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# THE JOURNAL OF ILLIBERALISM STUDIES

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

RAPHAËL DEMIAS-MORISSET

## 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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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,

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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

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<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.





# The Second Birth of Christopher Lasch in France: Roots and Mechanisms of a Postmortem Success

AMAURY GIRAUD

## Abstract

*How a US intellectual, Marxist sociologist, and history professor, who died in the mid-1990s, eventually became famous in the French public debate of ideas, mainly during the 2010s—nearly 20 years after his death—via a dual form of promotion undertaken and conducted by a “tory anarchist” philosopher, Jean-Claude Michéa, who is a specialist in the works of George Orwell, Marcel Mauss, and Karl Marx. Michéa is nowadays considered the main representative essayist of an atypical “anti-modern socialism,” or “conservative socialism,” a complex ideology in which philosophical illiberalism plays a key role. This is a story of an intellectual throwback to the origins of an astonishing and unexpected rediscovery (or, more precisely, discovery, in this French case), which principally took place in the south of France and began during the end of the 20th century.*

Keywords: Christopher Lasch, Jean-Claude Michéa, conservative left, antimodern socialism, antiliberalism, intellectual populism

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*Today, it is the elites—those who control the international flow of money and information, preside over philanthropic foundations and institutions of higher learning, manage the instruments of cultural production and thus set the terms of public debate—that have lost faith in the values, or what remains of them, of the West.*

Christopher Lasch<sup>1</sup>

During the winter of 2018–2019, France’s political institutions and media landscape got scared of the Yellow Jackets Movement, a social and popular revolt against gas taxes that finally chose different and multiple faces which could show, on the one hand, rural protesters blocking the roundabouts of thousands of villages and, on the other hand, many looters and violent squads confronting policemen and sometimes destroying public infrastructure, most often in Paris. The first group of protesters, the rural one, was described by many analysts as the *France périphérique* protesters who simply wanted dignity, respect, and more economic opportunity, which the “neoliberal” economic system, whether truly or falsely incarnated by President Emmanuel Macron, was presumed by the demonstrators not able to allow. The concept of *France périphérique* was created during the early 2010s by a French urban geographer, Christophe Guilluy,<sup>2</sup> whose work is mostly inspired by that of Jean-Claude Michéa and so, as logical consequence, by George Orwell and Christopher Lasch (1932–1994) also (two of the Michéa’s main sources of inspiration).

A lot of public commentators, during the climax of the Yellow Jackets crisis, drew a parallel between the reasons for this French social anger and a book published posthumously in 1995 by Christopher Lasch: *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy*. This essay, which many French journalists took as a point of reference during the events of 2018–2019, evokes a “Middle America”<sup>3</sup> described as disregarded and disdained by the both sides, by the East Coast and West Coast, of a rich, bourgeois, and pro-multiculturalist America who is supposed, according to Lasch, to have more links and ties with all the international upper classes of the rest of the world than with the working class of its own country: “The new elites are at home only in transit, en route to a high-level conference, to the grand opening of a new franchise, to an international film festival, or to an undiscovered resort. Theirs is essentially a tourist’s view of the world—not a perspective likely to encourage a passionate devotion to democracy.”<sup>4</sup>

In the newspaper *Les Echos*, for example, *The Revolt of the Elites* was cited, on November 19, 2018, at the very beginning of the Yellow Jackets Movement, as a “premonitory book.”<sup>5</sup> In March of 2019, *La revue des deux mondes* stated that the diagnostic conceptualized by Lasch in his final essay of 1995—the theory of a new separation between the lower and upper classes in the United States (axiological values, ways of life, vernacular citizenship versus global citizenship, etc.) was also

1 Christopher Lasch, *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1995), p. 25–26.

2 For representative works, see Christophe Guilluy, *Fractures françaises* (Paris: Éditions Flammarion, 2010); Christophe Guilluy, *La France périphérique—Comment on a sacrifié les classes populaires* (Paris: Éditions Flammarion, 2014).

3 “The new elites are in revolt against ‘Middle America,’ as they imagine it: a nation technologically backward, politically reactionary, repressive in its sexual morality, middlebrow in its tastes, smug and complacent, dull and dowdy. Those who covet membership in the new aristocracy of brains tend to congregate on the coasts, turning their back on the heartland and cultivating ties with the international market in fast-moving money, glamour, fashion, and popular culture. It is a question whether they think of themselves as Americans at all. Patriotism, certainly, does not rank very highly in their hierarchy of virtues.” Christopher Lasch, *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1995), p. 5–6.

4 Lasch, *Revolt of the Elites*, p. 6.

5 Jean-Luc Baslé, “Gilets jaunes: La trahison des élites,” *Les Echos*, November 19, 2018, <https://www.lesechos.fr/idees-debats/cercle/gilets-jaunes-la-trahison-des-elites-148529>.

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a valid concept for the French social issues of the 2010s.<sup>6</sup> Later, during the month of August 2019, *Le Figaro* would consider *The Revolt of the Elites* as one of “the greatest essays of the 20th century.”<sup>7</sup> Moreover, in September 2018, a few weeks before the first national demonstration by the Yellow Jackets, the French lawyer Renaud Beauchard published an essay on the “virtuous populism”<sup>8</sup> of Christopher Lasch. More recently, the journalist Laurent Ottavi has written a biographical piece about Christopher Lasch and the question of progress.<sup>9</sup>

How can one correctly and rationally explain the fact that, since the start of the 2010s, an American essayist and sociologist like Christopher Lasch—who died in 1994—has become as notorious as he is nowadays in the French intellectual debate? Why has the theorist of “the revolt of the elites,” who was principally analyzing the American society as a focused topic during all his professional life, be seen today with his work recycled and re-employed by a lot of French philosophers, sociologists, thinkers, and journalists? To fully understand this mysterious and surprising phenomenon of the late discovery of Lasch’s work in France, it is partly towards Jean-Claude Michéa that our gaze must be turned.

### **From Rochester, New York to Montpellier, France: The Importation of an American Critical Theory of Progress and Its Ideology**

The thought of Christopher Lasch has been well known, for years and decades, in US intellectual circles. His deconstruction of what he considered the deleterious effects of modernity, liberalism, and capitalism on, for example, family structures;<sup>10</sup> the increase of the individualistic feeling;<sup>11</sup> or the new social division between upper and lower classes,<sup>12</sup> took place within the American public intellectual conversation during his lifetime and was discussed during, predominantly, the 1970s and 1980s.

In France, the first translation of a Christopher Lasch book appeared in 1981 (that year, the French publishing house Robert Laffont<sup>13</sup> published *The Culture of Narcissism* at the behest of the Eurocritic “sovereignist” demographer and anthropologist Emmanuel Todd;<sup>14</sup> the French title chosen for this publication was *Le complexe de Narcisse*). This release had, at this time, some influence on a restricted group of French intellectuals, especially on the sociologist and philosopher Marcel

6 Valérie Toranian, “Peuple contre élites: Comment ‘refaire société?’” *La revue des deux mondes*, March 21, 2019, <https://www.revuedesdeuxmondes.fr/article-revue/peuple-contre-elites-comment-refaire-societe/>.

7 Alexandre Devechio, “Les grands essais du XXe siècle: *La révolte des élites* de Christopher Lasch,” *Le Figaro*, August 23, 2019, <https://www.lefigaro.fr/vox/societe/les-grands-essais-du-xxe-siecle-la-revolte-des-elites-de-christopher-lasch-20190823>.

8 Renaud Beauchard, *Christopher Lasch: Un populisme vertueux* (Paris, Éditions Michalon, 2018).

9 Laurent Ottavi, *Christopher Lasch face au progrès* (Paris: Éditions de l’Escargot, 2022).

10 Christopher Lasch, *Heaven in a Heartless World: The Family Besieged* (New York: Basic Books, 1977).

11 Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1979).

12 “The privileged classes in Los Angeles feel more kinship with their counterparts in Japan, Singapore, and Korea than with their own countrymen,” Lasch, *Revolt of the Elites*, p. 46.

13 Christopher Lasch, *Le complexe de Narcisse* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1981).

14 Emmanuel Todd (born 1951) is, in France, considered a “prophetic” anthropologist who correctly anticipated the collapse of the Soviet Union in his famed 1976 essay, *La chute finale: Essai sur la décomposition de la sphère soviétique*. In 2002, he published a new piece on the hypothetical future slump of the American empire, entitled *Après l’empire: Essai sur la décomposition du système américain*. In recent years, he has focused his observations on the contemporary world with a highly critical point of view on Western liberal values. In 2024, he published a new essay about Vladimir Putin’s war in Ukraine, titled *La défaite de l’Occident* (The Defeat of the West) after having published, in 2022 and exclusively in Japan, *La troisième guerre mondiale a commencé* (World War III Has Begun), which has become a huge success in the Japanese Archipelago, with more than 100,000 copies sold.

Gauchet,<sup>15</sup> who has stated that, “When *The Culture of Narcissism* was published, I thought that it pointed out something that was obvious.”<sup>16</sup> Despite this first translation and its effects on a limited academic environment, the effective contacts between Christopher Lasch and French intellectual fields would remain modest during the 1980s. Nevertheless, it must be pointed out that, in 1986, an English television program on Channel 4 organized a debate between Christopher Lasch and the Greco-French philosopher and psychoanalyst Cornelius Castoriadis<sup>17</sup> (in 2012, a French translation of this televised verbal exchange, called *La culture de l'égoïsme*, was published).

If the connections between Christopher Lasch and the French reflective spheres during his lifetime were light and scanty, the American academic historian nevertheless had an extensive knowledge about past and present French thinkers and philosophers (thus, in *The True and Only Heaven*,<sup>18</sup> published in 1991, he analyses and quotes Georges Sorel, Guy Debord, or Régis Debray, for example). The French publication of *The Culture of Narcissism* in 1981 can be seen as the commencement of a leisurely impregnation of Lasch's thought into the “Hexagon.” But the real start of an effective circulation of “Laschism” in the debate of French political and philosophical ideas would not find its genesis in Paris but in the South of France, namely in Montpellier and in Castelnau-le-Lez (a small village located in the immediate suburbs of Montpellier).

In 1988, Alain Martin (born 1941) created in his own villa of Castelnau-le-Lez, with his wife Françoise, a small publishing company called Climats. Before its establishment at the end of the 1980s, Alain Martin was a salesman for the far-left publishing house Champ Libre, which was founded by the film producer Gérard Lebovici<sup>19</sup> (1932–1984) with the unavoidable help of Guy Debord (1931–1994). Champ Libre, under the supervision of Debord, published a lot of anti-totalitarian essays. In 1971, Debord and Lebovici released *Les habits neufs du président Mao* (The Chairman's New Clothes), written by the Belgian Sinologist Simon Leys,<sup>20</sup> a relentless incrimination of Maoism and its Cultural Revolution begun in 1966. As with Castoriadis and Lefort's Socialism or Barbarism before, the anti-totalitarianism of Champ Libre was specifically a Marxist criticism of totalitarianism. Also, Champ Libre published during the 1980s, and for the first time in France, some of the 1930s essays of George Orwell (*Homage to Catalonia* in 1981, and *The Road to Wigan Pier* in 1982).

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<sup>15</sup> Marcel Gauchet (born 1946) is a complex thinker. All his work on the origins of democracy demonstrates that individualism, capitalism, and liberalism have been undoubtedly essential to the historical construction process of democracy, but he does not abstain from criticism of its modern negative aspects, from his point of view. Therefore, he tries to argue that state limitations to capitalism could permit to « civilize capitalism » and so to circumscribe those modern negative effects.

<sup>16</sup> Interview conducted by the author with Marcel Gauchet, Gallimard headquarters, Paris, October 14, 2020.

<sup>17</sup> Cornelius Castoriadis (1922–1997) was, along with the sociologist Claude Lefort (1924–2010), cofounder in 1949 of the French intellectual organization known as Socialism or Barbarism, which had the political peculiarity to be, at the same time, an anti-totalitarian group opposed to Stalinism and Maoism, and a Marxist anti-capitalist movement (for example, Lefort was one of the rare far-left intellectuals who supported the Soviet dissident Viktor Kravchenko in France when the latter was accused by the Communist newspaper *Les lettres françaises*, in 1947, of being a US disinformation agent for having published his book *I Chose Freedom*, written in 1946, about Soviet totalitarianism and the gulag system). Furthermore, Socialism or Barbarism inspired Guy Debord (1931–1994) to create his Situationist International. In 1975, in his essay *L'institution imaginaire de la société*, Castoriadis would partly give up Marxism and, at the end of his life, the philosopher would show a kind of anti-modern yet still anti-capitalist conservatism, especially in his 1996 book, *La montée de l'insignifiance*, (The Rise of Insignificance).

<sup>18</sup> Christopher Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1991).

<sup>19</sup> In 1984, Lebovici was murdered in Paris. The reasons of his murder have never been resolved and remain mysterious even 40 years after the crime.

<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, Simon Leys (1935–2014) was also a specialist in the works of George Orwell and wrote, in 1984 (supreme irony), *Orwell ou l'horreur de la politique* (Paris: Éditions Hermann, 1984).

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The readings of Guy Debord and his *Society of Spectacle*<sup>21</sup> on the one hand, and of the George Orwell's essays on the other (but also the perusal of a lot of other Champ Libre books) would produce a huge and decisive influence on a high school philosophy teacher from Montpellier: Jean-Claude Michéa (born 1950). The latter met Alain Martin in the southern city at the end of the 1970s. Alain Martin and Jean-Claude Michéa have both been members of the French Communist Party (PCF) and they share, according to Michéa, the common experience of having "left the Party through Debord"<sup>22</sup> (namely though an anti-totalitarian Marxism and not by renouncing opposition to capitalism as many ex-far-left thinkers of May 1968 did in France through the 1970s and 1980s, such as André Glucksmann or Romain Goupil, for example). Michéa describes himself as a kind of traditional Communist: "I was born and raised in a communist family (communist parents, communist grandparents), consequently I am a revolutionary ... because of my family tradition and not because of an oedipal revolt against the father or the mother. So, it could explain the tenderness I feel to some forms of conservative thought while remaining, however, a radical."<sup>23</sup>

To sum up his political and philosophical ideas, Michéa uses the George Orwell concept of "Tory anarchism" (he also uses the notion of "common decency" defined in *The Road to Wigan Pier* in 1937 as an ordinary and instinctive morality that Orwell thinks the masses are spontaneously endowed with). During the 1980s and after having read all the translated essays of George Orwell published by Champ Libre, Jean-Claude Michéa wrote his first article about Orwell and the question of Esperanto but, despite the active support of Jorge Semprùn,<sup>24</sup> this article failed to find any important journal that wanted to publish it. At the beginning of the 1990s, Alain Martin suggested to Jean-Claude Michéa that he write an essay on the basis of his old unpublished article. This essay, released in 1995, would be the philosophy professor's first book: *Orwell, anarchiste Tory*.<sup>25</sup>

Progressively, at Climats, the old friendship between Martin and Michéa turned into a prolific collaboration. In a way, Jean-Claude Michéa would play at Alain Martin's Climats the same role as Guy Debord played at Gérard Lebovici's Champ Libre. A new collection, named "Sisyphé," would even be directed by Michéa himself. Only one year after the American publication of *The Revolt of the Elites* (1995), the philosophy professor of Montpellier decided to publish a translation of what he considered the "testament-book"<sup>26</sup> of Christopher Lasch (*La révolte des élites* was the first essay published in the Sisyphé collection at Climats). Following this inaugural publication, all the other essays of Christopher Lasch would be translated and published by Climats at Castelnau-le-Lez (*The Culture of Narcissism*<sup>27</sup> in 2000, *Mass Culture Reconsidered*<sup>28</sup> in 2001, *The True and Only Heaven*<sup>29</sup> in 2002, etc.). Every single Lasch book published by Climats would likewise have a special preface

21 Guy Debord, *La société du spectacle* (Paris: Buchet-Chastel, 1967); second edition, under Champ Libre: 1971.

22 Jean-Claude Michéa interview by Guillaume Erner, France Culture Radio, January 9, 2019.

23 Jean-Claude Michéa interview by Jean Cornil for "La cause du peuple," YouTube, January 28, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5r-tLzIGPW0>.

24 Jorge Semprùn (1923–2011) was a socialist and anti-fascist Spanish writer who fought Franco's regime during a long exile in France. Moreover, Semprùn was the brother-in-law of Alain Martin himself. He is also the father of Jaime Semprun (1947–2010), an ex-situationist intellectual who created, during the 1980s, *L'encyclopédie des nuisances*, a publishing company specializing in George Orwell's political philosophy, in criticisms of technology (Günther Anders, René Riesel, etc.), in anti-capitalist environmentalism, and in a kind of anti-modern fight against liberalism.

25 Jean-Claude Michéa, *Orwell, anarchiste Tory* (Castelnau-le-Lez: Éditions Climats, 1995).

26 Jean-Claude Michéa, "Lasch, mode d'emploi", preface to Christopher Lasch, *La révolte des élites et la trahison de la démocratie*, (Castelnau-le-Lez: Éditions Climats, 1996).

27 Christopher Lasch, *La culture du narcissisme – La vie américaine à un âge de déclin des espérances*, (Castelnau-le-Lez: Éditions Climats, 2000).

28 Christopher Lasch, *Culture de masse ou culture populaire ?*, (Castelnau-le-Lez: Éditions Climats, 2001).

29 Christopher Lasch, *Le seul et vrai paradis – Une histoire de l'idéologie du progrès et de ses critiques*, (Castelnau-le-Lez: Éditions Climats, 2002).

written by Michéa. Furthermore, not only did the philosophy teacher of Montpellier spread Lasch's thought by dint of the editing company of Alain Martin located in Castelnau-le-Lez, but also he re-employed "Laschism" for his own reflective work.

Thereby, in the 14 essays that the anti-liberal philosopher wrote from 1995 onward—whether it be *The Complex of Orpheus*<sup>30</sup> (2011), *The Mysteries of the Left*<sup>31</sup> (2013), or *Our Enemy the Capital*<sup>32</sup> (2017)—Lasch was always quoted and mentioned regularly by Michéa. The director of the Sisyphé collection at Climats actively promoted Laschism by resorting to, on the one hand, the publication of all Lasch's books in French and, on the other hand, by promoting Lasch's critical points of view on modernism, liberalism, and capitalism all throughout his essays written (this is why it is possible to describe this intense promotion conducted by the philosophy teacher of Montpellier as a "dual form of promotion" developed and expanded in France).

### **Christopher Lasch and the Possibility of a Democratic Populism: A Finally Successful Theoretical Importation in France**

According to Michéa, Christopher Lasch must be seen as continuing a not-very-well-known, atypical socialist and Marxist tradition: that of the anti-modern and anti-progressive criticism of capitalism. In this perspective, the American sociologist serves Michéa's purposes by questioning modern liberal and progressive values, designated as non-moral values because ethics would be, in a capitalist society, a break with and a barrier to eternal economic growth<sup>33</sup> (Michéa also reuses the originally epistemological concept of Max Weber—that of "axiological neutrality"—to describe what he considers, in all modern Western societies, to be a total loss of morality and decency generated by modern liberal capitalism, whose model is seen by him as built on the morally neutral logics of law and market only).

In his 1991 work, *The True and Only Heaven*, Christopher Lasch examines firstly the "ideology of progress" and inventories all the critics who have been addressed to this "ideology." Afterward, he would go on to propose, in *The Revolt of the Elites* (1995), a rehabilitation of the concept of populism:<sup>34</sup> "Populism, as I understand it, is unambiguously committed to the principle of respect. ... Populism is the authentic voice of democracy. ... Populism is 'judgmental,' to invoke a current adjective the pejorative use of which shows the capacity for discriminating judgment has been weakened by the moral climate of humanitarian 'concern.'"<sup>35</sup>

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30 Jean-Claude Michéa, *Le complexe d'Orphée – La gauche, les gens ordinaires et la religion du progrès*, (Paris: Éditions Flammarion Climats, 2011).

31 Jean-Claude Michéa, *Les mystères de la gauche – De l'idéal des Lumières au triomphe du capitalisme absolu*, (Paris: Éditions Flammarion Climats, 2013).

32 Jean-Claude Michéa, *Notre ennemi le capital – Notes sur la fin des jours tranquilles*, (Paris: Éditions Flammarion Climats, 2017).

33 Moreover, Michéa regularly mentions the essay of the Communist Polish-British sociologist Zygmunt Bauman (1925–2017), *Does Ethics Have a Chance in a World of Consumers?* (2008). Climats finally translated and published this book in 2009.

34 "Populism," despite the actual and contemporary utilization of the word—notably in the Western media landscape where this word is often used, especially in Europe, as a synonym for far-right, reactionary demagoguery or neo-fascism (for example: Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, Giorgia Meloni and Matteo Salvini in Italy, Marine Le Pen in France, etc., despite the existence of populists on the left as well)—actually has a unique and relatively unknown history. Indeed, at the end of the 19th century, in both the United States of America and tsarist Russia, "populist" political organizations officially appeared (the People's Party in America, whose leaders wanted to "restore the government of the republic to the hands of plain people," and the Narodniki in the Russian Empire, who fought for popular socialism, were very much opposed to Lenin, and wished to apply the goal of Karl Marx expressed in the preface to *Das Kapital* in 1867: namely to "reveal the economic law of motion of modern society"—a sentence that Lenin rejected as "problematic" in his fierce essay of 1894 against the Narodniki called *What the "Friends of the People" Are*). Thereby, in Christopher Lasch and Jean-Claude Michéa's minds, it is the original meaning of "populism" that must be defended as a democratic tool for instigating public policies made by and for the people, particularly for the lower and proletarian classes.

35 Lasch, *Revolt of the Elites*, p. 106.



## *The Second Birth of Christopher Lasch in France*

For Lasch, the word “populism” does not refer to what we currently know nowadays with the contemporary versions of nationalism and identity politics all over the world (Donald J. Trump, Narendra Modi, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, etc.) but to a conservative, anti-progressive and anti-modern historical populism born during the 19th century among, especially, the Western working classes: “The conventional identification of democracy with progress makes it hard to see that democratic movements in the nineteenth century took shape in opposition to innovation. The new breed of capitalists were the real progressives: working-class radicals, on the other hand, struggled to preserve a way of life that was under attack.”<sup>36</sup> Also, according to Lasch, a part of the socialist and populist 19th century can be seen as a kind of a blend of activism and conservatism<sup>37</sup> (for example, at the beginning of the 1810s in United Kingdom, the Luddite Rebellion was a workers’ revolt against economic change and the loss of jobs caused by machinery and the adoption of new technologies).<sup>38</sup>

It is precisely this unusual rendition of socialism, Marxism, and populism as, possibly, anti-modern and anti-progressive ones—an interpretation which constitutes a crucial part of Lasch’s work on the “ideology of progress”<sup>39</sup>—that Michéa would reuse and, then, even associate in his own essays with George Orwell’s ideas (“common decency,” “tory anarchism,” instinctive and popular socialism of “the ordinary decent men,” etc.). In the preface that the philosophy teacher of Montpellier writes for the publication of the French translation of *The Revolt of the Elites* published by Climats in 1996 (a preface entitled “Lasch, a Handbook”), it is about the moral and democratic populism of Christopher Lasch that Jean-Claude Michéa would insist on:

In this testament-book, Christopher Lasch insisted on placing his critique of the new elites of advanced capitalism under the label ‘populism,’ namely in accordance with the historical meaning of the word, a radical battle for freedom and equality fought in the name of public virtues. We know how much, for several years now, official media methodically works on erasing this original meaning, only to denounce as “fascist” or “moralizing” (in our time, the highest thought crime) all the plain people’s efforts to maintain a minimal democratic civility and to stand up to the growing empire of the “experts” over their way of life.<sup>40</sup>

If the first French edition, released in 1981, of *The Culture of Narcissism* was able to produce a few inspirational effects, albeit only on a narrow group of mostly Parisian intellectuals, the “dual form of promotion” initiated and led by Jean-Claude Michéa at Climats since the mid-1990s would hugely and massively develop and expand “Laschism” all over France and would ultimately make the hitherto relatively unknown, anti-modern, and anti-progressive critics of capitalism of the late American sociologist renowned in France. Thenceforth, the name of Christopher Lasch would be sustainably associated, in the French public debate, with the name of

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36 Christopher Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1991), p. 213.

37 “Students of working-class movements have called attention again and again to their curious mixture of militancy and conservatism,” Christopher Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1991), p. 213.

38 Guy Debord, an important source of inspiration for both Christopher Lasch and Jean-Claude Michéa, writes in *The Society of Spectacle* (1967) that the modern logics of capitalism suppose and implicate “a permanent victory of innovation” over “tradition.”

39 Jean-Claude Michéa, him, prefers to define this “ideology” as a true “religion of progress”, paraphrasing thus the title of an ironic book published in 1887 by the proper son-in-law of Karl Marx, the French socialist Paul Lafargue (1842–1911): *La religion du capital*. In 2018, Jean-Claude Michéa would have this sarcastic essay by Paul Lafargue republished by Climats.

40 Jean-Claude Michéa, “Lasch, mode d’emploi,” preface to Christopher Lasch, *La révolte des élites et la trahison de la démocratie*, (Castelnaud-le-Lez: Éditions Climats, 1996), p. 10.

Jean-Claude Michéa, who has been, since then, perceived as the leading introducer<sup>41</sup> of Lasch's thought into the Hexagon.

In 2005, a major and decisive event concerning Climats occurred: one of the biggest French publishing houses, Flammarion, acquired the entire catalog of the small enterprise from Castelnau-le-Lez, which allowed Alain Martin and his wife to finally retire. From that moment on, Climats was no longer a little artisanal publisher of the Montpellier area but instead formally became a wholly-owned subsidiary of Flammarion publishing.<sup>42</sup> In this way, all the books already published since 1988 by Climats are now likely to reap a national success (even if, by dint of the writing and editing toil of Jean-Claude Michéa, the tiny publishing house had become, since the beginning of the 2000s, a reputable institution in humanities and social sciences). Having been turned into an imprint of Flammarion, Climats continues nonetheless not only to publish Jean-Claude Michéa's own essays but also to welcome the editorial advice and choices of the anti-liberal philosophy teacher of Montpellier (thus, as of today, a total of seven Christopher Lasch books<sup>43</sup> have been published by Climats/Flammarion since 1996). With the sale of the company in 2005, a vast amplification phenomenon produced undoubtedly massive effects on the notability of both Jean-Claude Michéa and Christopher Lasch (in such a way that, at the start of the 2010s, a lot of French journalistic articles<sup>44</sup> refer to Lasch's work as a must-read).

At the beginning of the 2010s, the growing fame of Michéa himself heavily influenced the promotion of Lasch's concepts in France. A young generation of journalists, raised on the theories of Michéa (and on Lasch's and Orwell's as well), created an online media outlet called Ragemag from 2012 to 2014. Their moto was: "There is in me a blend of an anarchist and of a conservative but in proportions that remain to be determined."<sup>45</sup> Moreover, Ragemag assumed at the time a clear political and philosophical ideology: "The thought of Jean-Claude Michéa, and also the thoughts of his favorite authors, George Orwell and Christopher Lasch, constitute the intellectual fundament of our magazine."<sup>46</sup> Ten years after the disappearance of the website, some of the former journalists of Ragemag are nowadays working at some of the most important French media outlets, such as the weekly news magazine *Marianne*, for example. On the intellectual side, the theories of the Michéa-Lasch duo managed to influence, already in the early 2010s, a lot of French sociologists, philosophers, and thinkers.

In 2011, in reaction to the diffusion of an analysis article from the Terra Nova think tank (an organization close to the Socialist Party of France [PS]), which advised the French left to understand that the lower classes had by then switched to the side of the far right Front National (FN), and so to politically play on "the France of

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41 In an article published by the newspaper *Marianne* in 2001, the essayist Philippe Muray (1945–2006) would describe Jean-Claude Michéa as a "magnificent propagator of Lasch's work." See Philippe Muray, "Christopher Lasch ou le parti de la vie," *Marianne*, 2001, as transcribed in Philippe Muray, *Exorcismes spirituels III in Essais* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2010), p. 1261.

42 To clearly understand the importance of Flammarion, Michel Houellebecq—the most famous current French novelist—is a Flammarion-affiliated writer.

43 Frédéric Joly (born 1973), the translator of *The True and Only Heaven* back in 2002, would for a long time run the Climats collection at Flammarion. He would also gradually address some criticisms to Jean-Claude Michéa, accusing the latter of a slow intellectual "sclerosis" and "stiffening" (see "Frédéric Joly: 'Jean-Claude Michéa, une pensée qui se sclérose,'" *Le Monde*, January 10, 2017, [https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2017/01/10/frédéric-joly-jean-claude-michea-une-pensee-qui-se-sclérose\\_5060369\\_3232.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2017/01/10/frédéric-joly-jean-claude-michea-une-pensee-qui-se-sclérose_5060369_3232.html)).

44 If, during the 2000s, most of the articles mentioned Christopher Lasch mainly in direct connection with his French introducer Jean-Claude Michéa, since the early 2010s references to the American anti-modern historian have been much more numerous. For example, from 2006 to 2010, only about 10 or so articles of *Le Figaro* mentioned Lasch while, between 2011 and 2021, there were approximately 100.

45 This quotation is, most often, attributed to the minister of war of the French Third Republic, Georges Clemenceau (1841–1929), though it is believed to be apocryphal.

46 Ragemag (website), December 10, 2012, Ragemag archives (2012–2014), available on Internet Archive Wayback Machine, <https://web.archive.org>.

tomorrow” composed of graduates, youth, women, and minorities,<sup>47</sup> the political scientist Laurent Bouvet (1968–2021) and the urban geographer Christophe Guilluy (born 1964) founded an activist network called La Gauche Populaire (The Populist Left).

In the essays of both Laurent Bouvet<sup>48</sup> and Christophe Guilluy written during the 2010s, their references to concepts developed by Christopher Lasch, and later made famous by Jean-Claude Michéa in France, were notably manifold. In the case of Guilluy, the urban geographer can even be considered as a true “Michéist” intellectual who continually relies not only on the thought of Jean-Claude Michéa for his own publications but also the conceptual contributions of Christopher Lasch and George Orwell, which he discovered through the books of the philosophy teacher of Montpellier. If La Gauche Populaire of Bouvet and Guilluy disappeared in 2013, and Ragemag followed suit in 2014, during the 2012–2013 period the two dynamics were notoriously convergent (a lot of references to The Populist Left were made on Ragemag, and Laurent Bouvet ostensibly supported the web magazine at that time).<sup>49</sup>

In the wake of the collapse of Ragemag, the second half of the 2010s would see a lot of journals being created by young journalists directly inspired by Jean-Claude Michéa, and so obviously by Christopher Lasch as well, which would take a critical position regarding consumerism but in an anti-modern and anti-progressive way (*Le Comptoir*, *Limite*, *Philitt*, etc.). These journals can have different political sensitivities (*Le comptoir* is in favor of “degrowth” and fights for “a society without classes, founded on the traditional values of gift and mutual aid,”<sup>50</sup> while *Limite* speaks out for a Christian conservative approach to ecology, etc.), but all are deeply inspired by Jean-Claude Michéa and Christopher Lasch.<sup>51</sup>

Some of the 2010s novice journalists of Ragemag, *Le Comptoir*, *Limite*, or *Philitt* are nowadays, a decade after the launch of these limited-audience journals, working in much bigger newsrooms like those of *Marianne*<sup>52</sup> or *Le Figaro*.<sup>53</sup> When she became the director of *Marianne* in 2018, the journalist and essayist Natacha Polony (born 1975, who describes herself as a “left-wing reactionary,”<sup>54</sup> was involved in the “sovereigntist” presidential campaign of Jean-Pierre Chevènement in 2002, and who claims to be profoundly inspired by Jean-Claude Michéa) would go on to hire a lot of the former journalists of Ragemag, *Le Comptoir*, *Limite*, and *Philitt*. If the diffusion and the expansion dynamic of Lasch’s thought in France really began to take root in the Montpellier area from the mid-1990s via the intense “dual form of promotion”

47 Olivier Ferrand, Romain Prudent, and Bruno Jeanbart, “Gauche: quelle majorité électorale pour 2012?” *Terra Nova*, May 10, 2011, <https://tnova.fr/democratie/politique-institutions/gauche-quelle-majorite-electorale-pour-2012/>.

48 For representative works, see Laurent Bouvet, *Le sens du peuple—La gauche, la démocratie, le populisme* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard [Le Débat], 2012); Laurent Bouvet, *L’insécurité culturelle* (Paris: Éditions Fayard, 2015).

49 Laurent Bouvet, “Talking about Ragemag, it is not advertising, it is serving the public interest,” Twitter, July 30, 2012, [defunct account].

50 Le Comptoir, “Le Comptoir, socialistes et révolutionnaires,” *Le Comptoir*, November 15, 2017, <https://comptoir.org/2017/11/15/le-comptoir-socialistes-et-revolutionnaires/>.

51 Among their other inspirations, we can find a lot of authors to whom Jean-Claude Michéa regularly refers, such as Simone Weil (1909–1943), George Orwell (1903–1950), Pier Paolo Pasolini (1922–1975), etc.

52 Ludvine Bénard (Ragemag, *Le Comptoir*), Kévin Boucaud-Victoire (Ragemag, *Le Comptoir*, *Limite*) and Matthieu Giroux (*Philitt*) all now work for *Marianne*.

53 Eugénie Bastié (*Limite*) writes for the *FigaroVox* (the part of the French newspaper dedicated to philosophical and political ideas). In the *FigaroVox*, likewise, the young journalist Alexandre Devecchio names Michéa as one of his “masters,” and speaks of a true “Michéa generation” in France. See Alexandre Devecchio, *Les nouveaux enfants du siècle* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 2016). He describes Lasch’s *Revolt of the Elites* as a “posthumous masterpiece that seems to have been written the day before yesterday” (Alexandre Devecchio, commenting on his article “Les grands essais du XXe siècle: *La révolte des élites* de Christopher Lasch,” *Le Figaro*, August 23, 2019), <https://twitter.com/AlexDevecchio/status/1164870150845358081>.

54 “Être une gauche libérée, c’est pas si facile ....” *Causeur*, no. 33, March 2016, <https://www.causeur.fr/gauche-republique-laicite-37298>.

Amaury Giraud

initiated by Michéa, then since the end of the 2010s, the circulation of Lasch's critical ideas about modernism, capitalism, and liberalism has been actively pursued by this new generation of journalists working for *Marianne* or *Le Figaro*.<sup>55</sup>

By joining these much larger newsrooms since the end of the 2010s, this new generation of journalists is henceforth perfectly situated to promote "Laschism" in France through the mass media this new generation belongs to now. This partly explains why, during the events of the Yellow Jackets Movement of the winter of 2018–2019, a large number of parallels were drawn in many Hexagonal media outlets between this French social revolt and the analysis proposed in *The Revolt of the Elites* more than 20 years before.

In May 2018, just a few months before the Yellow Jackets outbreak, the sociologist and philosopher Marcel Gauchet was interviewed about Lasch's theory: "The Lasch thesis is very interesting, even though he did not anticipate the revolt of the people following the revolt of the elites! There is a great truth in his thesis, which embraces the truth of globalization. The elites are more on the global side, while the peoples are more on the local and the national side. In a general manner, the fundamental problem of our societies is the link between the global sphere and the national communities. ... Our first task is to highlight this contradiction, in order to define an acceptable compromise between an open society and protectionism."<sup>56</sup>

## Conclusion

*When money talks, everybody else is condemned to listen. For that reason, a democratic society cannot allow unlimited accumulation. Social and civic equality presuppose at least a rough approximation of economic equality.*

Christopher Lasch<sup>57</sup>

Largely unknown in France when he died in 1994, in spite of the French translation and publication of *The Culture of Narcissism* in 1981, Christopher Lasch became posthumously renowned and famed during the 2000s and, chiefly, the 2010s. Due to the highly keen "dual form of promotion," which started at the end of the 20th century and was carried on by a high school philosophy teacher from Montpellier, Jean-Claude Michéa, through the small Castelnau-le-Lez publishing house Climats, this unexpected, and atypical celebrity—later followed by a new generation of journalists at the end of the 2010s—makes of Christopher Lasch one of the most famed American intellectuals in France today (albeit with an unusual time lag).

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55 Paradoxically, *Le Figaro*, which in France is considered the leading right-wing conservative print media outlet, seems to be the French newspaper which is nowadays the most favorable to the still anti-capitalist Marxist and populist philosophies of both Michéa and Lasch.

56 Hocine Rahli, "La démocratie qui vient: Entretien avec Marcel Gauchet," *Nonfiction*, May 28, 2018, <https://www.nonfiction.fr/article-9410-la-democratie-qui-vient-entretien-avec-marcel-gauchet.htm>.

57 Lasch, *Revolt of the Elites*, p. 22.

## *The Second Birth of Christopher Lasch in France*

Whether it be, for example, Natacha Polony,<sup>58</sup> Christophe Guilluy,<sup>59</sup> or Marcel Gauchet,<sup>60</sup> a conservative fringe of the French intellectual left now likes to refer profusely to the theories of the late history professor at the University of Rochester. But this belated intellectual stardom of the American Marxist historian and sociologist seems to have even exceeded the strict perimeters of the French reflective left.

Indeed, and very surprisingly, even a far-right leader and former journalist such as Éric Zemmour<sup>61</sup> also refers nowadays to the anti-modern criticism of Christopher Lasch—though always by conveniently omitting Lasch’s fundamental anti-capitalist orientation (in the same way as liberal right-wing leaders and anti-Communist figures have, for a long time and especially during the Cold War, omitted the passionate socialism and anti-capitalism of George Orwell in order to only focus on the anti-totalitarian part of the British writer’s masterpieces). Perhaps the critical comment of the American historian Russell Jacoby (born 1945, and whose PhD dissertation was also partly supervised by Christopher Lasch himself) could be applied here, in which he describes right-wing and extreme right-wing leaders in favor of economic liberalism (and always presenting themselves to their electorate as truly and surely “conservative”) as the kind of incoherent politicians who paradoxically “worship the market while cursing the culture it engenders.”<sup>62</sup>

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58 Natacha Polony, “La sécession des élites et la colère des peuples,” *Le Figaro*, April 5, 2013, <https://www.lefigaro.fr/mon-figaro/2013/04/05/10001-20130405ARTFIG00557-la-secession-des-elites-et-la-colere-des-peuples.php>.

59 “‘There’s no such thing as society’ ... In October 1987 Margaret Thatcher spoke these words. ... This prophetic vision announced indeed the great secession, that of the upper world, which, by abandoning the common good, was going to plunge Western countries into the chaos of relative society. ... In 1994, the historian Christopher Lasch was already talking about the secession of the elites,” Christophe Guilluy, *No society—La fin de la classe moyenne occidentale* (Paris: Éditions Flammarion, 2018), p. 9-10.

60 “The idea formulated by Lasch that ‘populism is the authentic voice of democracy’ seems obvious to me. Populism is simply a response to the anti-majoritarian nature of the conduct of Western governments for forty years, it is a response to all the crucial questions posed by globalization. Populism is the child of globalization,” interview conducted by the author with Marcel Gauchet, Gallimard Headquarters, Paris, October 14, 2020.

61 “Éric Zemmour: ‘Narcisse si laid en son miroir,’” *Le Figaro*, May 9, 2018, <https://www.lefigaro.fr/vox/societe/2018/05/09/31003-20180509ARTFIG00209-eric-zemmour-narcisse-si-laid-en-son-miroir.php>.

62 Quoted in Jean-Claude Michéa, *L’empire du moindre mal: Essai sur la civilisation libérale* (Castelnaud-le-Lez: Éditions Climats, 2007), p. 130.





# Conceptual Flipsiding in/and Illiberal Imagination: Towards a Discourse-Conceptual Analysis

MICHAŁ KRZYŻANOWSKI AND  
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## Abstract

*This article highlights the increasingly prevalent process of so-called “conceptual flipsiding”: that is, of strategic reversal of notions once closely associated with liberal democracy, and of its key values of freedom, equality, tolerance, and the like, for the pronouncedly illiberal gains. Viewing the said process as part and parcel of the wider normalization of an illiberal imagination through strategic discourses and practices in and beyond the field of politics, the article contends that conceptual flipsiding increasingly allows recontextualizing and eventually normalizing a deeply illiberal understanding of polity, society, and community. Seeing these as increasingly redefined in recent years in many formerly liberal-democratic contexts by, especially, the far right and its numerous affiliates in politics, media, and/or un-civil society, the article argues for theoretical and analytical elaboration of conceptual flipsiding in order to depict its wider exploratory usability in grasping the current illiberal conceptual and discursive fluidity. The article emphasizes that, following the discourse-conceptual logic behind the conceptual flipsiding dynamics, one is able to deconstruct the ongoing infusion of key social and political concepts and discourses with new and often deeply illiberal understandings.*

Keywords: conceptual flipsiding, illiberalism, discourse-conceptual analysis, far right, social and political concepts

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While the government presence of far-right parties has commonly been associated with deep institutionalization of illiberal politics, widely conceived, several cases also show that, even if the far right falls out of government, the eradication of its socio-political illiberal logics is a very complex process that must take place across a variety of laws, procedures, and public institutions<sup>1</sup>. However, while backpedaling on processes of “undermining the institutional fabric of liberal democracy”<sup>2</sup> by the far right is one thing, it seems the reversing of wider “illiberalism as culture”<sup>3</sup> is perhaps even more complex, since it requires a gradual re-shifting of public and everyday discourses into those that could allow for the reinstating of liberal democracy not only in politics but also in the wider society.

A particular challenge—indeed evident in both of the above processes—seems to be posed by the society-wide implications of what we define as *conceptual flipsiding*: a process of strategic reversal of notions closely associated with liberal democracy or with its key values of freedom, equality, tolerance, and the like, for pronouncedly illiberal gains.<sup>4</sup> We contend that, as it is increasingly present in contemporary illiberal discourses, conceptual flipsiding should not only be seen as an element of political-institutional “mainstreaming” of the far right<sup>5</sup> but also, or perhaps especially, as part of a much broader and much more pervasive society-wide processes of normalization of illiberal discourses and practices.<sup>6</sup> It should especially be located among those driven by the often long-term, gradual “discursive shifts”<sup>7</sup> taking place across a variety of public and everyday social contexts.

We argue that, as a result of conceptual flipsiding, not only could the once widely acceptable meanings of key socio-political concepts be gradually “washed out”<sup>8</sup> or “semantically bleached,”<sup>9</sup> but that they would often be outright strategically replaced with new, illiberal understandings. This would often lead to increasing public uncertainty as to whether the previous (in most cases liberal-democratic) or the current (in most cases illiberal) understanding of some key notions in public life should actually be seen as valid and legitimate. As a result, however, often the latter rather than the former understandings would prevail, yet with such deep conceptual “doublethink,”<sup>10</sup> resulting in at least a duality—if not an outright multiplicity—of understandings and misunderstandings of many socially foundational ideas. The uncertainty and volatility around those, as is evident with as pivotal concepts as, for example, the rule of law, would be of huge importance in the institutional domain

1 Martin Krygier, Adam Czarnota, and Wojciech Sadurski, eds., *Anti-Constitutional Populism*. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

2 Wojciech Sadurski, *A Pandemic of Populists* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

3 Jan Kubik, “Illiberalism as Culture,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Illiberalism*, ed. Marlene Laruelle (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780197639108.013.4>.

4 Michał Krzyżanowski and Natalia Krzyżanowska, “Narrating the ‘New Normal’ or Pre-Legitimising Media Control? COVID-19 and the Discursive Shifts in the Far-Right Imaginary of ‘Crisis’ as a Normalisation Strategy,” *Discourse & Society* 33, no. 6 (2022): 805–818, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0957926522109542>.

5 Pontus Odmalm and Eve Hepburn, eds., *The European Mainstream and the Populist Radical Right*, (London: Routledge, 2017); Aurelien Mondon and Aaron Z. Winter, *Reactionary Democracy* (London: Verso, 2020).

6 Michał Krzyżanowski, “Normalization and the Discursive Construction of ‘New’ Norms and ‘New’ Normality: Discourse in/and the Paradoxes of Populism and Neoliberalism,” *Social Semiotics* 30, no. 4 (2020): 431–448, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10350330.2020.1766193>; Ruth Wodak, *The Politics of Fear: Shameless Normalisation of Far-Right Discourse* (London: Sage, 2021).

7 Michał Krzyżanowski, “Discursive Shifts in Ethno-Nationalist Politics: On Politicisation and Mediatization of ‘Refugee Crisis’ in Poland,” *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies* 16, nos. 1–2, (2018): 76–96, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15562948.2017.1317897>; Michał Krzyżanowski, “Discursive Shifts and the Normalisation of Racism: Imaginaries of Immigration, Moral Panics and the Discourse of Contemporary Right-Wing Populism,” *Social Semiotics* 30, no. 4 (2020): 503–527, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10350330.2020.1766199>.

8 Ewa Polak, “Zacieranie granic i rozmywanie znaczeń jako jedna z tendencji współczesnych przemian cywilizacyjnych,” *Annales UMCS* 25, no. 1 (2018): 25–38, <http://dx.doi.org/10.17951/k.2018.25.1.25>.

9 Antoine Meillet, “L’évolution des formes grammaticales,” *Scientia (Rivista di Scienza)* 12, no. 6 (1912): 384–400.

10 George Orwell, *1984* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1949).



where such duality/multiplicity would often hinder the possible reversal of the previously normalized illiberal ideas (see, for example, Poland after the defeat of the far-right Law and Justice [PiS] party in the fall of 2023).<sup>11</sup>

To be sure, the general process of strategically “twisting” or “reversing” the meaning of key social and political concepts which we highlight is far from new. It has, namely, been recurrently present in public and especially political discourse of, in particular, authoritarian, nationalist, and populist regimes where reversal of meanings would recurrently serve manipulation and misinformation, often as part of authoritarian legitimization of mechanisms and institutions of violence and social control.<sup>12</sup> It would hence be particularly evident during periods of crisis:<sup>13</sup> that is, when the often radical or even outright exclusionary visions of polity and society would come to the fore and/or be ideologically promoted. In such a scenario, strategies of, among other things, the famous “victim-perpetrator-reversal”<sup>14</sup> or of persistent, populist “calculated ambivalence”<sup>15</sup> would figure among the frequent attempts to misrepresent ideas in and about society, often in the ideological defense of nativism, radicalism, colonialism, racism and the like.

Given its ongoing romance with many of the above ideologies combined into a pronouncedly illiberal catalog of values and views, it is not surprising that the contemporary far-right accelerating, in particular, in the 21st century,<sup>16</sup> would be particularly eager to make strategic redefinitions of liberal-democratic notions for illiberal gains into one of its central, discursive-political strategies. Therein, conceptual flipsiding would become a process not only of initiating but also of, indeed, the recontextualizing and normalizing of a deeper, public “reversal of meanings”<sup>17</sup> for both evidently illiberal but even outright anti-democratic or even anti-social aims.

11 David Ost, “Letter from Poland: Undoing the country’s authoritarian experiment,” *The Nation*, January 30, 2024, <https://www.thenation.com/article/world/letter-from-poland>.

12 Victor Klemperer, *The Language of the Third Reich*, (London: Continuum, 2006); Roger Fowler, Bob Hodge, Gunther Kress, and Tony Trew, *Language and Control*, (London: Routledge & Keegan Paul, 1979); Willibald Steinmetz, ed., *Political Languages in the Age of Extremes*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

13 Reinhart Koselleck, “Crisis,” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 67, no. 2 (2006): 357–400, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/30141882>; Michał Krzyżanowski, Anna Triandafyllidou, and Ruth Wodak, “Introduction,” in *The European Public Sphere and the Media: Europe in Crisis*, eds. Anna Triandafyllidou, Michał Krzyżanowski, and Ruth Wodak (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 1–12; Michał Krzyżanowski, Ruth Wodak, Hannah Bradby, Mattias Gardell, Aristotelis Kallis, Natalia Krzyżanowska, Cas Mudde, and Jens Rydgren, “Discourses and Practices of the ‘New Normal’: Towards an Interdisciplinary Research Agenda on Crisis and the Normalization of Anti- and Post-Democratic Action,” *Journal of Language & Politics*, 22, no. 4 (2023): 415–437, <https://doi.org/10.1075/jlp.23024.krz>; Hagen Schulz-Forberg, “The Spatial and Temporal Layers of Global History: A Reflection on Global Conceptual History through Expanding Reinhart Koselleck’s Zeitschichten into global spaces,” *Historical Social Research* 38, no. 3 (2013): 40–58, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23644524>; Hagen Schulz-Forberg, “Crisis and Continuity: Robert Marjolin, Transnational Policy-Making and Neoliberalism, 1930s–1970s,” in *Rethinking European Integration History in Light of Capitalism*, ed. Aurélie D. Andry, Emmanuel Mourlon-Druol, Haakon A. Ikonomou, and Quentin Jouan (London: Routledge, 2022): 679–702, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13507486.2019.1599826>.

14 Ruth Wodak, *Disorders of Discourse* (London: Longman, 1996).

15 Ruth Wodak, “Populist Discourses: The Rhetoric of Exclusion in Written Genres,” *Document Design* 4, no. 2 (2003): 132–148, <https://doi.org/10.1075/dd.4.2.04wod>; Jakob Engel and Ruth Wodak, “Calculated Ambivalence and Holocaust Denial in Austria,” in *Analysing Fascist Discourse*, eds. John R. Richardson and Ruth Wodak (London: Routledge, 2014): 73–96; Kurt Sengul, “It’s OK to Be White”: The Discursive Construction of Victimhood, ‘Anti-White Racism’ and Calculated Ambivalence in Australia,” *Critical Discourse Studies* 19, no. 6 (2021): 593–609, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17405904.2021.1921818>.

16 Gabriella Egenius and Jens Rydgren, “Frames of Nostalgia and Belonging: The Resurgence of Ethno Nationalism in Sweden,” *European Societies* 21, no. 4 (2019): 503–602, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616696.2018.1494297>; Cas Mudde, *The Far-Right Today* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2019); Jens Rydgren “Radical Right-Wing Parties in Europe. What’s Populism Got to Do with It?” *Journal of Language and Politics* 16, no. 4 (2017): 485–496, <https://doi.org/10.1075/jlp.17024.ryd>; Jens Rydgren and Sara van Der Meiden, “The Radical Right and the End of Swedish Exceptionalism,” *European Political Science* 21, no. 4 (2019): 439–455, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41304-018-0159-6>; Wodak, *The Politics of Fear*; Ruth Wodak and Michał Krzyżanowski, eds., *Right-Wing Populism in Europe & USA: Contesting Politics & Discourse beyond ‘Orbanism’ and ‘Trumpism’* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2017), *Journal of Language & Politics* special issue 16, no. 4).

17 Andrzej Rychard, “Manifestacja Odwracania Znaczeń,” *Poranek TOK FM*, September 8, 2023, <https://audycje.tokfm.pl/podcast/145466.-Manifestacja-odwracania-znaczen>.

Hence, assuming the central importance of conceptual flippings for illiberalism as “highly polysemic and multicontextual,”<sup>18</sup> this paper elaborates on the notion and its more general (and perhaps transnational) usability in grasping the current illiberal conceptual and discursive fluidity. It also emphasizes the necessity to critically and analytically follow the discourse-conceptual logic<sup>19</sup> that nests the ongoing infusion of key social concepts with illiberal understandings across a variety of contexts. On top of that, fostered by the wider tenets of illiberalism as well as its most frequent context of articulation—that is, the politics of the far right and its affiliates in political, media and uncivil society—many facets of contemporary conceptual flippings would entail a “recontextualization”<sup>20</sup> of historical ideas and arguments. As a result, a wider, and often historically contingent illiberal colonization of concepts encompassed by notions once universally seen as the key values of liberal democracy would take place. It would see those concepts being radically redefined, often up to the point of becoming standard notions in illiberal politics and ideologies (as has evidently been the case with, for example, the many recent debates over the concept of freedom of speech).<sup>21</sup>

However, in a similar vein, many other flippings would emerge as elements of strategic labeling in public discourse. Therein, ideologies and views profoundly conflicting with liberal democracy—including of racism, extremism, neofascism, etc.—would come to be increasingly normalized in the course of their redefinition under the guise of, among other things, previously flippings notions of freedom of speech, patriotism, and the like. Thereby, their somewhat automatic public acceptability instrumentalized to legitimize the effectively antidemocratic actions and aims. Still, at the same time, not only would specific ideas or notions see their meanings profoundly altered, but so would the labels used against social actors standing in defense of the liberal-democratic understanding of some key social and political notions. The former would hence often be referred to via labels such as woke intellectuals, cancel culture, and the like, and would in the wider struggle for definitions deemed as culture wars<sup>22</sup> be deliberately and strategically misrepresented as non-belonging to the allegedly increasingly nativist, exclusionary, and essentially illiberal common sense.<sup>23</sup>

Given the above complexities, we approach concepts as inherently fluid social constructs and as always open to possible reinterpretations and misinterpretations, across various contexts in and beyond public language, the public sphere, and public discourse.<sup>24</sup> We argue that, as the general descriptor of “liberal” or “liberalism” can be a compound of both liberal-democratic views but also of opposing illiberal ideologies, related concepts, and their interpretation, would also be historically contingent and strongly context-dependent. Our aim is, therefore, to reveal theoretically as well as empirically the recent dynamism of concepts set in the liberal-democratic vs. illiberal

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

19 Michał Krzyżanowski, “Recontextualization of Neoliberalism and the Increasingly Conceptual Nature of Discourse,” *Discourse & Society* 27, no. 3 (2016): 308–321, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0957926516630901>; Michał Krzyżanowski, “‘Brexit’ and the Imaginary of ‘Crisis’: A Discourse-Conceptual Analysis of European News Media,” *Critical Discourse Studies* 16, no. 2 (2019): 465–490, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17405904.2019.1592001>.

20 Basil Bernstein, *Strategies of Pedagogic Discourse* (London: Routledge, 1990); Krzyżanowski, “Recontextualizations of Neoliberalism.”

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

22 Sean Phelan, “Seven Theses about the So-Called Culture War(s)—or Some Fragmentary Notes on ‘Cancel Culture,’” *Cultural Studies* (2023), <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502386.2023.2199309>.

23 George Newth and Alessio Scopelliti, “Common Sense, Populism, and Reactionary Politics on Twitter,” *Party Politics* (online first 2023), <https://doi.org/10.1177/13540688231224319>.

24 Helge Jordheim, “Conceptual History,” in *Bloomsbury History: Theory & Method* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350970878.066>; Hagen Schulz-Forberg, “The Spatial and Temporal Layers of Global History”; Willibald Steinmetz and Michael Freeden, “Introduction—Conceptual History: Challenges, Conundrums, Complexities,” in *Conceptual History in the European Space*, eds. Willibald Steinmetz, Michael Freeden, Juan Fernandez-Sebastian (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2017): 1–46, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781785334832-002>.

dichotomy while assuming that they would need to be seen as elements of a longer continuum rather than being placed in a fixed set of universal positions. By doing so, we also recognize that contestation of concepts will always be the central factor in their social functioning and the key driver in their redefinition, while thereby recognizing the vision of illiberalism as “a global but context-dependent movement that varies in intensity across countries, regime types, and constituencies, and features different ideational combinations.”<sup>25</sup>

Hence, informed by the various intricacies of the illiberal discourse logic, our focus below revolves analytically around far-right discourse as one the key sites of articulation of illiberal ideas repackaged via the conceptual flipsiding logic. However, we look at discursive practices of the far right under the assumption that, though prominent, the political is only one of the many contexts in which illiberal ideas would be expressed and negotiated, often on a par, and in connection with, among other things, multiple venues and channels of the burgeoning “illiberal intellectual internationale,”<sup>26</sup> illiberal “uncivil society” (both online and offline),<sup>27</sup> or via erupting illiberal “hyperpartisan media.”<sup>28</sup> The perspective taken here builds therefore specifically not only on our long-term research on the illiberal discourse and politics of the far right<sup>29</sup> but also on the work on how the nativist politics of exclusion has recently become more widely normalized and legitimized via various mobilizing concepts and strategic discursive shifts. These, as the research shows, would often be proposed by the far right and/or its wider illiberal affiliates<sup>30</sup> yet while aiming for the general recontextualization and normalization of illiberalism in the wider public imagination.

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25 Laruelle, “Illiberalism,” 304.

26 Valentin Behr, “Towards a Transnational and Social History of Anti-Liberalism. Insights from the Trajectory of Ryszard Legutko,” *European Politics and Society* 24, no. 1 (2023): 22–39, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23745118.2021.1956237>; Ramona Coman, Valentin Behr, and Jan Beyer, “The Shaping Power of Anti-Liberal Ideas,” *European Politics and Society* 24, no. 1 (2021): 1–4, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23745118.2021.1956244>.

27 Michał Krzyżanowski and Per Ledin, “Uncivility on the Web: Populism in/and the Borderline Discourses of Exclusion,” *Journal of Language & Politics* 16, no. 4 (2017): 566–581, <https://doi.org/10.1075/jlp.17028.krz>.

28 Maria Rae, “Hyperpartisan News: Rethinking the Media for Populist Politics,” *New Media & Society* 23, no. 5 (2021): 1117–1132, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444820910416>.

29 Natalia Krzyżanowska and Michał Krzyżanowski, “‘Crisis’ and Migration in Poland: Discursive Shifts, Anti-Pluralism and the Politicisation of Exclusion,” *Sociology* 52, no. 3 (2018): 612–618, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038518757952>; Michał Krzyżanowski, “Right-Wing Populism, Opportunism and Political Catholicism: On Recent Rhetorics and Political Communication of Polish PiS (Law and Justice) Party,” in *Populismus: Herausforderung oder Gefahr für die Demokratie?* eds. Anton Pelinka and Birgit Haller (Vienna: New Academic Press, 2012): 111–126; Michał Krzyżanowski, “Policy, Policy Communication and Discursive Shifts,” in *Analysing Genres in Political Communication*, eds. Piotr Cap and Urszula Okulska (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2013): 101–133; Michał Krzyżanowski, “From Anti-Immigration and Nationalist Revisionism to Islamophobia: Continuities and Shifts in Recent Discourses and Patterns of Political Communication of the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ),” in *Right-Wing Populism in Europe: Politics and Discourse*, eds. Ruth Wodak, Brigitte Mral, and Majid KhosraviNik (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013): 135–148, <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781472544940.ch-009>; Michał Krzyżanowski, Anna Triandafyllidou and R. Wodak, “The Politicisation and Mediatization of the ‘Refugee Crisis’ in Europe,” *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies* 16, nos. 1–2 (2018): 1–14, <https://doi.org/10.1075/jip.17042.krz>; Krzyżanowski and Ledin, “Uncivility on the Web”; Wodak and Krzyżanowski, *Right-Wing Populism in Europe & USA*.

30 Krzyżanowski, “Discursive Shifts in Ethno-Nationalist Politics”; Michał Krzyżanowski, “‘We Are a Small Country that Has Done Enormously Lot’: The ‘Refugee Crisis’ and the Hybrid Discourse of Politicising Immigration in Sweden,” *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies* 16, nos. 1–2 (2018): 97–117, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15562948.2017.1317895>; Krzyżanowski, “Normalization and the Discursive Construction of ‘New’ Norms and ‘New’ Normality”; Krzyżanowski, “Discursive Shifts and the Normalisation of Racism”; Michał Krzyżanowski and Mats Ekström, “The Normalization of Far-Right Populism and Nativist Authoritarianism: Discursive Practices in Media, Journalism and the wider Public Sphere/s,” *Discourse & Society* 33, no. 6 (2022): 719–729, <https://doi.org/10.1177/09579265221095406>; Krzyżanowski and Krzyżanowska, “Narrating the ‘New Normal’ or Pre-Legitimising Media Control?”; Michał Krzyżanowski, Mattias Ekman, Per-Erik Nilsson, Mattias Gardell, and Christian Christensen, “Un-Civility, Racism and Populism: Discourses and Interactive Practices of Anti- & Post-Democratic Communication,” *Nordicom Review* 42 (2021): 3–15, <https://doi.org/10.2478/nor-2021-0003>.

## Conceptual Flipsiding in/and the Illiberal Logics of Discourse

While the articulation and communication of illiberal ideologies takes place in and via public discourse—wherein the political input often remains central—the public domain is also, at the same time, the main carrier as well as the main site of mediation of, on the one hand, the specifically political process of the ideological “mainstreaming” of far-right ideologies<sup>31</sup>, and, on the other hand, of the related, deeper as well as society-wide dynamics of the normalization of exclusion seen as a token of the ever more widespread illiberal, exclusionary thinking in the general public domain.<sup>32</sup>

Normalization needs to be seen as part of a longer and continuous process that relies on various strategic *discursive shifts*<sup>33</sup> that are first enacted, then perpetuated, and eventually normalized in line with pronounced strategies of political, media, and other powerful public actors. This logic, consequently, often creates recurrent path dependencies for the even deeper practices of not only rhetorical but also physical or systemic exclusion, which are “pre-legitimized”<sup>34</sup> via the construction and fueling of a wider “atmosphere of incitement”<sup>35</sup> to, as well as acceptance of, discrimination against those members and groups in society hastily considered as the “other.” The analysis of discursive shifts, furthermore, makes it possible to identify how and when public and political discourses transform and become politicized in the media<sup>36</sup> for various illiberal aims. It also allows for exploring how, down the line, exclusionary discourses almost always create a peculiar snowball effect and eventually acquire velocity that allows them to successively pre-legitimize ever-stronger expressions of discrimination and exclusion in the wider society.

Irrespective of the context in which these processes occur, *discursive shifts* rely strongly on construction of various “imaginaries.”<sup>37</sup> Within those, the often untrue and unrealistic representations and visions of the nativist self or, in particular, of the imagined “other” (within/outside) community can be articulated and eventually mobilized. In a longer run, these can also be perpetuated and normalized, thus becoming stable elements of illiberal public discourses pre-legitimizing the wider politics of exclusion. Crucially, mindsets central to normalized discourses of exclusion combine elements of the real and the unreal<sup>38</sup>, and promulgate more or less objective facts and processes identifiable in the social reality with imagined or even utopian visions of how society was, allegedly, functioning in the past (“retrotopia”)<sup>39</sup> or how

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31 Mondon and Winter, *Reactionary Democracy*; Odmalm and Hepburn, *The European Mainstream and the Populist Radical Right*; Rydgren and van der Meiden, “The Radical Right and the End of Swedish Exceptionalism.”

32 Aristotle Kallis, “Far-Right ‘Contagion’ or a Failing ‘Mainstream’? How Dangerous Ideas Cross Borders and Blur Boundaries,” *Democracy & Security* 9, no. 3 (2013): 221–246, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17419166.2013.792251>; Aristotle Kallis, “‘Counter-Spurt’ but Not ‘De-Civilization’: Fascism, (Un)civility, Taboo, and the ‘Civilizing process,’” *Journal of Political Ideologies* 26, no. 1 (2021): 3–22, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569317.2020.1825278>; Krzyżanowski, “Discursive Shifts in Ethno-Nationalist Politics”; Krzyżanowski “Normalization and the Discursive Construction of ‘New’ Norms and ‘New’ Normality”; Krzyżanowski “Discursive Shifts and the Normalization of Racism.”

33 Krzyżanowski, “Discursive Shifts in Ethno-Nationalist Politics”; Krzyżanowski, “Normalization and the Discursive Construction of ‘New’ Norms and ‘New’ Normality”; Krzyżanowski, “Discursive Shifts and the Normalization of Racism.”

34 Michał Krzyżanowski, “Values, Imaginaries and Templates of Journalistic Practice: A Critical Discourse Analysis,” *Social Semiotics* 24, no. 3 (2014): 345–365.

35 Wodak, *The Politics of Fear*.

36 Krzyżanowski, “‘We Are a Small Country that Has Done Enormously Lot,’ “ 79.

37 Bob Jessop, “Understanding the ‘Economization’ of Social Formations,” in *The Marketization of Society* (Bremen: University of Bremen, 2012): 5–36; Bob Jessop, “Crisis Construal in the North Atlantic Financial Crisis and the Eurozone Crisis,” *Competition & Change* 19, no. 2 (2015): 95–112, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1024529415571866>; Krzyżanowski, “‘Brexit’ and the Imaginary of ‘Crisis’ “; Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).

38 Ruth Levitas, *Utopia as Method*, (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

39 Zygmunt Bauman, *Retrotopia*, (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2017).

it apparently could or should be functioning in the illiberal “new normal”<sup>40</sup>. This includes visions of what society is (“the people”), but also how relationships between its members (men/women, majority/minorities, etc.) should be organized and articulated. These visions hence act in support of “public pedagogies”<sup>41</sup> which allow political and other actors to ideologically control social action via public imagination.

All of the above logics and discursive shifts need to be considered within the wider setting of various types of “discursive change,”<sup>42</sup>—that is, the transnational discourse dynamics defining trajectories and strategies of public discourses across various contexts.<sup>43</sup> While various types of dynamics could well be considered as those defining contemporary facets of discursive change, one significant trajectory has been that of the “increasing conceptualization of discourse,”<sup>44</sup> which, originally arriving as a token of neoliberal economization of society and of the public domain,<sup>45</sup> eventually came to be also adopted by illiberal politics and ideologies.<sup>46</sup> The said dynamics encompass various parallel processes. On the one hand, it entails a gradual changing of the focus or orientation of discourse away from social actors and groups—as those traditionally represented as agents, doers, or as benefactors of various social, political, and economic dynamics—to making it ever more focused on abstract ideas and concepts. On the other hand, while moving the focus of discourse away from social actors and from doers/benefactors of social action—and thus making it ever less focused on human/social agency—this process has allowed for representing social processes and problems on a strictly abstract and conceptual level. By the same token, it has often obscured the agency of powerful actors—responsible for changes that could be perceived as negative for society—while additionally not showing members of society affected by various facets of change.

The adoption of such strategies by, in particular, the far right, was to a large extent logical, insofar as ideological debates induced by the far right (such as culture wars) have very often boiled down to strictly conceptual struggles and have very often been framed via *topos*<sup>47</sup> of “definition and name interpretation”<sup>48</sup> instead of focusing on specific actions or policies, or considering their medium- and long-term implications. However, such illiberal embracing of conceptual logic entails a number of further discursive dynamics. The first of these is the process of production of the so-called “borderline discourse”<sup>49</sup>—often initially distributed by far-right affiliates within uncivil society and hyperpartisan channels, and only later entering the mainstream media and political debates—whose aim is the normalization of uncivil and often antisocial, illiberal ideologies under the guise of socially- and politically-acceptable ideas and claims. Such construction of borderline discourse has been crucial in, for example, normalization of the wider politics of exclusion groomed in such socially-acceptable ideological-discursive frames of rationalism, religion, values, etc.<sup>50</sup> By the same token, the production of borderline discourse would also enable

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40 Krzyżanowski et al. “Discourses and Practices of the ‘New Normal.’”

41 Philip Graham and Harry P. Dugmore, “Public Pedagogies in Post-Literate cultures,” *Discourse & Society* 33, no. 6 (2022): 819–832, <https://doi.org/10.1177/09579265221095421>.

42 Norman Fairclough, *Discourse and Social Change* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1992).

43 Krzyżanowski, “Policy, Policy Communication and Discursive Shifts.”

44 Krzyżanowski, “Recontextualizations of Neoliberalism.”

45 Jessop, “Understanding the ‘economization’ of Social Formations”; Sean Phelan, *Neoliberalism, Media and the Political*, (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

46 Krzyżanowski, “‘Brexit’ and the Imaginary of Crisis,”; Krzyżanowski and Krzyżanowska, “Narrating the ‘New Normal’ or Pre-Legitimising Media Control?”

47 *Topos* (plural *topoi*) is a Greek term for an analytical category often used in rhetorical, narrative, or discourse analysis to designate a specific argumentation scheme/frame often recurrently deployed by the speakers/authors. For further details, see, for example, Michał Krzyżanowski, *The Discursive Construction of European Identities* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2010).

48 Martin Reisigl and Ruth Wodak, *Discourse and Discrimination* (London, UK: Routledge, 2001).

49 Krzyżanowski and Ledin, “Uncivility on the Web.”

50 Krzyżanowski, “Normalization and the Discursive Construction of ‘New’ Norms and ‘New’ Normality.”

simultaneous or subsequent introduction of the wider “proxy discourses”<sup>51</sup> that allow for elaborating various frames in either their proximity or by association, as “public implicatures.”<sup>52</sup> Such has been frequently the case with, for example, discussions connecting criminality to immigration/multiculturalism, and with arguments about their inherent connection persisting in the public imagination even when the relationship would not be made explicit any longer.

### The Concept of the Family in the Discourse of the European Far Right

Below, we focus analytically on the discourse of illiberal politics of the far right wherein, as an empirical example, we trace ideas and mindsets that have been attached to the wider concept of the family and to its various sister concepts. We show how the latter—in our case, in particular, the notion of equal opportunities between men and women, women’s rights, or even of anti-discrimination—would be strategically redefined for the purpose of recontextualizing a strongly conservative vision of family, of women’s rights and of gender. As we argue, they would be flip-sided conceptually in order to, paradoxically, support the apparently stable and unitary understanding of family as heteronormative and nuclear, as it is consequently emphasized in illiberal discourse. Hence, in the analysis below, we sample the discourses that entail various definitions of family in party-political strategies represented in programmatic documents. We do so in order to show how conceptual flip-siding of the nodal concept of the family—and particularly of its key sister concepts—not only solidifies the hegemonic understanding of family as heteronormative but also allows the far right to, on its back, normalize and make acceptable various further exclusionary notions and views.

As we argue, the concept of the family requires attention as it has recently become one of the most widely used notions in far-right politics, up to the point of even becoming a central tenet of its electoral success in various contexts (for the most recent case, see Italy and Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni’s Brothers of Italy (Fratelli d’Italia: FdI).<sup>53</sup> However, the concept of the family has also been used in the illiberal imagination more widely while frequently becoming an entry point to the public narratives on issues of, among other things, gender, fertility rights, women’s rights, equal opportunities, parenting practices, anti-discrimination, etc., which therefore have often been the targets of illiberal ideological actions, especially of the far right.<sup>54</sup> Indeed, as we show, the meaning of all these concepts and ideas would often undergo dynamic change—especially via their translations into the illiberal and deeply conservative catalog of values as we show below. While being, effectively, conceptually flip-sided, these concepts would, at the same time, endow the de facto strongly traditional meaning of family with an aura of modern approach while obscuring its still deeply traditional understanding.

51 Hugo Ekström, Michał Krzyżanowski and David Johnson, “Saying ‘Criminality,’ Meaning ‘Immigration?’ Proxy Discourses and Public Implicatures in the Normalisation of the Politics of Exclusion,” *Critical Discourse Studies* (2023), <https://doi.org/10.1080/17405904.2023.2282506>.

52 Ekström, Krzyżanowski, and Johnson, “Saying ‘Criminality.’”

53 Joseph Cerrone, “Italian Far-Right Discourse in the 2022 Election Campaign,” *Illiberalism Blog*, October 6, 2022, <https://www.illiberalism.org/italian-far-right-discourse-in-the-2022-election-campaign>; Alessia Donà, “The Rise of the Radical Right in Italy: The Case of Fratelli d’Italia,” *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 27, no. 5 (2022): 775–794, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1354571X.2022.2113216>; Claudia Torrissi, “The Anti-Women Agenda of the Woman Set to Be the Next Italian Prime Minister,” *Open Democracy*, September 26, 2022, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/giorgia-meloni-far-right-brothers-of-italy-election-prime-minister-racism-gender>.

54 Weronika Grzebalska and Andrea Pető, “The Gendered Modus Operandi of the Illiberal Transformation in Hungary and Poland,” *Women’s Studies International Forum* 68 (2018): 164–172, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsis.2017.12.001>; Michaela Köttig, Renate Bitzan, and Andrea Pető, eds., *Gender and Far Right Politics in Europe* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017); Natalia Krzyżanowska, *Kobiety w (polskiej) sferze publicznej* (Toruń: Wydawnictwo A. Marszałek, 2012); Natalia Krzyżanowska, “Konstruowanie macierzyństwa jako kwestii społecznej na przykładzie dyskursów polskiej sfery publicznej,” *Kultura i Edukacja* 4, no. 104 (2014): 142–166, <https://doi.org/10.15804/kie.2014.04.11>; Natalia Krzyżanowska, “The Commodification of Motherhood: Normalisation of Consumerism in Mediated Discourse on Mothering,” *Social Semiotics* 30, no. 4 (2020): 563–590, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10350330.2020.1762986>.

Indeed, given the concept of family is one of the most complex in the social sciences, its illiberal simplifications favoring fixed understandings, such as those highlighted below, must be viewed as purposeful and strategic. They allow, namely, to discard a modern vision of family as a process, and as subject to changes taking place with time, with the evolving life-course of its members, and within the dynamics of the wider society and social change<sup>55</sup>. Therefore, family as a concept—and a denotation of a certain community, intimacy, and a set of practices and of a shared responsibility<sup>56</sup>—would be subject to many processes of idealization and ideological misappropriation that would also chime in with its reinforcement in illiberal mindsets. The latter would often not only ignore but openly combat the plurality of the family's contemporary forms and foreground heterosexual and nuclear family<sup>57</sup> while negating plurality of contemporary family forms including, *inter alia*, same-sex and trans-gender families<sup>58</sup> or families based on assisted reproduction,<sup>59</sup> all of which would often be often targeted by illiberal visions. The latter would also enable obscuring the fact that, as such, family is not only a locus of socialization but also a space where gender inequality would often be incepted and sustained<sup>60</sup> prior to its recontextualization into wider society. It is for those reasons that conceptions of family would be particularly open to politicizations as made evident in far-right illiberal discourse with its focus on the implied stability of family and on simultaneous conceptual dynamism of its closely-related sister notions.

### *The Context*

Our analysis below looks at the discourse about family of the Freedom Party of Austria (Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs: FPÖ) present in the Austrian and European political scene since the 1940s. Its ideological catalog has continuously revolved around nativist ideas and claims though with specific policies to enforce those changing over time.<sup>61</sup> The FPÖ came into the international spotlight at the end of the 1980s and in the 1990s, when, under the then leadership of Jörg Haider, the party brought to Austrian political discourse a focus on anti-immigration and nativist politics (for example, under the famous strategically ambivalent slogan, “Austria First”) thus forging a discursive link that in years to come would become a standard tenet of the European as well as international far right. As a result, the FPÖ of the late 1990s enjoyed radically increased public support and even entered the Austrian federal government as the coalition partner of the conservative Austrian People's

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55 Mirosława Marody and Anna Giza-Poleszczuk, *Transformations of Social Bonds: The Outline of the Theory of Social Change* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2018).

56 Gerard Delanty, *Community* (London: Routledge, 2018).

57 Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim, *Individualization: Institutionalized Individualism and Its Social and Political Consequences* (London: Sage, 2002).

58 Joanna Mizielińska and Agata Stasińska, “Beyond the Western Gaze: Families of Choice in Poland,” *Sexualities* 21, no. 7 (2018): 983–1001, <https://doi.org/10.1177/136346071771850>.

59 Jenny Gunnarson-Payne, “Reproduction in Transition: Cross-Border Egg Donation, Biodesirability and New Reproductive Subjectivities on the European Fertility Market,” *Gender, Place & Culture* 22, no. 1 (2015): 107–122, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2013.832656>; Zeynep B. Gürtin and Charlotte Faircloth, eds., *Conceiving Contemporary Parenthood: Imagining, Achieving and Accounting for Parenthood in New Family Forms* (London: Routledge, 2020).

60 Ann Oakley, *Sex, Gender, and Society* (London: Routledge, 1972); Ann Oakley, *The Sociology of Housework* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974); Claudia Goldin, “A Grand Gender Convergence: Its Last Chapter,” *American Economic Review* 104, no. 4 (2014): 1091–1119, <https://doi.org/10.1257/aer.104.4.1091>.

61 For details on FPÖ development and its key ideological tenets, see Michał Krzyżanowski and Ruth Wodak, *The Politics of Exclusion: Debating Migration in Austria* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2009); Walter Manoschek, “FPÖ, ÖVP and Austria's Nazi Past,” in *The Hidden Phenomenon in Austria*, eds. Ruth Wodak and Anton Pelinka (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2002): 3–17; Anton Pelinka, *Zur österreichischen Identität: Zwischen deutscher Vereinigung und Mitteleuropa*, (Vienna: Ueberreuter, 1990); Anton Pelinka, *Die Kleine Koalition. SPÖ-FPÖ 1983–1986* (Vienna: Böhlau, 1993); Anton Pelinka, *Vom Glanz und Elend der Parteien: Struktur- und Funktionswandel des österreichischen Parteiensystems* (Innsbruck: Studien Verlag, 2005); Anton Pelinka, “How Austrian Politics Went from Over-Stability to Unpredictability,” *World Politics Review* (2017), <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/how-austrian-politics-went-from-over-stability-to-unpredictability>.

Party (Österreichische Volkspartei, or ÖVP) in 2000—yet with this famously leading to political repercussions of both national and international nature.

Given the FPÖ's apparently pervasive inability to remain efficient while in government,<sup>62</sup> the party has since the early 2000s enjoyed some isolated stints in government (within repeated coalitions with the conservatives in 2000 to 2005, and 2017 to 2019), yet spent the majority of the new millennium in opposition. While in government, the FPÖ would strongly proliferate its policies – which could best be described as a highly ambivalent to outright paradoxical combination of welfare and neoliberal logics with FPÖ remaining nativistically “proletarian” as well as welfare-chauvinist.<sup>63</sup> On the other hand, while in opposition, the party would continue to master its anti-establishment, populist-nativist claims as well as being focused on what has been called “constant campaigning”<sup>64</sup>, in particular with regard to channeling its anti-immigration, nativist, or ever more explicitly Islamophobic politics. However, while the FPÖ has remained out of government recently, it has, under the current leadership of Herbert Kickl since 2021, again managed to rebuild its base gradually yet quite significantly, with polls indicating even around 30% support in early 2024.<sup>65</sup>

### *Methodology: Discourse-Conceptual Analysis*

Given the theoretical and analytical focus on the conceptual character of the analyzed discourse, the analysis below utilizes the “discourse-conceptual analysis” (or DCA; Krzyżanowski 2010, 2016, 2019) that combines key insights from, on the one hand, the Discourse-Historical Approach in Critical Discourse Studies<sup>66</sup> and, on the other hand, the so-called conceptual history (or *Begriffsgeschichte*)<sup>67</sup> of Reinhart Koselleck<sup>67</sup> and of his key followers.<sup>68</sup> DCA has previously been deployed extensively in the analyses of illiberal discourse of the far right (for example, the Austrian FPÖ<sup>69</sup> but also the Polish Law and Justice [PiS] party),<sup>70</sup> or of the far right's key ideological projects (such as, for example, Brexit).<sup>71</sup>

In terms of the actual analysis, the DCA follows a typical multilevel discourse-historical analysis.<sup>72</sup> Therein, at first, the entry-level thematic analysis is usually

62 Reinhard Heinisch, “Success in Opposition—Failure in Government: Exploring the Performance of the Austrian Freedom Party and other European Right-Wing Populist Parties in Public Office,” *West European Politics* 26, no. 3 (2003): 91–130, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402380312331280608>.

63 Philip Rathgeb, “Makers against Takers: The Socio-Economic Ideology and Policy of the Austrian Freedom Party,” *West European Politics* 44, no. 3 (2021): 635–660, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2020.1720400>.

64 Bernhard Forchtner, Michał Krzyżanowski, and Ruth Wodak, “Mediatization, Right-Wing Populism and Political Campaigning: The Case of the Austrian Freedom Party,” in *Media Talk and Political Elections in Europe and America*, eds. Mats Ekström and Andrew Tolson (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013): 205–228.

65 “Austria—National Parliament Voting Intention,” in *Politico—Poll of Polls* (2024) <https://www.politico.eu/europe-poll-of-polls/austria/>.

66 Krzyżanowski, *The Discursive Construction of European Identities*; Martin Reisigl, “The Discourse-Historical Approach,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Critical Discourse Studies*, eds. John Richardson and John Flowerdew (London: Routledge, 2018): 44–59.

67 Reinhart Koselleck, *Vergangene Zukunft: Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1979); Reinhart Koselleck, *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing History, Spacing Concepts*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).

68 Jan Iversen, “Text, Discourse, Concept: Approaches to Textual Analysis,” *Kontur* 7 (2003): 60–69, [https://kontur.au.dk/fileadmin/www.kontur.au.dk/OLD\\_ISSUES/pdf/kontur\\_07/jan\\_iversen.pdf](https://kontur.au.dk/fileadmin/www.kontur.au.dk/OLD_ISSUES/pdf/kontur_07/jan_iversen.pdf); Jan Iversen, “About Key Concepts and How to Study Them,” *Contributions to the History of Concepts* 6, no. 1 (2011): 65–88, <https://doi.org/10.3167/choc.2011.060104>; Hagen Schulz-Forberg, *Zero Hours: Conceptual Insecurities and New Beginnings in the Interwar Period* (Brussels: PIE-Peter Lang, 2013); Schulz-Forberg, “The Spatial and Temporal Layers of Global History”; Schulz-Forberg, “Crisis and Continuity.”

69 Krzyżanowski, “From Anti-Immigration and Nationalist Revisionism to Islamophobia.”

70 Krzyżanowski and Krzyżanowska, “Narrating the ‘New Normal’ or Pre-Legitimising Media Control?”

71 Krzyżanowski, “‘Brexit’ and the Imaginary of ‘Crisis.’”

72 Krzyżanowski, *The Discursive Construction of European Identities*, chap. 2.



performed in order to map the text-semantic aspects of the contents of discourse (and devise relevant discourse topics) before moving on to the in-depth analysis that covers a variety of discursive strategies including, centrally, various argumentation frames (summarized via different *topoi*). At the intersection of these levels, yet mainly while drawing on the in-depth analysis which is also the main focus of our examination below, the key aim is to explore the main arguments in the discourse surrounding the concept of family. This results in empirically forming the concept's semantic field: that is, a cumulative map of thematic-argumentative connections which are formed in the process of relating the central or basic concept in question to its sister- or counter-concepts that would either help, respectively, to particularize or oppose its meaning.

### Analysis

The FPÖ's approach to conceptualizing the family as well as wider gender relationships embodied by the family's sister concepts has, especially in recent decades, remained more or less consequently framed by the party's wider far-right and ethno-nationalist stance anchored in a rather set number of issues and ideas.<sup>73</sup> Among these, there have been, for example: definitions of family as such, especially via strictly heteronormative ideas of partnerships and traditional ideas, in addition to criticizing homosexuality and same-sex relationships and/or foregrounding (though in many cases rather cursorily) family- and elderly-related welfare provisions.

In recent years, this catalog has also been extended by the idea of women's rights, often subsumed to a wider gender equality which, as has been shown extensively before,<sup>74</sup> has long been in focus of the FPÖ as the notion enabling, among other things, the party's anti-multiculturalist and especially more recent Islamophobic rhetoric (via arguments wherein, for example, Islam would be criticized for disregarding women's rights, including in such practices as wearing headscarves, etc.). In many cases above, however, once redefined and "flipsided" in their meanings, many family-related notions would tend to be used in a rather path-dependent way: they would mainly be used nominally or figuratively (that is, just mentioned) before being purposefully misinterpreted.

In the current FPÖ Program (which has been in place with some modifications since 2011<sup>75</sup> and hence, also, despite its de facto evolution, maintaining an image of certain stability of views), the notion of family would be prominent on a par with the Party's wider self-presentation as a nativist party (traditionally self-defined as *Heimatpartei*). Indeed, throughout the document, the current FPÖ slogan describing the party as a "social homeland party" (*die soziale Heimatpartei*) would be repeated on each page of the program, while the front page would also include a statement that FPÖ's "Heart Beats in Red-White Red" (*Unser Herz schlägt rot-weiss-rot*), making reference to the Austrian red-white-red national flag often used in the party's political communication materials.

References to family as a concept first appear on page 3, where a presentation of a 10-point list of "Key points of freedomite politics" (*Leitsätze freiheitlicher Politik*) is presented. Therein, point 4 speaks specifically of family and defines this as a

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73 Carina Klammer and Judith Goetz, "Between German Nationalism and Anti-Muslim Racism: Representations of Gender in the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ)," in *Gender and Far Right Politics in Europe*, eds. Michaela Köttig, Renate Bitzan, and Andrea Pető (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017): 79–93.

74 Krzyżanowski, "From Anti-Immigration and Nationalist Revisionism to Islamophobia."

75 For details, see FPÖ Parteiprogramm (2023). <https://www.fpoe.at/en/themen/parteiprogramm/parteiprogramm-englisch>. Note that, apart from its program, the FPÖ also tends to use various programmatic documents as a guideline for its politicians and officials as far as implementation of the program and its key points. These include, for example, the Handbook of Freedomite Politics (*Handbuch Freiheitlicher Politik*: HFP), which we have already analyzed previously; see also Krzyżanowski, "From Anti-Immigration and Nationalist Revisionism to Islamophobia."

heteronormative construct, necessarily including children, as well as alluding to the role of the family as multi-generational. Specifically, it is argued that:

4. The family, as a partnership between a man and a woman with common children, is the natural nucleus that holds a functioning society together, and which, with the solidarity of the generations, underpins our sustainability.<sup>76</sup>

The above ideas are then also further developed/particularized in Part 4 of the program, corresponding with point 4 of the initial outline of “key points,” which is devoted specifically to “Family and Generations” (Familie und Generationen) and amounting to 1.5 pages.

There are, at first, two *topoi*: of *family as a foundation of a society* and of *family as a heteronormative construct*, which are further developed (see Figure 1 for key *topoi* and concepts used in relation to family in the document). The latter is emphasized from the outset, when the definition of family as a “partnership of man and woman” is repeatedly mentioned. This eventually leads to a statement, in the fifth paragraph of the section, that the FPÖ outwardly rejects “a separate legal institution for same-sex relations,” thus effectively building a heteronormative (and to some extent implicitly anti-homosexual) argument. Further to that, the previous focus on children is also redeployed to argue that “only partnerships between men and women provide our society with a wealth of children,” wherein children serve as a concept that pre-legitimizes the strictly heteronormative vision of family and allows for rejection of homosexuality on the one hand and of homosexual partnerships or marriages as “families” on the other.

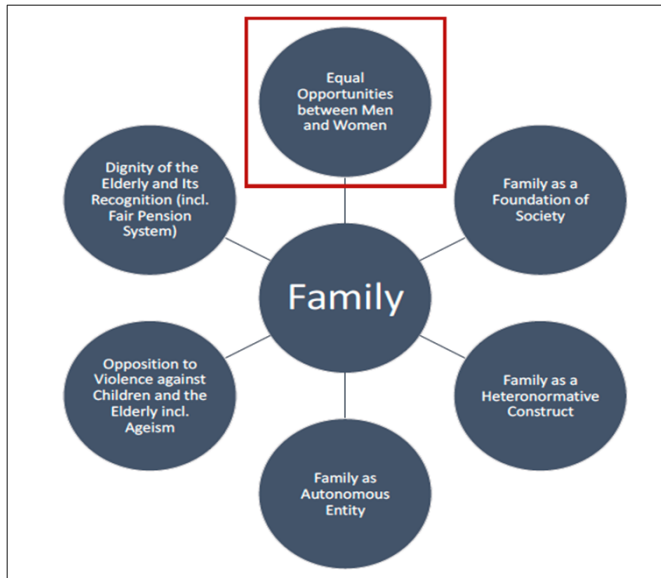


FIGURE 1: Semantic Field of the Concept of Family in the FPÖ Party Program.

<sup>76</sup> FPÖ Program, p. 3.

Symptomatically for the Party's programmatic as well as discursive ambivalence, the section devoted to family also includes a rather paradoxical discussion and, effectively, a redefinition of "equal opportunities between men and women" (within the set of arguments related to gender equality). Therefore, the FPÖ argues, it is "committed to" gender equality, in addition to further specifying where that equality should be evident (that is, in "mutual respect" and "fair incomes"). However, while the first two passages of discussion on gender relations pertain to the above, purely declarative and general statements, already the third paragraph of the section moves to a deeper redefinition of equal opportunities, and in particular their eventual implementation. It claims that:

We emphatically reject the preferential treatment of a gender to overcome actual or perceived discrimination. Statistical inequalities caused by a variety of factors cannot be evened out by wronging individual people. This is why we speak out against any quota regulation or "gender mainstreaming."<sup>77</sup>

Hence, one witnesses here a specific "conceptual flipsiding" wherein, on the one hand, gender equality is first nominally mentioned as a concept but, on the other, it is provided with understanding that is far from its equity-based understanding. This becomes even more obvious when the FPÖ makes further declarative statements on the one hand, while on the other rejecting any actual actions and policies that would enforce gender parity in the wider society, as is the case with the openly rejected "gender mainstreaming." More importantly, in order to fulfil the above argument, the evidence of gender inequalities in society is strongly trivialized and mitigated as resorting to "statistical inequalities" while implying the problem may, de facto, not exist and only be a case of a misperception drawn from statistical distributions. This is realized via a strategy of "indetermination,"<sup>78</sup> which effectively allows for diluting the problem by making its various aspects unspecific. Hence, we see the FPÖ arguing that potential gender inequalities are "caused by a variety of factors," and hence one also cannot apply any specific solutions (such as, for example, the said gender mainstreaming) to eradicate the problem.

While the remaining discussion in the FPÖ program is devoted to two *topoi*—one of *caring for children and the elderly in the context of intergenerational family contacts*, and another of *violence and age-based discrimination*), an interesting set of overall arguments still transpires through the remaining discussion in the "Family & Generations" section. On the one hand, the FPÖ styles itself as an "anti-discrimination" party, which, however, knowing the party's very persistent and long-term anti-pluralist stance, seems rather dubious and a clear case of intended, "calculated ambivalence."<sup>79</sup> Yet, as one eventually learns, said anti-discrimination is also, in addition, conceptually flipsided as it is mainly presented as an act of fighting discrimination against heterosexual families, thus resembling wider argumentative flipsides frames known from "anti-white racism."<sup>80</sup> The same also applies to several arguments in favor of a variety of welfare provisions, which, communicating the FPÖ's apparently pro-welfare and pro-inclusivity stance, on the one hand emerges as a set of unsubstantiated flipsides (especially knowing the party's usually nativist welfare-chauvinist stance) while at the same time constituting the entry point into neoliberal pre-legitimation (explicitly mentioning "corporate and private pension planning").<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> FPÖ Program, p. 8.

<sup>78</sup> Theo van Leeuwen, *Discourse and Practice* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

<sup>79</sup> Wodak, "Populist Discourses."

<sup>80</sup> Sengul, "It's OK to Be White."

<sup>81</sup> FPÖ Program, 9.

## **Conclusions**

Our analysis emphasizes that, as a political-discursive strategy, conceptual flipsiding requires close theoretical and empirical attention, given its pervasiveness and the often pivotal role in the contemporary normalization of anti- and post-democratic thinking.<sup>82</sup> As our examination above shows, conceptual flipsiding is also a complex strategy which allows public proponents of illiberalism—including, most prominently, the far right—to deploy in their discourse a variety of concepts which, in their origins, are liberal-democratic and/or egalitarian yet are in the studied discourse being openly endowed with specifically illiberal and quasi-traditionalist as well as conservative meanings. As has been shown, concepts rarely undergo the flipsiding process in isolation and the process often affects wider or longer chains and conceptual constellations. Thereby, not only the major or central notions (in our case, the family) but also—or perhaps especially—their key sister-concepts are endowed with new, illiberal meanings. This allows proponents of the illiberal stance to reverse meanings of not only isolated notions but also, effectively, of wider semantic fields of key social and political concepts.

A strategic nature of the conceptual flipsiding process highlighted in our analysis is particularly vital here. As we have shown, namely, the illiberal stance is recontextualized (in our case, by the far right) with the aim of deploying redefined concepts for pronouncedly political and ideological reasons and, first and foremost, in order to colonize concepts seen as vital entry points to related, wider areas of the social and political imagination. Therefore, as has been shown, the key concepts are often figuratively or nominally mentioned while being instrumentalized as entry points for challenging and opposing a number of further notions and ideas that do not align with the illiberal (including far-right) political-ideological catalog. In our case, the recurrent discursive focus on, among other things, gender and women's rights, same-sex relationships, etc., is emphasized in illiberal discourses to de facto strongly criticize those concepts and reject their liberal-democratic meanings.

The above, as has been shown, happens while deploying (at least initially and nominally) the concepts known to be associated with liberal-democratic thinking and hence in a strategy which not only redefines them but also, in doing so, effectively enables their takeover by the illiberal ideologies. This, crucially, poses many challenges as far possibilities of critically deconstructing and analyzing or possibly reversing this process. Namely, given that, the discourse in question still revolves around recognizable and widely acceptable notions, it also allows for new illiberal meanings to be accepted and normalized under the guise of acceptable ideas. This, consequently, hinders deconstruction of illiberal conceptual flipsiding which, effectively, hijacks the language once known to liberal democracy and its ideas/values and makes it increasingly difficult for its liberal-democratic understandings to be reinstated and brought back to the center of the public imagination.<sup>83</sup>

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82 Krzyżanowski et al., "Discourses and Practices of the 'New Normal'"; Laruelle, "Illiberalism."

83 Research presented in this article was funded by a Swedish Research Council (Vetenskapsrådet) "Immigration and the Normalization of Racism: Discursive Shifts in Swedish Politics and Media 2010–22" grant (PI Michał Krzyżanowski, Uppsala University, grant number 2019-03354).



# Illiberal Ideas: An Anatomy of Intellectual Historians and Illiberalism

MATTHIJS LOK

## Abstract

*In this contribution, I discuss the complex role of intellectual historians in the study of antiliberalism and illiberalism. I briefly explore the politics of intellectual history, focusing on Stephen Holmes' book *Anatomy of Antiliberalism* and on the rupture and appropriation of conservative ideological heritages by contemporary self-styled national conservatives. The subsequent section deals with the European amnesia of traditions of illiberalism. I argue that illiberalism in the European context should be studied from a longer historical perspective, beginning in the Napoleonic era, than just the post-1989 period.*

Keywords: conservatism, antiliberalism, traditionalism, intellectual history, Europe

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## Illiberal Ideas: Introduction<sup>1</sup>

The urgency of studying the ideas of the antiliberals and illiberals, has been underlined by recent scholarship. For a long time, studying antiliberal or illiberal ideas was regarded as something of a contradiction in terms. A few decades or so ago, this view started to shift. The intellectual world of late-nineteenth-century radical nationalists and fascists is increasingly the focus of research projects.<sup>2</sup> Also, in the study of populism, neoconservatives, and the alt-right, academics increasingly focus on the concepts and the rhetoric used and illiberal worldviews, and do not just see these movements as the result of social factors to be studied quantitatively.<sup>3</sup> Marlene Laruelle, moreover, has described illiberalism as an “ideological universe” and has argued that the illiberal ideas themselves should be taken seriously.<sup>4</sup>

Finally, it has now been acknowledged that illiberalism does not only manifest itself as an anti-elitist element of populism, but that also academic and intellectual forms of illiberalism exist as well. These educated illiberals do not only attack educational institutions but aim to build their own academic and pedagogical institutions themselves, as an alternative to the existing academic and educational institutions deemed too liberal.<sup>5</sup>

In this contribution, I discuss the complex role of intellectual historians in the study of antiliberalism and illiberalism. My ambition is not primarily to provide an overview of antiliberal ideas themselves, but to focus more generally on the political relationship between intellectual history, antiliberalism and illiberalism. In the next sections, I briefly explore the politics of intellectual history, focusing on the continuities and discontinuities in conservative ideas in Europe.<sup>6</sup> The subsequent section deals with the importance of studying traditions of illiberalism. In the conclusion I summarize the uses of intellectual historians for the study of antiliberalism and illiberalism.

Antiliberalism, in my view, overlaps in many ways with illiberalism, but also differs from it because it represents a more explicitly articulated stand against liberal ideas

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1 I thank Léonie de Jonge, Valentin Behr, and the anonymous peer reviewer for their useful comments and feedback, and Marlene Laruelle for her encouragement. An earlier version of this article was originally written for a workshop on the ethics of researching the far right, organized by Gulnaz Sibgatullina, Marlene Laruelle, and Luiza Bialasiewicz at the University of Amsterdam on June 16, 2023.

2 The ideological world of fascists and national socialists was taken seriously in the work of Roger Griffin, for instance, in his *Modernism and Fascism: The Sense of a Beginning under Mussolini and Hitler* (London: Palgrave, 2007). For a study of the ideological world of late-nineteenth-century German radical nationalists, see Peter Walkenhorst, *Nation–Volk–Rasse: Radikaler Nationalismus im Deutsche Kaiserreich 1890–1914* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 2007).

3 A selection: Jan-Werner Müller, *What Is Populism?* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 7–40; Benjamin Teitelbaum, *War for Eternity: The Return of Traditionalism and the Rise of the Populist Right* (London: Penguin, 2021); George Hawley, *Making Sense of the Alt Right* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019). By contrast, an example of a quantitative sociological study of illiberalism is that of Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, *Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

4 Marlene Laruelle, “Illiberalism: A Conceptual Introduction,” *East European Politics* 38, no. 2 (June 2022): 303–327, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2022.2037079>.

5 Anja Giudici, “Seeds of Authoritarian Opposition: Far-Right Education Politics in Post-War Europe,” *European Educational Research Journal* 20, no. 2 (March 2021): 121–142, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1474904120947893>; Dorit Geva and Felipe G. Santos, “Europe’s Far-Right Educational Projects and Their Vision for the International Order,” *International Affairs* 97, no. 5 (September 2021): 1395–1414, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iab112>. I thank Léonie de Jonge, at the University of Groningen, for these references. On the varieties of contemporary illiberalism, see Mihai Varga and Aron Buzogány, “The Two Faces of the ‘Global Right’: Revolutionary Conservatives and National-Conservatives,” *Critical Sociology* 48, no. 6 (September 2022): 1089–1107, <https://doi.org/10.1177/08969205211057020>.

6 For more on conservative Europeanism, see Matthijs Lok, *Europe against Revolution: Conservatism, Enlightenment and the Making of the Past* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), 25–30.

(whatever their alleged contents).<sup>7</sup> Illiberal regimes, in contrast to antiliberal ones, can sometimes hide under a liberal ideology, and therefore not be simply labeled as antiliberal without sufficient explanation. Antiliberalism, moreover, is at once a new ideology that came to fruition in the early 2000s but can also be considered as a resurrection of older ideas and traditions in a new context which can be dated back to the nineteenth and, perhaps, even the eighteenth century. Also, as we shall see, not all antiliberals according to the above definition have defended national sovereignty and the national state.

Antiliberalism, moreover, can potentially be studied purely within the realm of the history of ideas. Illiberalism, by contrast, should by definition be studied at the crossroads of ideology and practical politics. I would therefore propose to use here the concept of “traditions of illiberalism.” By using the word “tradition,” I would like to avoid the idea of a simple continuity between contemporary and older forms of illiberalism. Every historical moment has created its own unique form of illiberalism. At the same time, I argue that illiberalism has also made use of historical traditions and has perhaps also been constrained by them. Of course, the concept of tradition is itself to a certain extent also an illiberal notion, as, for instance, Mark Sedgwick has shown in his study of René Guénon and the influence of his school of “traditionalism” on the illiberal right.<sup>8</sup>

### **The Anatomy of Illiberalism**

A complex relationship exists between intellectual historians and the study of antiliberalism and illiberalism.<sup>9</sup> Far from being a distant and impartial object of scientific study, intellectual historians are usually profoundly involved in one way or another in the struggle for or against antiliberalism. This complexity is demonstrated by the book *The Anatomy of Antiliberalism*, first published in 1993, just a few years after the fall of the Berlin Wall.<sup>10</sup> This work, which has since then become a classic in the field, was written by the American political scientist and law professor Stephen Holmes.

*The Anatomy of Antiliberalism* has a dual purpose. On the one hand, the book provides a chronology of antiliberal ideas from the late eighteenth century to the late twentieth century, based on selections of a few thinkers. Holmes identified the idea of a “cultural crisis,” a pathology allegedly caused by liberal modernity, as the core of antiliberal thought.<sup>11</sup> Liberalism in the eyes of its critics inevitably led to the dissolution of all social bonds, the destruction of morals, and the decline of culture and civilization, which could be found in all his case studies. This idea he traced to the writings of the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century counter-revolutionary

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7 I thus disagree with the temporal distinction made in the *Oxford Handbook of Illiberalism* between an older and more historical antiliberalism and a contemporary illiberalism. I believe both versions can exist simultaneously, to a certain extent overlapping but not entirely. Marlene Laruelle, ed. *The Oxford Handbook of Illiberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024).

8 Mark Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World: Traditionalism and the Secret Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century* (Oxford University Press, 2004).

9 Intellectual historians study the history of ideas in a broad sense. For an English interpretation of the field: Richard Whatmore, *What Is Intellectual History?* (London: Polity, 2015). On the study of intellectual history in the various Western countries, see Darrin McMahon and Samuel Moyn, eds., *Rethinking Modern European Intellectual History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), and on the more recent global approach: Samuel Moyn and Andrew Sartori (eds.), *Global Intellectual history* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

10 Stephen Holmes, *The Anatomy of Antiliberalism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993). An update of Holmes’ argument can be found in his contribution in András Sajó, Renáta Uitz, and Stephen Holmes, eds., *The Routledge Handbook of Illiberalism* (Milton Park, UK: Routledge, 2022).

11 Holmes, *The Anatomy of Antiliberalism*, 5.

Joseph de Maistre, via the German political philosopher Carl Schmitt, to the critics of the 1968 revolution in the 1970s and 1980s British and American academia such as Alasdair MacIntyre and Christopher Lasch.<sup>12</sup>

Holmes' work can be considered a trailblazer in the academic study of antiliberalism, marking the topic as field of scholarly enquiry. Since the publication of Holmes's study, an increasing stream of publications have appeared of detailed case studies on historical antiliberalism from all over the world and all periods of history, no doubt reflecting political developments since the 1990s. Antiliberalism has so far been studied from medieval Spanish scholastic thought to American evangelism in the twentieth century.<sup>13</sup> An important more recent contribution is the edited volume *Antiliberal Europe* (2014).<sup>14</sup> Dieter Gosewinkel, the editor, rightly argues that European integration is usually regarded as an exclusive liberal project. *Antiliberal Europe*, by contrast, explores the European ideals of anti-modernist Catholics, conservatives, extreme rightists as well as communists, arguing that antiliberal concepts in twentieth century Europe were not the counterpart to, but instead part of the process of European integration.

At the same time, more than thirty years have passed since its publication of the *Anatomy of Antiliberalism*, and particular aspects of the book now seem outdated. First of all, Holmes made a small selection of a few great (male) minds from Europe and the United States and their works, to a large extent ignoring their historical and intellectual context, as advocated by the Cambridge school of political thought.<sup>15</sup> Secondly, he overlooked the global dimensions of the antiliberal tradition by exclusively focusing on the West. Thirdly, he considered anti-liberalism a homogenous tradition with a permanent ideological core, clearly separated from liberalism and other ideological traditions. Recent work by international historians, by contrast, is on the crossroads between liberal and illiberal traditions, underlining the porousness of ideologies and intellectual traditions.<sup>16</sup>

Holmes' work, moreover, aims to be more than just a history of antiliberal ideas. The second part of the book contains a systematic refutation of the antiliberal ideas outlined in the first part. Holmes selects different criticisms of liberalism, such as the atomization of society, the alleged indifference towards the common good, the eclipse of authority, the sacrifice of the public realm to the private, the supposed moral skepticism, and the exclusive focus on the economic.<sup>17</sup> Holmes is here not a merely a historian or a researcher but very explicitly the judge of these ideas as well. One could admonish Holmes for his lack of historicity and impartiality. It is also true that his explicitly anachronistic and activist stance perhaps fits better in the academic scholarship of the 2020s than in that of the 1990s. Moreover, in the 1990s, the triumphal decade of liberal ideas, studying antiliberalism was perhaps a

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<sup>12</sup> Holmes, *The Anatomy of Antiliberalism*, "Part I: The Antiliberals," 13–186.

<sup>13</sup> Michael D'Emic, "Market Liberalism and Antiliberalism in Spanish Late Scholastic Treatises (1541–1547)," *Journal of Markets & Morality* 15, no. 1 (Spring 2012), no DOI found; Axel R. Schäfer, *American Evangelicals and the 1960s* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2013).

<sup>14</sup> Dieter Gosewinkel, ed., *Anti-Liberal Europe: A Neglected Story of Europeanization* (New York: Berghahn, 2014).

<sup>15</sup> Quentin Skinner, "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas," *History and Theory* 8, no. 1 (1969), 3–53. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2504188>.

<sup>16</sup> See Philippa Hetherington and Glenda Sluga, "Liberal and Illiberal Internationalisms," *Journal of World History* 31, no. 1 (March 2020): 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jwh.2020.0000>. See also Marjet Brolsma, Robin de Bruin, Stefan Couperus, Rachel Johnston-White, and Matthijs Lok, eds., *Beyond Left and Right? Antiliberalism in the Twentieth Century* (Abingdon: Routledge, forthcoming).

<sup>17</sup> Holmes, *The Anatomy of Antiliberalism*, 187–256.



more academic and somewhat exotic project for specialists. In hindsight, Holmes has certainly proven to have been ahead of the curve.

Holmes is an example of a scholar studying antiliberal ideas for the clear purpose of fighting them and undermining their alleged dangerous social influence. However, many intellectual historians past and present, by contrast, have used intellectual history to support and articulate antiliberal views. Holmes' antiliberal poster boys Maistre, Schmitt, and Leo Strauss were, to a certain extent, intellectual historians too. They used the history of philosophy for their own counter-revolutionary and antiliberal political views. Moreover, contemporary far-right politicians pose as intellectuals and as historians, referring to great ideas in the past as a fundament for their contemporary political views. Antiquity, the Middle Ages, or the Renaissance are championed by them as the true core of European culture, which is being destroyed by progressive liberal modernity.<sup>18</sup> The Enlightenment is currently perhaps the most contested part of the European past, vilified by some conservatives as the root of all evil, whereas other illiberals claim that enlightened progress was only possible in Western Europe, and cannot be exported to the rest of the world.<sup>19</sup> The question can thus be posed whether it is even possible to impartially write an intellectual history of antiliberalism and illiberalism, let alone its desirability.

### **Conservative Histories**

Since 2000, important new studies have also been published by intellectual historians on the history of conservatism. This topic is of particular relevance for the study of illiberalism, as many illiberal and populist politicians on both sides of the Atlantic have styled themselves since the 2000s as national conservatives. A good example is the American Edmund Burke Foundation, established in Washington, DC, in 2019, which has organized various conferences for national conservatives in Europe and the United States, attended by, among others, European illiberal politicians such as Viktor Orbán, Giorgia Meloni, and Marion Maréchal–Le Pen. The members of the Foundation “envison a protracted effort to recover and reconsolidate the rich tradition of national conservative thought as an intellectually serious alternative to the excesses of purist libertarianism, and in stark opposition to political theories grounded in race.”<sup>20</sup>

The chairman of the foundation is the American-Israeli political philosopher Yoram Hazony (born in 1946). He published a book with the title *Conservatism: A Rediscovery*, in 2022, in which he drew on the Anglo-Saxon past in the construction of a twenty-first century conservative ideology.<sup>21</sup> The Dutch right-wing maverick politician and Member of Parliament Thierry Baudet, to give another example, also started his career as a publicist on the conservative tradition in the eighteenth

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18 A good example is the Dutch politician and leader of the Forum for Democracy party, Thierry Baudet, who has extensively published on the history of conservative ideas. See, for instance, the volumes he edited with Michiel Visser, *Revolutionair verval en de conservatieve vooruitgang in de achttiende en negentiende eeuw* (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 2010).

19 For instance, the Dutch conservative intellectual Andreas Kinninger vilifies the Enlightenment. See, for instance, his *The Geography of Good and Evil* (Wilmington, Del.: ISI Books, 2009), whereas his Leiden law colleague and conservative politician Paul Cliteur champions the Enlightenment as a European triumph.

20 “Overview,” National Conservatism, accessed May 8, 2023, <https://nationalconservatism.org/>. As is also written on the website: “The Edmund Burke Foundation is a public affairs institute founded in January 2019 with the aim of strengthening the principles of national conservatism in Western and other democratic countries.” National Conservatism is a project of the Edmund Burke Foundation; see “Home,” The Edmund Burke Foundation, accessed May 13, 2024, <https://burke.foundation/>.

21 Yoram Hazony, *Conservatism: A Rediscovery* (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 2022).

and nineteenth century and as a historian of ideas.<sup>22</sup> These antiliberal right-wing politicians and ideologues use the label of conservative to downplay the radical nature of their policies by calling themselves moderate conservatives. Moreover, in this way, they are able to situate themselves in a venerable and centuries-old tradition, inhabited by respectable thinkers such as the eighteenth-century Member of the British Parliament Edmund Burke (1729–1997), whose best-known work can be traced back to the late-eighteenth-century Counter-Revolution.

In contrast to what these twenty-first-century politicians and their ideologues suggest, however, conservatism is, from a historical perspective, a slippery and paradoxical concept. In the past centuries, a variety of parties, politicians, and ideologies with radically different agendas have been categorized or have assumed the label of conservative. Even within the West, the word “conservatism” has traditionally had different meanings in the USA, the United Kingdom, and continental Europe. The word entered modern political discourse ironically as *nom de plume* of moderate revolutionaries in the Thermidor phase of the French Revolution (1795–1799). Whereas in the United Kingdom, and to a lesser extent the USA, the word “conservative” is a neutral or even positive name, in continental Europe being traditionally conservative is negative concept which politicians for most of the nineteenth and twentieth century were desperate to avoid (for instance, preferring the label of “Christian Democrat” instead after World War II).<sup>23</sup>

In contrast to older studies, which were often written from a sympathetic and defensive stance vis-à-vis conservatism and counter-revolution, these newer academic studies are often very critical of the idea of a continuous conservative tradition clearly demarcated from liberal and socialist ideological traditions.<sup>24</sup> A good example is the case of Edmund Burke. Burke, as we have observed, is usually acclaimed by politicians and thinkers of the right as the father of an antiliberal conservative tradition. However, as books by English intellectual historians Richard Bourke and Emily Jones have demonstrated, the conservative Burke is above all an invention of the late-nineteenth century and twentieth century.<sup>25</sup> The eighteenth-century Burke was not a Tory but a Whig politician, inspired first of all by the enlightened spirit of his age. He was critical of the abuses of the British imperial authorities in India and in Ireland, if not of imperialism itself. Only at the very end of his life did he turn against the French revolutionaries, because he felt the radical nature of the Revolution threatened the enlightened progress and rule of law in Europe.<sup>26</sup>

Studies like these by Jones and Bourke are good examples of what intellectual historians can do when carefully studying and describing the writings of an author

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22 Baudet and Visser, *Revolutionair verval*. On the new Dutch right, see Merijn Oudenampsen, *The Rise of the Dutch New Right: An Intellectual History of the Rightward Shift in Dutch Politics* (Milton Park, Abingdon: Routledge, 2021).

23 For a recent overview of these traditions in the USA, Britain, France, and Germany, see Edmund Fawcett, *Conservatism: The Fight for a Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020). Unfortunately, Fawcett only studies conservative traditions within the national context, not conservatism as an international or transnational phenomenon. See Matthijs Lok, Friedemann Pestel, and Juliette Reboul, *Cosmopolitan Conservatism: Countering Revolution in Transnational Networks, Ideas and Movements (c. 1700–1930)* (Leiden: Brill, 2021).

24 Richard Bourke, “What Is Conservatism? History, Ideology and Party,” *European Journal of Political Theory* 17, no. 4 (October 2018): 449–475, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1474885118782384>.

25 Richard Bourke, *Empire and Revolution: The Political Life of Edmund Burke* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015); Emily Jones, *Edmund Burke and the Invention of Modern Conservatism, 1830–1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

26 Bourke, *Empire and Revolution*, 851–920.

and politician. On the basis of painstaking research using original sources, they are able to explain why certain allegedly conservative and antiliberal icons are later fabrications. Similar well-documented and well-researched studies have appeared by historians who question the reactionary, counter-enlightened, and antiliberal character of continental nineteenth-century conservative icons such as Joseph de Maistre, Friedrich von Gentz, and Clemens von Metternich.<sup>27</sup>

Similar to their twenty-first-century counterparts, eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century conservative authors fought over what it meant to be European and the character of European identity and its past. Already in the eighteenth century an idea was constructed that Europe was in decline as a result the corruption brought about by proto-liberal and enlightened ideas of the French philosophes. The counter-revolutionary Europeanists agreed that Europe was in dire need of spiritual and moral regeneration.<sup>28</sup>

However, the counterrevolutionaries of the eighteenth century differed in fundamental ways from the politicians and publicists who claim to follow in their footsteps in the twenty-first century. To begin with, these counter-revolutionaries did not just simply adopt the Enlightenment and its legacy, but appropriated it for their own agenda. Moreover, the authors were definitely not nationalists, and they would have been horrified to be categorized in the tradition of national conservatism. Overall, they rejected nationalism as an excessive form of patriotism which belonged to the radical wings of the barbaric French Revolution. Instead, they opted for a moderate cosmopolitanism, in which universal Christian citizenship was combined with loyalty to region and locality.<sup>29</sup> Instead of attacking immoral elites, moreover, these authors were afraid of the destruction of traditional institutions and authority, as well as the undermining of social hierarchy.<sup>30</sup>

In contrast to the views of many new secular Christians in Western Europe, religion, in particular Catholicism, was crucial for the regeneration of a corrupted and exhausted European civilization. I suspect they would have observed with disgust the glorification of the nation state and the will of the people by contemporary national conservatives. They would probably have understood this as the final triumph of the French Revolution and its legacy, and the death of the historical European civilization they loved and cherished. As Joseph de Maistre wrote somewhat melodramatically at the end of his life: “I am dying with Europe; I am in good company.”<sup>31</sup>

## **Illiberal Amnesia**

Laruelle, as we have seen, defines illiberalism as “a backlash against today’s liberalism in all its varied scripts.” It should be pointed out, however, that illiberal and antiliberal ideas and practices have not appeared *ex nihilo* in Europe after the fall of

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27 Carolina Armenteros, *The French Idea of History: Joseph de Maistre and His Heirs 1794–1854* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011); Raphaël Cahen, *Friedrich Gentz, 1764–1832: Penseur post-Lumières et acteur du nouvel ordre européen* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017); Wolfram Siemann, *Metternich: Strategist and Visionary* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2023).

28 Lok, *Europe against Revolution*.

29 Matthijs Lok, Friedemann Pestel, and Juliette Reboul, *Cosmopolitan Conservatism: Countering Revolution in Transnational Networks, Ideas and Movements* (Leiden: Brill, 2021).

30 Lok, *Europe against Revolution*, 260–263.

31 Cited in Armenteros, *The French Idea of History*, 30.

the Berlin Wall, as many authors seem to suggest.<sup>32</sup> Already during and after earlier revolutions in European history, illiberal and antiliberal backlashes manifested which articulated their own illiberal and antiliberal ideas. The European illiberal tradition is still mostly overlooked by contemporary supporters of the project of European integration. A visit (in January 2023, at least) to the permanent exhibition of the House of European History, situated next to the European Parliament, will teach the visitor that modern Europe is above all the result of the subsequent progressive movements of humanism, the Enlightenment, the French Revolution, liberalism, and industrial modernity (with its darker sides of imperialism and ecological costs). Europe's anti-enlightened, counter-revolutionary and illiberal history (before 1933, at least) is mostly neglected by the curators of this museum.

A few examples of illiberal and antiliberal ideas before 1989 will follow in this section. In many ways, the first articulations of a critique of liberal modernity, so prevalent in the rhetoric of today's antiliberals in Europe and outside it, can be found in the critique by Catholic and Protestant apologists of Enlightened philosophy in the eighteenth century. These apologists did not use the world "liberal," but "libertinage" for the ideas they deemed atheist, immoral, and dangerous. The worst fears of the critics of philosophy came true, when they observed in the coming of the French Revolution the inevitable outcome of the spread of enlightened ideas.<sup>33</sup> Each of the great revolutions of 1789, 1830, 1848, 1871, and 1919 resulted in its own backlash with its own articulation of illiberal and antiliberal ideas, partly building on the vocabulary of older counterrevolutions.

It is certainly not true to state that liberalism is essentially a Western European idea, and that Europe's East or the East itself stand for illiberal and antiliberal ideas. Perhaps somewhat surprisingly for students of illiberalism, French history, for instance, can be considered a gold mine for studying the history of illiberal experiments. In the past centuries, French models exerted an enormous influence on the spread of illiberal ideas, as well as on liberal ones.<sup>34</sup> Perhaps the first modern illiberal politician, according to the definition of Marlene Laruelle, was none other than Emperor Napoleon I (who ruled from 1804 to 1814, and briefly again in the spring of 1815). To stabilize the French Revolution and prevent a return of the revolutionary radicalism of 1792–'94, Napoleon's attitude *vis-à-vis* the revolutionary heritage, perhaps not unlike that of twentieth-century illiberal politicians, was ambiguous. On the one hand, he secured the civil equality of the French male citizen, an important legacy of the Revolution ending centuries of feudal civic inequality. On the other hand, he took away the political and democratic rights of these same French citizens in a backlash against revolutionary democracy. However, he did not destroy representative institutions such as the Legislative Chamber (*Corps législatif*) and the Senate but made them powerless and completely dependent upon his will instead. In the name of safeguarding revolutionary freedom and equality, he founded an authoritarian empire, at least in theory ruled by one man.<sup>35</sup> This pattern of securing elements of the liberal state while bending them in an illiberal manner, in

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32 Anne Applebaum, *Twilight of Democracy: The Seductive Lure of Authoritarianism* (New York: Doubleday, 2020); Edward Luce, *The Retreat of Western Liberalism* (London: Abacus, 2017); Ben Rodes, *After the Fall: The Rise of Authoritarianism in the World We've Made* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021).

33 See, for instance, Darrin McMahon, *Enemies of the Enlightenment: The French Counter-Enlightenment and the Making of Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

34 On the lost French influence on the formation of modern liberalism, see Helena Rosenblatt, *The Lost History of Liberalism: From Ancient Rome to the Twenty-First Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).

35 On Napoleon I and his Empire, a huge literature exists: two recent examples are the biography by Michael Broers, *Napoleon: Soldier of Destiny*, vol I, and *Napoleon: The Spirit of the Age*, vol. II (London: Faber and Faber, 2014–2020); and Thierry Lentz, *Nouvelle histoire du premier empire*, 2 vol. (Paris: Fayard, 2002–2004).

the name of security, stability, and the national interest, would find many imitators in later centuries.

An excellent example of the transfer of illiberal tradition in more than one way was the foundation of the so-called Second Empire by Napoleon's nephew (the son of his brother, the king of Holland) in 1852. Napoleon III's empire can be regarded as both a backlash against and as a product of the 1848 liberal revolutions.<sup>36</sup> Like many illiberal regimes in history, Napoleon III's had come been installed by popular vote. And, like his uncle, Napoleon III did not dismantle France's republican institutions but transformed them to suit his own illiberal and authoritarian preferences. Tellingly, the concept of "liberal democracy" was first coined in France in the 1860s by those in opposition to the policies of Napoleon III.<sup>37</sup> The Second Empire was inspired by the model of the Grand Empire, but also differed from it in fundamental ways. In contrast to his uncle, Napoleon III had a less military style of governing—surrounding himself with businessmen rather than generals, and combining illiberal politics with economic and social modernization projects such as the boulevards of Paris.<sup>38</sup>

In several ways, Napoleon III's empire fits remarkably well into Laruelle's definition of illiberalism.<sup>39</sup> his was founded on the ideology of the Napoleonic myth, preserving the revolutionary legacy of equality through an authoritarian state, and with the emperor as the representation of the will of the French people.<sup>40</sup> His rule presented a backlash against the revolutionaries and republicans of the 1848 revolution. Moreover, Napoleon III proposed solutions that were "majoritarian, nation-centric and sovereigntist, favouring hierarchy and homogeneity," in contrast to the multinational and diverse empire of his uncle's. Finally, Napoleon III replaced the political debate in parliament with the political cult of the emperor Napoleon and the depoliticized glory of the French imperial nation, as well as the cult of economic progress and technological modernity. Napoleon III's regime, despite its collapse in 1871, presented a model for other illiberal forms of rule, such as the government of Germany's Chancellor Otto von Bismarck.

The tradition of illiberal politics survived into Europe's twentieth century. In his magisterial handbook, *Dark Continent*, British historian Mark Mazower has convincingly pointed out how fascism in many ways did not present a rupture with preceding liberal regimes, but was an extreme version of its politics.<sup>41</sup> Far less studied is also the fact that the interbellum of the World Wars witnessed not only the rise of the antiliberal ideologies of Nazism, fascism, and Communism, but also the surge of various forms of illiberal conservative regimes all over the continent that replaced the parliamentary regimes that had been installed after World War I. Salazar's Portugal and Franco's Spain were the longest-lived examples of this interbellum

36 On the 1848 revolutions: Christopher Clark, *Revolutionary Spring. Fighting for a new World* (London: Allen Lane, 2023).

37 Helena Rosenblatt, "The History of Illiberalism," in Andrés Sajó, Renáta Uitz, and Stephen Holmes, eds., *The Routledge Handbook of Illiberalism* (Milton Park, UK: Routledge, 2022): 16–32.

38 Frédéric Bluche, *Le Bonapartisme: Aux origines de la droite autoritaire* (Paris: Nouvelles éditions latines, 1980); Roger Price, *The Second French Empire: An Anatomy of Political Power* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

39 Pierre Rosanvallon has been portraying the Second Empire as the ideal type of illiberalism since the 2000s: Pierre Rosanvallon, *La démocratie inachevée: Histoire de la souveraineté du peuple en France* (Paris: Gallimard, 2000).

40 On the Napoleonic myth, see Sudhir Hazareesingh, *The Legend of Napoleon* (London: Granta, 2004).

41 Mark Mazower, *Dark Continent: Europe's Twentieth Century* (London: Penguin, 1998).

illiberalism.<sup>42</sup> Moreover, Klaus Kiran Patel in his book on the history of European integration, *Project Europe*, has argued that only in the late 1970s did liberal values come to be expressed as fundamental to the European project.<sup>43</sup> In this light, the new illiberal regimes of Hungary and Poland of the 2010s can be seen as part of a longer pan-European illiberal tradition, and not just as revivals of a typical East European experience of empire and Communism.

The interesting question is, of course, why the illiberal side of European history has been forgotten or ignored. This “illiberal amnesia,” could be observed in the exposition of the House of European History in Brussels, as described above. As Martin Conway has described, the liberal-democratic narrative of European history was a postwar war invention, useful in the liberal-democratic reconstruction of Europe after World War II, and reinforced by the 1989 fall of the Berlin Wall and the enlargement of the European Union with the accession of several of the former Communist countries. As he wrote: “democracy became during the second half of the twentieth century something that Europeans told one another about themselves, and thereby about their own collective identity.”<sup>44</sup> The liberal narrative of the European past and the forgetting of its more illiberal aspects benefitted the building of liberal-democratic consensus in the postwar decades.

### Conclusion: The Uses of Intellectual History

The preceding sections have attempted to underline the crucial role of intellectual historians in the study of antiliberalism and illiberalism. One important reason is that ideas past and present matter to contemporary illiberals themselves. They often call themselves national conservatives, as we have seen, to underscore their respectable ideological inheritance and historical lineages, as well as to downplay their radicalism. Secondly, illiberal and antiliberal politics and ideologies do not come from nowhere, but usually build on older forms and traditions from Europe and the West itself, which are adapted to new contexts. This illiberal side of European history and memory (at least before 1933) is often overlooked or downplayed by proponents of the project of European integration. Thirdly, intellectual history is often neither impartial nor innocent: usually, the intellectual historians are closely involved and entangled with their subject, acting as supporters or detractors of illiberal ideas, or even both at the same time.

My own political role as an intellectual historian, to conclude this contribution, is thus primarily to study the ideas and political languages articulated by those who can be classified as antiliberals or illiberals, in order to hold up to scrutiny their claims of intellectual authority and ideological inheritance. By carefully excavating the origins and instrumentalization of key notions past and present, such as freedom, nation, or state, they lose much of their self-evidence and power. Moreover, by pointing to the differences between past and present understandings of political concepts, alternative interpretations can be found to those in currently illiberal as well as neoliberal use.

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42 António Costa Pinto, ed., *An Authoritarian Third Way in the Era of Fascism: Diffusion, Models and Interaction in Europe and Latin America* (Milton Park, UK: Routledge, 2022); Tara Zahra, *Against the World: Anti-Globalism and Mass Politics between the World Wars* (New York: Norton, 2023).

43 Kiran Klaus Patel, *Project Europe: A History* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

44 Martin Conway, *Western Europe's Democratic Age, 1945–1968* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020), 305; cf. Martin Conway and V. Depkat, “Towards a European History of the Discourse of Democracy: Discussing Democracy in Western Europe, 1945–1960, in *Europeanisation in the Twentieth Century: Historical Approaches*, eds. M. Conway and K. Patel (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010): 132–156.

Finally, historians point to the “illiberal amnesia” that is underlying dominant narratives of European history, questioning the self-satisfied view that contemporary liberals have of the European past. At the same time, I firmly believe that it is of crucial importance not to disregard or ostracize these illiberal and antiliberal ideas and opinions, however repulsive they may seem at first sight. The task of historians is to study both the ideas we like and those we like least. One reason to do this is that social and liberal democracy will eventually become stronger when we take seriously the arguments of its most ferocious critics.







# Illiberal Leaders in the International Arena: The Cases of Hungary and Israel

HADAS ARON AND EMILY J. HOLLAND

## Abstract

*In recent years, illiberal leaders have become increasingly influential on the global stage. This paper examines the international behavior of such leaders. Using the cases of Hungary under Viktor Orbán and Israel under Benjamin Netanyahu, we demonstrate that illiberal leaders prioritize domestic agendas designed to maintain their power above all else. While they may exhibit disruptive behavior in the international arena on issues peripheral to their core domestic interests, they tend to eventually compromise in these areas. However, when there is a conflict between their central domestic agenda and the broader interests of the state, the narrow domestic agenda takes precedence.*

Keywords: illiberalism, Israel, Hungary, foreign Policy, international system, liberal international order

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Over the past decade, illiberal leaders have played an increasingly prominent role in world politics. These leaders have championed illiberalism as a new path forward for their states and the global community. In this paper, we examine the international behavior of illiberal leaders and argue that their primary objective of consolidating domestic power can result in foreign policies that prioritize domestic electoral interests over the wider interests of the state. Specifically, where commitments to international alliances and institutions clash with the domestic agenda of concentrating power and limiting political competition, illiberal leaders will favor the narrow domestic interest. This holds even when the illiberal policy harms crucial state interests such as security or economic prosperity. Illiberal leaders will be more cooperative in the international arena on policies that do not threaten their illiberal domestic system or the preferences of their immediate support base. Although international relations literature demonstrates that domestic politics is sometimes a driver for foreign policy,<sup>1</sup> in democracies it is generally not entirely driven by narrow domestic electoral concerns. The international behavior of illiberal leaders is thus distinct from other types of leaders.

We evaluate this argument using the cases of Hungary under Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and Israel under Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. We show that, for the most part, illiberal leaders comply with international demands when faced with existential economic and security pressures. However, they are more likely to reject the norms of behavior of the international system when these pressures threaten the integrity of their domestic support base. Moreover, over time illiberal leaders tend to become more disruptive and less cooperative in the international arena. Our research suggests several possible reasons for this behavior. First, illiberal leaders promote and incorporate narratives of nationalism and extremism into their political discourse and policy. Second, illiberals bring extremists into their midst, elevating them to prominent political positions. Finally, and relatedly, illiberal leaders tend to degrade the quality of the foreign-policy apparatus by replacing professional personnel with more corrupt and ideologically driven civil servants.

### **Illiberalism: Definition and Scope**

Illiberalism is an ideology that rejects liberalism, including liberal values, domestic institutions intended to serve as checks on power, and the web of international institutions that has codified relations between states since World War II. Illiberals hold conservative positions on a variety of issues, particularly traditional gender roles, state sovereignty, nationalism, and the hegemony of majority ethnic groups.<sup>2</sup>

Illiberalism is common in countries that have had a significant liberal experience but are now experiencing a backlash. As a result, popular support and electoral success are essential elements of illiberalism.<sup>3</sup> Unlike their liberal counterparts, illiberals secure popular support through a variety of means that defy the rule of law. To stay in power, illiberal leaders undermine checks and balances between institutions, attempt to control the media, delegitimize political rivals, and distribute targeted

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1 Peter Gourevitch, "The Second Image Reversed: The International Sources of Domestic Politics," *International Organization* 32, no. 4 (Autumn 1978): 881–912. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S002081830003201X>; William C. Wohlforth, "Realism and Foreign Policy," *Foreign Policy: Theories, Actors, Cases*, 3rd ed., eds. Steve Smith, Amelia Hadfield, and Tim Dunne 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008): 35–53.

2 Marlene Laruelle, "Illiberalism: A Conceptual Introduction," *East European Politics* 38, no. 2 (April 2022): 303–327. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2022.2037079>; Julian G. Waller, "Distinctions with a Difference: Illiberalism and Authoritarianism in Scholarly Study," *Political Studies Review* 22, no. 2 (May 2024). <https://doi.org/10.1177/14789299231159253>.

3 Hadas Aron and Jack L. Snyder, "The International Politics of Illiberalism," in *The Oxford Handbook of Illiberalism*, ed. Marlene Laruelle (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024): 1–41.

benefits for their constituents.<sup>4</sup> They also mobilize against minorities, in particular ethnic minorities, immigrants, feminists, and the LGBTQ+ community.<sup>5</sup> The need for a popular mandate distinguishes these nations, which have turned illiberal after experiencing liberalism, from anti-liberal states—those that are not liberal and have never embraced liberalism on a large scale.

Illiberalism has increased in a variety of contexts. First, illiberalism emerged as a counter-reaction to the spread of liberalism after the end of the Cold War. In states that lacked the social and institutional framework to support liberal democracy, liberalism often proved a destructive force. Rapid privatization and the opening of markets to competition often turned into the sale of state assets to well-connected individuals.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, freedom of speech without media regulation led to nationalist incitement.<sup>7</sup> Prominent examples of this include Russia, whose economy collapsed twice during the 1990s, and the former Yugoslavia, where nationalist mobilization erupted into a civil war. Illiberalism was a response to this crisis of democracy. According to illiberals, a strong central government, uninhibited by liberal institutions, is more capable of addressing social upheaval and economic challenges.

Illiberalism is also common where a struggle between liberal and illiberal elites is a central characteristic of the political system. These cases are the focus of our paper. This struggle over the ordering of politics and society is common in Central and Eastern European countries such as Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia. In these countries, the 1990s were characterized by rapid changes that raised unemployment and emigration, and at the same time, by the pursuit of economic prosperity and integration into the European Union. Despite an overall improvement in living standards, there was a strong sense of disappointment when jubilant post-Cold War expectations were not met.<sup>8</sup> This disappointment deepened the historical rift between a liberal urban population that views itself as part of Western Europe and periphery populations who resent liberalism and wish to preserve their unique identity and maintain sovereignty vis-à-vis the West. Illiberalism is built on this divide.

Though Israel is not a post-Communist country, it went through several similar processes that can account for the struggle between liberalism and illiberalism that has come to define society and the political system. First, rapid liberalization in the 1980s and 1990s deepened socio-economic cleavages, far more than in most of Central-Eastern Europe. Second, liberalism expanded significantly in Israel, primarily through the role of the Supreme Court as a constitutional court, and relatedly, in the protection of individual rights. Lastly and most significantly, the

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4 Andrea LP Pirro and Ben Stanley, "Forging, Bending, and Breaking: Enacting the 'Illiberal Playbook' in Hungary and Poland," *Perspectives on Politics* 20, no. 1 (2022): 86–101, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592721001924>; Bálint Magyar and Bálint Madlovics, *The Anatomy of Post-Communist Regimes: A Conceptual Framework* (Central European University Press, 2020); Licia Cianetti, James Dawson, and Seán Hanley, "Rethinking 'Democratic Backsliding' in Central and Eastern Europe—Looking beyond Hungary and Poland" (Taylor & Francis, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2018.1491401>.

5 Lenka Bustikova and Petra Guasti, "The Illiberal Turn or Swerve in Central Europe?" *Politics and Governance* 5, no. 4 (2017): 166–176, <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v5i4.1156>; Anna Grzymala-Busse and Monika Nalepa, "How Illiberal Populists Gain and Stay in Power: Programmatic Cohesion and Government Performance," (unpublished manuscript, 2022), [https://www.monikanalepa.com/uploads/6/6/3/1/66318923/clear\\_winners\\_programmatic\\_ambiguity\\_and\\_the\\_electoral\\_punishment\\_of\\_populists.pdf](https://www.monikanalepa.com/uploads/6/6/3/1/66318923/clear_winners_programmatic_ambiguity_and_the_electoral_punishment_of_populists.pdf); Alexander Cooley and Daniel H. Nexon, "The Real Crisis of Global Order: Illiberalism on the Rise," *Foreign Affairs* 101 (January/February 2022), 103, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/world/2021-12-14/illiberalism-real-crisis-global-order>.

6 Joel S. Hellman, "Winners Take All: The Politics of Partial Reform in Postcommunist Transitions," *World Politics* 50, no. 2 (January 1998): 203–234, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0043887100008091>.

7 Jack L. Snyder, *From Voting to Violence: Democratization and Nationalist Conflict* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2000).

8 Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes, *The Light That Failed: A Reckoning* (Penguin UK, 2019); Jacques Rupnik, "From Democracy Fatigue to Populist Backlash," *Journal of Democracy* 18, no. 4 (2007): 17–25, <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/is-east-central-europe-backsliding-from-democracy-fatigue-to-populist-backlash/>.

ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the control over the Occupied Territories have never co-existed comfortably with a liberal guarantee of individual rights.

In the past few years, illiberalism has also made advancements in Western liberal democracies. The most striking example is the success of President Donald Trump in the United States. In these mature democracies, illiberal success stems from a backlash to globalization and accompanying economic and cultural insecurities. It is important to note that, as in other parts of the world, in recent decades Western liberalism expanded its institutional and cultural arenas. Constitutional courts and international economic institutions expanded their mandates, which triggered an illiberal backlash. For example, in the Eurozone, decisions on economic measures like debt accumulation are subject to EU scrutiny; in the UK, the 1998 Human Rights Act incorporated the European Convention of Human Rights into British Law, a step seen by some as a transformation of the Westminster system.<sup>9</sup>

As noted, we focus here on cases of illiberalism in states that experience a struggle between liberalism and illiberalism. We do so for two reasons. First, these states can more easily and consistently be defined as illiberal. States that have been nominal democracies can easily slip into full authoritarianism, where legitimization from the people (or some subsection of the people) is no longer relevant. Such cases cannot be consistently categorized as illiberal according to our definition. This is probably the case in Russia today.

Second, we wish to avoid analyzing great powers. Arguably, both Donald Trump in the US and Vladimir Putin in Russia have been illiberal leaders of great powers. However, great powers have unique behavior in the international system<sup>10</sup> and the cases are extremely limited and idiosyncratic. The international behavior of great powers differs from that of small and status quo powers because they have greater means, and therefore greater freedom to realize their goals. As such, great powers set the stage for the behavior of other actors.

We employ two cases to demonstrate our theory: Benjamin Netanyahu in Israel and Viktor Orbán in Hungary. Both leaders have been in power for many years, allowing us to examine their behavior in multiple situations and observe transformations in decision-making over time. In recent years, both Israel and Hungary have moved towards illiberalism and have been heavily criticized by the liberal international community for their attempts to curtail liberal democracy. Netanyahu and Orbán have also invested in relationships with other illiberal leaders, despite their position within and dependence on the liberal community. Although the outcomes of their leadership appear similar, Israel and Hungary face different sets of constraints, a variation we exploit here. Hungary is a European Union member state, and its behavior is shaped by the benefits and obligations of membership. Israel faces different constraints. Its involvement in ongoing conflict in the Middle East makes it existentially dependent on its international alliances, primarily its relationship with the US. Together, the cases provide a wide spectrum of international situations with which illiberal leaders are faced.

### **Illiberalism and International Behavior**

One of the most common actions of illiberal leaders is an attack on liberal institutions that limit government power. Liberal allies frequently criticize policies that undermine liberal democracy and target minorities. This is particularly true when a state is an integral member of the Western liberal order, as are the cases this paper addresses. To stave off this liberal critique, illiberal leaders form nontraditional

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<sup>9</sup> K. D. Ewing, "The Human Rights Act and Parliamentary Democracy," *The Modern Law Review* 62, no. 1 (1999): 79–99, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2230.00192>.

<sup>10</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001).

international alliances with fellow illiberals and with anti-liberal China, which has never experienced liberalism and is distinctly opposed to it.<sup>11</sup>

Alliances outside the liberal world are intended to provide immediate economic benefits in the form of trade and investments. Russia has been funding illiberal groups in many countries and pursuing favorable trade relations with allies. China has been cultivating diplomatic and economic relationships around the globe, especially via its Belt and Road Initiative.<sup>12</sup> In the West, many of the states that signed on to the initiative were led by illiberals. Second, nontraditional illiberal alliances empower illiberals in their dealings with liberals because they signal an alternative to the liberal alliance.

Illiberal alliances have also been fruitful for the diffusion of illiberal practices. Viktor Orbán, for example, has emerged as a role model for illiberals. His methods of power centralization, the undermining of courts, and the takeover of the media have become a form of “best practices” for illiberal leaders.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, in the past few years, illiberal leaders have taken more aggressive courses of action. Robert Fico, the Prime Minister of Slovakia for 10 years, became radically opposed to Western liberalism at home and abroad only in the last few years. Netanyahu, the longest-serving Israeli prime minister, has become far more illiberal since 2015. Pursuing these new relationships, illiberal leaders neglect and endanger their important liberal alliances.

Our analysis focuses on tensions between international liberal commitments and a commitment to the illiberal turn. Such tensions are particularly evident in situations that force illiberals to pick between the two. We argue that the strongest commitment of illiberal leaders is to the domestic arrangements that keep them in power. Illiberals are unlikely to retract reforms that limit political competition and secure their domestic position, even when these clash with the state’s international commitments and threaten its international position. Similarly, illiberals will prioritize the interests of their base of supporters above all. When the state’s commitment to liberal allies and institutions conflicts with the dismantling of liberal institutions, or with the trade and security preferences of the illiberal base, illiberals will prioritize domestic illiberalism over international commitments. This holds even if international commitments to alliances and institutions are vital to the interests of the state and the broader population.

Illiberals will be less rigid and more willing to cooperate with liberals on issues that are not central to their domestic agenda, even if these issues clash with the broader international illiberal agenda. In such cases, illiberals may still be disruptive, consistent with their leadership style, but will not ultimately be obstructionist.

In our case study analysis, we examine events in which liberal commitments clashed with illiberal policies, forcing illiberals to navigate between narrow personal and state interests. The Russo-Ukrainian War is an example of this for Hungary, and Netanyahu’s formation of the most extreme right-wing government in Israeli history has significantly worsened tensions between Israel and Western allies.

The focus on narrow domestic interests is quite unusual in foreign policy-making. Classic international relations literature argues that foreign policy is the pursuit of the “national interest” defined in terms of power maximization.<sup>14</sup> Newer literature examines the patterns of bias leaders are faced with when making policy, including

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11 Alexander Cooley and Daniel Nexon, *Exit from Hegemony: The Unraveling of the American Global Order* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

12 Cooley and Nexon, *Exit from Hegemony*.

13 Kim Lane Scheppele, “Autocratic Legalism,” *University of Chicago Law Review* 85, no. 2 (March 2018): 545–584.

14 Hans J. Morgenthau and Kenneth W. Thompson, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, 6th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1985).

bounded rationality<sup>15</sup> and organizational culture.<sup>16</sup> Most of the literature assumes that, despite imperfect information or miscalculation, most foreign-policy behavior is conducted to further the perceived interest of the state. Literature on authoritarian states argues that when states have small winning coalitions, leaders stay in power by rewarding their supporters with private goods, which allows them to take more risks in foreign policy.<sup>17</sup> But the illiberal states we discuss here are democracies, making the prioritization of narrow domestic interests in foreign policy exceptional.

We expect this foreign-policy behavior to increase over time, such that illiberal states will risk damaging their liberal alliances and the core interests of their state. Our research suggests several possible explanations for this. First, illiberals promote narratives of national sovereignty and state sufficiency that are unrealistic in an increasingly interdependent world. Illiberals are not committed to the truth and often promote false narratives and conspiracy theories.<sup>18</sup> In doing so, they risk tying their own hands through a commitment to a radical base of support.<sup>19</sup>

In addition, illiberal policies have consequences for the government's decision-making environment. In their quest to concentrate power, illiberal leaders degrade their ability to craft policy in a limited information environment. Illiberal leaders tend to replace competent civil servants with less professional, more personalist and ideologically driven ones.<sup>20</sup>

### **Illiberalism and International Politics in Hungary**

Since he took office for the second time, beginning in 2010, Viktor Orbán has faced international criticism for his illiberal practices. However, not all illiberal policies have the same weight in the international arena. In this section, we examine Orbán's policies according to their importance to his illiberal domestic agenda and to Hungary's Western allies. We show here that policies critical to Orbán's domestic agenda prevailed, even when facing costly external sanctions. In contrast, in areas that were less central to Orbán's domestic agenda and more crucial to Western allies, Orbán's government eventually compromised and aligned with Western international policies.

### **Domestic Illiberalism in Hungary versus the European Union**

Orbán's illiberal domestic policies, in particular the attack on the courts and media, have brought him into a direct and sometimes costly confrontation with the European Union. Controlling and weakening the judicial system was key to Orbán's illiberal agenda. Without independent courts, his Fidesz party-led government could pass decisions with virtually no checks on its power, including weakening non-governmental institutional checks on power by institutions like independent media and civil society organizations.

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15 Herbert Alexander Simon, *Models of Bounded Rationality: Empirically Grounded Economic Reason*, vol. 3 (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1997).

16 Elizabeth Kier, "Culture and Military Doctrine: France between the Wars," *International Security* 19, no. 4 (Spring 1995): 65–93, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2539120>.

17 Bruce Bueno de Mesquita et al., "An Institutional Explanation of the Democratic Peace," *American Political Science Review* 93, no. 4 (December 1999): 791–807, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2586113>.

18 Andrea Lp Pirro and Paul Taggart, "Populists in Power and Conspiracy Theories," *Party Politics* 29, no. 3 (May 2023): 413–23, <https://doi.org/10.1177/13540688221077071>; Jasper Theodor Kauth and Desmond King, "Illiberalism," *European Journal of Sociology / Archives Européennes de Sociologie* 61, no. 3 (December 2020): 365–405, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003975620000181>.

19 Jack L. Snyder, *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991).

20 Michael W. Bauer et al., *Democratic Backsliding and Public Administration: How Populists in Government Transform State Bureaucracies* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

Independent domestic courts are also of interest to the international community, particularly within the context of the European Union. First, independent courts are the hallmark of liberal democracy as they uphold the rule of law and protect individual rights. A vast body of literature demonstrates that liberal states cooperate with each other at higher rates than other regime types on a variety of issues from security to trade.<sup>21</sup> The EU was built on shared liberal-democratic values, rather than merely on short-term interests. Following from these foundational shared liberal values, EU institutions rely on broad consensus between member states. These institutions are ill-equipped to handle persistently noncompliant states.<sup>22</sup>

On a more pragmatic level, independent courts safeguard against corruption and misuse of funds. Weakening the courts poses a challenge for international investors. The EU, moreover, distributes significant funds to member states, especially those with lower gross national income like Hungary.

Various European institutions responded to Hungary's wide-ranging attack on the independence of its courts. The European Commission initiated infringement procedures against Hungary, the most notable of which was a response to the decision to abruptly lower the retirement age of judges by eight years, forcing into retirement a significant portion of the state's senior judges (those aged 62–70 in 2011). As part of the procedure, the case moved to the European Court of Justice, which ruled in 2012 that Hungary's actions were incompatible with European Union law. Hungary was forced to compensate the unlawfully dismissed judges but did not reinstate most of them.<sup>23</sup> Thus, though it lost the case, its illiberal agenda remained virtually intact. This was the most notable international court ruling against Hungary's attack on liberal democracy.

The European Parliament issued several condemnatory reports that outlined and criticized Hungary's democratic erosion and in 2018, triggering an Article 7 procedure against Hungary (a procedure used when a member state is considered at risk of breaching core EU values). If enacted, Article 7 procedures can be a significant sanction and may entail stripping a member state of its voting rights (referred to as the "nuclear option"). However, the Council of the European Union did not move the procedure past the first stage, where it languished for years. The Council did express concern for the erosion of democracy in Hungary and sought the opinion of the Venice Commission on several occasions. The Venice Commission criticized key pieces of legislation that undermined liberal democracy.<sup>24</sup>

Finally, in 2020, the European Union negotiated a covid-19 recovery plan that tied the allocation of funds to adherence to rule-of-law standards. Hungary and Poland threatened to veto the plan, and eventually the parties agreed on a watered-down version of the provision. In late 2022, the European Commission invoked this standard and withheld Hungary's share of the Covid-19 Recovery and Resilience Plan (€10.4 billion in grants and low-interest loans). Moreover, due to concerns regarding judicial independence and human rights, the Commission decided to withhold disbursement of Hungary's Cohesion Fund as well—€22 billion for national

21 Edward D. Mansfield and Helen V. Milner, "Regime Type, Veto Points, and Preferential Trading Arrangements," *Stanford Journal of International Law* 46, no. 2 (summer 2010), 219; Bruce Russett et al., "The Democratic Peace," *International Security* 19, no. 4 (spring 1995): 164–184, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2539124>.

22 Bojan Bugarić, "Protecting Democracy and the Rule of Law in the European Union: The Hungarian Challenge," SSRN Scholarly Paper (Rochester, NY, July 15, 2014), <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2466340>; Jan-Werner Müller, "Should the EU Protect Democracy and the Rule of Law inside Member States?," *European Law Journal* 21, no. 2 (March 1, 2015): 141–60, <https://doi.org/10.1111/eulj.12124>; SSRN Scholarly Paper (Rochester, NY, July 15, 2014).

23 Kriszta Kovács and Kim Lane Scheppele, "The Fragility of an Independent Judiciary: Lessons from Hungary and Poland—and the European Union," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 51, no. 3 (September 2018): 189–200, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.postcomstud.2018.07.005>.

24 Gábor Halmai, "The Early Retirement Age of the Hungarian Judges," in *EU Law Stories: Contextual and Critical Histories of European Jurisprudence*, eds. Fernanda Nicola and Bill Davies (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

investment projects.<sup>25</sup> This was by far the most far-reaching international sanction against Hungary, implemented more than a decade after the Orbán government launched an attack on democracy that, according to experts, altered Hungary's regime. Importantly, the EU's increased scrutiny and willingness to act came in the context of Russia's war in Ukraine, as we discuss in the next section.

Since taking office in 2010, the Orbán government has taken steps to erode democracy. Even when these actions directly impacted the European Union, they incurred minimal costs. When the costs increased, Orbán remained steadfast, because the concentration of power and elimination of checks on it are at the very core of his agenda. Though the Orbán government does enact other disruptive foreign policies, it is less committed to pursuing these policies when sanctioned.

### **Hungary, Non-Western Allies, and the 2022 Russian Invasion of Ukraine**

In his infamous "illiberal democracy" speech in 2014, Orbán proclaimed that illiberal and non-liberal states like Russia, China, Singapore, and others, were role models for Hungary.<sup>26</sup> In some respects, his foreign policies have followed the spirit of this speech. Since 2010, Viktor Orbán's government has declared its intent to expand to non-Western markets in order to reinforce Hungary's sovereignty and independence vis-à-vis Western allies. In addition, increased trade with non-liberal states provides economic benefits that are not conditional on maintaining standards of governance. The government has dedicated a section of the Ministry of the Economy to non-Western markets, and Orbán has cultivated close political as well as economic ties with Russia and China.<sup>27</sup> Orbán consistently pursued close energy ties with Russia, even signing a long-term gas contract with Russia's Gazprom after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.<sup>28</sup> Hungary was the first European country to join China's Belt and Road development program, leading the way for other post-Communist European states.<sup>29</sup> China also committed to several investment projects in Hungary, including lithium-ion battery manufacturing factories, an electric vehicle factory, and the foundation of a new university.<sup>30</sup> The close relationship was highlighted during Chinese Premier Xi Jinping's 2024 state visit to Hungary.

This apparent shift toward non-Western allies only partially and recently altered the Hungarian economy. Hungary remains dependent on its Western allies for security and trade: more than 70% of both its imports and exports are with EU countries.<sup>31</sup> Foreign manufacturing, particularly for the German auto industry and European appliances, sustains the Hungarian labor force. And, of course, Hungary remains dependent on its NATO membership for security.

After the 2014 Russian invasion of Crimea, Hungary's close ties with Russia were strained when the EU placed Russia under a limited sanctions regime. Orbán

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25 Lorne Cook, "EU Unblocks Billions for Hungary Even Though Its Leader Threatens to Veto Ukraine Aid," AP News, December 13, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/eu-hungary-ukraine-funds-cohesion-infrastructure-democracy-01c7a6927e7b4711a56336d4b9c2916>.

26 Csaba Tóth, "Full Text of Viktor Orbán's Speech at Băile Tușnad (Tusnádfürdő) of 26 July 2014," Budapest Beacon (news site), July 29, 2014, <https://budapestbeacon.com/full-text-of-viktor-orbans-speech-at-baile-tusnad-tusnadfurdo-of-26-july-2014/>.

27 Zsuzsanna Végh, "Hungary's 'Eastern Opening' Policy toward Russia: Ties That Bind?" *International Issues & Slovak Foreign Policy Affairs* 24, nos. 1–2 (2015): 47–65.

28 Wilhelmine Preussen, "Hungary Signs New Gas Deal with Gazprom," *Politico*, August 31, 2022, <https://www.politico.eu/article/hungary-signs-deal-with-gazprom-over-additional-gas/>.

29 Anastas Vangeli, "China's Engagement with the Sixteen Countries of Central, East and Southeast Europe under the Belt and Road Initiative," *China & World Economy* 25, no. 5 (September–October 2017): 101–124, <https://doi.org/10.1111/cwe.12216>.

30 Valerie Hopkins, "Chinese University to Open Budapest Campus as Orbán Tilts to Beijing," *Financial Times*, January 19, 2021, <https://www.ft.com/content/55565169-98f3-4391-8df8-5adf30d814f9>.

31 United States Department of State, "2023 Investment Climate Statements: Hungary," Department of State website, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-investment-climate-statements/hungary/>.



attempted to limit the sanctions, but ultimately Hungary complied with the EU program, and accordingly, its trade volume with Russia decreased significantly.<sup>32</sup> Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine proved to be a far greater challenge for Orbán. For NATO, this was an opportunity to re-establish its commitment to European security and to emphasize unity after concerns over the integrity of the alliance during the Trump administration. Support for Russia became politically toxic, and European leaders who had previously held close ties with Putin's Russia had to change their course or lay low. Hungary's neighbors in Central and Eastern Europe viewed Russia as an existential threat, especially Hungary's close ally Poland under the PiS government.

In February 2022, just a month before the Hungarian general elections, and with the united opposition polling well, the Russian invasion of Ukraine could have been a turning point in Hungarian politics. But rather than changing course or staying silent, Orbán chose to double down on his support for Russia. Though this accusation was entirely baseless, Orbán accused Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky of trying to drag Hungary into war and stated that Orbán himself was the last line of defense against the outbreak of World War III. The Orbán government's near-complete control over Hungarian media resulted in most Hungarians accepting this narrative. Opinion polls demonstrate that Hungarian views on Russia and Ukraine, and their associated threat perception, differed significantly from public opinion in other countries in the region.<sup>33</sup>

After winning the election, Orbán continued his attempts to block EU policies aimed at punishing Russia and supporting Ukraine. One issue of particular importance was EU sanctions on energy imports from Russia. A core component of the Fidesz government was subsidized energy prices for rural consumers, and sanctions on Russia's energy sector challenged Orbán's ability to provide affordable utilities for his rural base. Hungary has virtually no alternative sources of energy, a long-standing structural problem that was exacerbated by Orbán's strategy of pursuing close energy ties with Russia rather than diversifying sources and suppliers. As a result, EU sanctions on Russian energy imports were politically and economically disastrous for the Orbán regime. After threatening to veto the EU's embargo on Russian oil and oil products, the most severe sanction the bloc imposed on Russia, Hungary managed to secure an exemption for the import of Russian pipeline oil.<sup>34</sup> Hungary also secured an exemption to continue purchasing large volumes of Russian natural gas, but since 2022, the Orbán government has reduced its domestic energy subsidies overall while adding subsidies for firewood and coal.<sup>35</sup> Orbán has subsequently blamed the EU sanctions for Europe's energy crisis and potential recession.<sup>36</sup>

Not all of Orbán's refusals to comply with EU policies were connected to energy; he has held up almost every Ukraine-supportive program, from the transfer of weapons and funds to the sanctions on banks and individuals. In addition, Hungary (following

32 Statista, "Export Value to Russia from Hungary 2021," Statista website, accessed February 8, 2024, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1000954/value-hungarian-goods-exports-to-russia/>.

33 Moira Fagan et al., "Poles and Hungarians Differ over Views of Russia and the US," Pew Research Center website, October 2, 2023, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2023/10/02/peoples-and-hungarians-differ-over-views-of-russia-and-the-us/>; "Russian-Ukrainian Conflict: 61% of Hungarian Voters Think That Orbán Is the One Who Best Defends Hungarian Interests," Visegrad Post (news site), March 10, 2022, <https://visegradpost.com/en/2022/03/10/russian-ukrainian-conflict-61-of-hungarian-voters-think-that-orban-is-the-one-who-best-defends-hungarian-interests/>.

34 Kate Abnett, Jan Strupczewski, and Ingrid Melander, "EU Agrees Russia Oil Embargo, Gives Hungary Exemptions; Zelenskiy Vows More Sanctions," Reuters, June 1, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/best-we-could-get-eu-bows-hungarian-demands-agree-russian-oil-ban-2022-05-31/>.

35 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, *OECD Companion to the Inventory of Support Measures for Fossil Fuels*, "Country Notes: Hungary," OECD website, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1787/5a3ef665-en>.

36 "Hungary PM Orbán Says EU's Russia Sanctions Should Be Scrapped," Reuters, September 22, 2022, Europe, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/hungary-pm-orban-says-eus-russia-sanctions-should-be-scrapped-report-2022-09-22/>.

Turkey's lead) held up the ratification of Sweden's NATO membership, noting Sweden's hostility and its critique of Hungary's democratic backsliding as the reason.

The EU and the United States responded to Hungary's lack of cooperation on this central issue with a mix of threat and persuasion. As noted above, the EU has been withholding funds from Hungary since 2022. Though the reason for this sanction is EU concern over the rule of law, there is no doubt that European attitudes toward Hungary have hardened due to the state's stance on the Russia-Ukraine War. As an expression of this growing hostility, since the beginning of the conflict, different actors have argued in favor of the so-called "nuclear option." This was first raised when Hungary initially refused to vote for a €50 billion aid package to Ukraine in 2023. But even after this crisis was resolved, the desire to move forward with the Article 7 procedure did not abate. In January 2024, the European Parliament demanded Article 7 proceedings be pushed forward due to rule-of-law and human-rights concerns, and in June 2024, Belgium, serving as the rotating president of the Council of the European Union, urged the EU to implement the toughest measures included under Article 7, stripping Hungary of many of the rights that member states enjoy. This was in advance of the scheduled transfer of the EU presidency to Hungary in July 2024.

Despite generating significant disruption and hold ups, Hungary eventually relented on every issue it had stalled and blocked, including sanctions, aid to Ukraine, and approving the accession of new NATO members. Orbán has used his veto power to increase his leverage vis-à-vis the EU. Notably, just a day before the European Summit in December 2023 in which Hungary threatened to hold up the resolution on an aid package to Ukraine, the European Commission released €10.2 billion of Hungary's frozen funds.<sup>37</sup> In response, the EU Parliament decided to sue the Commission in the European Court of Justice for misuse of taxpayer funds.<sup>38</sup> Because EU decision mechanisms are largely based on consensus, engaging in blackmail has been a particularly successful strategy for Orbán. The EU has often used financial incentives and special exemptions to persuade Orbán to agree to Union-level policies.

Orbán's government has been persistent in its pursuit of an illiberal transformation of Hungary's domestic political structure. In the international arena, Hungary's behavior remains more complex. Orbán has employed anti-EU rhetoric for years, but until its 2019 suspension, Fidesz was an active member of the European People's Party (EPP), the center-right bloc in the European Parliament. As such, it was relatively compliant with the mainstream centrist agenda of the EU. Hungary has only become an emboldened and disruptive actor in the last couple of years, especially after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. For the moment, it still largely votes in favor of EU policy, but stalls procedures and engages in blackmail. For its part, the EU did not respond decisively to Hungary's illiberal domestic policies for over a decade, even when these policies ran afoul of EU norms and rules.

Beyond the context of divided loyalties over the war in Ukraine, there are other potential explanations for Hungary's increasingly bold position vis-à-vis the EU. First, globally, illiberals have become less restrained—Netanyahu, whom we discuss next, is one example, but so are the increasingly illiberal rhetoric and actions of the likes of Prime Minister Narendra Modi in India, Prime Minister Robert Fico in Slovakia, and former President Donald Trump running for a second term in office in the U.S. Arguably, the proliferation of illiberal leaders allows them to imitate each other's practices and rhetorical styles. Moreover, illiberals protect each other from international censure through diplomatic means, such as mutual support

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37 Nicolas Camut, "Commission Unblocks €10.2B for Hungary as EU Tries to Sway Viktor Orbán on Ukraine," *Politico*, December 13, 2023, <https://www.politico.eu/article/commission-unblocks-e10-2-billion-for-hungary-as-eu-tries-to-sway-viktor-orban-on-ukraine/>.

38 Andy Bounds, "EU Parliament Sues Ursula von Der Leyen's Commission over Hungary Funds," March 14, 2024, *Financial Times*, <https://www.ft.com/content/4ed54bbb-559e-460c-9fdc-6a743d994c4b>.

in international institutions. These dynamics further embolden them.<sup>39</sup> Second, increasing Chinese investment has diversified investment sources in Hungary,<sup>40</sup> perhaps rendering it slightly less financially dependent on the EU (although for the time being, this should not be overestimated).

In addition, with limited independent media, Hungary's information environment has declined, and as a result, so has the ability of citizens and the opposition to keep the government and civil service in check. The civil service has also been hollowed out and is now partisan and loyal to the Fidesz party, and the foreign service has retreated from a pro-European ideology. More specifically, Muller and Gazsi show that a significant reorientation of the Hungarian institutions of diplomacy occurred after Orbán transformed the domestic arena, and in the context of EU resistance to his illiberal domestic policies. The main pillar of this reorientation was a new understanding of the diplomatic service as ideological rather than professional.<sup>41</sup> This transformation of the diplomatic service integrated Orbán's anti-EU narratives into diplomatic decision-making.

Finally, the repeated weakness of EU responses can explain Hungary's increasingly disruptive behavior. Although the frustration with Hungary has increased and the withholding of EU funds was a significant rebuke, the EU has not systematically addressed the serious problem posed by Hungary. Invoking the latter stages of Article 7 requires a unanimous vote that the EU cannot obtain: Slovakia under Fico is likely to stand by Hungary, perhaps joined by Meloni's Italy. At the same time, the consensus-based decision mechanism grants member states many opportunities for bad-faith behavior. As we explore next, for the moment, different international sanctions mechanisms have also failed to induce compliance from Israel.

### **Illiberalism and International Politics in Israel**

Benjamin Netanyahu and Viktor Orbán both suffered significant political losses relatively early in their careers. Orbán served as prime minister in Hungary from 1998 to 2002, while Netanyahu did so in Israel from 1996 to 1999, and for both, their first term in office ended in a resounding defeat. A few years later, both returned to power with a deeper understanding of their respective political systems and many personal grievances. For Netanyahu, the primary lesson from his first term was that his political survival depended on his far-right base, particularly the settlers.

Netanyahu's behavior in the international arena has thus been tailored to the preferences and interests of his far-right illiberal base. This domestic alliance has impacted Netanyahu's relationship with Israel's closest ally, the U.S., his choice of international allies more broadly, and even his security approach toward Hamas. In addition, to avoid internal competition, Netanyahu captured the Likud party and populated it with cronies. This impacted the overall quality of governance, including in foreign policy. Since the unprecedentedly large and successful terrorist attacks by Hamas on October 7, 2023, the costs of his actions have become increasingly evident, but have not changed Netanyahu's international behavior.

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39 Julian G. Waller, "Mimicking the Mad Printer: Legislating Illiberalism in Post-Soviet Eurasia," *Problems of Post-Communism* 70, no. 3 (May 2023): 225–240. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10758216.2021.1960863>; Marlies Glasius, Jelmor Schalk, and Meta De Lange, "Illiberal Norm Diffusion: How Do Governments Learn to Restrict Nongovernmental Organizations?" *International Studies Quarterly* 64, no. 2 (June 2020): 453–468. <https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqaa019>.

40 Carlo Martuscelli, Camille Gijs, and Pieter Haeck, "Hungary Is Flirting with China—at What Cost to the EU?" *Politico*, June 25, 2024. <https://www.politico.eu/article/hungary-flirt-china-cost-eu-trade-foreign-direct-investment/>.

41 Patrick Müller and David Gazsi, "Populist Capture of Foreign Policy Institutions: The Orbán Government and the De-Europeanization of Hungarian Foreign Policy," *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 61, no. 2 (March 2023): 397–415. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.13377>.

## Illiberalism and U.S.-Israeli Relations

While becoming the longest-serving prime minister in Israeli history, Netanyahu has sought to portray himself as a great statesman, determined to boost Israel's international standing through his experience, masterful oratory skills, and unmatched interpersonal connections. In reality, Netanyahu has been very unpopular with most U.S. presidential administrations, generating an increasingly strained relationship. This is a crucial issue as the U.S. is an existential ally—it provides Israel with significant security aid; sells arms and ammunition to Israel; and provides diplomatic protection, especially by vetoing UN Security Council resolutions on Israel.

During his 1996 to 1999 term in office, Netanyahu's delay tactics in the peace negotiations with Palestinians and his brash and arrogant style aggravated the Clinton Administration and later the George W. Bush Administration.<sup>42</sup> In one interview, former George H. W. Bush Secretary of State James Baker revealed that he banned Netanyahu from visiting the State Department.<sup>43</sup>

Netanyahu's strained relationship with the Obama Administration was more public. Barack Obama deeply distrusted Netanyahu, especially regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the Jewish settlements in the occupied territories. The sentiment was captured in a private conversation between Obama and French President Nicolas Sarkozy, caught on tape, in which both leaders expressed annoyance with Netanyahu's dishonesty.<sup>44</sup> The Obama Administration subsequently viewed Netanyahu as openly supporting its opposition candidate, former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney, in the 2012 presidential election.<sup>45</sup>

The most significant rift between Netanyahu and the Obama Administration was precipitated by Netanyahu's public support of the Republican Party. In 2015, Netanyahu accepted the invitation of House Speaker John Boehner to address the US Congress. The invitation was political—Republicans invited Netanyahu without informing the White House, counting on Netanyahu to attack the Obama-brokered Iran Nuclear Deal. Netanyahu acted as a Republican political agent, infuriating the White House and the Democratic Party. Democratic Congresswoman Nancy Pelosi, then House Minority Leader and a supporter of Israel, strongly criticized the speech, noting, "I was near tears throughout the prime minister's speech—saddened by the insult to the intelligence of the United States."<sup>46</sup> Moreover, the speech was held just two weeks before the Israeli elections and was a part of Netanyahu's campaign, demonstrating his international prowess. By accepting the invitation to speak, Netanyahu politicized Israel in the US, risking the long-term bipartisan support Israel relies on.

The Obama Administration's frustration with Netanyahu on the settlement issue led to a rare US abstention in a vote on the legality of settlements in the UN Security Council.<sup>47</sup> Explaining the reasoning behind the vote, US Ambassador to the UN Samantha Power noted that "The Israeli Prime Minister recently described his government as 'more committed to settlements than any in Israel's history,' and one of his leading coalition partners recently declared that 'the era of the two-state solution

42 Thomas L. Friedman, "Who Is Bibi?," *New York Times*, May 19, 1998, Foreign Affairs, Opinion, <https://www.nytimes.com/1998/05/19/opinion/foreign-affairs-who-is-bibi.html>.

43 Bernie Becker, "I Barred Netanyahu from State Dept., Baker Says," *The Hill*, November 2, 2014, <https://thehill.com/policy/defense/222577-james-baker-i-barred-netanyahu-from-state-dept/>.

44 "Sarkuzi, Obama Bemoan Netanyahu over Open Mic," CNN, November 8, 2011, <https://www.cnn.com/2011/11/08/world/europe/france-sarkozy-netanyahu/index.html>.

45 Harriet Sherwood, "Binyamin Netanyahu Gambles on Mitt Romney Victory," *Guardian*, September 20, 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/sep/20/binyamin-netanyahu-gambles-on-mitt-romney>.

46 Lauren French, "Pelosi: Netanyahu Speech 'Insulting to the Intelligence of the United States,'" *Politico*, March 3, 2015, <https://www.politico.com/story/2015/03/nancy-pelosi-benjamin-netanyahu-speech-react-115701>.

47 Resolution 2334 2016 UNSC.

is over.’ At the same time, the Prime Minister has said that he is still committed to pursuing a two-state solution. But these statements are irreconcilable.”<sup>48</sup>

To ease American pressure to halt construction in the settlements and negotiate with Palestinians, Netanyahu also courted the support of the evangelical Christian community in the US. Traditionally, Israel’s strongest support from within a single demographic group in the US comes from diaspora Jews. Since the Jewish community in the US leans liberal, Netanyahu sought different and less traditional allies. Prioritizing the relationship with evangelicals was another politically-charged move that alienated the American Jewish community and further undermined bipartisan support. Indeed, in recent years, younger Jews are less supportive of Israel than are their parents,<sup>49</sup> in part because of Israel’s domestic right-wing shift.

Although Netanyahu enjoyed a relatively productive relationship with the Trump Administration (as discussed below), his relationship with the Biden Administration has been contentious. Netanyahu’s current administration is the most far-right government in Israel’s history.<sup>50</sup> Netanyahu was briefly ousted in 2021, after he was indicted on several corruption charges.<sup>51</sup> To regain power and avoid his legal woes, Netanyahu allied with and legitimized the most radical right-wing groups in Israel, in particular the head of the ultranationalist faction, Otzma Yehudit (Jewish Power), Itamar ben Gvir. Netanyahu became the left-wing marker of his coalition, and it is often unclear if he is in control of his coalition partners or led in increasingly illiberal directions. The Biden Administration and other liberal actors expressed concerns about the composition of the government, especially as it unveiled radical plans to curtail the rule of law and significantly undermine the judiciary.<sup>52</sup> Breaking with tradition, after the Israeli elections Biden did not invite Netanyahu to the White House, and they met only once before October 7, 2023, on the sidelines of the United Nations 2023 Annual Summit.

In response to Biden’s snub, Netanyahu’s illiberal coalition members and other influential media figures criticized Biden on Channel 14, the TV news channel associated with Netanyahu and the far right. They repeated Trump’s unfounded conspiracy theory that the 2020 US presidential elections were rigged, that Biden did not win, and several journalists questioned Biden’s fitness for office.<sup>53</sup> The Minister of Diaspora Affairs, Amichai Chikli, called on the Biden Administration not to intervene in Israel’s domestic affairs, and Minister of Foreign Affairs, Eli Cohen, suggested that Vice President Kamala Harris criticized the judicial reforms in Israel without reading them, stating: “If you ask her what about the reform troubles her, she wouldn’t be able to name one clause that bothers her”<sup>54</sup>. These actions were harmful to the US-

48 “Full Text of US Envoy Samantha Power’s Speech after Abstention on Anti-Settlement Vote,” *Times of Israel*, December 24, 2016, <http://www.timesofisrael.com/full-text-of-us-envoy-samantha-powers-speech-after-abstention-on-anti-settlement-vote/>.

49 Jordan Muchnick and Elaine Kamarack, “The Generation Gap in Opinions toward Israel” (Brookings, November 9, 2023), <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-generation-gap-in-opinions-toward-israel/>.

50 Jonathan Lis, “Netanyahu’s Government, the Most Right-Wing in Israel’s History, Takes Office,” *Haaretz*, December 28, 2022, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2022-12-28/ty-article-live/far-right-finance-minister-will-also-be-in-charge-of-west-bank/0000185-5865-d6a2-adf5-79e5d1c50000>.

51 By 2019, Netanyahu had become an increasingly polarizing leader, especially after his indictments. Israel held five election cycles from 2019 to 2022, struggling to form a stable government. From 2021 to 2022, a coalition government was formed based on opposition to Netanyahu’s leadership. It included an array of ideologically disparate parties, a fact that contributed to its early demise.

52 Matt Spetalnick, “US Chides Israel over Judicial Overhaul Law after Lawmakers Defy Biden,” *Reuters*, July 24, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/us-calls-israel-parliament-vote-unfortunate-urges-work-toward-consensus-2023-07-24/>.

53 “Yinon Magal Tokef: “Biden Buba Shel Ha’Ulra Smola’nim Be’Arhav [Hebrew],” *Israel HaBoker* (Maariv, March 29, 2023), <https://www.maariv.co.il/news/politics/Article-991818>.

54 Amir Tibon, “She Didn’t Even Read It’: Israel’s Foreign Minister Fires Back at Kamala Harris over Judicial Overhaul,” *Haaretz*, June 7, 2023, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2023-06-07/ty-article/israels-foreign-minister-fires-back-at-kamala-harris-over-judicial-overhaul/00000188-9487-d3a7-adcf-b58f0b120000>.

Israeli relationship, and they exemplified a broader decline in professional diplomacy under Netanyahu.

The desire to avoid critique and intervention on the settlement issue guided Netanyahu's relationship with the European Union as well.<sup>55</sup> The EU has been more forceful in its critique of Israeli occupation and the Jewish settlements. This critique was expressed in an agenda of "differentiation"—a separate treatment for the settlements and for Israeli pre-1967 territories (recognized by the international community as part of the state of Israel). Netanyahu strongly opposed such policies, and his policies vis-à-vis Europe can be viewed as a direct result of this protection of the Jewish settlements. Most notably, as we elaborate below, Israel under Netanyahu prioritized bilateral relationships with populist-led countries. The intention was to gain enough allies to undermine broader EU sanctions related to the settlements. Indeed, Israel relies on the votes of Hungary and Austria (and previously Poland under the Law and Justice [PiS] government, as well as that of the Czech Republic) in the EU to water down a strict stance on this issue. Though trade relations remain strong, Israel's tactic has frustrated the EU, resulting in a curtailment of further trade, culture, and academic cooperation.<sup>56</sup>

Though the majority of European censure is focused on the occupation and Jewish settlements, liberal European allies also expressed concern over Netanyahu's judicial reform. French President Emmanuel Macron, German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock, and European Parliament President Roberta Metsola warned that Europe would have to reconsider its relationship with Israel if the state no longer shares the values of liberal democracy.<sup>57</sup>

After October 7, the tensions between the West and Israel under Netanyahu took on immediate and existential importance. As we explore below, even when there was a significant conflict between the stability of Israel's foreign alliances and Netanyahu's domestic illiberal agenda, the illiberal agenda prevailed. Netanyahu prioritized appeasing his far-right factions to maintain his grip on power even at the expense of Israeli security.

### Netanyahu's Illiberal Allies

Netanyahu actively cultivates relationships with counterpart illiberal leaders. These relationships are not based on a shared worldview of democracy and human rights but champion the principles of state sovereignty and the protection of national identity. Illiberal leaders are unlikely to criticize Israel's policies toward the Palestinians, or its curtailing of liberal institutions like the Supreme Court.

Netanyahu's Likud party formed close ties with far-right parties with antisemitic or Nazi backgrounds that were officially boycotted by the state of Israel, including the Sweden Democrats and the Holocaust-denying far-right Romanian party, Alianța pentru Unirea Românilor (Alliance for the Union of all Romanians: AUR). Likud even took steps to end the boycott of AUR.<sup>58</sup> Likud formed an even closer bond with

55 Guy Harpaz, "EU-Israel Relations: Netanyahu's Legacy," *European Foreign Affairs Review* 27, no. 4 (December 1, 2022), <https://kluwerlawonline.com/api/Product/CitationPDFURL?file=Journals\EERR\EERR2022034.pdf>.

56 Maya Sion-Tzidkiyah, "Ha'Asor Ha'Avud: Yechasei Israel Ve'Ha'Tchud Ha'Eropi 2010–2020 [Hebrew]" (Mitvim, October 2021), <https://mitvim.org.il/publication/hebrew-the-lost-decade-israel-eu-relations-2010-2020-dr-maya-sion-tzidkiyah/>.

57 Jonathan Lis, "EU Parliament Head Warns on Judicial Overhaul during Herzog's Holocaust Memorial Visit," *Haaretz*, January 26, 2023, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2023-01-26/ty-article/eu-parliament-head-warns-on-judicial-overhaul-during-herzogs-holocaust-memorial-visit/0000185-ee1f-d21e-ade5-ee5f1f090000>; Rina Bassist, "World Leaders' Rejection of Israel's Judicial Reform Is a Reason to Worry," *Jerusalem Post*, March 17, 2023, <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/article-734594>.

58 Amir Tibon and Noa Shpigel, "Chak Me'Ha'Likus Yazam Diun Be'Misrad Ha'Chuz al Hitkarvut le'Miflagot Yamin Kitzoni Be'Europa [Hebrew]," *Haaretz*, August 3, 2023, <https://www.haaretz.co.il/news/politics/2023-08-03/ty-article/premium/0000189-bb56-d20c-addf-fbd694560000>.

PiS in Poland and the ruling Fidesz party in Hungary, two parties who are rewriting their countries' histories and denouncing any responsibility of society or the state for the murder of Jews in the Holocaust. Likud's ties with Fidesz are especially close, and the two parties participate in joint conferences and share political advisors and campaign and governance strategies.<sup>59</sup> In 2019, Viktor Orbán visited Israel, where the two leaders lauded their friendship and made statements about joint values—animosity toward international institutions, a shared anti-Islam and anti-immigration agenda, and economic cooperation.<sup>60</sup>

Netanyahu also formed close ties with illiberal leaders beyond Europe. He participated in Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro's inauguration alongside illiberal leaders from around the globe. Bolsonaro visited Israel shortly thereafter, and Brazil then opened a new trade office in Jerusalem.<sup>61</sup> Netanyahu has also been close to Modi, and the leaders have made reciprocal state visits in the last few years.

Netanyahu invested special effort in his relationship with Russian President Vladimir Putin. Over the last decade, the two have met at least 10 times.<sup>62</sup> Netanyahu has called Putin every year to congratulate him on his birthday, a practice common in some former Soviet countries, but less so in the West. Israel also did not take a clear position on the Russian invasion of Ukraine, despite the Iranian involvement in the war and US diplomatic efforts to pull Israel firmly over to the primarily Western-led alliance in support of Ukraine. This neutrality agenda continued during the year-and-a-half Netanyahu was out of office, from June 2021 to December 2022. The justification was that Israel should continue to appease Russia so that Russia would allow it to operate against the Iranian presence in Syria.

Another illiberal relationship Netanyahu cultivated was with US President Donald Trump. Netanyahu was an ally of Trump's and credited their alliance for Trump's internationally controversial decision to move the US Embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, and for the Abraham Accords, which established bilateral diplomatic relations between Israel and several Arab countries: the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan. In 2019, Netanyahu released a billboard campaign that displayed him shaking hands with Trump and Putin with the caption, "Netanyahu—A Different League."<sup>63</sup>

Finally, in recent years, Netanyahu has supported significant Chinese investments in infrastructure projects in Israel. This has led the head of the Israel Security Agency (Shin Beit), Nadav Argaman, and the US to warn of the security threat of growing Chinese ownership.<sup>64</sup> Netanyahu himself has tried to cultivate a closer diplomatic relationship with Beijing. In 2023, after the Biden Administration snubbed Netanyahu because of his far-right and illiberal government, Netanyahu announced plans to meet Xi Jinping in Beijing and posed with a copy of Xi's book, *The Governance of China*.<sup>65</sup>

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59 Lahav Harkov, "Likud Official Provided Intel for Hungarian Anti-Soros Campaign," *Jerusalem Post*, December 18, 2017, Israel News, <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/likud-official-provided-intel-for-hungarian-anti-soros-campaign-518384>.

60 "PM Netanyahu Meets with Hungarian PM Viktor Orban Prime Minister's Office," Israeli Government, Prime Minister's Office website, February 19, 2019, [https://www.gov.il/en/pages/event\\_hungary190219](https://www.gov.il/en/pages/event_hungary190219).

61 "Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro Is Visiting Israel," Israeli Government, Ministry of Foreign Affairs website, March 31, 2019, [https://www.gov.il/he/pages/brazilian\\_president\\_visits\\_israel](https://www.gov.il/he/pages/brazilian_president_visits_israel).

62 Anshel Pfeffer, "Opinion: Why Netanyahu Is Suddenly a Lot Less Friendly with Putin," CNN, February 7, 2023, <https://www.cnn.com/2023/02/07/opinions/netanyahu-putin-israel-russia-ukraine-pfeffer/index.html>.

63 Ruth Margalit, "Benjamin Netanyahu's Two Decades of Power, Bluster and Ego," *New York Times*, September 27, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/27/magazine/benjamin-netanyahu-israel.html>.

64 Lior Gutmann, "Tzir Beijing-Cambodia-Haifa Mad'ig et Ha'Shabak [Hebrew]," *Calcalist*, October 10, 2019, <https://www.calcalist.co.il/markets/articles/0.7340.L-3771703.00.html>.

65 The planned meeting did not take place, due to the onset of the war following the October 7 attacks.

The policy of seeking alliances beyond the West has been directly tied to the goal of legitimizing and normalizing the settlement project. This was explicitly stated by Minister of Justice Ayelet Shaked's "Plan for National Strength" in 2017, which stated that Israel must strengthen its hold on the occupied territories by embarking on massive construction and development of Jewish settlements. Moreover, according to the plan, Israel needs to openly declare its intentions to the world and try to move more international embassies to Jerusalem. The minister argued that this plan would not harm Israel's international standing if Israel allied with states like Russia, India, and China, which also prioritize state sovereignty and national identity and actively fight Islamic terrorism.<sup>66</sup>

Israel was not sanctioned by the international community in any significant way as a result of Netanyahu's domestic and international illiberal turn. However, after October 7, Israel's security dependence on Western allies and the futility of its illiberal ties became immediately evident.

### Strengthening Hamas

Since October 7, 2023, Israel's approach towards Hamas during Netanyahu's term has been continually re-examined. Following Israel's unilateral retreat from the Gaza Strip in 2005, Hamas won the most votes in the Palestinian legislative elections and seized power in Gaza. In the years that followed, Hamas targeted Israel with missiles, and Israel imposed intermittent blockades and attacks. From December 2008 to January 2009, within the context of the Annapolis peace negotiations with the Palestinian Authority (PA), Israel executed an extensive military operation in Gaza designed to weaken the Hamas government. The Israeli government hoped that the PA would instead regain control over Gaza. The operation was widely condemned internationally due to the high death toll in Gaza.<sup>67</sup> The 22-day war did not eliminate Hamas, and the PA did not overthrow Hamas in Gaza.

Netanyahu ran for office in 2009 on the promise of eliminating Hamas in Gaza. Instead, his policies entrenched Hamas. Netanyahu's agenda aimed to avoid a peace process he regarded as dangerous and mistaken, and one that the far-right base strongly opposed. Once installed in office, he halted peace talks and has not held working meetings with the chairman of the PA since 2010. As part of this agenda, Netanyahu sought to prevent a process of West Bank-Gaza unification under the PA that his predecessor wished to establish. To do so, he sustained Hamas in Gaza despite ongoing and persistent Hamas attacks on the towns around the Gaza Strip. In 2011, Israel struck a deal with Hamas to release 1,027 prisoners in exchange for an Israeli soldier, held hostage in Gaza.<sup>68</sup> This deal established Hamas as the champion of Palestinians on the important issue of security prisoners held in Israel. The head of Hamas in Gaza, and the leading force behind the October 7 massacre, Yahya Sinwar, was among those freed in the deal. Israel went on to attack Gaza periodically to "trim" Hamas' abilities, but it also transferred Qatari funds directly to Hamas and eased the restrictions on Gaza as rewards for ceasefires. At the same time, Israel significantly reduced cooperation with moderate forces in the PA.<sup>69</sup>

Over time, the idea that the PA was not a partner for peace and that the conflict should be managed rather than resolved became common in mainstream Israeli politics. However, some still warned of the great danger of Netanyahu's agenda. In 2013, former head of the Israel Security Agency Yuval Diskin warned that by

66 "Shaked Presents 5 Point Plan for National Strength," Arutz Sheva (media network website), January 24, 2017, <https://www.israelnationalnews.com/news/223803>.

67 "Gaza Crisis: Toll of Operations in Gaza," BBC News, July 25, 2014, Middle East, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-28439404>.

68 Ben Quinn, "Gilad Shalit Freed in Exchange for Palestinian Prisoners," *Guardian*, October 18, 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/oct/18/gilad-shalit-palestine-prisoners-freed>.

69 Aluf Benn, "Israel's Self-Destruction: Netanyahu, the Palestinians, and the Price of Neglect," *Foreign Affairs* 103 (March/April 2024), 44, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/israel/israels-netanyahu-self-destruction>.



continuously weakening the PA and its chairman, Mahmoud Abbas, Netanyahu was actually strengthening Hamas.<sup>70</sup> Radical settlers, on the other hand, hailed the policy. In 2015, the then MP of the far-right religious party Haba'it Ha'Yehudi (The Jewish Home), Bezalel Smotrich, discussed Hamas in an interview, calling the Palestinian Authority a burden and Hamas an asset.<sup>71</sup> According to his analysis, because Hamas is a discredited terrorist organization, the international community will not recognize Palestine as long as Hamas is in power, unlike the Fatah-governed Palestinian Authority. Thus, in Smotrich's and the far right's view, Hamas staying in power was in Israel's interest.

### **October 7 and the Failure of Illiberal Ties**

On October 7, 2023, Hamas launched an unprecedented attack on Israel, killing approximately 1,200 Israelis and foreign nationals in one day and taking more than 240 Israelis hostage.<sup>72</sup> Despite Netanyahu's strained relationship with the US and other traditional liberal allies, these states immediately expressed rhetorical support and provided material assistance to Israel.

In contrast, the illiberal states with whom Netanyahu had cultivated relationships were less supportive. Putin, and to a lesser extent Xi, expressed support for Hamas.<sup>73</sup> For Putin, this was an opportunity to condemn American imperialism, one of his foundational narratives. He immediately blamed the massacre on failed US policy in the Middle East and invited a Hamas delegation to Moscow. Russia is also a close ally of Iran, which provides arms to Russia for its war in Ukraine, collaborates with Russia on military strategy in the Middle East, and shares the anti-American worldview. China views both Russia and Iran as important strategic allies and is in fierce international competition with the US. Donald Trump, who was insulted when Netanyahu congratulated Biden on the latter's election win in November 2020, responded to the October 7, 2023, attacks by slighting the Israeli military and praising the capabilities of Hezbollah.<sup>74</sup> Putin and Xi's responses demonstrate that connections between illiberals are ephemeral and transactional. Ultimately, in terms of its geopolitical characteristics, Israel does not belong to the illiberal bloc, while it can either be a welcome or an unwelcome actor in the Western liberal bloc. As for Trump, though radical-right actors in Israel still view him as a close ally, he is erratic and self-interested both in the domestic and international arenas.

Despite strong security incentives for reinforcing Israel's ties to the Western liberal alliance, Netanyahu did not alter his illiberal course after October 7. Most notably, parliament members of the ruling coalition and government ministers continue to express extremist, hardline views. In the context of the Israel-Hamas War, some of them have expressed support for ethnic cleansing and other forms of war crimes.<sup>75</sup> Moreover, despite US pressure, members of Netanyahu's coalition have continued to incite violence in the West Bank, risking an escalation of violence and the loss of international support.

70 "Misconception 2: Building Up Hamas," Conception 2023 (website collaboration between the Berl Katznelson Center, the Molad Center for the Renewal of Israeli Democracy, and *Telem* [journal]), 2024, <https://www.conception2023.co.il/concep2/>.

71 Milan Czerny and Dan Storyev: "יזריטוטם לאלצב - תסנה זירוע" Arutz Ha'Knesset-Bezalel Smotrich: "Ro'e Be'Abu Mazen Netel U'Va' Hamas Neches" [Hebrew], YouTube, October 7, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pB16PMEPuiM>.

72 "Israel Social Security Data Reveals True Picture of Oct 7 Deaths," France 24, December 15, 2023, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20231215-israel-social-security-data-reveals-true-picture-of-oct-7-deaths>.

73 Milan Czerny and Dan Storyev, "Why Russia and Hamas Are Growing Closer," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 25, 2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/90841>.

74 Maegan Vazquez, "Trump Doubles Down on Calling Hezbollah 'Very Smart,'" *Washington Post*, October 27, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2023/10/27/trump-hezbollah-very-smart/>.

75 Ishaan Tharoor, "Israeli Calls for Gaza's Ethnic Cleansing Are Only Getting Louder," *Washington Post*, January 5, 2024, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2024/01/05/wy-israel-hamas/>.

These actions have been extremely costly: Israel now faces charges of genocide at the International Court of Justice.<sup>76</sup> This is a result of the extremely high death toll and physical damage in Gaza, but much of the legal case against Israel is based on the rhetoric of Netanyahu's allies. Israel has also lost public support within the West, especially among young people.<sup>77</sup> Again, the war itself is the main cause, but Netanyahu's illiberal extremist government is another central factor. Most importantly, the alliance between Israel and the US is on shaky ground. President Biden, a staunch supporter of Israel, has threatened to halt weapon shipments to Israel. In another sign of a serious rift, Netanyahu has accused the Biden Administration of significantly reducing arms shipments to Israel.<sup>78</sup> This is an existential concern, as Israel is also facing an immediate threat from Hezbollah in Lebanon.

Netanyahu himself remains mostly silent in response to the extremist actions of his coalition partners and even those by members of his own party (although domestically he does continue to partake in attacks on left-wing rivals, including protesters and families of hostages that are affiliated with the center-left). The most straightforward explanation for Netanyahu's puzzling behavior is that he seeks to stay in power by any means necessary. He has lost much of his domestic support,<sup>79</sup> and he requires the ongoing support of his extremist coalition in order to survive politically. This makes his time horizon very short, and as a result, Israel's long-term interests hardly factor into his calculations.

Arguably, Netanyahu's hands are also tied by his own narratives. Netanyahu has been promising his supporters "a total victory"<sup>80</sup> over Hamas. Though according to experts, and even the military itself, this is an unspecified and unrealistic outcome, the radical media associated with Netanyahu is now committed to this slogan. Netanyahu has also promised to block the PA from taking on governing responsibilities in Gaza, leaving him with no viable solutions to replace the Hamas government in Gaza.

Another possible contributing factor in Israel's increasingly costly foreign policy is the deterioration of the civil service. Under Netanyahu, the civil service has been de-professionalized in favor of a more corrupt, clientelist, and ideological personnel, resulting in incompetence and dysfunction.<sup>81</sup> The chaos that followed the October 7 attacks demonstrated the levels of state incompetence. Experts estimate that the diplomatic bureaucracy in Israel is on the verge of collapse due to funding issues and poor management.<sup>82</sup>

## Conclusions

Orbán and Netanyahu's illiberal domestic policies have led to serious threats to their respective countries' prosperity and security. Although it is too soon to say if their actions will have consequences beyond the risks they have already incurred, the mere discussion of Article 7 proceedings against Hungary and the degradation of Israel's

76 Raffi Berg, "What Is South Africa's Genocide Case against Israel at the ICJ?" BBC, May 24, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-67922346>.

77 Muchnick and Kamarack, "The Generation Gap in Opinions toward Israel."

78 Dov Lieber and Shayndi Raice, "Netanyahu Complains of 'Dramatic Drop' in U.S. Arms Shipments to Israel," *Wall Street Journal*, June 23, 2024, <https://www.wsj.com/world/middle-east/netanyahu-complains-of-dramatic-drop-in-u-s-arms-shipments-to-israel-af65138f>.

79 Shani Rozanes, "Support for Israeli PM Netanyahu Continues to Decline," Deutsche Welle, December 27, 2023, <https://www.dw.com/en/support-for-israeli-pm-netanyahu-continues-to-decline/video-67830364>.

80 Ishaan Tharoor, "Netanyahu's Delusional, Deadly Quest for 'Total Victory,'" *Washington Post*, February 9, 2024, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2024/02/09/netanyahu-israel-total-victory-hamas-palestine/>.

81 Chen Agari, "Eifo Ha'Meshilut Shelachem [Hebrew]," *The 7th EYE* (news site), October 12, 2023, <https://www.the7eye.org.il/499133>.

82 Nimrod Goren and Roei Kibrik, "Ha'Reforma Shel Katz Eina Ha'nuscha Ha'Nechona Le'Tikun Misrad Ha'chutza [Hebrew]," *Haaretz*, July 17, 2019, <https://www.haaretz.co.il/blogs/mitvim/2019-07-17/ty-article/0000017f-f8c0-d47e-a37f-f0fc33050000>.

relationship with the US are problematic. Hungary relies on the European Union for significant funding and on NATO for its security, and the US is Israel's security patron. Risking these relationships is the direct result of the attempt to hold on to domestic power through illiberal policies tailored to the respective governments' bases of supporters above all else. For the most part, illiberal domestic consolidation strategies do not affect the direction of a state's foreign policy, but the cases above demonstrate how these domestic strategies can lead to miscalculation and overreach that can risk the state's core interests.

Our analysis demonstrates that while illiberals still cooperate to some extent with liberal international institutions and alliances, they are increasingly disruptive actors. This behavior is partly rooted in domestic factors. Illiberals often promote nationalist narratives, which can constrain them to isolationist and non-cooperative courses of action. They also legitimize extremist actors who pull them in increasingly illiberal directions. Additionally, illiberals erode the decision-making environment and civil service by replacing professional civil servants with ideologically-driven loyalists. This undermines the effectiveness of governance, including in the diplomatic service.

There are also significant international factors contributing to the emboldened behavior of illiberals. First, Russia and China have been strategically investing in relationships that counter the influence of the Western alliance, providing illiberals with support beyond the West and reducing their dependency on Western incentives to cooperate. Second, the number of illiberal leaders is increasing, and this trend could accelerate, especially considering the pivotal election year of 2024. As more illiberals gain power, there is a growing diffusion of strategies to consolidate power, undermine democratic institutions, and resist external pressures.

Finally, our cases demonstrate the weaknesses of the liberal West in responding to disruptive actors on the international stage. Instead of implementing decisive measures, there has been a tendency to resort to economic aid or political concessions to gain cooperation from illiberal leaders. These tactics often further embolden illiberal actors. In order for it to be maintained, the international liberal order requires a more decisive and coordinated response from states that have promoted its ideals. The possibility of such a response depends heavily on the staying power of liberal-democratic leaders, even in established democracies, which is far from guaranteed. This uncertainty makes it challenging to produce an effective defense against international illiberalism.





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