpetuation of oppressive systemic structures but also facilitated the resurgence of reactionary politics, as the liberal hegemony struggles ever more to convince us that it has the solutions to the many crises we are facing. Whatever our position in the hierarchy of power, we all must reckon with our role in shaping it. This includes academics, who often downplay their role in the shaping of public discourse and legitimizing or challenging power.

Challenging epistemologies of ignorance thus requires us to confront both past and present shortcomings and do away with comfortable fantasies.³⁰ Pointing to the failures of really existing liberalism, its inconsistencies, and its contradictions is not “canceling” liberalism as such. It is an essential step toward a critical assessment and addressing of the current system’s clear inability to counter the reactionary turn. If liberalism in and of itself proves ultimately unhelpful as a concept or ideology in surmounting the present challenges, then we have a duty to explore whether it must be dispensed with. Crucially, this need not mean abandoning key principles that can be transposed to new frameworks or ideologies, or indeed originated elsewhere.

However, challenging such epistemologies of ignorance can only be done through a critical evaluation of all liberal (and even more broadly progressive) concepts that we take as common sense but have been hijacked by reactionary forces to serve their needs. Take free speech again, which today only seems to benefit those wishing to reinforce their position in power and turn the clocks back.³¹ There is no free speech without equal and fair access to public discourse: currently, free speech only works for those who have the power to shut down critique of their unfair and undeserved standing in society. The same could be said of other concepts that have been sacralized and must urgently be reassessed, reclaimed, or reinvented: democracy, human rights, or *laïcité* in France, to name a few.³²

Finally, standing against the forces of reaction takes an unwavering commitment. There is no middle, objective, neutral ground between racism and anti-racism, fascism and anti-fascism, transphobia and trans rights, and so on. Simply not being a fascist does not make one anti-fascist, especially if we passively accept the slide toward fascism, the removal of rights from certain communities, or their downright exclusion from our societies. Our commitment to equality and liberty must be uncompromising and it must be for all if it is to be genuine.

“I Was Gonna Fight Fascism . . . But No One Wants to Be That Guy”³³

Everyone wants to be on the opposite side of fascism, still widely considered evil in politics. Yet words are easy . . .

Much like “populism,” I have argued here that the rise of “illiberalism” as a concept to explain the threats to “democracy” today is not only unhelpful; it is counterproductive and potentially itself a threat. I first highlighted how the use of “illiberalism” in much public discourse leads to a misunderstanding of the current political context, as

30 Jason Glynos, “Critical Fantasy Studies,” *Journal of Language and Politics* 20, no. 1 (January 2021): 95–111, <https://doi.org/10.1075/jlp.20052.gly>.

31 Gavan Titley, *Is Free Speech Racist?* (Cambridge: Polity, 2020).

32 Robert Meister, *After Evil: A Politics of Human Rights* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010); Mondon and Winter, *Reactionary Democracy*; and Aurelien Mondon, “The French Secular Hypocrisy: The reme Right, the Republic and the Battle for Hegemony,” *Patterns of Prejudice* 49, no. 4 (2015): 392–413, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0031322X.2015.1069063>.

33 Soccer 96 and DePlume, “I Was Gonna Fight Fascism.”

Aurelien Mondon

it diverts attention from systemic issues onto a bogeyman it legitimizes and thus enables. Building on critical work on populism, I then discussed the processes of hype, euphemization, and false equivalence, all of which have participated in mainstreaming reactionary politics in the name of protecting “us” against it. I then suggested three considerations that should be core to any engagement with the concept, should we take seriously the many crises facing the world currently.

We must therefore also take seriously the consequences of creating phantasmatic enemies to justify the positioning of the current liberal hegemony as “what is good.” While it is clear that history has not ended, it is struggling to be reborn, and we remain stuck in the past, chasing windmills rather than building the future. In this, reactionary politics allow for a mix of morbid fascination, voyeurism, and self-righteousness, all of which combine in general inaction. Whether it is under the guise of illiberalism, populism, terrorism, the far/extreme/radical right, authoritarianism, or fascism, much time has been spent since the fall of state communism looking for the next great enemy of liberalism. Yet as we are indeed facing many crises the current liberal settlement appears unable or unwilling to address, it is time for us to explore solutions beyond the past and reclaim the present and future.