

BOOK REVIEW

**Boris Vormann and Michael Weinman (eds.), *The Emergence of Illiberalism: Understanding a Global Phenomenon*,
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As illiberalism is rising globally, it is not surprising that not just the scholars of political science want to understand the phenomenon. Authoritarian regimes and politicians have become frequent guests of the covers of weekly magazines, and an article about illiberal governance can generate endless discussion threads on the internet. In many cases, however, the explanations of such articles and cover stories differ largely from the academic discourse. Nevertheless, they demonstrate that there is an increasing interest when it comes to illiberalism.

How and why countries, once devoted to liberalism, want something radically different now? Does the rise of illiberalism a reaction to the failures of the neoliberal era? What kind of issues and politicians facilitate this uprising? Can we recognise similar patterns between such regimes? And, probably more importantly, what would be the most efficient way to address the political arguments of these regimes? These are the questions that the edited volume *The Emergence of Illiberalism: Understanding a Global Phenomenon* wants to address. The title rightly suggests that the editors approach their theme from a global perspective: while the first part of the book provides theoretical explanations from different scholars of the field, the second half of the volume presents several case studies from countries that are dealing with the rise of illiberalism.

Although previous works also analysed cases of populist and illiberal governments to develop a new theory or explain the phenomenon from new angles, this volume follows a partially different approach. The editors do not seek to develop a new theory based on the case studies. Rather, the book suggests that because of the different characteristics of these illiberal regimes, developing a new theoretical concept regarding the emergence of illiberalism is almost impossible. But even though the volume does not present a broad theory, it offers several explanations, and the reader can recognise at least one launching point, shared by probably all authors — namely that we are witnessing the global crisis of democracy.

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The first chapter, written by the editors, gives a detailed overview of how Boris Vormann and Michael Weinman understand illiberalism. For them, illiberal democracy is a “politics of fear” (p. 5), and illiberal politicians take advantage of the failures of the neoliberal era. In this sense, their argument is similar to Roger Eatwell and Matthew Goodwin’s (2018) point, who claimed that deprivation had underpinned the populist surge since many only experienced the downsides of neoliberal economic policies. Interestingly, however, the editors point out that while many illiberal politicians seek to return to the era when neoliberal policies did not exist, in real life, the opposite is happening in some countries. Indeed, the Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán, for example, has been a fierce critique of neoliberal economic policies for so long, but as political scientists argued (Fabry, 2018, for instance), Orbán’s economic policy shows neoliberal tendencies. While the editors underline the global nature of the phenomenon, they also note that despite many similarities, such countries and their illiberal regimes or politicians are not the same. Besides that the chapter addresses the authors’ perspective and main points, it already offers an important distinction. Instead of simply talk about a crisis, the editors make explicit that we need to address two crises at the same time. Firstly, political liberalism is in crisis. But there is another crisis as illiberal politicians realised the former crisis and were seeking power or already in power in some countries.

Crisis becomes a significant theme of the book. Brian Milstein’s contribution to the book (the second chapter) is mainly about the analysis of crisis per se. However, this chapter is perhaps the most theoretical or even philosophical. Milstein, a political theorist, seeks to connect Jürgen Habermas’s theory of legitimation crisis to the current political era. While the analysis appears an interesting contribution — and clearly shows that Habermas’s argument is still relevant —, the chapter is the least integrated part of the book. Similarly, the late Roger Scruton’s essay (chapter 6), where he argues that conservatism is not against openness, and the real danger is the “liberal individualism” (p. 71), is a refreshing work per se, however, it is not strongly connected to the theme of the volume. Some could argue, on the other hand, that an edited volume inevitably includes loosely connected works, but some readers may not be convinced enough that the editors chose the contributions carefully enough. Nevertheless, as a reader, one can recognise that Scruton partially refers to the illiberal rise, since, in his account, such emergence is a reaction, but not the neoliberal era or the politics after 1989 but to the already-mentioned “liberal individualism”.

Some of the other chapters use recent political events to highlight their arguments. The best example is perhaps Marc F. Plattner’s contribution (chapter 3), where a detailed account is given of the term illiberal democracy and the way Viktor Orbán positively used the term in his well-cited speech back in July 2014. Based on that speech, Plattner discusses that the term became a positive label and not pejorative anymore for illiberal leaders. However, Plattner argues that illiberal democracies are not stable enough — after a period of time, they tend to turn into autocracy or move back towards the democratic way.

In chapter 4, Ewa Atanassow's point of departure is similar in many senses: we can see the emergence of illiberalism as a debate on the relation between democracy and liberalism. The author follows Alexis de Tocqueville's perspective on democracy, and by using his work (*Democracy in America*), she argues that Tocqueville did see coming the illiberal uprising (p. 61). Moreover, whereas politicians, journalists, and even political scientists seem to think that the problem is the illiberal politicians and parties themselves, Atanassow argues differently. She notes that if one explores in more detail, a more complex problem can be found: the global discrediting of the people and democratic politics (p. 66). It might seem that illiberal politicians are for the people, but the very fact that they often deny democratic politics and consensus in many cases means that they are discrediting voters. Although the author of the chapter does not follow a normative approach, she offers an answer to the question „what can be done?“ (p. 68): one can simply reject the illiberal story, however, it is probably more beneficial to tell a more liberal, truer story in order to combat the illiberal narrative.

The scholars of the volume sometimes recall personal accounts of experiences that makes the book more interesting for a general audience as well. This is especially noticeable in the last chapter of the first part of the book. Here, Roger Berkowitz starts with a description of his travels in East-Central Europe after the fall of the Berlin Wall. According to Berkowitz, the world, but particularly that part of Europe, was significantly different back then: after the collapse of the communist block, people of countries like Poland or Hungary were full of hope and, no doubt, they wanted to „join Europe“. Nowadays, a traveler would observe something else: as the argument goes again, democracy is in crisis and this is more than obvious in that part of Europe. So, what is happening there? Berkowitz manages to explain the rebellion against authority and, as he terms, „elite governance“ (p. 86). Even though he starts with the cases of European countries, most of his argument is based on examples from the United States. The most significant argument of the chapter also uses contemporary examples from the US: like Eatwell and Goodwin (2018), Berkowitz presents four different prejudices that contributed to the democratic crisis we are witnessing. In his account, for example, prioritising security over freedom and the moralisation of the political opponents are among these prejudices. In general, Berkowitz's arguments are strongly backed by examples and theories of classical thinkers in the history of political science (Hannah Arendt, Tocqueville), and this chapter of the first part of the volume could appeal to many audiences, partly because of the author's appealing writing style.

The second part of the book is a collection of case studies of illiberal politics or governance in different countries. Some of the chapters focus upon one particular country, but some follow a comparative perspective and study numerous countries or a region at the same time. One chapter, written by Christian Lammert, analyses the current tendencies in the United States in light of Donald Trump's presidency, while another contribution, by Jonathan Hopkin and Mark Blyth, takes a more comparative

view to discuss the anti-system politics in Western democracies. Also, there is a chapter (by Claudia Wiesner) devoted to the European Union and its democratic deficits. In addition, one chapter deals with the rise of illiberalism in Poland and Hungary, and there are contributions devoted to India, Japan, Turkey, and Brazil.

While these countries and regions differ, there is a general pattern in the book that the reader can recognise: in some countries, the illiberal governance is already established and has been in power for many years, as the case of Turkey or Hungary shows. On the contrary, other countries like Japan are still facing the danger of illiberalism or maybe already on the illiberal path (India), as the authors of these chapters argue. Therefore, the question arises: what are the similarities between such countries? Is it the political landscape and the party system? Or the failures of previously well-established parties and institutions that opened the way to this rise?

In fact, rather than answering such questions, the scholars of the second part of the volume are more interested in the current state and policies of these regimes. The most significant theme of the chapters is the way these regimes erode the system of checks and balances and create a media system that is controlled by the government. In chapter 11, for example, Gülçin Balamir Coşkun and Aysuda Kölemen richly describe the Turkish AKP's (Justice and Development Party) way towards power. Instead of focusing on Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the chapter takes the reader inside the history and transformation of AKP. Likewise, in Hungary and Poland (as Ivan Krastev outlines in the well-argued and precise chapter 10), similar government actions are present, namely the facilitated cultural and political polarisation by the governing illiberal governing parties, and the hostile narrative about the European Union. Just like the AKP in Turkey, the Polish and Hungarian governing parties actively use conspiracy theories to maintain their power (p. 159).

One of the contributions (chapter 13 by Kristin Surak) was originally published in the *New Statesman* magazine, and therefore the reader should expect a shorter and maybe even surprising analysis. Surprising because the chapter is about Japan, a country that is usually not part of any discourses devoted to illiberalism. However, Surak outlines, economic gaps are growing, and the need for immigrant workers is increasing in Japan, where one of the main responses to these issues is a "nationalist reawakening" (p. 205). The author explains why such reawake is worrying and what could be the consequences (claims for "traditional values" and the erosion of press freedom), but she never explicitly claims that Japan is on the illiberal path. In the end, the reader can feel the chapter is a bit unusual contribution to the volume, given that the country cannot be compared to other illiberal regimes discussed here, but this only makes the book more informative and wide-ranging.

At the heart of chapter 12 lies again the very concern with how to measure whether a country is no longer a democracy. Here, Nandini Sundar discusses different terms (such as illiberal democracy, fascism, and authoritarian populism) and the applicability of such terms to the current Indian government. Sundar concludes that India is not a "regular democracy" (p. 198) anymore as democratic

institutions have been suborned to the government. The crisis of institutions as one of the major problems is an important theme in chapter 14 as well. As Esther Solano's analysis — which is partially based on quantitative research —, about Brazil make it apparent, the victory of the far-right Jair Bolsonaro had deep roots in the recent history of the country. And particularly the massive corruption and the disappointment in the traditional politicians (p. 214) and institutions have given the green light to the coming of Bolsonaro. While the author states the importance of studying political personalities like Bolsonaro, ironically, her chapter proves that doing the former is not enough, since populist or illiberal successes usually have deep roots in the past.

The volume addresses many worrying symptoms of the illiberal upsurge. Countries are turning away from democracy, and as Ivan Krastev argues in chapter 10, the trend is “unlikely to go away anytime soon” (p. 164). On the other hand, there are still things that can give hope for those who believe in (representative) democracy, the democratic institutions, and the system of political checks and balances: as Gülçin Balamir Coşkun and Aysuda Kölemen highlight, democratic resistance can survive under any circumstances, even in classrooms, parks, or stadiums.

The Emergence of Illiberalism: Understanding a Global Phenomenon is an important contribution to the field of political science. The global perspective that the volume offers is still a rare approach when it comes to illiberalism. Political theorists can find provocative and arguable essays in the first part of the book, while the case studies can be used by analysts and policymakers as well. While the contributions differ in their quality and depth, most of them offer the reader several insights into the functioning of illiberalism. It would have been interesting, however, to read a conclusion based on all the chapters, but the final chapter, by Craig Calhoun, only addresses the history of populism and its contemporary nature. As such, it is an excellent overview from ancient Athens to Steve Bannon in where the author comes to the conclusion that the “we, educated elites, spend too much of our time being angry at populists and not enough time being angry at the betrayal of the broad public interest by governing and economic elites in our societies” (p. 243). There is a chance that he is right?

References

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