

BOOK REVIEW

The Emergence of Illiberalism. Understanding a Global Phenomenon

edited by Boris Vormann and Michael D. Weinman. London: Routledge. 2021. 272p. \$34.99 Paperback, £120 Hardback, \$26.24 eBook.

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The Emergence of Illiberalism. Understanding a Global Phenomenon, edited by Boris Vormann and Michael D. Weinman (2021) is a timely publication that attempts to make sense of the crisis of liberal democracy that has affected most parts of the world over the past decade.

Echoing the argument first raised by Chantal Mouffe in her famous article ‘The “End of Politics” and the Challenge of Right-Wing Populism’ (in F. Panizza, 2005, *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy*, London: Verso, 72–98), the volume’s editors argue that the main reason for the recent rise of illiberal politics lies in the financial crisis that erupted in 2008, which showed the unsustainable contradictions of the neoliberal economic model. As the frequent reference to Thomas Piketty’s *Capital in the Twentieth-Century* (2014) also suggests, the common argument in almost all the contributions is then that neoliberalism has proven unable to provide large swathes of the population with decent living standards, and this failure has eroded the legitimacy of the ruling elites who were supposed to temper the inequalities that this economic model inevitably produces.

The principal merit of this book is its ability to explore the *pars construens* of the ‘emergence of illiberalism’, an intriguing but often overlooked feature of this phenomenon. While most scholars have focused on the destructive component of the actions undertaken by illiberal autocrats, the latter now seem fully committed to establishing new political regimes. Hence the need to move beyond the taxonomy that has hitherto assumed that liberal democracy is merely facing a regression, or a decline, to embrace conceptual perspectives that could better address the formation of innovative institutions and practices, such as autocratization.

A second added value of this book comes from its effort to take stock of the internal debate that animates the conservative camp. In ‘*Illiberal Democracy and the Struggle on the Right*’, Marc F. Plattner argues that the most important battle for the survival of liberal democracy is actually taking place on that side of the political spectrum, where liberal conservatives are growingly being challenged by illiberal conservatives. The latter wish to convince the former that there is no longer space for them in the current architecture of liberal democracy. As Plattner correctly remarks, this battle does not only invest concrete ordinary politics, but has by now reached the realm of political theory, with critics of liberal thought such as Ryszard Legutko propagating the idea that liberal democracy would have become a mere synonym for progressivism. This contribution is therefore a necessary reminder for researchers to devote more attention to this burgeoning debate on the right, which has so far attracted only limited scholarly attention.

An eclectic academic, Roger Scruton fully deserves the label of ‘liberal conservative’. That is why his text ‘*The Open Society from a Conservative Perspective*’ sheds such valuable light on the debate outlined by Plattner. His elegant essay revolves around a chief concept: constraints.

In its extreme manifestation, liberal democracy has spread the idea that any form of constraint is to be rejected as a burden on the free expression of the individual. Nevertheless, open societies where individual freedoms can prosper are necessarily founded on constraints, namely conditions that determine and govern the existence of institutions that grant, protect, and extend these same freedoms. In the present time it is primarily the nation-state that provides these institutions. Scruton's reflection highlights thus a crucial paradox at the heart of the crisis of liberal democracy. The nation-state is still assigned the task to grant its citizens increasingly extensive individual rights, even as its very existence, and even more so the existence of its basic point of reference (the nation), is simultaneously challenged by supranational institutions, such as the EU, which are often supported by the most liberal sectors of society. This essay raises therefore some of the most pressing questions that liberal forces are struggling to answer in the current political climate: what to do with the nation state? Does the definition of the nation, understood as the most important pillar of the traditional construction of Western-style liberal democracies, need to be reformulated? For a building to be open, there must first be a building, ideally with foundations, walls, and a roof, all those boundaries that define as well as protect. Without a building, there can be no openness, only emptiness, argues the British scholar.

While the theoretical section of the book presents several stimulating insights into the topic of illiberalism, the following empirical part is not as convincing. First of all, many of the contributions are mostly descriptions of significant political episodes, such as the rise of Bolsonarism in Brazil or Turkey's post-coup descent into authoritarianism, with scarce analytical insight. More problematic, though, is the terminological vagueness of this section. In two chapters, Hopkin and Blyth's and Solano's, the words 'illiberalism' or 'illiberal' do not appear at all. Sundar applies the concepts of 'illiberal democracy' and 'authoritarian populism' to past periods of India's recent history, but labels Modi's rule as 'proto-fascism'. The only author who actually adopts the concept of 'illiberalism' is Ivan Krastev, whose essay is a slightly revised version of an article that appeared on *Foreign Affairs* in 2018. As a result, the contributions do not seem to address the same phenomenon – arguably, the 'emergence of illiberalism' – with a plurality of perspectives that interact fruitfully with each other, but rather approach different phenomena. It is also worth mentioning that, although the editors claim that 'No doubt, autocratic movements learn from one another across national boundaries', this element is not addressed anywhere in the volume, either in theoretical terms or in the empirical section. This absence reflects the inherent difficulty of studying processes of 'authoritarian learning', or 'authoritarian contagion', namely the circulation of illiberal ideas and practices among autocratic actors, an intangible phenomenon that proves difficult to operationalize, despite the empirically intuitive understanding that these actors influence and reinforce each other through cooperation and exchange.

In conclusion, three main points emerge from this volume as the three decisive challenges for the survival of liberal democracy. First, the estrangement of elites from the needs of ordinary people, which has become more acute in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis. Second, the shortage of political alternatives, due to the convergence of the main parties towards a centrist acceptance of the dominance of the liberal paradigm. Third, the search for a new definition of political community that could bind people together (again). If the nation is no longer able to give individuals a sense of a common future, another model of community must be imagined. These three challenges will require not only further research, but also a greater commitment from policy makers in the years to come, if the trend towards autocratization is to be reversed. This volume suggests that the emergence of illiberalism may not be a mere revival of past ideologies, but a genuine product of modernity, a process leading most human societies into the future, and not back the past.