

ROUTLEDGE HANDBOOK OF ILLIBERALISM

This volume is the first authoritative reference work solely dedicated to the various components of illiberalism.

Illiberalism is most often discussed in political and constitutional terms, yet illiberalism is rooted in society and cannot be limited to only political or legal treatment. Illiberal trends are present all over the world and are not fixed to one era. This *Handbook* comprises over 60 individual chapters, each dedicated to different aspects of the same phenomenon, presented through the lens of different disciplines and authored by an internationally recognized expert in the field. It charts all representative countries and regions where illiberalism is present and deals with the most important historical antecedents.

The *Routledge Handbook of Illiberalism* will form an important component of any library's holding and will be of benefit as an academic reference, as well as being of practical value to anyone who wishes to gain a clear understanding of the concepts required to explain this conundrum.

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PREFACE

András Sajó, Renáta Uitz, and Stephen Holmes

In the scholarly literature most words ending in “cy” (democracy) or “ism” (populism, liberalism) indicate a concept. Concepts are, increasingly and fashionably, “contested.” This is not the case with illiberalism, a term that was hardly used until recently and could not, therefore, enter the Hall of Fame of contested concepts. Although illiberalism has a number of constituent elements, it is not a “classical concept” that would have “a minimal definition which includes the necessary and jointly sufficient defining properties” (van Kessel 2014, 104, following Sartori 1984).

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. The rise of illiberalism is not always violent. At times it is not even unpleasant. Nor is it synonymous with totalitarianism or autocracy. It is compatible with the political rituals of a competitive democracy. It results from political, social, and economic practices that unduly concentrate powers in the executive branch, or from the limitations on social diversity or political pluralism (i.e. in the name of higher values such as Christianity, Hinduva, Islam, the common good, or peace and harmony). Some of the values and practices associated with illiberalism have a long historical pedigree, others are more recent. Indeed, various forms of illiberalism predate liberalism: human history is dominated by illiberal practices and liberalism emerged as a systematic attack on prevalent illiberal forms of social organization and thinking. The rise of illiberalism is a social fact – troubling for some, welcome to many.

Illiberal vs Liberal Democracies

There is a thriving cottage industry dealing with democratic backlash, but much less interest in illiberal phenomena in politics. More precisely, the illiberal aspect of new cultural phenomena is often disregarded, as these new forms of social expression are viewed with adoration or astonishment. This happens at a time when minimalist conceptions of democracy (Przeworski 1999) – once regarded as a host of possibilities for an open-minded study of government – have become an intellectual burden beyond the riddles of dominant party democracies and electoral authoritarianism that produce regime stability like clockwork.

In the shadow of the search for the right label it is tempting to define illiberalism as a denial of liberalism. Yet liberalism itself is too contested and historically changing for it to form a hard

core that could simply be negated for purposes of definition, even if many illiberal practices and dogma were construed as negations of liberal essentials. For example, liberty is understood in many non-liberal discussions as detrimental to humans, or a pretext to disregard primary human obligations. However, in practice illiberalism is not necessarily based on denial, for illiberal governments most claims concerning liberty are simply irrelevant, especially if these governments dominate how rights and liberties are characterized and used in society.

Fareed Zakaria famously referred to illiberal democracies as regimes with free elections but without liberal institutions (Zakaria 1997). However, such liberal institutions may exist even in an electoral dictatorship, and may even deliver some benefits associated with them. The difference is that in political contexts where legitimation does not come from liberal considerations such institutions are not central to exercising (or limiting) power: the liberal culture animating these institutions has either disappeared or never existed. Politics and governance beyond the constitutional frame (and beyond constitutional constraints) is one of the troubling and currently understudied aspects of illiberal regimes, in particular illiberal democracies.

Lack of scholarly attention may in part be due to unease: to legitimate and perpetuate their power, illiberal rulers often rely on institutional and procedural solutions familiar to respected democratic constitutions and contexts with relatively minor adjustments. Studying these solutions (a constitutional amendment, election rules, or ways of establishing a constitutional court) would require reflection on the darker side of constitutional democracy. As for illiberal cultural phenomena, increasing intolerance and vulgarity, together with alternative facts and a culture of shamelessness, are celebrated as authentic or socially just forms of self-expression.

Despite its current global prevalence, populism is not the only successful road leading to illiberalism. Religious fundamentalism, radical nationalism, and communitarianism are also commonly travelled paths. Most of the elements of illiberalism we find already in Plato's celebration of an illiberal social order (as summarized in Popper's attack in which he accused Plato of defending "lying, political miracles, tabooistic superstition, the suppression of truth, and ultimately, brutal violence" (Popper 1950, 194)). Illiberalism rejects rational discourse, instead promoting intolerance, fear of difference, the cult of force, discipline, and moral authority (i.e. morality being a matter of authority). The above are ordinary staples of illiberalism. Respect for authority and tradition in society, fear of individual freedom, and praise of organic collectives are rather common tropes in ideological attacks on liberalism, and in the political regimes related to these positions. If not communitarian, illiberalism is at least sympathetic to it, and it is certainly anti-individualistic. Of course, critics of liberalism have their own concerns with liberalism (egotism, elitism, exploitation, denial of obligations, dogmatism, etc.). This *Handbook* thus intends to present also the arguments, reasons, and facts (as reflected in scholarship) *in favour of* illiberalism.

Illiberalism vs Anti-liberalism

Anti-liberalism is not the same as illiberalism. Modern anti-liberalism started as a programmatic reaction to liberalism, and it comprises widely varied strains of thought and moral and ideological commitments. At its origins the anti-liberal tradition has strong associations with the counter-enlightenment, and is associated with de Maistre, Schmitt, Strauss, Lasch, and MacIntyre, and (for Germany) Herder, Hegel, and Fichte, as well as socialists and papal Encyclicals of the late nineteenth century. "Anti-liberalism is more a mind-set than a theory. It is more a 'culture' or cluster of shared prejudices than a closely argued system of thought" (Holmes 1989, 228).

Anti-liberalism – whether directed at liberal theories or liberal societies – credits liberalism as the ultimate reason or source of the contemporary moral crisis of society, an ill that results in economic, cultural, and political, etc., demise. Anti-liberalism does not wish to repair such a fatal flow: it seeks to do away with it. Anti-liberalism’s targets include liberal individualism, neutrality (seen as indifference), rationalism (seen as faithlessness and godlessness), as well as its embrace of critical inquiry and pluralism (seen as being devoid of truths), its cosmopolitanism and overwhelming universalism (as a matter of principle). Anti-liberal positions were articulated against the liberalism that emerged following the French Revolution, particularly in the liberal criticism of Rousseauist ideas (see Benjamin Constant) and against liberal expansionism (as in the case of German nationalists and romanticists).

Contemporary anti-liberalism builds on these criticisms, but it has a strong democratic and egalitarian addition: it is directed against the “elites” as opposed to the common man or people, or nation. But contemporary illiberalism in government and social control is more than that: it denies public reason; hence the openness to misinformation, and the denial of truth and values in illiberal regimes. It is suspicious of the Enlightenment, and consequently in reason, especially in public reason and intellectual elites. It does not have a consistent theory of politics, society, or of an illiberal constitution. Instead, it relies on contingent ideologies like populism, religious values, or communitarianism. It is not necessarily anti-individualistic even if its preferred reference is some imagined community, and it can be anti-individualistic without being collectivist (e.g. when it restricts individual choice or at least discourages individual choice as culturally inappropriate). Finally, it is not limited to ideas (scholarly or practical).

As such, illiberalism refers to political practices of government and social relations in the economy and culture. In brief, modern illiberalism is not an all-encompassing or comprehensive ideology: it does not offer a coherent vision of society, presenting in its place fragmented rallying cries like getting rid of elites and experts and make the nation great (preferably great again).

Illiberalism vs Populism

Today, illiberalism very often comes up in the context of populism. There is a rapidly growing literature on populism because of the political, social, and economic changes that are attributed to populist movements and forms of communication. There are very important illiberal elements in populism; they may even be decisive for the success of populism. But this is not the concern of this *Handbook*. The concern is that once the populist movements have obtained power, they often shift government and society, and increasingly international relations, in an illiberal direction. The emerging regime is not populist, although it may maintain important elements of populist mobilization, topoi, and communication in the regime’s electoral reaffirmation.

An increasing number of illiberal regimes have emerged in many countries in the last decade; in many other countries the mainstream political establishment drifts toward populist positions and *de facto* illiberal positions (e.g. in humanitarian and asylum policies) in order to prevent the coming to power of authentic populist competitors. This reinforces illiberal tendencies in society and social institutions. How illiberal regimes select existing illiberal tendencies of societies (e.g. siding with anti-modernist religious organizations or other anti-modernist forces) is a matter of further research. The illiberal elements of social relations that are selected for reinforcement (e.g. favouring “traditional” family models and roles) and the extent to which the illiberal political environment creates illiberal social trends and cultural patterns is the subject matter of this *Handbook*.

Illiberalism as a Sui Generis Subject of Academic Study

Leaving aside the political connotations, illiberalism, seen from the scholarly perspective, is a set of often interrelated social, political, and legal practices and positions which are studied under different headings (authoritarian or theocratic regimes in political science; conservatism in political theory; statism and developmentalism in economic studies; populism in the sociology of movements). These studies follow the analysis of their own logic: illiberalism is discussed (or not) within the concept of populism, or nationalism, or international trade only if it illuminates the primary object of study, if it gets attention at all. As such, the interrelatedness of phenomena is easily lost.

To use Umberto Eco's example, the understanding of the platypus was impossible so long as the concepts of mammals and birds were based on mutual exclusivity and there was no full specimen available for analysis (Eco [1997] 1999). The platypus is now safely in the unique class of egg-laying mammals (monotremes), while illiberalism as a concept is struggling for its place in a field crowded by placeholder concepts (anti-liberalism, nativism, traditionalism, conservatism, democratic backlash, authoritarianism) which – as their constant negotiation indicates – are unable to grasp multicoloured phenomenon. In the absence of a stable and comprehensive frame of reference, important features, dynamics, and interrelations are missed.

We believe that closer engagement with illiberalism has a lot to offer the scholarship on politics, government, and society. To start: is illiberalism different from authoritarianism? And more importantly, are illiberal regimes different from authoritarian ones? Consider Huntington and Moore's definitions of democracy and authoritarianism: "Democracy exists where the principal leaders of a political system are selected by competitive elections in which the bulk of the population has the opportunity to participate. Authoritarian systems are nondemocratic ones" (1970, 509). Does this opposition make sense today, when the bulk of the population does actually participate in elections which are not necessarily fair, but minimally competitive?

Some scholars consider contemporary election-based illiberal regimes authoritarian because even if elections and other forms of public decision-making are free they are not fair (some politicians and journalists even call these regimes fascist). For our purposes such dichotomy is of little use. Many contemporary regimes rely on democratic means to maintain an illiberal regime; illiberalism (just like authoritarianism) appears in contexts other than political power building. Many illiberal democracies move towards authoritarianism, but important differences persist, especially in the level of constraint used to rule, in public mentalities, social and economic organization, and in matters of regime legitimation. Authoritarianism as a political form is certainly illiberal, but not all forms of illiberalism have to do with authoritarianism.

Admittedly, the editors of the *Handbook* consider the study of illiberalism vital because of their commitment to liberalism in the continental sense (i.e. individual personal freedom in a free and open society, in a political community which functions as a constitutional democracy). Many scholars and politicians do not endorse this perspective. It is quite possible that the contemporary social order cannot be maintained on liberal grounds, with nominal priority given to individual choices; likewise, it is possible that the international economic order will not continue to operate on the assumptions of free trade and what is often called neoliberalism (either because of an alleged resulting social injustice or nationalist protectionism).

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