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Really existing liberalism, the bulwark fantasy, and the enabling of reactionary, far right politics¹

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There is no present or future, only the past, happening over and over again, now. (O'Neill, 1943)

While Francis Fukuyama's concept of the end of history has been thoroughly rejected in most serious analyses, including by his own account, it continues to grip much of our political imaginary (see Bessner, 2023): "That liberalism is dominant now, however, seems to be a commonplace on which all can agree" (Finlayson, 2012, p. 17). This seemingly frozen state of politics echoes the poignant line quoted above from Eugene O'Neill's play *A Moon for the Misbegotten* set in 1943, written 100 years ago. Whatever happens in the current state of polycrisis can only be read within the boundaries of liberal hegemony. Any challenge is dismissed as exceptional, abnormal, and ultimately irrelevant. It is through that lens that "shocks" to the system such as the election of Donald Trump, the Brexit victory in the UK's referendum on the EU, and the rise of the far right and its accession to power in many countries have generally been understood. Far from being analyzed as originating from the failure(s) of the liberal hegemony, they have been covered and treated as exceptional events. Therefore, despite countless lamenting headlines and articles about the rise of "populism" and "illiberalism," there has been very little reflection in mainstream elite discourse on the wider implications of the failure of the liberal hegemony. Instead, there has been at first a naïve optimism, that liberalism would almost naturally triumph against illiberalism, followed by widespread panic since it has become clear that this is not the case. This is despite a wide acknowledgment of the democratic backsliding and decay many countries have been facing since the late twentieth century (although one that is often mistaken as recent rather than entrenched; see, for example, Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018). This setting has meant that we have seen a rise in the public discourse of terms such as "populism" and "illiberalism" used to describe this "new", "fuzzy" state of affairs (Waller, 2023; Laruelle, 2022; see Stavrakakis, 2014; Stavrakakis et al., 2018 on populism and antipopulism in particular).² In her attempt to provide a conceptual introduction to illiberalism in particular, Marlene Laruelle (2022) offers a good overview of the issues that currently prevent a clear understanding of the concept. This links to Marlies Glasius's work (2018, p. 516), which notes

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that “we currently lack the tools to distinguish between tangible threats to democracy and interpretations imbued by left-liberal prejudice.” In this context, Glasius rightly recommends focusing on praxis, and the same should certainly be applied to liberalism.

Therefore, I propose that core to the current panic over “illiberalism” and “populism” is a fantasy (Glynos, 2021) whose discourse uncritically posits liberalism and liberal democracy as a natural bulwark against reaction. This narrative, born out of the Second World War and the defeat of fascism and Nazism, is based on a simplistic, mythologizing reading of history, which conveniently eschews the well-documented ambivalence of “the West” toward many key tenets of what would eventually become the benchmark for “evil” in politics (Meister, 2010). In this narrative, the West and liberalism were redeemed through (eventually) taking sides against fascism (even though mainstream actors had not only partaken in some of the most abhorrent ideas pushed by the fascist regimes to their logical end but also influenced Hitler’s own deathly ideology and practice (see Losurdo, 2014, pp. 337–340 for a summary)). The Second World War conveniently wiped the slate clean for the liberal elite,³ as if they had had no involvement in countless genocidal projects throughout the era of colonialism or are not continuing to benefit from the exploitation and/or exclusion of certain communities on the basis of (biological) race, gender, ability, or class.

What I argue in this article is that such fantasies have led Western democracies to a situation where full-fledged reaction is at the gates of power, and yet where there is still no appetite to face the possibility that *really existing liberalism*⁴ has been a more or less active enabler rather than a bulwark. Addressing such shortcomings would mean that if we were to be serious about democracy, solutions would have to be found elsewhere than in fantasized visions of the past or blamed on others for stealing our enjoyment of liberal democracy. This would mean facing the failings of liberalism itself and restarting history. Yet at present, we seem stuck in a cycle where all we can be given as an alternative to a deeply dysfunctional and disliked status quo are reactionary politics taking us back, rather than forward: There is no present or future, only the past, over and over again.

My aim is thus to tease out whether what we are seeing is the rise of “illiberalism” and/or “populism” against liberalism, or whether liberalism always held “illiberal” tendencies at its core and can therefore act as an enabler. To illustrate what has become an incredibly precarious position, where the rights of many are increasingly denied, threatened, or removed, I first briefly outline the construction of the liberal fantasy and counterpose it with really existing liberalism’s failure to live by its own ideals. I then turn to the crumbling of the liberal fantasy and the necessity for the liberal elite of creating and hyping an illiberal other on the (far) right to strengthen the liberal hegemony leading to the mainstreaming of reaction. Finally, I conclude with a grim yet hopeful assessment of the current predicament and the urgent need to think democracy beyond the liberal hegemony.

Before moving on, it is crucial to note that concepts such as liberalism and illiberalism are used in this argument as empty signifiers whose precise meaning is necessarily unclear and unsettled and as such serve the purpose of many actors whose aims may be dramatically opposed. This builds on the common acknowledgment highlighting the difficulty in defining liberalism precisely because of its many traditions and flexibility (Bell, 2014; Freedon, 2005; Laruelle, 2022; Losurdo, 2014; Waller, 2023). While these authors do not define liberalism as an empty signifier themselves, my point builds on this lack of clear definition and applies it to a wider political discourse where the conceptualization of liberalism as an empty signifier becomes meaningful. The aim here therefore is not to adjudicate what liberalism is or who is a liberal, but rather to reflect on the role played by claiming to be or being called a liberal or act on behalf or in defence of liberalism. As explored below, the contradistinction between who gets to belong to the liberal camp and who does not is key to the process of mainstreaming. It is worth stressing that these boundaries are fuzzy and constantly evolving and that someone seemingly illiberal at a point in time or in comparison to a more liberal person can become liberal should the pendulum swing toward illiberalism or when compared to a more illiberal person. Liberal democracy is used in a similar manner in this article, despite the relationship between liberalism and democracy being “complex and by no means one of continuity or identity” (Bobbio, 1990, p. 1).

1 | FANTASY LIBERALISM OR REALLY EXISTING LIBERALISM: POSTRACIAL, POSTPATRIARCHAL, POST-TOTALITARIAN SOCIETIES?

As Jason Glynos (2021) notes in his outline of critical fantasy studies, the concept of fantasy is a useful one for theorists, particularly those interested in discourse, as:

It speaks directly to the way we are gripped by certain norms and ideas and identities, but also because it taps into a related network of concepts for thinking about problems of reform and transformation—whether social, economic, or political. It can speak to issues linked to resistance to change and transformation, just as much as issues linked to our ready embrace of change and transformation.

This applies well to the construction of the liberal hegemony after World War II and the myths that have been consolidated ever since, and in particular during the Cold War. Many of these arguments are well rehearsed in critical approaches to liberalism, but it is worth providing here a short overview of the hegemonic setting and the contradictions core to *really existing liberalism* before turning to the role they play in the enabling of reaction. As Roland Barthes (2009, p. 168) noted, “myth has the task of giving an historical intention a natural justification, and making contingency appear eternal.” Crucially, to quote Glynos (2021) again,

Everyday understandings of fantasy of course tend to oppose it to reality and the ‘facts of the matter’. However, one of the most intriguing insights that psychoanalysis brings to bear on debates about ideology is the idea that fantasy is precisely not opposed to reality or ‘facts of the matter’, at least not necessarily so. What is important from the point of view of fantasy is that it is aligned with desire, not that it opposes some notion of representational truth.

Therefore, while defeating the “evil” of fascism was undoubtedly necessary, it created a fantasy that the world born out of the Holocaust would never repeat such atrocities ever again (even though official racist policies remained in place across much of the West at the time). As highlighted by Robert Meister (2010), World War II and the reckoning with the Holocaust paved the way for a version of history and in particular “Evil” which was positioned in the past and almost definitely overcome as the USSR fell.

For Losurdo, flexibility has always been one of the great strengths of liberalism as an ideology (and in our case empty signifier), as it has often proved able to adapt to its opponents: “it is enough, however briefly, to introduce the profane space (slaves in the colonies and servants in the metropolis) into the analysis, to realize the inadequate, misleading character of the categories (absolute pre-eminence of individual liberty, antistatism, individualism) generally used to trace the history of the liberal West” (see also Bell, 2016, pp. 62–70). While the Second World War provided a blank slate for liberalism to posit itself on the right side of history, a less hagiographic study of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries demonstrates that the ideas that eventually developed into Nazism and fascism were not always at odds with those of the founding fathers of modern liberalism. Beyond the ambivalence of liberal states and leaders in the early rise of fascism, liberal colonialism often provided templates regarding hierarchies of worth in who should be part of the people, who should lead, who could be exploited or altogether excluded and even killed (Arneil, 2012; Bell, 2016; Hobsbawm, 1989; Losurdo, 2014; Rodney, 2018).⁵ It is no surprise that the process of decolonization was so often read in national narratives in a manner that excluded such contradictions (see, e.g., Gopal, 2020).

One could argue of course that it is not simply liberalism as an ideal or ideology that is a bulwark against fascism, but the liberal democratic settlement with its separation of power, rule of law, free press, and elections. Yet here again, much of this is based on what has been termed by Charles W. Mills as an “epistemology of ignorance.” For Mills (1997, p. 3), the social contract, at the basis of the liberal order and our current hegemony, obfuscates “the ugly realities of group power and domination” and whitewashes over the ways in which “we, the People” or “the rights of Man” were originally constructed on clear exclusionary premises despite them forming the basis of a more open societal vision

than what they aimed to replace: limited equality and progress are not full equality and progress. In fact, it can serve to further entrench systemic inequality: think, for example, of the introduction of the Jim Crow laws and segregation after the Civil War in the United States as an attempt to consolidate racial hierarchies and split the working class (Roediger, 2007). What Mills outlines for the Racial Contract was also discussed by others with regard to the sexual or patriarchal contract (see Gines, 2017; Pateman, 2018 [1988]) and could be expanded to other forms of exclusion inasmuch as they prescribe “for [their] signatories an inverted epistemology, an epistemology of ignorance; a particular pattern of localized and global cognitive dysfunctions (which are psychologically and socially functional), producing the ironic outcome that whites [or men or anyone holding a privileged identity] will in general be unable to understand the world they have made” (Mills, 1997). To return to the concept of fantasy, it is therefore possible to state both that liberalism did indeed create the opportunity for some progress and at times actively so, but that it also always harbored the possibility of reaction and often acted as an actor of progress against the will of some of its proponents.

It is not only through the historiography of the Second World War and whitewashing of the liberal elite’s role in exclusionary or genocidal projects or the more abstract idea of a contract that the liberal fantasy has naturalised exclusion but in its focus on individual freedoms (or more precisely that of some individuals). This again is particularly clear in the perpetuation of racism as a systemic form of oppression but could be extended to others. As Eduardo Bonilla-Silva and Victor Ray (2015, p. 59) noted, “Most mainstream social analysis, and most Americans themselves, view racism as ‘individual-level animosity or hatred towards people of colour,’ associated primarily with its most explicit historical manifestations and representations. This is particularly well documented in Bonilla-Silva’s research on colorblind racism (2006, p. 2) which demonstrates that “Whites have developed powerful explanations—which have ultimately become justifications—for contemporary racial inequality that exculpate them from any responsibility for the status of people of color.” Seeing liberalism as a bulwark against oppression therefore relies on what Tukufu Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva (2008) have called “white methods,” that is

The practical tools used to manufacture empirical data and analysis to support the racial stratification of society. White methods are the various practices that have been used to produce ‘racial knowledge’ since the emergence of White supremacy in the fifteenth and sixteenth century and of the disciplines a few centuries later. (Zuberi & Bonilla Silva, 2008, p. 18)

This is also exemplified in Meister’s work (2010, p. 31) on the depoliticization of human rights to protect existing hierarchies: “mainstream human rights literature is, implicitly, an effort to ease the beneficiary’s mind by troubling it just enough to acknowledge from a position of safety the undeserved nature of the advantage he still enjoys.” For Meister, this ignorance of power relationships has led to human rights and liberalism being used at first sight counterintuitively to justify breaches of human rights and liberalism in their very name.

There is therefore a real risk in conflating an ideal project and the implementation and justification of certain structures of power in its name. This has been widely studied and generally accepted when it comes to socialism and communism and *really existing* socialism and communism and yet continues to be widely overlooked when it comes to liberalism. As Lorna Finlayson (2012, p. 21) notes, “history and real politics are crucial when we need to discredit socialist theory, but suddenly uninteresting—or ‘too complicated’—when it comes to liberalism.” It is particularly striking that many takes on illiberalism shy away from defining liberalism, as if its nature and meaning are believed to be obvious, which very much speaks to its hegemony. As Helena Rosenblatt (2018, p. 1) notes, “‘liberalism’ is a basic and ubiquitous word in our vocabulary.”⁶ And yet, as Waller (2023) pointedly highlights building on Duncan Bell’s work, “liberalism’ itself resists clear definition and has meant substantively different things both across different regions and over time in one or another country.” With this in mind, a number of attempts at defining illiberalism have been made in recent years to move us away from their careless use, and yet liberalism itself is not always given much attention in the analysis or is simply used by comparison or defined by its ideals rather than its practice. Waller’s point (2021) is that “illiberalism is a modern ideological or ideational family that perceives itself in opposition to and reaction against philosophical liberalism” but rarely stressed strongly enough in the literature, let alone in public discourse. This is

similar to the point raised by Laruelle (2022, p. 30) that illiberalism “represents a backlash against today’s liberalism in all its varied scripts—political, economic, cultural, geopolitical, civilizational—often in the name of democratic principles and by winning popular support.” Laruelle’s “five major illiberal scripts” (2022, pp. 312–313) make it clear that if anything liberalism only exists as an ideal yet to be attained. This awkward assemblage often feels contradictory, as if exceptions to these scripts are more often the rule than not. The fuzziness of liberalism is thus central to defining “illiberalism” and requires us to see it as an empty signifier rather than the hegemonic good we tend to accept it as, even in academic circles. Despite much evidence to the contrary, postracial, postpatriarchal, and post-totalitarian fantasies have become uncritically accepted as reality, and their positive aura has led to the strengthening of the liberal hegemony through the naturalization of their relationship. Such blind faith in the liberal empty signifier could not be more obvious than in the failure to address the rise of reactionary politics, to which I now turn.

2 | LIBERALISM AS A BULWARK AGAINST THE RESURGENCE OF THE FAR RIGHT AND REACTIONARY POLITICS?

As Peter Mair (2006) pointedly noted, a key challenge for the seemingly unchallenged liberal hegemony has been to retain the semblance of democratic legitimacy it held, as both elite and voters seemed to withdraw (see also Crouch, 2014, on postdemocracy). Mair suggested that what may have been at play then was not a serious attempt from the elite to reconnect with “the people”, but rather to “redefine democracy in such a way that does not require any substantial emphasis on popular sovereignty, so that it can cope more easily with the decline of popular involvement. At the extreme, it is an attempt to redefine democracy in the absence of the demos” (p. 29). This did not go unnoticed and led to a backlash that was mistakenly simplified as “populism” (De Cleen et al., 2018; Hunger & Paxton, 2022; Mondon, 2023). This misdiagnosis failed to account for the many facets of the opposition to the technocratic and oligarchic takeover, conflating left-wing demands for generally moderate democratic rejuvenation and the resurgence of the far right. That both could denounce the same elite did not mean that both related to the same “people” or source of legitimate power in some sort of horseshoe theory.⁷ Yet it is this confusion that lent unjustified democratic credibility to the far right and its elitist politics (see Collovald, 2004; Glynos & Mondon, 2019; Mondon, 2017; Mondon & Winter, 2020).

Crucially, much of the hegemonic strength of liberalism continues to be found in its symbolic opposition to illiberal alternatives and the people who support them who steal *our* enjoyment of fantasized versions of liberalism.⁸ As such, these unpalatable alternatives are necessary as they represent a more negative option to the unsatisfactory status quo and the unfulfillable ideal version of the liberal project. They also lessen the trust that can be given to “the people” in making democratic decisions and holding democratic power (echoing old conservative fears regarding the masses (Le Bon, 1963), which were often shared by early liberals).⁹ This contradistinction is absolutely essential to legitimize increasingly unpopular politics: We are bad but they are worse so be careful what you wish for. What Aaron Winter and I (Mondon & Winter 2017, 2020) have described as illiberal articulations of racism¹⁰ serve a legitimizing purpose and act as a warning to anyone who may feel the system is no longer working for them, for most or even based on its basic promises, tenets or ideals: things could be much worse. Ironically, as pointedly argued by Seongcheol Kim (2023) in the much-discussed case of Hungary, far from being an alternative, “Orbán’s ‘illiberal democracy’ has proven to be an even more steadfast flagbearer of the TINA principle (“there is no alternative”) and the negation of the Lefortian ‘conflict of collective wills’ than the neoliberal establishment itself.”

This is therefore a dangerous game to play, as using reactionary politics as a scarecrow risks legitimizing them, something we have witnessed in many cases. Think, for example, of Socialist president François Mitterrand’s cynical attempt in France to split the right by propping up Jean-Marie Le Pen’s Front National (FN) in the mid-80s, at a time when his Socialist government was failing to deliver its radical agenda and turning to austerity. This set in motion the “rise” of the FN, which was in fact very much the failure of the mainstream to live by the democratic and progressive demands of its “people” who happened to be in opposition with economic priorities. As neoliberalism became

increasingly hegemonic in elite circles, parties like the FN proved a godsend to scare electorates into accepting more and more limited political options and progress (Mondon, 2013). Yet as this new economic settlement has continued to fail most, while massively benefiting the few by design, it has also created a situation where the far right has become, in public discourse at least, a legitimate opposition to a system that is increasingly disliked if not reviled. The cases of Brexit and Trump are also excellent examples here to illustrate how the alternative to widely unpopular status quo choices which were represented by Remain/the EU or Hillary Clinton were limited to the far right and blamed on the “white working class” qua The People, despite all evidence pointing to their limited (albeit concerning) appeal and their predominantly wealthy following (Mondon & Winter, 2018, 2020).

Therefore, rather than acting as a bulwark against the resurgent far right, I argue that the liberal elite has facilitated the process through which the far right has become a growing threat, and in doing so allowed reactionary politics to gain hold in the mainstream. This was further aided by the search for new enemies in the aftermath of the Cold War and the rise of “clash of civilizations” narratives. This proved a blessing for the far right at a time when it had already started its transformation away from the most caricatural and taboo aspects of its ideology, if not from its principles. Toward the end of the twentieth century, parts of the far right had begun reinventing themselves, loosely based on the precepts crafted by the *Nouvelle droite* and its counterhegemonic project. Building on Antonio Gramsci’s theories, far-right intellectuals such as Alain de Benoist advocated for a long-term strategy based on reclaiming cultural power rather than chasing electoral victories (Mondon, 2013). In practice, this meant shifting away from biological racism and other types of discourse that had become taboo in the post-war and post-60s period. One of the new targets of the far right became Islam and Muslim communities. As much of the liberal elite naturalized the threat of Islam as the new enemy of “what is good” (Mondon & Winter, 2017), the more reconstructed far right was able to navigate the fuzzy borders between what was portrayed as “legitimate concerns” in mainstream circles and yet what was clearly based on racializing narratives of innate threats posed by disparate groups of people whose only shared identity is their religion (Garner & Selod, 2015).

While the mainstream has continued to voice its opposition to the far right in principle, it has also legitimized its position as alternative by giving space to its ideas and exaggerating its support to distract from its own failures. While illiberal articulations of Islamophobia have generally continued to be rejected and denounced by the liberal elite (and increasingly the reconstructed far right), liberal ones have become the norm in the fantasy, based on the threat posed by Islam to liberalism. As Winter and I (Mondon & Winter 2017, 2020) have argued, illiberal articulations of oppression, that is the most violent and extreme ones, have served as alibis for the more mundane and systemic ones, which can even be couched in liberal terms. In the case of the mainstreaming of Islamophobia, this was done through what is generally considered as the core liberal concepts of free speech (Tittle, 2020; Tittle et al., 2017), secularism (Mondon, 2015), women’s or LGBTQ+ rights (Farris, 2017; Puar, 2007).

Similar absorption of reactionary politics can be witnessed in the constructed urgency to tackle immigration as “a major concern.” These narratives are often based on skewed data and understanding of the construction of public opinion, which serves to negate the role played by those in discursive power in shaping the agenda (Mondon, 2022a). Instead, blame is placed on “the people” and by the same token, reactionary politics are legitimized through pseudo-democratic reasoning: This is what the people want. This is not limited to racialized politics, and the same processes can be witnessed in the mainstreaming of transphobia in the name of free speech, women’s, children’s, and LGB rights (Amery & Mondon, 2024).

As illiberal articulations of reactionary politics continue to be denounced but their liberal counterparts absorbed, the pendulum shifts and it has become increasingly common for mainstream actors to move toward increasingly illiberal territory. Creating too tight a border between liberalism and illiberalism risks making actions deemed illiberal an exception that ends up legitimizing others deemed liberal by comparison, even if they participate in the slide toward exclusion or authoritarianism. Recent examples make this all too clear, whether it is Trump’s extreme foray into conspiracy theories and outright lies, which have made Ron de Santis seem moderate by comparison, former Home Secretary Suella Braverman’s racist outbursts, denounced by her own colleagues who also support her most ignominious politics such as the “stop the boat campaign” (Adu et al., 2023), or the French government’s attacks on the

Human Rights League, which are denounced by many mainstream actors, who ignore the many other warnings given by the HRL regarding the rise of mainstream Islamophobia in France for example (Johannès, 2023). As Katsambekis (2023) notes, “reluctance to acknowledge and combat the problem of authoritarianism ... as a danger to democracy may facilitate the further authoritarian radicalisation of mainstream political forces to the point that they become fully-blown authoritarian.” We could even go further: terms such as “authoritarianism” (or in our case “illiberalism”), if used carelessly, can create othering practices that tap into processes of exclusion and exceptionalization such as orientalism (Koch, 2017; Said, 1978).

Crucially, what the mainstreaming of reactionary politics through a combination of liberal and illiberal articulations highlights in particular is that the inclusion of minoritized communities within the liberal social contract has always been precarious, limited, and subject to conditions. As such, the liberal order and its progressive outlook have always been dependent on the forces it has had to contend with. Should the ante be on the side of progress, then liberalism would more or less willingly accommodate new demands for equal rights and justice, as was the case in the post-war period. However, it should have always been clear that, should the balance shift back toward reaction, liberalism could just as well adapt, more or less willingly, as it indeed did in 1930s Germany, even if this would cause its ultimate destruction. In this, the interests of the few were ultimately more important than those of the many.¹¹

This does not mean that far-right narratives are ever accepted fully or unconditionally within mainstream discourse: They continue to serve their purpose as unacceptable alternatives to the status quo. As I have discussed in the case of Braverman or the LDH, they first allow for the creation of an apparently impermeable border between the acceptable and the unacceptable, the liberal and the illiberal, even if said liberal positioning increasingly legitimizes and even resembles the illiberal. Second, this also allows for the creation of false equivalences between alternatives to the system on the left and far right, in an attempt to delegitimize progressive alternatives. As Waller (2023, p. 8) notes, illiberalism “is politically neutral—that is, left- and right-partisan variants can be included and is economically unspecified meaning that statism, social market capitalism, and varieties in-between do not get defined out accidentally—only libertarian or strict ‘classical liberal’ economics are removed at the definitional stage from an understanding of illiberalism itself.” Yet, more often than not, this is turned into a normative argument whereby any articulation of illiberalism is a threat not just to liberalism, but to democracy qua liberal democracy qua capitalism and even neoliberalism. This can be witnessed in recent elections in the United States, the UK, and France, where what should be considered moderate social democratic platforms (and even liberal by some standards and definitions) were treated in mainstream public discourse as similar to or even bigger threats than the far-right candidates, who ended up benefiting both from the lack of scrutiny and being propped up as legitimate albeit denounced alternatives. The defense of some mythical center at all costs has led to dramatic consequences whereby the reactionary right has been able to construct itself as a rebellious force speaking truth to power, rather than the defenders of old forms of privilege attempting to turn back the clocks on the limited and precarious rights won by various communities over the past century (Mondon & Winter, 2020; Robin, 2018). This has not only strengthened their claims to be heard against the increasingly unpopular status quo but somewhat counterintuitively strengthened said status quo by creating false equivalences between left- and right-wing alternatives and hyping potentially misleading concepts such as polarization (Mondon & Smith, 2022). As such, it has led to the strengthening of oligarchy (Rancière, 2005; Vergara, 2020) and inverted authoritarianism (Wolin, 2008) and the weakening of democratic, emancipatory alternatives.

3 | AGAINST AND BEYOND OLIGARCHIC LIBERALISM, INVERTED TOTALITARIANISM, AND REACTIONARY DEMOCRACY

To understand our current predicament and the resurgence of reactionary politics, it is therefore urgent to take a more critical approach to liberalism and finally break away from the myths created in the 20th century to make sense of the atrocities committed by the West/North against their own and others. This requires accepting the clear and simple fact that the “liberal revolution” can only be understood as “a tangle of emancipation and disemancipation” (Losurdo, 2014,

p. 301). Building loosely on Losurdo's own conclusions (2014, pp. 341–343), it is urgent to reckon with the facts that democracy has not always been at the heart of the liberal tradition; that various types of exclusion generally associated with illiberal politics have not been overcome painlessly within the liberal tradition, and that progress has not been linear. To put it simply, emancipation was often to be found against the liberal elite and outside of the “liberal world” (Delmas, 2018; Manchanda & Rossdale, 2021). This is a crucial point as, as Achille Mbembe (2016, p. 184) stresses, in times of necro-politics, “nothing, henceforth, is inviolable; nothing is inalienable; and nothing is imprescriptible. Except, perhaps, property—still.”

Seeing the current context solely through the lens of an opposition between liberalism and illiberalism misses some crucial political points. It does not account for the well-documented flexibility of liberalism when it comes to adapting and absorbing reactionary politics rather than automatically and inherently opposing them. Perhaps more importantly, it excludes from the discussion the concept of democracy and its multiple practices altogether, which are only mentioned in panic and made synonymous either to liberalism and the need for its uncritical defense, or to so-called populism and the threat “the people” pose. This clearly taps into well-rehearsed arguments on the liberal side whereby only a liberal elite can give “the people” what they need. While this may be defined as liberalism should particular individual and minority rights be granted and protected, it is more akin to what Jacques Rancière (2005) has called “states of oligarchic law, ... where the power of the oligarchy is limited by a dual recognition of popular sovereignty and individual liberties” or what Wolin (2007, p. 59) has called “misrepresentative or cliently government.” For Rancière, far from being the keepers of democracy, the liberal elite displays more often than not a hatred of it. This hollowing out of democracy in its ideal form has been made far worse with the rise of neoliberalism (Abraham-Hamano et al., 2017; Brown, 2015; Cornelissen, 2023; Whyte, 2019), which has reinforced the idea that democracy comes second to capitalism, but that liberalism is increasingly one option amongst others as demonstrated by the rise of authoritarian capitalist regimes (see, among others, Bruff, 2014). Coupled with the resurgence of culture wars waged in the name of “the people,” this has led to the strengthening of “reactionary democracy” (Mondon & Winter, 2020; see also Richmond & Charnley, 2022).

While one could still claim that rights remain protected thanks to the strength of liberal constitutions and the rule of law, these are in fact proving increasingly precarious, and authoritarian tendencies are not far under the surface. As Sheldon Wolin powerfully argued back in 2007 in his prescient book *Democracy Inc.*, “far from being exhausted by its twentieth-century versions would-be totalitarians now have available technologies of control, intimidation, and mass manipulation far surpassing those of that earlier time” (2017, p. xviii). Yet what Wolin feared was not the totalitarianism hyped in reactionary circles around “clashes of civilizations,” but those that found their source very much within liberal democracies which would represent “the *political* coming of age of corporate power and the political demobilisation of the citizenry” (his emphasis). Wolin stressed that contrary to theories of the end of history, the progress that had been achieved in terms of democratic rights over the past two centuries was not only far from complete but had not been consolidated and could be easily dismantled. Furthermore, the symbols that had been core to constructing such progress and reifying it could easily be harnessed by reactionary forces to push authoritarian agendas.

Fast forward to 2023 and we can see that much of what Wolin predicted in what was considered a radical take at the time has become all too real. As already discussed, means of systemic exclusion and oppression have been naturalized using liberal and progressive concepts. All the while, corporate power has consolidated with private actors playing an ever more crucial role in the fate not just of countries but of the planet, with no democratic scrutiny (Farrow, 2023). In fact, those who were supposed to hold such power accountable in their role as the fourth estate have been either disbanded or fallen in line with their masters as a liberal oligarchy has developed, and securitization of society and the crackdown on democratic dissent have become the norm in what is argued—in an Orwellian manner—for the protection of democracy.

Therefore, if democracy has become a shell of its former, imperfect and incomplete, self, it is not because it has been replaced by “illiberalism” or because of “populists,” but because the liberal elite in power has failed to reckon with the many crises that demanded radical change. Daniel Bessner's pithy summary (2023) of Fukuyama's most recent work makes this particularly clear:

Liberalism and Its Discontents is not especially illuminating, repeating tired criticisms of the left and the right that don't add much to scholarly analysis or political conversation. In essence, Fukuyama believes that embracing centrist liberalism was, and remains, the "mature" thing to do. While adolescents and fools endorse politics of radical change, adults accept that the limited reforms of liberalism are the best humanity can hope for. Though Fukuyama is willing to acknowledge many of liberalism's limitations, he cannot envision a world beyond it.¹²

While it may seem at times unreachable, the kind of change required is not foretold and could take many different shapes and forms, but the denial of the very necessity of radical change whether in terms of politics, economics, or with regard to mere survival in the face of climate breakdown (Dillet & Hatzisavvidou, 2022), has made things far worse. This denial has led to the construction of false equivalences between left and right alternatives (Fukuyama, 2022): both constructed as illiberal threats which have demanded instead the unconditional support of the status quo in the face of the hyped rise of the far right. Such diversions have bought some time for the liberal elite. Yet they have only been just a stopgap as they have led to the legitimization of reactionary forces and demonstrated further the inability of the current hegemony to respond to crises that have not gone away. This has led to a limited reckoning in some spheres, with some prominent proponents of the bulwark theory changing tack, although with little humility or proper reflection (Mondon, 2023). Far more would be needed to reverse the trend. To go back to O'Neill's quote, we must evade the past, critically acknowledge and assess the present, and take a leap of faith toward the future.

There is, of course, not one singular strategy or solution to get out of our current predicament, but I would like to conclude on one which I believe is within our reach. Much of the current political landscape in the past decade has been shaped by populist hype (Glynos & Mondon 2019). This misdiagnosis has placed the blame on the people for the rise of reactionary politics and has therefore justified the inclusion of reactionary actors at the table and even the absorption of their ideas as, after all, "this is what the people want." Yet, this bottom-up understanding of the rise of reactionary politics is misleading. Whether it is Trump or Brexit (Mondon & Winter, 2018, 2020), Islamophobia (Mondon & Winter, 2017), or concerns about immigration (Mondon, 2022a), each has been blamed on a very limited understanding of "the people" and democracy, based on the idea that power does indeed reside in the pure collection of public opinions. Yet, this ignores very well-documented processes of mediation and top-down agenda setting which, when taken into account, paint a very different picture. Far from being passive administrators of the popular will, the elite in what is today considered as democracy has played a central part in shaping the current reactionary agenda and imposing narratives guiding our public debate. This is not a ground-breaking finding or a radical statement. Yet in the current context where much of the liberal elite shun their responsibility for the mess they have played a key part in creating and turn instead to fantasies as diversions, this could be a momentous reckoning.

ENDNOTES

¹ I would like to thank the editors and reviewers for their extremely useful comments. I would also like to thank colleagues who have provided feedback on various iterations of the paper. Special thanks to Sophia Hatzisavvidou, George Newth, Benoit Dillet, Alex Yates, Giorgos Katsambekis, and the organizers of the Researching Illiberalism Workshop and Gulnaz Sibgatullina in particular.

² As Giorgos Katsambekis (2023) notes, "contestability around key notions in the social sciences and political theory is nothing new. In fact, it can be considered an indication of healthy scholarly debates that advance through trial and error, testing conceptualisations and hypotheses, pitting different interpretations against each other, reassessing, adjusting, refining and proceeding. However, I would argue that this sense of ambiguity and confusion around authoritarianism specifically is not only problematic in itself, but also indicative of a worrying trend."

³ By liberal elite, I refer to people or groups with privileged access to the shaping of public discourse, whether it be in politics, the media, the arts, or academia, and who have participated in consolidating the liberal hegemony (see Farkas & Schou, 2023).

⁴ "Really existing liberalism" here is used as a reference to "really existing or actually existing socialism," that is, that a regime "was in a meaningful sense socialist; that, however, it was not socialist in quite the way that the great socialist writers had had in mind; but that, nonetheless, it existed and, after a fashion, functioned, which is more than could be said for the sort

of socialism that could be found in these classics" (Brown, 1992, p. 316). This also builds on Mark Fisher's discussion (2009, p. 46) of "really existing capitalism" as "marked by the same division which characterized Really Existing Socialism, between, on the one hand, an official culture in which capitalist enterprises are presented as socially responsible and caring, and, on the other, a widespread awareness that companies are actually corrupt, ruthless, etc."

⁵ As Duncan Bell (2016, pp. 3–4) notes, "Mainstream approaches to the subject, at least in the Anglo-American tradition, continue to argue about the nature of justice, democracy, and rights, while ignoring the ways in which many of the ideas and institutions of contemporary politics have been (de)formed or inflected by centuries of Western imperialism—"this half millennium of tyranny against diverse civilisational forms of self-reliance and association"—and the deep complicity in this enterprise of the canon from which they draw inspiration, concepts, arguments, and authority. While a persistent tattoo of criticism has been maintained by dissident scholars, it has made little impact on the core concerns or theoretical approaches of the field."

⁶ Rosenblatt adds that "The truth is, however, that we are muddled about what we mean by liberalism. People use the term in all sorts of different ways, often unwittingly, sometimes intentionally. They talk past each other, precluding any possibility of reasonable debate. It would be good to know what we are speaking about when we speak about liberalism" (ibid.).

⁷ The work of Benjamin De Cleen and Juan Alberto Ruiz Casado (2023) on the "populism of the privileged" here is particularly relevant to highlight key issues with flattening the use of the concept.

⁸ Versions here is in the plural as few would agree on one particular ideal form of liberalism.

⁹ Although it is worth noting that those often thought of as early liberals did not consider themselves liberals (see Rosenblatt, 2018).

¹⁰ Illiberal articulations of racism are those generally witnessed in violent actions, whether physical or discursive, which appear to cross a clear line into the unacceptable. These are generally couched in crude expressions of racism, often biological. As such, they can be considered outside of our norm and exceptional and can be denounced by a wide variety of actors, including those who rely on more sophisticated articulations of racism and exclusion (see Mondon & Winter, 2020 for more detail). While Winter and I focused on racism, these articulations can be discussed regarding other forms of exclusion (see Amery & Mondon, 2023, for example).

¹¹ The work of Michael A. Wilkinson (2021) here is particularly relevant for a historical overview.

¹² It is fascinating that, while on point in his criticism of Fukuyama, Bessner nonetheless echoes some of the same limitations created by the "end of history" narratives and in particular the impossibility of alternatives.

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