



# Illiberal Ideas: An Anatomy of Intellectual Historians and Illiberalism

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## 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

<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.