



# The Paradoxical Sources of Illiberalism: A Synoptic Approach to the Genealogies of Illiberalism

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## Abstract

*This paper aims to explore the implications of the essentially contested nature of the concept of liberalism in the conceptualization of illiberalism in order to understand the existence of misunderstandings and contradictions in the delimitation and definition of the concept within illiberalism studies. To this end, we seek to show that the contributions of linguistic political theory, inspired by the work of Wittgenstein, are able to describe and understand the conflicts that illiberalism can raise. Indeed, since liberalism is both an ideology and an analytical concept, it is difficult to define the latter without arbitrating the ideological conflicts between the “liberals pretenders.” As the synoptic comparison of the genealogies of illiberalism found in the literature shows, these conflicts are transcribed in the conceptualization of illiberalism, in a more or less imperceptible way, and are sometimes instrumentalized to invert the function and content of the concept. Consequently, our hypothesis is that the notion of “grammar” is useful in clarifying the fact that the concept of illiberalism has a different function and purpose depending on what is considered liberalism and the liberal tradition, which ultimately allows us to assess the coherence and relevance of the concept’s use.*

Keywords: liberalism, illiberalism, neoliberalism, genealogies, conceptual puzzlement, ideology, epistemology

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DOI: 10.53483/XCPS3572

As the literature on illiberalism—whether theoretical or empirical, comparative or monographic—consistently reminds us, the study of the illiberal phenomenon immediately faces a series of epistemological, historical, methodological, and ideological problems that form a veritable conceptual puzzle.<sup>1</sup> Some of the ramifications of this conceptual puzzle are “ordinary” (which does not mean they are simple) in that they relate to classic issues in comparative politics and political theory. Thus, the definition of “essentially contested” notions such as democracy always raises delicate problems; similarly, the study of liberalism always raises a series of difficulties: is it an ideology? a meta-ideology constitutive of modernity? or a geographically and historically situated set of values and culture?<sup>2</sup> From the complexity of grasping liberalism stems a number of difficulties specific to the apprehension of illiberalism, which scholars have not failed to note, as summarized by Marlene Laruelle:

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.<sup>3</sup>

The most important manifestation of this conceptual puzzle is illustrated by the difficulty of establishing a satisfactory consensual conceptual framework for understanding illiberalism. So, while András Sajó and Renáta Uitz define illiberalism as a set of phenomena that reflects negatively liberal practices and challenge individual liberty, Jasper Theodor Kauth and Desmond King prefer to distinguish two distinct phenomena, namely, disruptive illiberalism—the authoritarian challenge to liberal procedural democracy—and ideological illiberalism, which challenges liberalism’s ideological foundations on personal liberty as well as equal treatment of individuals.<sup>4</sup>

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1 On this point, see the recurrent mentions of a puzzle or confusions in the apprehension of illiberalism within the literature. See, for example, Jasper Theodor Kauth and Desmond King, “Illiberalism,” *European Journal of Sociology* 61, no. 3 (December 2020): 365–405, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003975620000181>; and Julian G. Waller, “Illiberalism and Authoritarianism,” preprint, May 30, 2023 (forthcoming in *Oxford Handbook of Illiberalism*), <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4463982>.

2 W. B. Gallie, “Essentially Contested Concepts,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 56, no. 1 (June 1955): 167–98.

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

4 “Illiberalism is a social, political, cultural, legal, and mental phenomenon (or a set of such phenomena) that reflects liberal practices and related beliefs negatively, but not necessarily by negating them” (András Sajó and Renáta Uitz, “A Compass for Illiberalism Research,” in *Routledge Handbook of Illiberalism* (New York: Routledge, 2021), 975–91; Kauth and King, “Illiberalism.”

Finally, illiberalism is also defined as a new ideology that challenges liberalism in an institutionally, philosophically, and culturally coherent way by Laruelle and Julian Waller.<sup>5</sup> We can see that definitions (and genealogies) of illiberalism vary in the literature, although some elements, such as the inclusion of right-wing populism, are subject to convergence. Indeed, the definition of illiberalism is not just the subject of contradictory interpretations but also the subject of disagreement over the very nature of this phenomenon—is it an ideology? a mentality? or a category of political regime?—and over the appropriate method for its investigation.<sup>6</sup>

Such tensions are not solely attributable to classical epistemological and methodological disputes between “idealist” and “realist” (or “materialist”) approaches, nor those between theoretical and empirical approaches. Indeed, most studies on illiberalism do not fail to contextualize their subject and draw on the history of ideas to frame illiberalism. Recent publications of chapters and articles on the genealogy of illiberalism offer clues to some of the causes of this conceptual puzzle.<sup>7</sup> Thus, far from facilitating the understanding of the illiberal phenomenon by establishing a consensus on the intellectual and political sources of illiberalism, these genealogies reflect the existence of unresolved (and sometimes unacknowledged) conflicts in the determination of the liberal and anti-liberal tradition.

Drawing on the work of Duncan Bell and Michael Freeden, who have explored these conflicts and their influence on the conceptualization of liberalism, my article aims to show that it is necessary to understand illiberalism in a similar way, taking into account the plurality of grammars of (il)liberalism that have emerged from these interpretations of liberal historiography.<sup>8</sup> First, I show that the unavoidable association of illiberalism with a more-or-less complete form of anti-liberalism necessarily gives rise to methodological and epistemological problems—the conceptual puzzle—due to the ideological conflicts within the liberal galaxy (part 1). I then explore how this conceptual puzzle can be clarified by using a linguistic and comprehensive approach. In line with the conceptual framework developed by Hanna Pitkin, I advocate using the notion of a language game—borrowed from Ludwig Wittgenstein—to conceptualize illiberalism, while being attentive to the plurality of grammars of liberalism (part 2).<sup>9</sup> Last, I demonstrate how my approach both reveals and explains the existence of contradictions in the conceptualization of illiberalism, which result from the overlooked coherence between political phenomena labeled “illiberal” and certain grammars of liberalism (part 3).

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5 Laruelle, “Illiberalism”; Julian G. Waller, “Distinctions with a Difference: Illiberalism and Authoritarianism in Scholarly Study,” *Political Studies Review*, published ahead of print, March 20, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1177/14789299231159253>.

6 Thus, although the editors of the *Routledge Handbook of Illiberalism* contest the view that illiberalism can be reduced to an ideology or regime type, these analytical grids are repeated throughout the book. See Andrés Sajó, Renáta Uitz, and Stephen Holmes, eds., *Routledge Handbook of Illiberalism* (New York: Routledge, 2021).

7 Among others, I refer to Helena Rosenblatt, “The History of Illiberalism,” in *Routledge Handbook of Illiberalism*; Stephen Holmes, “The Antiliberal Idea,” in *Routledge Handbook of Illiberalism*; Aron Buzogány and Mihai Varga, “The Ideational Foundations of the Illiberal Backlash in Central and Eastern Europe: The Case of Hungary,” *Review of International Political Economy* 25, no. 6 (November 2018): 811–28, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09692290.2018.1543718>; and finally, Frank Furedi, “Illiberal Liberalism: A Genealogy,” *Journal of Illiberalism Studies* 2 no. 2 (2022), 19–36, <https://doi.org/10.53483/WCKT3541>.

8 Duncan Bell, “What Is Liberalism?” *Political Theory* 42, no. 6 (December 2014): 682–715, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0090591714535103>; Michael Freeden, *Ideologies and Political Theory: A Conceptual Approach* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996) and *Liberal Languages: Ideological Imaginations and Twentieth-Century Progressive Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

9 Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, *Wittgenstein and Justice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2020).

## Exposing the Conceptual Puzzle

In order to shed light on the conceptual puzzle of illiberalism, it is first necessary to expose the existence of several misunderstandings within the literature mobilizing the concept of illiberalism and illiberal democracy. Indeed, a brief, inexhaustive history of the notion of illiberalism reveals that it has consistently given rise to contradictory conceptualizations ever since the need to think about illiberalism emerged in the 1990s in the wake of the third wave of democracy. Thus, for Bell, David Brown, Kanishka Jayasuriya, and David Martin Jones, the coauthors of *Towards Illiberal Democracy in Pacific Asia* (1995), the notion of illiberalism aims to describe the incompatibility between Western liberalism and an anti-individualist (and therefore anti-liberal) Confucian culture, which leads to the development of a “non-neutral” state governed by a technocratic and paternalistic elite that replaces *rule of law* with *rule by law*.<sup>10</sup> For Fareed Zakaria, on the other hand, illiberalism means a majoritarian undermining of liberal institutions governing the exercise of power and individual freedoms. Zakaria conceptualizes illiberalism in continuity with the liberal critique of the tyranny of the majority. Consequently, the emergence of illiberal democracy is not the result of an incompatibility between liberalism and a non-Western culture, but the resurgence of the historical incompatibility between popular sovereignty and constitutional liberalism.<sup>11</sup>

Although Zakaria and Bell agree on the link between illiberalism and the questioning of liberal constitutionalism, their conceptualizations are therefore radically contradictory, even while they conform to relatively consensual narratives on what constitutes liberalism and anti-liberalism. Bell’s conceptualization of illiberalism is based on an opposition between a liberalism historically defined by its egalitarian individualism and a meritocratic and familialist anti-liberalism, while Zakaria’s is based on the opposition between a liberalism that historically protects individual rights guaranteeing freedom and the free market, protected by mechanisms such as checks and balances on the power of government and by the independence of the judiciary. Yet these interpretations of the liberal tradition (or the misunderstandings that their application to comparative politics induces) have considerable implications, as they give rise to diametrically opposed analyses. Thus, for Bell, the Singaporean regime, like South Korea and Taiwan, is an illiberal democracy, while for Zakaria, it is, on the contrary, a liberal dictatorship in complete opposition to illiberal democracies such as Boris Yeltsin’s Russia or Hugo Chavez’s Venezuela.

How can we explain the fact that conceptualizations of illiberalism can be so divergent, leading to completely contradictory descriptions of the same regime, while resting on common interpretations of the liberal tradition? Despite the absence of a conceptual framework structuring studies on illiberalism that would explain the permanence of certain conceptual problems—like transitology within democratizations studies—the comparison between the pioneering works on the

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10 Daniel A. Bell and Kanishka Jayasuriya, “Understanding Illiberal Democracy: A Framework,” in *Towards Illiberal Democracy in Pacific Asia*, edited by Daniel A. Bell et al., (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 1995), 1–16. The conclusion of this study is that political change in Pacific Asia is likely to lead to a form of illiberal democracy. What then does the model of illiberal government that has developed in Pacific Asia since 1945 involve? In our view there are three distinctive features of East Asian illiberal democracy: first, a non-neutral understanding of the state; second, the evolution of a rationalistic and legalistic technocracy that manages the developing state as a corporate enterprise; finally, the development of a managed rather than a critical public space and civil society. (David Martin Jones et al., “Towards a Model of Illiberal Democracy,” in *Towards Illiberal Democracy in Pacific Asia*, 163–67)

11 Fareed Zakaria, “The Rise of Illiberal Democracy,” *Foreign Affairs* 76, no. 6 (November-December, 1997): 22–43, <https://doi.org/10.2307/20048274>; and *The Future of Freedom: Illiberal Democracy at Home and Abroad*, rev. ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007).

conceptualization of illiberalism and the contemporary works that have developed in the wake of the claim to illiberalism by a growing part of right-wing populism seems to show that such misunderstandings remain in contemporary literature, as we shall see below.<sup>12</sup>

Considering these various observations, my hypothesis is that all conceptualizations of illiberalism, whether or not they pay attention to the polysemy of the term liberalism and the plurality of its appropriations, think of illiberalism in the continuity of a dichotomy between liberalism and anti-liberalism which stems from a grammar of liberalism that defines the appropriate uses of these terms.<sup>13</sup> Consequently, it is impossible to conceptualize illiberalism without being entangled in the plurality of interpretations of liberal historiography that directly or indirectly define what anti-liberalism is.

Studies on illiberalism thus reveal the existence not only of several conceptualizations of liberalism but also of several grammars of liberalism, whose competition has been overlooked. Each scholar (and each political actor) masters a certain grammar of liberalism, that is, a repertoire of potential uses of the term liberalism, adapted to specific disciplines or geo-historical areas. The diversity of these usages is consequently limited not only by specific contexts of enunciation but also by the interpretation of what constitutes the liberal tradition. However, the identification of the liberal tradition is the subject of conflict both within liberalism—that is, among the intellectuals and political actors who claim the term—and outside it—that is, among liberalism’s ideological opponents and in the academic sphere. As a result, the genealogies of liberalism differ and clash in their division of the liberal tradition—the distinction between classical liberalism and new liberalism, for example—and in their interpretation of the core concepts of liberalism, such as freedom and individuality.

This linguistic clarification of the different grammars of liberalism is particularly important because the reading of liberal historiography determines the conceptualization of liberalism and illiberalism. As we have seen, liberalism is conceptually associated with individualism, according to a classic interpretation of liberal historiography. This association is challenged by feminist approaches, which emphasize the relative nature of this individualism due to the importance of the (patriarchal) family in liberal theories, leading to the formulation of a different grammar of liberalism.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, the conceptualization of liberalism will differ if it is based on a “critical” interpretation of liberal historiography, like that of Domenico Losurdo or Desmond King, which will show the permeation of historical forms of liberalism with racist and eugenic practices conceptually associated with fascism.<sup>15</sup> Consequently, the use of distinct grammars of liberalism implies different morphologizations of liberal ideology, which will give more or less interest to the

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12 On the influence of transitology within democratization studies, see Guillermo O’Donnell and Philippe C. Schmitter, *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Tentative Conclusions about Uncertain Democracies* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013).

13 I borrow this dichotomy from Bell, who writes: There are several responses to “overextension.” One is simply to ignore it, deploying the term as if its meaning was self-evident. Ubiquitous across the humanities and social sciences, this unreflective impulse generates much confusion. Another is to engage in “boundary work”—to demarcate and police the discourse. (Bell, “What Is Liberalism?”)

14 Wendy Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020).

15 Domenico Losurdo, *Liberalism: A Counter-History* (London: Verso Books, 2014); Desmond King, *In The Name of Liberalism: Illiberal Social Policy in the USA and Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

formulation of a concept of illiberalism.<sup>16</sup> Thus, if we mobilize Losurdo and King's interpretation of liberal historiography, the variety of "illiberal practices" to be taken into account in conceptualizing illiberalism will be broader and will include states traditionally considered liberal, such as the United Kingdom.

However, the use of the same grammar can conceal contradictory interpretations of liberal historiography, which is often the case between political opponents within or outside an ideology, as Freeden has shown.<sup>17</sup> Liberals and anti-liberals can thus agree on the association of liberalism with constitutionalism, although their decontestation of this concept may differ according to more or less contradictory readings of liberal historiography.

Of course, this observation about the contested nature of the definition of liberalism and its tradition is already known.<sup>18</sup> However, it serves above all to preclude a consensual definition of liberalism (and, by extension, of anti-liberalism). Yet the fact that liberalism may be an essentially contested concept does not prevent us from studying the causes and implications of conflicts between different grammars of liberalism and, within it, competing grammars and conflicts over the decontestation of some. To put it another way, the fact that the definition of liberalism (and incidentally that of anti-liberalism) is contested and contestable constitutes the starting point of my study.

While it is a commonplace to acknowledge the diversity of uses of the term liberalism, the conflicts of interpretation of the liberal tradition and the intra-ideological conflicts within the liberal family are little known. Yet these conflicts have led intellectuals vindicating liberalism to exclude each other from the liberal perimeter. Thus, we can observe the consequences of this process if we compare Zakaria's and Bell's conceptualizations of illiberalism. So, it appears that the grammar Zakaria uses, which associates liberalism with rule of law and capitalism, insists on the importance of classical liberalism in the conceptualization of liberalism. This grammar is justified by an interpretation of liberal historiography that emphasizes the importance of Anglo-Scottish liberalism and the political and intellectual legacy of Edmund Burke or Thomas Jefferson. This interpretation of the liberal tradition implies that the progressive and egalitarian connotation of the term liberalism in ordinary American language reflects a distortion of its original meaning.

Consequently, according to this grammar of liberalism, anti-liberalism is associated with the questioning of rule of law and capitalism. The use of this grammar reflects coherent decontestations of the concepts of rule of law and capitalism, which make them inseparable. This explains why Zakaria considers the Singaporean regime to be liberal, because even if it is a "dictatorship" that does not strictly respect the principles of political liberalism, the regime guarantees sufficient civil liberties to allow the development of a capitalist market economy, and why he considers regimes that claim to be socialist to be illiberal. Conversely, the fact that Bell associates liberalism with egalitarian individualism and pluralism reflects his distinct interpretation of the liberal tradition, which places greater emphasis on its contemporary development, particularly under the influence of John Rawls. This grammar of liberalism explains why Bell regards the Singaporean regime as illiberal. Despite its capitalist market

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16 Michael Freeden, "The Morphological Analysis of Ideology," *The Oxford Handbook of Political Ideologies*, online ed. (Oxford: Oxford Academic, 2013), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199585977.013.0034>.

17 Michael Freeden, *Liberalism Divided: A Study in British Political Thought 1914–1939* (OUP Oxford, 1986).

18 Ruth Abbey, "Is Liberalism Now an Essentially Contested Concept?" *New Political Science* 27, no. 4 (December 2005): 461–80, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07393140500370972>.

economy, the latter is not necessarily associated with liberalism, which also leads to a more nuanced apprehension of constitutionalism and a distinction between rule of law and rule by law, where Zakaria makes no such distinction.

This process of excommunication and struggle for a monopoly on the determination of the liberal tradition is therefore of the utmost importance, as it induces a semantic and conceptual conflict around illiberalism. For example, for Friedrich A. Hayek, state interventionism defended by “progressive” liberals such as John Stuart Mill is illiberal and leads to totalitarianism, because true liberalism promotes the deregulated free market.<sup>19</sup> Conversely, for Benedetto Croce and John Maynard Keynes, it is the deregulated free-market liberal tradition that is false liberalism.<sup>20</sup> Each of these authors justifies the excommunication of his intra-ideological opponents by his interpretation of the liberal tradition.<sup>21</sup> Consequently, the intellectual genealogy of liberalism and illiberalism encounters a *language game* in which several grammars of liberalism are superposed, each based on interpretations of the liberal intellectual tradition and on its adaptation to specific sociopolitical contexts.<sup>22</sup> This leads to major conflicts in the delimitation and interpretation of the illiberal phenomenon, as the very point of the term illiberalism is to conceptualize direct or indirect opposition to liberalism.

Hence, what is considered “liberal” in some contexts will be considered “illiberal” or “anti-liberal” in others. Studies on illiberalism are not immune to the paradoxes resulting from these overlaps. The concept of illiberalism is thus constructed from sociopolitical contexts in which specific languages of the liberalism-illiberalism relationship are mobilized and interpreted in the light of the grammar of liberalism employed by the researchers themselves. I argue that this configuration leads to a language game in which the terms liberalism and illiberalism are employed according to distinct logics, implying certain epistemological and methodological precautions in the conceptualization of illiberalism. Therefore, one of the keys to solving the illiberal conceptual puzzle is to obtain a synoptic view of the genealogies of illiberalism to clarify the conflicts in the interpretation of the liberal tradition that structures the conceptualization of illiberalism and its intellectual and political sources.

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19 Philippe Légé, “Hayek’s Readings of Mill,” *Journal of the History of Economic Thought* 30, no. 2 (June 2008): 199–215, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1042771608000185>; and Friedrich A. von Hayek, *Individualism: True and False* (Dublin: Hodges, Figgis & Co., 1946).

20 Luigi Einaudi, “Dei diversi significati del concetto di liberismo economico e dei suoi rapporti con quello di liberalismo,” in Benedetto Croce and Luigi Einaudi, *Liberismo e liberalismo* (Milan-Naples: Ricciardi, 1988), cited by Catherine Audard, “Le ‘nouveau’ libéralisme,” *L’Economie politique* 44, no. 4 (2009): 6–27; John Maynard Keynes, “The End of Laissez-Faire,” in *Essays in Persuasion* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2010), 272–94.

21 Nestor Capdevila, *Le concept d’idéologie* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2004), 80–92.

22 I have borrowed the notion of a language game from the work of Wittgenstein and its reception in political science. This reception has been explored by Pitkin, *Wittgenstein and Justice*; and Mark Bevir, *The Logic of the History of Ideas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511490446>. Pitkin gives the following definition of “grammar” in Wittgenstein’s conceptual framework: Meaning, or whatever says fixed regardless of context, is by no means all of what is regular or regulated about language, nor all that we learn when we learn language. Beside the meaning or sense, there is something else which make a phrase like “all of it” sound peculiar in some contexts, and lack all sense in others. . . . These regularities in language Wittgenstein calls “grammar,” and they go far beyond the element of meaning or sense that stays fixed regardless of context. Grammar is what a child learns through experience and training, not explanation; it is what we all know but cannot say. Grammar includes all the patterns or regularities or rules in language, permitting new projections and yet controlling what projections will be acceptable. (Pitkin, *Wittgenstein and Justice*, 80).



## Untangling the Conceptual Puzzle of Illiberalism

Like other fields of scholarly literature devoted to notions that are sources of conceptual confusion, such as populism and democracy, illiberal studies employ tools derived from the conceptual framework of the philosophy of ordinary language or from its reception in political science and the history of ideas.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, the study of the illiberal phenomenon calls for the mobilization of a linguistic approach, as it allows us to expose the semantic springs of certain conceptual problems affecting the apprehension of the illiberal phenomenon, while at the same time informing this very phenomenon.<sup>24</sup> As Pitkin demonstrates in developing Wittgenstein's contributions to philosophy (and political science):

What we really lack when we are conceptually puzzled is not a definition or rule, but a clear overview of the relevant cases, Wittgenstein says he is “not after exactness, but after a synoptic view.” The idea of perspicuity, of a “perspicuous representation,” he says is of “fundamental importance” and “earmarks the form of account” he gives, his way of looking at things. A main cause of conceptual puzzlement is the fact “that we do not command a clear view of the use of our words. – Our grammar is lacking in this sort of perspicuity.” Thus, the real task here is “not to resolve a contradiction but to make it possible for us to get a clear view” of the problem troubling us, of “the state of affairs before the contradiction is resolved.” Of course, a perspicuous overview of inconsistency is not the same as a single, unifying, consistent rule that fits all the cases. But if no single, unifying, consistent rule *can* fit all the cases, then an overview of the chaotic facts may well be what is really needed.<sup>25</sup>

Although it does not constitute an epistemological imperative that would invariably undermine the relevance of research that does not employ it, the linguistic approach helps to explain the blind spots and biases affecting our understanding of the illiberal phenomenon, due to the language game in which the latter is entangled.<sup>26</sup> To say it another way, the notion of a language game helps to distinguish different coherent

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23 For example, the *Routledge Handbook of Illiberalism Studies* features three mobilizations of the notion of family resemblance, which stems directly from Wittgenstein's philosophical investigations. There are also numerous references to notions derived from the reception of the linguistic turn, especially the notion of “essentially contestability,” which is mobilized to apprehend liberalism (397), populism (426), and the rule of law (520).

24 On the reception of the “linguistic turn” in political science, see in particular Michael Freeden, *Ideologies and Political Theory*.

25 Pitkin, *Wittgenstein and Justice*, 92–93.

26 Pitkin writes:

Of course, a Wittgensteinian perspective and Austinian tools of analysis are not absolute prerequisites for the kind of perspicuous overview of plural grammar that is needed here. Various writers in the social sciences do sometimes make significant “Wittgensteinian” discoveries about a concept like “power” without benefit of ordinary-language philosophy. But the examples of this kind of insight I have come across tend to be quite limited in scope. The discovery is more or less accidental, and it often covers only a fraction of what needs to be said about a word's grammar. Further, the writer is often unable to characterize what he has discovered with full accuracy, being limited by the usual label-and-object assumptions about the nature of meaning. So he often cannot follow through on his discovery, or put it to anything like its full potential of use. (Pitkin, *Wittgenstein in Justice*, 275)

Besides, the mobilization of the Wittgensteinian conceptual framework has already been explicitly mobilized by Andy Hamilton to conceptualize the relation between conservatism and illiberalism in a very enlightening way. See Hamilton, “Conservatism as Illiberalism,” in *Routledge Handbook of Illiberalism*.



sets of mobilizations of the terms liberalism and illiberalism. In fact, the metaphor of a language game highlights the fact that depending on the “area of language,” that is, the context of enunciations and the grammar of liberalism in use, we can claim liberalism or, on the contrary, illiberalism to defend the same ideals, the same political agenda. So, while Ronald Reagan came to power denouncing liberalism, Margaret Thatcher justified a return to it. Therefore, language games that encircle liberalism imply certain contradictions and unthinking about the liberal and anti-liberal intellectual tradition. Far from ending up in relativist dead-end where the conceptualization of liberalism and illiberalism is impossible to define and operate, I argue that it is possible to start from this observation to better understand the sources of what is today called “illiberalism,” namely, the questioning of liberal constitutionalism.<sup>27</sup> A comparison of these different grammars of liberalism would require a larger work to do justice to it, so in continuity with Freedman’s morphological approach, I focus here on certain concepts such as individualism and interventionism to show how certain grammars of liberalism induce impasses regarding the sources of illiberalism.

For instance, several conceptualizations of illiberalism can be found in the *Journal of Illiberalism* and the *Routledge Handbook of Illiberalism*.<sup>28</sup> For the *Handbook’s* editors, liberalism is continuous with the philosophy of the Enlightenment and can be conceptually closely associated with the notion of individualism.<sup>29</sup> Illiberalism, on the other hand, is not an ideology or a type of regime, but a phenomenon in which this individualism is challenged by a heterogeneous assemblage of old and more recent practices and ideas.<sup>30</sup> This conceptualization of liberalism is based on a certain interpretation of the liberal tradition, whose major authors would be John Locke, Montesquieu, Benjamin Constant, and John Stuart Mill, and it places all critics of individualism, liberal constitutionalism, and enlightenment, whether conservative or progressive, in the illiberal camp.<sup>31</sup> This grammar of liberalism is itself shared by some “conservative” and “progressive” authors (and political actors) critical of liberalism. This grammar is mainly based on an interpretation of the liberal tradition as a continuation of the philosophy of the Enlightenment—whose main components are individualism and the distinction between facts and values—and forms the basis of the critique of “liberal atomism.”<sup>32</sup> This critique can be found to varying degrees in conservative and communitarian thought.<sup>33</sup>

Consequently, the linguistic association of liberalism with individualism is shared by liberals and anti-liberals alike. However, the fact that this grammar is shared

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27 Tímea Drinóczi and Agnieszka Bień-Kacala, “Illiberal Constitutionalism: The Case of Hungary and Poland,” *German Law Journal* 20, no. 8 (December 2019): 1140–66, <https://doi.org/10.1017/glj.2019.83>; and Gábor Halmai, “Illiberal Constitutional Theories,” *Jus Politicum* 25 (January 2021), 135–52, <https://hdl.handle.net/1814/71260>.

28 On this point, see Maria Snegovaya, Mihai Varga, and Julian G. Waller’s review of the *Routledge Handbook of Illiberalism* (*Journal of Illiberalism Studies* 3, no. 1 (2023), 119–29, <https://doi.org/10.53483/XCLX3551>).

29 “To understand antiliberalism, therefore, we need to start by explaining the centrality of individualism to the liberal idea” (Stephen Holmes, “The Antiliberal Idea,” in *Routledge Handbook of Illiberalism*).

30 Sajó, Uitz, and Holmes, *Routledge Handbook of Illiberalism* (New York: Routledge, 2021), xxi.

31 Sajó and Uitz write:

The sources of intellectual illiberalism are manifold. Beyond Catholic integralists, various movements inspired by communitarianism sought to develop counterstrategies to escape prevailing orthodoxies (including Marxism and liberalism). Current strains of Critical Race Studies, Dis/ Crit (critical race and disability studies), QueerCrit, and Critical Legal Geography and, more recently, various strands labeled as “post-liberalism” try to bypass the customary left-right political divide. (Sajó and Uitz, “A Compass for Illiberalism Research,” 978)

32 Holmes, “The Antiliberal Idea.”

33 Stephen Holmes, “The Permanent Structure of Antiliberal Thought,” in *Liberalism and the Moral Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).

does not mean that definitions of individualism converge. As Stephen Holmes has shown, the association of liberalism with individualism often serves as a strawman, reducing liberalism to an antisocial ideology.<sup>34</sup> As Immanuel Wallerstein points out, this grammar of liberalism rests more or less on its assimilation to a meta-ideology of Western modernity and tends to confuse the critique of modernity with the critique of liberalism.<sup>35</sup> As a result, reactionary thinking and communitarian, (eco)feminist, and Marxist theories, based on the epistemological, moral, and political critique of liberal individualism, can be subsumed within the spectrum of illiberalism.<sup>36</sup> This grammar of liberalism thus induces a certain way of conceptualizing illiberalism, since the notion of anti-individualism is not adequate to characterize a precise ideology or type of regime.<sup>37</sup>

However, this conceptualization of liberalism is contested both by authors using the same grammar (the association of liberalism with individualism) and by authors who question it. Thus, for liberists or paleo-liberals, individualism is indeed a core concept of liberalism, but it does not imply the existence of individual rights apart from property rights because of their *negative* interpretation of the concept of liberty, which places authors in favor of political and social rights—such as Mill or Hans Kelsen—in the anti-individualist and therefore anti-liberal camp.<sup>38</sup> This interpretation of the liberal tradition is based precisely on a critique of the Enlightenment and rationalism. Following the example of Hayek, it is possible to portray an “Anglo-Scottish” empiricist liberalism, based on the figures of David Hume and Adam Smith, as being opposed to the “continental” rationalist enlightenment. This interpretation of the liberal tradition enables Hayek to criticize Keynesian social democracy and the legal system that allows it to be established, namely legal positivism.<sup>39</sup>

There is thus a major contradiction between conceptualizations of liberalism mainly or incidentally based on the concept of individualism, which has the effect of modifying the interpretation of the anti-liberal tradition and thus the delimitation of the illiberal phenomenon. The liberist reading of liberal historiography is ambiguous about the anti-liberalism of conservative authors such as Carl Schmitt—from whom several theses were appropriated by neoliberals—and even tends to place some of them, such as Edmund Burke, in the “liberal” camp.<sup>40</sup> Consequently, the conceptualization of liberalism based on the concepts of individualism and the free market tends to exclude from the perimeter of anti-liberalism political currents favorable to capitalism. As we have seen, this led Zakaria—and in the past,

34 Holmes, “The Permanent Structure of Antiliberal Thought.”

35 Immanuel Wallerstein, *After Liberalism* (New York: New Press, 1995).

36 Holmes (“The Antiliberal Idea”) writes:

Hostility to liberal individualism and the apotheosis of a presumably redemptive community, taken together, constitute the enduring core of the antiliberal mindset. Expressed obscurely in attacks on a nonexistent liberal atomism, resentment of really existing liberal individualism is the existential stance that ties together antiliberalism’s various camps and manifestations.

37 “Illiberalism refers to a set of social, political, cultural, legal, and mental phenomena associated with the waning of individual liberty (personal freedom) as an everyday experience. Illiberalism is not an ideology or a regime type” (András Sajó, Renáta Uitz, and Stephen Holmes, “Preface,” *Routledge Handbook of Illiberalism*).

38 The expression “paleo-liberalism” was coined by Ludwig von Mises and Hayek at the Lippmann Colloquium. On this subject, see Serge Audier, *Néolibéralisme(s)* (Paris: Grasset, 2012).

39 Friedrich von Hayek, *Law, Legislation and Liberty*, vol. 2 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 176–78.

40 F. R. Cristi, “Hayek and Schmitt on the Rule of Law,” *Canadian Journal of Political Science / Revue canadienne de science politique* 17, no. 3 (1984): 521–35; William E. Scheuerman, “The Unholy Alliance of Carl Schmitt and Friedrich A. Hayek,” *Constellations* 4, no. 2 (1997): 172–88, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8675.00047>; and Linda C. Raeder, “The Liberalism/Conservatism of Edmund Burke and F. A. Hayek: A Critical Comparison,” *Humanitas* 10, no. 1 (1997): 70–88.

“neoliberals” such as Milton Friedman and Hayek—to include authoritarian states such as Singapore and Augusto Pinochet’s Chile within the liberal perimeter, because socialism is the real anti-liberalism, according to them.<sup>41</sup>

Finally, there are two other grammars of liberalism, in which liberalism is detached from the “selfish” individualism associated with Manchester capitalism, leading either to the denunciation of individualism, as in the case of L. T. Hobhouse, or to the defense of an “egalitarian” and democratic interpretation of individualism, as in the case of John Dewey.<sup>42</sup> These “progressive” grammars of liberalism are based on two readings of the liberal tradition. Among the proponents of new liberalism and the welfare state, such as Raymond Aron, there is a rejection of classical liberalism, associated with laissez-faire and the rise of inequality during the 19th century. However, there is another interpretation of the liberal tradition shared by Keynes and the first generation of the Chicago School.<sup>43</sup> The second interpretation is based on a more democratic reading of the classical liberal tradition and aims to denounce its recuperation by a business elite and appropriation by intellectuals such as Herbert Spencer.<sup>44</sup> Historically, these two interpretations of the liberal tradition have led to the idea that socialism is compatible with liberalism, while the free market is associated with conservatism or even anti-liberalism.<sup>45</sup>

Thus, according to Freeden, supporters of the free market are “mistaken liberals” who have been excluded from the liberal perimeter since the first half of the 20th century and are in fact conservatives.<sup>46</sup> The outcome is a conceptualization of anti-liberalism that is radically different from previous ones, although it can be superimposed on the first grammar of liberalism based on the philosophy of the Enlightenment. Thus, for proponents of “progressive” grammars of liberalism, one of the main intellectual sources of illiberalism is to be found in the thought of Schmitt, because his critique of liberalism targets both liberal constitutionalism and the egalitarian individualism of the new liberals.<sup>47</sup>

Unlike the grammar of liberalism that positions a “homogeneous” liberalism opposite several anti-liberal critiques of modernity, the progressive grammar rests on a conceptual rupture between liberalism and capitalism (or between political and economic liberalism). The concept of the free market advocated by “pseudo-liberals”

41 Thomas Carothers, “Zakaria’s Complaint,” *The National Interest*, no. 72 (2003): 137–43; and Andrew Farrant, Edward McPhail, and Sebastian Berger, “Preventing the ‘Abuses’ of Democracy: Hayek, the ‘Military Usurper’ and Transitional Dictatorship in Chile?” *American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 71, no. 3 (2012): 513–38, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1536-7150.2012.00824.x>. This explains the hostility of Hayek and free-market advocates to Keynesian social democracy and the New Deal, which they described as the first step towards communism. See Hayek, *Law, Legislation and Liberty*.

42 Michael Freeden, *The New Liberalism: An Ideology of Social Reform* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986); and John Dewey, “The Future of Liberalism,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 32, no. 9 (1935): 225–30, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2015856>.

43 Among them are Frank Knight and Henry Simmons. On the distinction between the first and second generations of the Chicago School, see Robert van Horn, “Chicago’s Shifting Attitude toward Concentrations of Business Power (1934–1962),” *Seattle University Law Review* 34, no. 4 (2011): 1527.

44 Keynes, “The End of Laissez-Faire.”

45 Matthew McManus, ed., *Liberalism and Socialism: Mortal Enemies or Embittered Kin?* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing, 2021); and Edward Nell, *Free Market Conservatism: A Critique of Theory & Practice* (Abingdon, England: Routledge, 2009).

46 Freeden, *Ideologies and Political Theory*, 276–311.

47 Incidentally, as a result of the language game mentioned above, Schmittian criticism of social democracy is often thought of as both authoritarian and liberal, when liberalism is exclusively associated with capitalism. On this point, see Renato Cristi, *Carl Schmitt and Authoritarian Liberalism: Strong State, Free Economy* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1998); and Werner Bonefeld, “Economic Constitution and Authoritarian Liberalism: Carl Schmitt and the Idea of a Sound Economy,” in *The Idea of Economic Constitution in Europe*, edited by Guillaume Grégoire and Xavier Miny (Leiden: Brill Nijhoff, 2022), 182–203.

like Hayek and conservatives like Schmitt is thus opposed to regulated capitalism (or planned economy) and seen as incompatible with fundamental freedoms and liberal constitutionalism, which allows its inclusion in the concept of illiberalism.<sup>48</sup>

Thus, if from a linguistic perspective we can see a convergence in the use of the term illiberalism to describe right-wing populism, this common labeling actually covers up radically different conceptualizations of illiberalism.<sup>49</sup> Hence, I understand part of the conceptual puzzle of illiberalism to lie in these contradictory and mutually exclusive interpretations of the relationship between concepts of individualism, fundamental rights and freedoms, constitutionalism, and the market economy within the liberal tradition. The notion of a language game seems appropriate here to account for the resulting conceptual, semantic, and genealogical imbroglia:

Historically, the different meanings of liberalism vary according to the different national historical-political traditions.<sup>50</sup> The performativity of these different grammars on the political level leads to a problem of articulating the genealogies of liberalism, because by being appropriated by political actors, these different grammars have led to the sedimentation of different forms of liberalism. Regardless of how we conceptualize liberalism, we therefore need to adapt to what liberalism means in a given geo-historical context and adopt a certain distance from political actors' claims to liberalism or illiberalism. But the meaning of "liberal" is not only historically nonlinear within a single historical tradition; it is also open to contestation.<sup>51</sup> Thus, the common opposition in ordinary language between a "progressive" Anglo-American liberalism and a "conservative" continental liberalism is in fact proof of the ideologically driven competition between different grammars of liberalism. This unequal performativity of the grammars of liberalism explains why, in the name of Catholicism and traditionalism, the critique of liberalism is opportune for Patrick J. Deneen but less so for Pierre Manent.

On the ideological level, the use of the term "liberal" is the subject of conflicts dating back to the French Revolution, as Helena Rosenblatt reminds us.<sup>52</sup> This conflict exists both within the liberal family, meaning the currents claiming a monopoly on the definition of liberalism, and outside the liberal family. This semantic conflict leads to confusion, as the label "liberal" can be used to describe or apprehend distinct, even opposing, ideological formations. Thus, the criticism leveled at "liberalism" by communitarians such as Michael Walzer is in fact aimed solely at "high liberalism" and does not prevent him from claiming to be a liberal himself.<sup>53</sup> Similarly, defenders of liberalism can always contest the fact that the criticism leveled at liberalism is in fact aimed at a caricatured and truncated version of the latter, since it is based on a different interpretation of liberal historiography.<sup>54</sup>

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48 William E. Scheuerman, "Carl Schmitt's Critique of Liberal Constitutionalism," *The Review of Politics* 58, no. 2 (1996): 299–322; Helena Alviar García, "Neoliberalism as a Form of Authoritarian Constitutionalism," in *Authoritarian Constitutionalism*, edited by Helena Alviar García and Günter Frankenberg (Cheltenham, England: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2019), 37–56.

49 Wolfgang Merkel and Felix Scholl, "Illiberalism, Populism and Democracy in East and West," *Czech Journal of Political Science* 25, no. 1 (2018): 28–44, <https://doi.org/10.5817/PC2018-1-28>.

50 Michael Freeden, Javier Fernández-Sebastián, and Jörn Leonhard, *In Search of European Liberalisms: Concepts, Languages, Ideologies* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2019).

51 Freeden, *Liberalism Divided*.

52 Helena Rosenblatt, *The Lost History of Liberalism: From Ancient Rome to the Twenty-First Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).

53 Justine Lacroix, "Peut-on être libéral et communautarien? La pensée politique de Michaël Walzer," *Swiss Political Science Review* 7, no. 1 (2001): 83–93, <https://doi.org/10.1002/fj.1662-6370.2001.tb00310.x>.

54 Holmes, "The Antiliberal Idea."

These language games surrounding liberalism thus raise several analytical problems in the conceptualization of illiberalism. Indeed, a descriptive approach to illiberalism, limited to a given geo-historical context, will necessarily come up against certain grammars of liberalism and may correspond to what is considered liberal in another context. As I have already mentioned, this language game can be observed from the very genesis of the notion of illiberalism; but this competition of grammars is made apparent when certain languages of liberalism are *reversed* and described as “illiberal,” as Frank Furedi did when he denounced the deceptive nature of liberalism’s progressive grammar.<sup>55</sup> Having sketched out a synoptic approach to illiberalism, it seems appropriate to show its contributions to the genealogy of illiberalism, as the articulation of the plurality of grammars of liberalism on the historical-political and conceptual levels leads to confusion in the conceptualization of illiberalism.

### **Paradoxical Genealogies and Language Games**

As Sajó and Uitz have already noted, “liberalism is a word with too many concepts,” so the conceptualization of illiberalism cannot escape a series of conceptual problems, some of which I have attempted to shed light on.<sup>56</sup> This conceptual puzzle finds its most important manifestation in disagreements over the perimeter of the illiberal phenomenon, and by extension over its intellectual and political sources. Although there may appear to be a consensus on the political phenomena encompassed within the perimeter of illiberalism, such as right-wing populism, a comparison of the different grammars of liberalism employed by the authors shows that conceptualizations of illiberalism differ and that these overlaps may be fortuitous. Thus, although the inclusion of the Hungarian regime in the illiberal perimeter seems self-evident given Viktor Orbán’s appropriation of the term “illiberal democracy,” it is not self-evident according to several grammars of liberalism. Like Singapore, simultaneously described as a liberal dictatorship by Zakaria and an illiberal democracy by Bell, the political transformations in Hungary and Poland are subject to contradictory readings. For Furedi and Anne-Marie Le Pourhiet, these political transformations do not call into question the liberal nature of the Hungarian and Polish regimes.<sup>57</sup> On the contrary, they argue that the constitutional reforms in Hungary and Poland have enabled resistance to a progressive illiberal liberalism that has replaced the true liberalism of the Western tradition. In symmetric opposition, these political transformations have been described by Zakaria and Holmes as the resurgence of a conflict between democratic populism and liberal constitutionalism. This approach—which grants a form of majoritarian democratic legitimacy to political actors claiming illiberalism—is itself contested by authors such as Jan-Werner Müller, who view these transformations through the prism of the opposition between democratic liberalism and authoritarian illiberalism.<sup>58</sup> Each of these conceptualizations of illiberalism is based on a particular grid of interpretation of

55 Frank Furedi, “Illiberal Liberalism: A Genealogy,” *Journal of Illiberalism Studies* 2, no. 2 (2022): 19–36, <https://doi.org/10.53483/WCKT3541>.

56 Sajó and Uitz, “A Compass for Illiberalism Research”: 976.

57 Frank Furedi, *Populism and the European Culture Wars: The Conflict of Values between Hungary and the EU* (Routledge, 2017). Le Pourhiet writes:

In contemporary terminology, the oxymoron “liberal-democracy” actually refers to democratic regimes that in no way ignore traditional 18th-century freedom-rights, but merely reject Anglo-Saxon neo-liberal imperialism, in its so-called “progressive” economic, legal and multicultural versions. This is a fundamental ideological choice that is either decried by its opponents or asserted by its supporters, but it is not an institutional category. (Le Pourhiet, “*Démocratie illibérale: un oxymore?*” *Administration* 270, no. 2 (2021): 42–44, <https://doi.org/10.3917/admi.270.0042>)

58 Jan-Werner Müller, “The Problem with ‘Illiberal Democracy,’” *Social Europe*, January 27, 2016, <https://www.socialeurope.eu/the-problem-with-illiberal-democracy>.

the liberal tradition, which determines a certain grammar of liberalism and anti-liberalism.

Here, I believe that these divergences can be explained by comparing the genealogies of illiberalism on which they are based. Above all, the study of these genealogies reveals the existence of under-studied elements that create blind spots as to the sources of contemporary illiberal phenomena, thus helping us to understand the paradoxes of certain conceptualizations of illiberalism. For the editors of the *Routledge Handbook of Illiberalism*, the illiberal perimeter stretches from Catholic fundamentalism to critical race studies, while Hayek and Robert Nozick are described as traditional liberals.<sup>59</sup> However, as we have seen, this delimitation of illiberalism is not only contested but also reversed in other works. Thus, according to Freedom, Hayek is not a liberal, while for Wendy Brown, the illiberal phenomenon is rooted in the theories of neoliberals.<sup>60</sup> Finally, we might note that for Furedi, the nudge theory proposed by the free-marketers Cass and Sunstein is illiberal because it is in line with the interventionism of new liberalism, that is, the version of liberalism critical of capitalism.<sup>61</sup> The political and intellectual history of “liberalism” and “anti-liberalism” thus appears as a “heap of spare parts” that can be assembled according to several grammars of liberalism to forge a concept of illiberalism.<sup>62</sup>

Yet, it is possible to inform the different conceptualizations of illiberalism by comparing the delimitation of the illiberal phenomenon with its supposed intellectual and political sources. To put it another way, although the way in which one labels a phenomenon or tradition is always questionable, which can create the illusion that the concept of illiberalism is infinitely elastic, this does not result in a theoretical impasse, as it is possible to compare the genealogy of illiberalism one adopts with the intellectual and political sources of the illiberal phenomenon one has delimited.

Thus, if we look for example at Zakaria’s conceptualization of illiberalism, which today constitutes a major reference for illiberalism studies, we can see that he defines liberalism in a way that is meant to be faithful to classical liberalism, meaning that it is associated with individual freedoms, political constitutionalism, and the free market and is opposed to democracy, which is associated with the tyranny of the majority.<sup>63</sup> Illiberalism is therefore a latent drift within any democratic regime, which can only be prevented by the safeguards of constitutional liberalism. This grammar of liberalism (and illiberalism) is itself shared by Orbán and Jarosław Kaczyński,

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59 Sajó and Uitz (“A Compass for Illiberalism Research,” 979) write:

It is argued that modern liberalism, with its aspiration to be a theory (and practice) of (social) justice, tends to become programmatic and as such restricts the very freedom it would like to enhance as a capability. See, for example, the debates around [John] Rawls (1993 [*Political Liberalism*, New York: Columbia University Press]). For more traditional liberals like Hayek or Nozick social justice entails a programmatic *étatisme* restricting individual choice.

60 Wendy Brown writes:

Thus, more than a project of “economizing everything,” as I argued in *Undoing the Demos*, Hayekian neoliberalism is a moral-political project aimed at protecting traditional hierarchies by negating the social as a domain of justice and radically restricting democratic claims on states. Put another way, the attack on society and social justice in the name of market freedom and moral traditionalism is an emanation of neoliberal rationality, hardly the invention of political conservatives. (Wendy Brown, “Neoliberalism’s Scorpion Tail,” in *Mutant Neoliberalism: Market Rule and Political Rupture*, edited by William Callison and Zachary Manfredi [Bronx, NY: Fordham University Press, 2020], 36–90)

61 “In recent times, the social-engineering ambitions of new liberalism have assumed their most systematic form in the doctrine of “libertarian paternalism” (Furedi, “Illiberal Liberalism,” 29).

62 I borrow this formulation from Sebastien Caré, “La dérive des continents néolibéraux: essai de typologie dynamique,” *Revue de philosophie économique* 17, no. 1 (December 2016): 21–55, <https://doi.org/10.3917/rpec.171.0021>.

63 I am aware that the reception of Zakaria’s conceptual framework is itself contested, so this is only a quantitative assessment, based on the recurrence of citations of his work.



whose claim to illiberal democracy is based on the opposition between their electoral legitimacy and the “legal impossibilism” embodied in the constitutions inherited from the post-communist transition, which has retrospectively validated Zakaria’s narrative.<sup>64</sup>

Yet this grammar of liberalism and the interpretation of the liberal tradition on which it is based, which is widely shared, does not explain why Zakaria considers the Singaporean regime to be a liberal “dictatorship” and why this same regime is cited as a model by Orbán.<sup>65</sup> Since the Singaporean model is based on an authoritarian model that prioritizes economic growth over adherence to the separation of powers and respect for fundamental rights and freedoms, it can only be considered liberal if political liberalism is regarded as accessory (or even non-liberal, or illiberal). Consequently, if we include Orbán’s Hungary within the perimeter of illiberalism and consider that the Singaporean regime is indeed a model for Orbán’s Hungary, illiberalism seems to find one of its sources in theories favoring economic development to the detriment of political liberalism and representative democracy. Paradoxically, Zakaria’s conception of liberalism thus seems partially consistent with Orbán’s vision of illiberalism, illustrating the confusion caused by the overlapping of different grammars of liberalism.

Historically, the grammar associating liberalism and the free market—in which Hayek is one of the main intellectual references—has been used to present liberalism as opposed to democracy and the tyranny of the majority.<sup>66</sup> After the Second World War, this critique was even extended to representative democracy, with the electoral opportunism of parliamentarians being held responsible for the advent of the welfare state, which threatened property rights. Hayek and Thatcher thus regularly invoked the defense of classical liberalism and constitutionalism from the majoritarian and egalitarian excesses of representative democracy, while considering the Pinochet regime in Chile liberal. Accordingly, this grammar of liberalism, characteristic of the end of the Cold War, was used by Zakaria to conceptualize illiberalism and to draw a distinction between liberal dictatorship and illiberal democracy. However, this grammar of liberalism is based on a strategic fixation of liberal historical and political tradition that is incompatible with the inclusion of Orbán’s Fidesz, Jair Bolsonaro’s Partido Social Liberal, or Trump’s Republican Party within the perimeter of illiberalism. Indeed, as observed by several papers in monographic and comparative studies on their election to office, we are witnessing an alliance between national-conservative populism and neoliberal capitalism.<sup>67</sup>

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64 Jacques Rupnik, “The Specter Haunting Europe: Surging Illiberalism in the East,” *Journal of Democracy* 27, no. 4 (October 2016): 77.

65 Orbán in 2014:

This is why, Honorable Ladies and Gentlemen, a trending topic in thinking is understanding systems that are not Western, not liberal, not liberal democracies, maybe not even democracies, and yet making nations successful. Today, the stars of international analyses are Singapore, China, India, Turkey, Russia. And I believe that our political community rightly anticipated this challenge. (“Full text of Viktor Orbán’s speech at Băile Tuşnad [Tusnádfürdő] of 26 July 2014,” *The Budapest Beacon*, July 29, 2014, <https://budapestbeacon.com/full-text-of-viktor-orbans-speech-at-baile-tusnad-tusnadfurdo-of-26-july-2014/>)

66 For Pierre Rosanvallon (*La démocratie inachevée: histoire de la souveraineté du peuple en France* [Éditions Gallimard, 2000], 278), Zakaria’s work resurrects the opposition between democracy and liberalism dating back to the 19th century, which is not without certain anachronisms.

67 Stephan Pühringer and Walter O. Ötsch, “Neoliberalism and Right-wing Populism: Conceptual Analogies,” *Forum for Social Economics* 47, no. 2 (2018): 193–203, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07360932.2018.1451765>; Mitchell Dean, “Rogue Neoliberalism, Liturgical Power, and the Search for a Left Governmentality,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 118, no. 2 (April 2019): 325–42, <https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-7381170>; Michael A. Wilkinson, “Authoritarian Liberalism in Europe: A Common Critique of Neoliberalism and Ordoliberalism,” *Critical Sociology* 45, no. 7–8 (November 2019): 1023–34, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0896920519837325>; and Matthew Sparke, “Comparing and Connecting Territories of Illiberal Politics and Neoliberal Governance,” *Territory, Politics, Governance* 8, no. 1 (2020): 95–99, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21622671.2019.1674182>.



Signaling a process of political change, the rise of the nationalist and nativist radical right is increasingly fueling brazen attacks on the various institutions, rights and values [undergirding] constitutional liberalism across the West. Amongst others, these include attacks on checks and balances, where legislatures and judiciaries are subject to power-hungry executive branches, along with wider societal counterpowers, including independent academia and media.

...

Yet (the threat of) political illiberalization unfolds in a specific context of advanced neoliberalization, where (as of writing) economic ruptures remain mundane. What is foremost observed is the rise of political—not economic—populism across the West.<sup>68</sup>

From a genealogical perspective, this alliance is also consistent with the appropriation of Schmittian theses by neoliberal schools of thought in their advocacy of the concentration of power in the hands of the executive.<sup>69</sup> For supporters of the free market, the concentration of power in the hands of the executive is the best guarantee of the proper functioning of the market, as evidenced by the fact that constitutionalism is compatible with authoritarianism, since its primary purpose is to only safeguard the rights and freedoms necessary for a free-market economy.<sup>70</sup> According to Zakaria, liberalism is closely linked with capitalism, while illiberalism necessarily implies its questioning in favor of socialism.<sup>71</sup> However, this grammar of liberalism hides the importance of debates between “liberals” over the place of capitalism within liberalism and the concrete organization of the market economy, one of the manifestations of which is the use of the notion of crony capitalism as anathema.<sup>72</sup>

For instance, the Reagan-Thatcher model of governance is commonly associated with a form of economic ultraliberalism, as neoliberals defend the free market in their grammar of liberalism. However, this grammar is contested both by libertarians, that is, free-market advocates who reject liberalism, and by “progressive” liberals. For the latter, the conservative revolution of the 1980s led to the advent of a paradoxical and predatory interventionism based on market deregulation, privatization of public services, and support for big corporations through supply-side policies and the undermining of antitrust policies.<sup>73</sup> Consequently, far from leading to the minimalist

68 Reijer Hendrikse, “Neo-Illiberalism,” *Geoforum* 95 (October 2018): 169–72, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2018.07.002>.

69 Scheuerman, “The Unholy Alliance of Carl Schmitt and Friedrich A. Hayek”; and Bonn Juego, “Authoritarian Neoliberalism: Its Ideological Antecedents and Policy Manifestations from Carl Schmitt’s Political Economy of Governance,” *Halduskultuur* 19, no. 1 (2018): 105–36, <https://doi.org/10.32994/ac.v19i1.209>.

70 Alviar García, “Neoliberalism as a Form of Authoritarian Constitutionalism.”

71 “For all their energy Arab regimes chose bad ideas and implemented them in worse ways. Socialism produced bureaucracy and stagnation. Rather than adjusting to the failures of central planning, the economies never really moved on. Instead of moving toward democracy, the republics calcified into dictatorships” (Zakaria, *The Future of Freedom*).

72 For example, although Steve Bannon and Donald Trump have used the concept extensively to criticize his opponents, both Republican and Libertarian, the term itself has been used to describe Trumpian economic policy. See, for example, John Bellamy Foster, *Trump in the White House: Tragedy and Farce* (New York: New York University Press, 2017).

73 James K. Galbraith, *The Predator State: How Conservatives Abandoned the Free Market and Why Liberals Should Too* (Simon and Schuster, 2008); and Nell, *Free Market Conservatism*.

state advocated by libertarians, the coming to office of “neoliberal populists” led to a strengthening of the state. Indeed, the dissonance between the use of liberal grammar to defend the free market and its concrete political consequences was noted by Friedman himself, who went so far as to describe the Thatcher-Reagan governments as “socialist.”<sup>74</sup>

Finally, we have also seen the emergence of an “anti-globalist” fringe among free-market advocates, which denounces multilateral and regional free-trade agreements in favor of less “bureaucratic” bilateral agreements.<sup>75</sup> If we agree that this is the model adopted to varying degrees by Brazil, Hungary, and the United States, then it is difficult to include the anti-globalists in the illiberal perimeter without considering neoliberalism as one of its intellectual and political sources.<sup>76</sup>

How much circumspection one shows in the face of the alliance between neoliberalism and right-wing populism—and how one labels it—depends on the grammar of liberalism one employs. Describing the neoliberal nature of illiberal “governance,” for example, is fraught with terminological discomfort, due to the superimposition of the ideological concepts of liberalism, illiberalism, and neoliberalism. Indeed, it seems contradictory to define policies pursued by illiberal governments as neoliberal if neoliberalism is defined as ultraliberalism advocating the reduction of state interventionism. By contrast, for Wendy Brown and other authors conceiving neoliberalism as at odds with liberalism, the existence of a link between the free market and illiberalism seems more coherent, even logical.

I believe that the main contribution of the linguistic approach to illiberalism—and, more specifically, of the notion of a language game—is to shed light on certain typically overlooked aspects of the genealogy of political phenomena labeled as illiberal. The superimposition of different grammars of liberalism helps to dissect conceptualizations of illiberalism and the interpretations of the anti-liberal tradition upon which they are based. Paradoxically, the critical use of the concept of illiberalism (or liberalism) does not guarantee the existence of an ideological opposition with the political adversaries it designates. So, regardless of whether it was labeled liberal, ultraliberal, or populist, the conservative revolution of the 1980s was conceived as a coherent whole, even as Reagan criticized liberalism and Thatcher claimed it. With the term illiberalism now being reclaimed by political actors, it seems appropriate to maintain a certain distance from the claims of political actors—including intellectuals defending a normative approach—by questioning their affiliations with illiberalism or liberalism.

Nevertheless, maintaining this axiological distance is rendered more difficult by the performative nature of these language games, as the terms used by political actors become labels by which they can be identified. For example, transitology and the process of exporting the model of Western democracy associated with the Washington Consensus and shock therapy have been defended in the name

<sup>74</sup> “On both sides of the Atlantic, it is only a little overstated to say that we preach individualism and competitive capitalism, and practice socialism” (Milton Friedman, introduction to *The Road to Serfdom* by F. A. Hayek, Fiftieth Anniversary ed. [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994], ix–xx).

<sup>75</sup> Quinn Slobodian, “The Backlash Against Neoliberal Globalization from Above: Elite Origins of the Crisis of the New Constitutionalism,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 38, no. 6 (November 2021): 51–69, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276421999440>.

<sup>76</sup> Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes, *The Light That Failed: A Reckoning* (London: Penguin UK, 2019). I have tried to explore this thesis in my previous works, especially Raphaël Demias-Morisset, “Anglo-American Neoliberalism: An Illiberal Model?” in *The Anglo-American Model of Neoliberalism of the 1980s: Construction, Development and Dissemination*, edited by Nathalie Lévy et al. (Cham, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing, 2022), 81–96.

of liberalism. This association, which illustrates the success of the redefinition of liberalism by the currents defending the free market, was embraced even more easily because it corresponded to a classic, albeit contested, grammar of liberalism. So, we cannot ignore the fact that denouncing liberalism and claiming illiberalism can be a reaction to this process. The resulting language game implies that according to certain grammars resulting from a specific historical and geographical context, the liberalism that is “claimed” by intellectuals or political actors does not correspond to the liberal ideology described by Freedén’s morphological approach.

Conversely, this entails that certain claims of illiberalism and certain criticisms of liberalism do not imply a questioning of liberal ideology. Some claims and criticisms of liberalism are therefore mutually consistent (and politically expedient) because they mobilize the same grammar of liberalism, but this grammar is not necessarily compatible with liberal ideology. Ivan Krastev and Holmes’s diagnosis of the rise of illiberalism is a perfect illustration of the language game resulting from the performative success of the neoliberal redefinition of liberalism.<sup>77</sup> For them, liberalism is responsible for the advent of illiberalism, because the shock therapies and the conditionality mechanism imposed on Central and Eastern European states wishing to join the European Union are the result of the hegemony of liberal ideology. Their conceptualization of liberalism is therefore consistent with the “grammar” used by illiberal intellectuals and political actors, but not with liberal ideology itself. Yet this conceptualization of liberalism, shared by Zakaria, also implies blind spots with regard to the illiberal phenomenon and its parentage by neoliberalism (or free-market conservatism).

## Conclusion

In this article, I have mobilized a linguistic approach to political theory—that is, an approach concerned with the uses of concepts and not directly with their essence—in order to apprehend the conceptual puzzle affecting the characterization of illiberalism. The use of tools from the philosophy of ordinary language, such as the notion of language game, has served to give us a synoptic perspective on my object of research. Indeed, a comparison of the different approaches and conceptualizations of illiberalism reveals the existence of several grammars of liberalism backed by different interpretations of the liberal tradition.

Comparing these different grammars has enabled me to reveal the contested nature of liberal historiography and to sketch out the ideological roots of this conflict within the currents claiming to embody liberalism. These comparisons have highlighted the implications of these conflicts, namely, that certain grammars of liberalism are contradictory, or even mutually exclude each other from the liberal perimeter. In fact, certain conceptualizations of illiberalism—or anti-liberalism—both in normative political theory and in scientific literature, include in the illiberal perimeter what is considered liberal within other grammars. We can thus observe the existence of a language game in which it is possible to describe certain phenomena as liberal or illiberal, depending on the grammar of liberalism employed.

In a second stage, this article sought to deepen the implications of this observation by superimposing different grammars of liberalism, political phenomena included within an illiberal perimeter, and their genealogy. This overlapping suggests that certain conceptualizations of illiberalism are inconsistent because the delimitation of the illiberal perimeter they propose is incompatible with the grammar of

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<sup>77</sup> Krastev and Holmes, *The Light That Failed*.

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liberalism they employ. In my view, these contradictions are partially imputable to the performativity of the language games I have mentioned, that is, to their appropriation by political actors. Consequently, some of the intellectual and political sources of phenomena labeled as illiberal are necessarily paradoxical, because they are usually considered liberal.

Although necessarily open to question due to the plurality of grammars of liberalism, the genealogical study of illiberalism allows us to distance ourselves to some extent from the claims made by intellectuals, writers, and political figures claiming or denouncing illiberalism.