Ethics of Studying Illiberalism in a Hyperconnected, Polycrisis-defined Era: An Introduction to the Special Issue

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As of April 2024, at the time of composing this introductory note, research on the challenges faced by liberal democracies—whether established or aspiring—appears to be in continuously high demand. One needs only to focus on a small domain, election results, to realize the scope and intensity of those threats to the existing order. While elections of last year in Poland brought some hope for the pro-EU, left-wing opposition in Europe, populist far-right parties have secured a victory in the Netherlands, further fueling fears of a significant shift to the right in the upcoming European Parliament elections.[1] The recent casting-of-ballots in Russia has ensured incumbent Vladimir Putin's presidency for another six years, while the fall 2024 elections in the US, with Donald Trump as the primary Republican candidate, promise to be a tough race for the Democrats. In India, Hindu nationalist Narendra Modi will run for a third term, competing against a broad alliance of opposition parties that are struggling to catch up.[2]

Liberalism and democracy—understood both as practice and as concept—are under pressure in a context where practically all parts of the world are affected by a polycrisis, a state in which multiple crises become intertwined, making solutions to any of them particularly challenging, if not mutually exclusive. Illiberal actors react to and employ the multitude of overlapping crises—including energy, cost-of-living, and climate crises, as well as devastating consequences of ongoing wars in Ukraine and the Middle East—by continuously challenging the existing status quo, the established institutions and norms, often advocating for more closed, exclusivist, and conservative societies. An inherent part of these contemporary perils is the collapse of the very foundations of how we make sense of the world, as the notion of Truth itself risks becoming an empty signifier. The phenomena of "post-truth" and "alternative facts" indicate that socio-political, climate, and economic crises unfold while there is a growing disagreement on what constitutes Truth and who has the right to it. This phenomenon, referred to as yet another, epistemic crisis,[3]

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1 Kevin Cunningham et al., "A sharp right turn: A forecast for the 2024 European Parliament elections," ECFR, January 23, 2024, https://ecfr.eu/publication/a-sharp-right-turn-a-forecast-for-the-2024-european-parliament-elections/.

2 Sheikh Saaliq, "Here's what you need to know about the world's largest democratic election kicking off in India," AP, April 1, 2024, https://apnews.com/article/india-election-modi-bjp-democracy-8998fe6aba5fa26debc0f82c4e2ccf69.

3 Tetyana Hoggan-Kloubert and Chad Hoggan, "Post-Truth as an Epistemic Crisis: The Need for Rationality, Autonomy, and Pluralism," *Adult Education Quarterly*, 73:1 (2023), 3-20, https://doi.org/10.1177/07417136221080424.

adds an additional layer of complexity to bringing together the polarized and deeply divided societies, as different factions adhere to and become entrenched in distinct interpretive frameworks that shape their perceptions of reality.[4]

In this context, institutions previously entrusted with producing Truth—primarily universities and, to a lesser extent, research centers and think tanks[5]—find themselves at the epicenter of critique, all while still expected to produce high-quality and ethical research on diverse and distinct processes, cautiously brought together under the umbrella notion of "illiberalism."[6] Can research institutions avoid being co-opted, eroded, or transformed in contexts where other societal institutions fail to do so? Despite the persistence of an image that there is a clear demarcation line between what is perceived as safe, inclusive, and knowledge-oriented academic spaces on one hand, and dark, misogynistic, and exclusivist spaces occupied by supporters of an illiberal turn on the other, in reality, the distance between the object and the subject when studying illiberalism is barely there.

Research in the Postmodern Context

The shrinking and eventual disappearance of this distance owes itself to various processes that characterize the postmodern reality. Among these, three are particularly prominent: epistemic change that has made the responsibilities of a researcher vis-à-vis a research participant more pronounced; digitalization and hyperconnectivity that has blurred physical and institutional distances between a researcher and their respondents; and the proliferation of neoliberal logic into areas of social policy, including education and academic research, which imposes market principles on how research is conducted. Together, these processes engender a zone of tension for researchers delving into the study of illiberalism, as competing and contradictory norms collide while pressure to follow them increases.

Recent decades have witnessed a paradigm shift, particularly in social sciences and humanities research, towards prioritizing care and protection for research respondents. This shift has been catalyzed by a growing awareness of the potential harm inherent in the researcher's institutional power, leading to the implementation of strict rules regarding data protection and research ethics. While criticisms of the so-called "Moral Bureaucracies" are warranted[7]—where Research Ethics committees often prioritize norm adherence to fulfill bureaucratic requirements rather than striking a balance between potential risks and scientific advancement—the new ethical guidelines, for the most part, have been a valuable assistance in defining guiding ethics principles and norms within research projects.

However, while the contemporary academic community has been trying to define the procedures to make research ethically more fair, a larger epistemic transformation has challenged the very principles that dominated intellectual discourse for centuries. The proliferation of what is known as a decolonial approach to science,

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4 Jeffrey Friedman, "Post-Truth and the Epistemological Crisis," *Critical Review*, 35:1-2 (2023), 1-21, https://doi.org/10.1080/08913811.2023.2221502.

5 Katarzyna Jezierska, "Illiberal Think Tanks," in Marlene Laruelle (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Illiberalism* (online edn, Oxford Academic, 20 Nov. 2023) https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780197639108.013.24.

6 Marlene Laruelle (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Illiberalism* (online edn, Oxford Academic, 20 Nov. 2023), https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780197639108.001.0001.

7 José Luis Molina and Stephen P. Borgatti, "Moral bureaucracies and social network research," *Social Networks* 67 (2021): 13-19, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socnet.2019.11.001.

knowledge, and academic institutions[8] has informed critical perspectives regarding the very aspects of knowledge production. This critique has argued in favor of dismantling monolithic and totalizing systems of thought, prioritizing multiplicity over essentialization, and championing the diversity of cultures and identities over homogenization. In the process, concepts like rationality and autonomy, inspired largely by the Enlightenment philosophy, have come to be regarded as idiosyncratic Western constructs that historically served to establish and perpetuate dominance and power dynamics.[9]

In this evolving landscape, claims of objectivity and impartiality in scientific analysis are increasingly questioned to mitigate epistemic injustices. Instead, there is a growing recognition of the impact of researchers' subjectivities on the research process and an acknowledgement that knowledge production is inherently subjective and situational. Consequently, research outcomes are understood as products of co-creation, intended or unintended, influenced by the interaction between the subjects and objects of study. This approach, although lauded in the study of minority and oppressed communities, creates tension when we turn towards groups that are "unlikable,"[10] whose views and ideas we do not share, and whose positions (still marginalized, yet increasingly less so) we do not necessarily wish to change. What political views/actions/social position of our research respondents should be defining, if at all, when we consider the limits of privacy? Should university spaces be indeed open to all kinds of knowledge and perspectives, even the illiberal ones?

In addition to the epistemic shift, academic research is being conducted within a rapidly transforming physical reality. Globalization and the accessibility of travel have expanded the possibilities for research beyond the traditional confines of the researcher's geographic location or institutional affiliation. Moreover, the proliferation of digital technologies has created and made accessible virtual spaces that transcend physical and institutional borders. Turning to research data and methods, there are now vast amounts of digitized and continuously newly produced information ready to be "mined." Sophisticated means of harnessing and analyzing this data have already reached unprecedented levels, while the potential of AI and Large Language Models in transforming how we do research is still to be fully uncovered.

And as societies increasingly drive and feed on large data, we are confronted more and more with the boundaries of human capabilities to collect and process those quantities of information, prompting us to increasingly "outsource" the research work to machines. The desire to eliminate the biased and subjective "human" aspect from research results has already led to the domination of quantitative research methods even in those fields that have traditionally drawn on qualitative or mixed approaches. Yet is such data truly neutral and objective? And who is accountable when this data is being used to make societal interventions?[11]

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8 E.g., Gurminder K. Bhambra, Dalia Gebrial, and Kerem Nişancıoğlu, *Decolonising the University* (London: Pluto Press, 2018); Ramón Grosfoguel, Roberto Hernández, and Ernesto Rosen Velásquez, *Decolonizing the Westernized University: Interventions in Philosophy of education from within and without* (London: Lexington Books, 2016); Sharon Stein, *Unsettling the University: Confronting the colonial foundations of US higher education* (Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, 2022).

9 Hoggan-Kloubert and Hoggan, "Post-Truth as an Epistemic Crisis," p. 5.

10 Agnieszka Pasieka, "Anthropology of the far right, or: What if we like the unlikeable others?" *Anthropology Today* 35(2019): 3–4, https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8322.12480.

11 Annette N. Markham, Katrin Tiidenberg, and Andrew Herman, "Ethics as methods: doing ethics in the era of big data research—introduction," *Social Media + Society* 4.3 (2018): 1-9, https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305118784502.

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In addition to new methods and possibilities for conducting research, the digital revolution increasingly embeds us, the researchers, within the social fabric which we study. We live in a state of "digital hyperconnectivity—the condition in which everyone is (potentially) connected to everyone."[12] Hyperconnectivity has created new ways of being and constructing a self—where our digital self can be a better, happier, more successful version of our "real-world" one. Social media platforms encourage the merging of our professional accounts with the private ones, making the information beyond our publications record and conference visits publicly available. The results of research, the digital traces left in the process, are potentially forever out there, making it difficult to predict how this information can be used (against us) in the future. Hence the hyperconnectivity is not only about means of constructing a self, but also about new ways of being constructed as a self from the outside—"being configured, represented, and governed as a self by sociotechnical systems."[13] This, in turn, creates new risks to the safety of researchers engaged in studying groups with whom they do not share the same political views, for instance, as the consequences of a fallout with a community can be seriously emotionally, physically, and institutionally taxing.

Finally, these transformations occur within a broader context of evolving professional ethics and norms as universities increasingly conform to neoliberal market standards characterized by accountability, quantifiability, and tangible revenues.[14] Practices that may have been viewed as ethically dubious by earlier generations of academics, such as prioritizing grantsmanship, self-justificatory expressions of vested interests, and tangential claims to authorship, are now often regarded as legitimate and even laudable virtues in an era marked by hyper-performativity and heightened competition.[15] The neoliberal logic context in which universities operate leads them to respond to the undermining of liberalism and democracy by capitalizing on it. Research funders have been making substantial investments into projects that promise to explain and ideally provide policy recommendations on how to address the palpable dissatisfaction with the status quo among diverse societies. As a result, studying illiberalism becomes, to put it simply, both a socially relevant and professionally lucrative direction for a researcher to take. However, precisely this blurring of boundaries—between the financial interests of a university and priority research agendas, between a scholar's professional motivations and research ethics, and between the very subjects and objects of study—creates a serious area of tension for scholars engaged in illiberalism studies.

All these changes make it increasingly difficult to maintain a distance with the objects of our research, when we conduct research on the anti-democratic, illiberal, or radical right actors. Such a distance can be desirable for a number of reasons: moral—not to endorse or sympathize with their often exclusionary views; political—to marginalize, not normalize such positions; or professional—to avoid consequences for one's career through association with such groups; and finally personal—to protect the well-being and psychological health of the researcher. Despite the desirability of

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12 Rogers Brubaker, "Digital hyperconnectivity and the self," *Theory and Society*, 49 (2020) 49: 771, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11186-020-09405-1.

13 Brubaker, "Digital hyperconnectivity and the self," 772.

14 Adrianna Kezar, Tom DePaola, and Daniel T. Scott, *The gig academy: Mapping labor in the neoliberal university* (Baltimor: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019); Yvette Taylor and Kinneret Lahad, *Feeling Academic in the Neoliberal University: Feminist Flights, Fights, and Failures* (Cham: Springer International Publishing AG, 2018).

15 Bruce Macfarlane, "The neoliberal academic: Illustrating shifting academic norms in an age of hyper-performativity," *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 53:5 (2021): 465, https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2019.1684262.

maintaining such distance, it becomes increasingly challenging, if not impossible, in today's research landscape.

On this Special Issue

This special issue of the *Journal of Illiberalism Studies* is an attempt to shed light on this area of tension and deliberate on the rights and responsibilities of researchers involved in projects on challenges to democratic and inclusive societies. The concept for this special issue originated from two workshops on illiberalism hosted at the University of Amsterdam in November 2022[16] and June 2023.[17] The first workshop focused on theoretical conceptualizations of illiberalism, while the subsequent one delved into the ethical dimensions of such research. The eight papers included in this special issue were presented and discussed during these workshops. The peer-review process consisted of two stages: open peer-review in preparation for the workshop, and blind peer-review during the editing process for publication by the participants.

As the reader will likely notice, the format of this special issue deviates from the standard of the journal. The articles within this volume take the form of relatively short personal opinion pieces, where authors not only openly acknowledge their subjectivity in approaching their objects of study but also reflect on how their positionality informs their research. Each paper draws upon the personal experiences of working in the field, influenced by the researchers' individual backgrounds, identities, and personalities. While these accounts are personal and subjective, the authors acknowledge that their experiences are not unique and to a large extent are shaped by academic, institutional, or societal norms, thus likely resonating with others working in similar contexts.

The issues raised in these papers are complex and do not lend themselves to simple solutions, as moral, professional, and personal considerations are often in conflict. By engaging in (self-)reflexivity, the authors navigate the existing tensions and seek new places of understanding while respecting the differences in perception, status and views.[18] Consequently, the objective of this special issue is not to present a universal solution to complex issues, rather to stimulate a public discussion and contribute to building more egalitarian research relationships.

Specifically, the contributions in this collection bring into the spotlight existing contradictions between different kinds of responsibilities inherent to the roles that researchers hold as professionals, employers, colleagues, and engaged citizens. All of these roles, and consequently responsibilities, ideally come with a set of rights, which are also sometimes difficult to align, let alone protect. Professional responsibilities, for instance, require us to conduct thorough analysis that draws on a sufficient amount of data and evidence, and the collection of these data and evidence should align with the ethics of research and protection of the well-being of our respondents. The epistemic change in academic research poses questions regarding the existing institutional hierarchies and ownership of these data, incentivizing researchers to closely engage with respondents, co-create knowledge with them, and share the findings. As a result, there are issues of a practical kind: how to enter the field and gain access to the respondents without deceiving them about the goals of our

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16 *Analysing illiberalism in Europe: Concepts, methodologies, constraints*, U of Amsterdam, 11/3/2022—11/4/2022.

17 *Researching Illiberalism: Rights, Roles and Responsibilities of a Researcher*, U of Amsterdam 6/16/2023—6/17/2023.

18 Wanda S. Pillow, "Reflexivity as interpretation and genealogy in research," *Cultural Studies? Critical Methodologies* 15.6 (2015): 419-434, https://doi.org/10.1177/1532708615615605.

research or our own personal political preferences? A more fundamental question is: Who gains priority in protection: the respondent sharing a private information about committed crimes or their victims?

Beyond having professional responsibilities, scholars also operate as producers of knowledge that have the power to impact societies. Moral responsibility requires us not to normalize or "whitewash" words and deeds that are harmful to others, and not to function as instruments of illiberal groups seeking to reach broader audiences and claim public spaces from which they have been excluded. However, how do we distinguish legitimate and justified critique of institutions from attempts to impose exclusivist ideologies without hearing the other side out, without engaging in debate? And who shares the responsibility, if such an engagement takes place: the university board, the individual researchers, or the university collective? Moreover, there is an inherent tension between us trying to be the professional, sober, and maximally unbiased recorder of events and us in a scholar-activist status that requires to use our status to fulfil societal duties for the protection of inclusive norms.

The situation becomes further complex as the equation includes the pressures put by academic norms, institutions, and funders that issue and sponsor researcher projects. Funders' schemes are deliverables-oriented, meaning that tangible results need to be produced within a limited timeframe. In other words, researchers often do not have the possibility of engaging in long-term research or postponing/ refusing the publication of results. As noted by the two contributions in this issue, besides deliverables, the logic of grants requires a serious degree of visibility: of the researcher and of the research findings, ideally "disseminated" to broader audiences. This aspect, first of all, poses questions regarding the normalization and sensationalization of research on the illiberal actors. Moreover, it brings into the spotlight the issue of the rights that researchers should have when engaged in such research: namely to remain anonymous to protect their safety and well-being.

Content of the Issue

The special issue opens with Aurelien Mondon's contribution that draws attention to the risks of euphemizing reactionary politics by using new academic concepts. In his engagement with the notion of "illiberalism," Mondon advocates for discerning between opportunistic critiques of liberal democracies, often promoting normative and exclusionary politics, and constructive critiques aimed at addressing liberalism's inherent hierarchies and exclusion with an aim of building more fair societies.

Anja Hening, in her contribution, illustrates the ambiguous role of universities in challenging the illiberal movements, by using the example of Monday demonstrations in East Germany. While universities serve as open forums for discussion, deliberation, and critique, they also bear the responsibility of upholding academic integrity and preventing the dissemination of unscientific claims. Hening highlights the precarious position of researchers navigating uncharted territory, risking their status by organizing events or teach-ins which may not always be aligned with the university board and funder positions.

Continuing the discussion, Gábor Halmai explores scholars' agency in studying and consequently resisting constitutional illiberalism, using examples from Hungary and Israel. He underscores the passivity of the academic community in Hungary, where there is a lack of "scholactivism" tradition, which in Halmai's view, has contributed to the establishment of an illiberal regime in the country. Conversely, Israel has

exhibited a higher degree of scholarly involvement in defending normative values, though situation there has seriously changed since the start of the Israel-Hamas war in October 2024.

Pola Cebulak examines the potential impact of scholactivism by legal scholars, focusing on illiberal backlash against the judiciary and debates about "juristocracy." She emphasizes that despite the pressures on democratic norms, the scholars should not necessarily shield the EU institutions, including the Court of Justice, from social and political criticism; and instead engage in the involvement and empowerment of local actors who may feel marginalized in the European-level democratic processes.

In her paper, Marlene Laruelle discusses the difficulties of researching illiberalism at present-day American universities and research institutions. By focusing on the ecosystem of Washington D.C.—where policy-making, research, and public debate are particularly tightly interwoven— she highlights how researchers are often dependent on funders with specific ideological leanings. This situation can lead to a form of self-censorship where scholars have to prioritize topics and perspectives that are likely to be favorably received by funders and policy circles over those that challenge prevailing views.

The sixth contribution focuses on a specific case where illiberal actors have intersecting identities, including of oppressed religious minorities. The case study of European white male converts to Islam highlights inherent tensions in studying conservative Islam, particularly within prevailing security studies frameworks. The paper stresses the importance of developing a deeper understanding of the community to distinguish between various shades of conservative and far-right ideologies among Muslims.

Antonia Vaughan's article, based on interviews with researchers of the far right and manosphere, argues that the current approach to researcher safety has epistemological implications. It affects the type of research that can be conducted and who can safely contribute to knowledge production. These findings underscore broader issues of "epistemic exclusion" that unjustly hinder the ability of individuals with minority identities to participate in knowledge production.

Lastly, the conversation among four scholars—Larissa Böckmann, Marija Petrovska, Luiza Bialasiewicz and Sarah de Lange—reveals the tensions between the research ethics and a culture of care, on the one hand, and institutional obligations and the demands of an academic career, on the other. As the scholars work together on a project funded by the European Commission from different positions of power, they discuss and try to support each other in navigating issues of (in)visibility in the context of rigid institutional expectations and obligations.[19]