illiberalism Studies Program NEWSLETTER

AT GW'S INSTITUTE FOR EUROPEAN, RUSSIAN, AND EURASIAN STUDIES

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Journal of Illiberalism Studies

A new issue of the *Journal of Illiberalism Studies* is out! Articles touch on topics ranging from the genealogies of illiberalism, the "second birth" of Christopher Lasch in France, the illiberal imagination, the relationship of intellectual historians with illiberalism, and how illiberalism functions in the international arena. You won't want to miss it!

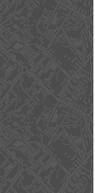
Read it here

Publications

Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance: A New Populist Party on the Rise

Svenja Hiesgen on Sahra Wagenknecht's new populist party in Germany and its heterodox ideology, plus the dangers emanating from the German elite's "business as usual" approach to politics.

From the ILLSP Team



Autocrats Can't Always Get What They Want: State Institutions and Autonomy under Authoritarianism

Julian G. Waller and his co-authors argue that to understand how authoritarian systems work we need to look not only at the interests and intentions of those at the top but also at the inner workings of the various parts of the state.

Putin the Resilient

Julian G. Waller argues in *Foreign Affairs* that predicting the collapse of Putin's regime is wishful thinking.

JD Vance, Project 2025, and How the Right Got Weird

Laura K. Field joined the *Offline* podcast to break down why the GOP's "weirdness" is tied to the emergence of the "New Right," how JD Vance exemplifies this moment, and how to prevent the movement from capturing more power in American politics.

RESOURCE HUB

Anat Gofen argues that street-level organizations (SLOs) play a key, but understudied, political role in democratic governance. Gofen identifies four SLO roles: policy-sphere, politics-sphere, SLOs-as-takers, and SLOs-as-makers. She then looks at how SLOs behave in the context of democratic backsliding and questions, asking whether SLOs converge to, or diverge from, illiberal policies. Gofen suggests that SLOs both influence and are influenced by, populism and democratic backsliding.

The Nation in the Time of the Pandemic: Media and Political Discourse across Countries during the COVID-19 Crisis explores the media and political discourses during the COVID-19 crisis across thirteen nations, arguing that the nation became a frame of reference to make sense of the crisis, to keep citizens united, to gain their trust, and to ensure compliance with unprecedented health mandates. The volume charts the resonance to 'non-ideological' values and narratives, taken up in an attempt to appeal to swaths of different stakeholders. It also evidences the perception that liberal democracy is fragile today, caused by too much consensus among political and media figures, dissent from that consensus, and the threat of populism.

Srdjan Vucetic asks a simple question, "How are neoliberal thought leaders reacting to the rise of radical conservatism?" To answer, Vucetic looks to Atlas, a global network of 500 neoliberal think tanks and organizations. He finds that there remains a reliable adherence to core neo-liberal ideas and that explicit evidence of ideological tension is scarce. However, the network as a whole appears consistently and willfully apathetic toward the radical right, a courtesy not shown to left-of-center ideas, parties, and governments, which Atlas-affiliated groups oppose with vigor and regularity.

István Benedek suggests that, while populism and autocratization studies are interconnected, they have yet to be combined into a comprehensive and systematic conceptual framework. To overcome this, Benedek connects these areas by putting forth the concepts of populist autocratization and populist electoral autocratization, an attempt to deepen understanding of the nature of contemporary autocratization and the stability of autocracies. The study is primarily theoretical but Benedek also engages with methodological and operationalization considerations, and outlines a brief research agenda to demonstrate the empirical applicability of the analytical framework.

The Far-Right in World Politics asks why the far right has gained political influence across countries spanning the Global North and South. It suggests that the far right's reach indicates a "distinct conjuncture in world politics," i.e., a common set of enabling conditions and characteristics. Thus, the volume explores far-right movements within their national contexts but with a focus on situating them globally. From this perspective, the book demonstrates the "deeply embedded" symptoms of far-right politics centered on racialized imaginaries across the globe... re-produced within the sinews of an evolving liberal international order."

Michael F. Bird reviews and interacts with two recent books on Christian nationalism, offering affirmation and critique concerning their warnings about the dangers of Christian nationalism for Christianity engaging in the political sphere. Each reviewed book is evaluated for the validity and accuracy of its critique of Christian nationalism and alternative options are also canvassed. The article closes with six theses for a Christical theology today.

Jason Brennan et al. describe public reason communitarianism, a theory structured similarly to public reason liberalism, showing that, while the latter believes that public reason will converge on liberal outcomes, the former suggests it may rather converge on communitarianism. The authors offer this theory as a challenge, as it poses a dilemma: if public reason liberals admit the coherence of public communitarian version of their view, then public reason does not uniquely generate liberal outcomes, and indeed in the real world may fail to justify liberalism. If liberals deny the coherence of the view, it seems they must rely on question-begging liberal premises or question-begging interpretations of key concepts in the public reason view. The authors contend that this, contrary to public reason liberals' self-understanding, demonstrates that their view is ideological after all.

Civic and Uncivic Values in Hungary: Value Transformation, Politics, and Religion starts from the premise that civic values are integral to liberal democracy and international peace. To determine the extent to which these values are respected and practiced in Hungary, the volume examines numerous fields and spheres, from politics to media, religion, cinema, and much more. It also charts how, under Prime Minister Orbán, Hungary has gravitated away from the civic values spelled out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Charter of the European Union.

Zsolt Péter Szabó et al. put forth that, while mental health stigma research shows the importance of societal and political views on mental health perceptions, most research in the field has been conducted in "typical Western neo-liberal settings." As a corrective, Szabó et al. look to Hungary, an understudied post-communist context with high levels of stigma, and examine stigmas related to both general and three specific mental illnesses. They do so by surveying Hungarians' political dispositions and their attitudes toward mental illnesses. They conclude that having right-wing authoritarian views was significantly linked to most stigma outcomes, while conservative political ideology showed a selective impact.

Milan Zafirovski unpacks the relationship between military expenditure and democracy, specifically the consequences of the first for the second in OECD countries from 2006–2017. Zafirovski proposes a theoretical sociological framework for approaching the problem of military expenditure and democracy and tests various hypotheses and finds that the results "for the most part support the theory and hypotheses that large and increasing military expenditure has adverse consequence for liberal democracy in general, and in OECD countries in particular."

The Radical Mind: The Origins of Right-Wing Catholic and Protestant Coalition Building challenges the prevailing wisdom that the American New Right and Christian Right are separate movements, with the former motivated by secular political aims and the latter religious convictions. Overturning this consensus, the book embraces a new term, the New Christian Right, and demonstrates that it infused right-wing activism with religion. Moreover, rather than working to conserve the past, this book argues that the New Christian Right is fundamentally a forward-looking and reactive movement focused on remaking the political landscape in the United States.

Drawing on three experiences—a mega-church service in suburban Singapore, and visits to two suburban hardcore gyms (in Northern England and the Southeastern United States)—Jason Luger presents the spatial experience of authoritarianism as a dynamic atmosphere with the seductive potential for radical joy. This challenges normative portrayals of authoritarianism as an inherently joyless, bleak, and oppressive operation of power. Contra these portrayals, Luger frames these experiences as spiritual, exhilarating spaces, spaces of radical possibilities that are simultaneously hierarchal, patriarchal, disciplined, and oppressive, arguing that "conjunctural subjectivities are effectively embedded in these spaces resulting in conflictual experiences." The paper avoids taxonomizing authoritarianism into clear binaries and instead frames it as both an open and closed socio-cultural-political space that needs further exploration at this moment.

Employing the Turkish ruling party's attempt to consolidate a pro-family, pro-birth, and Islamist gender regime based on the "moral degradation of women and LGBTI + people as a backdrop, Cinsen Günay-Erkol and Nurseli Yeşim Sinbiloğlu examine the role played by KADEK as a women's government-organized non-governmental (GONGO) feminist attempts to impose Western standards on Turkish society while advocating for women's rights from a culturalist position. Günay-Erkol and Sinbiloğlu analyze KADEM's construction of men and masculinities, their strategies of legitimization for neoqatriarchal masculinity, and their role as a transmitter of an Islamic neopatriarchal culture.

Utilizing attacks on democratic governance and liberal-democratic values at universities in Hungary and Turkey as case studies, Zahra Jaferova and Elizabeth Buckner explore the re-emergence of universities as spaces for the contestation of government policies in an era of illiberalism, rising nationalism, and populism. They conceptualize virtual space as a space of contestation and analyze social media data to identify the dominant narratives of governments/their supporters and those resisting them. From this, they identify two narratives: illiberal governments and their supporters frame the liberal and pro-freedom inclinations of universities as a 'threat' to the nation, while students and faculty portray the government as the real threat to their rights and freedoms and knowledge production within what was once a 'safe space' in universities, thus framing themselves as the 'true guardians' of their institutions.

Using Turkey and Israel as case studies, Karabekir Akkoyunlu and Yusuf Sarfati highlight a specific strategy employed by autocratizing populist incumbents in ethnically divided societies when they face election setbacks. They call this strategy a "blood gamble," which entails "cementing violent conflict to keep the opposition divided along identitarian cleavages while creating a rally-around-the-flag effect to help the incumbent win a renewed election." They demonstrate that, while the strategy has been used by both Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey and Benjamin Netanyahu in Israel, outcomes are shaped by differing institutional and political contexts. Namely, the extent of executive aggrandizement and the level of party fragmentation.

Looking at Rodrigo Duterte, the former president of the Philippines, and Donald Trump, Marco Garrido outlines the limits and pitfalls of thin comparisons and the necessity of thicker ones. Garrido presents the case for lumping Duterte and Trump together as emerging autocrats before pursuing a thicker comparison of Duterte and Trump, putting their support in economic, social, political, and historical context and highlighting substantial differences in their respective situations. Finally, he argues that thin comparisons are especially susceptible to interpretive biases in general and highlights three such biases—toward contemporaneity, continuity, and centrality—using the case of Duterte to illustrate.

With evidence from Argentina, Ecuador, and Venezuela, Benjamin García Holgado and Raúl Sánchez Urribarri center elected leaders' use of legalistic measures to undermine democracy, suggesting that the abuse of law is at the center of the toolkit of emerging autocrats. More specifically, the paper identifies courts and judicial actors, studying how (and in what ways) courts become illiberal tools for legal reforms that can gradually dismantle liberal democracy. Holgado and Urribarri claim that the co-optation of the judiciary by the executive helps create an appearance of institutional normalcy that enhances regime legitimacy and that, more generally, "legal narratives" can be used to legitimize the slow undermining of democratic rule.

*For resources on illiberal, populist, and authoritarian trends across the globe, consult our growing **Resource Hub** aggregating hundreds of published academic articles on illiberalism and other topics relating to illiberal movements. From security and international affairs, to democratic backsliding and public policy, this center of longstanding and recently-published literature continues to document ongoing global trends of growing illiberal movements around the world.*

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