




# Left-wing Illiberalism: Discussing the Doxa from a Latin American Perspective

*Iliberalismo de izquierda: discutiendo la doxa desde una perspectiva latinoamericana*

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**Abstract** — Illiberalism is not a phenomenon exclusive to one ideology, but a political strategy that can manifest itself on both the right and the left. While the illiberal right emphasizes nationalism, tradition and moral order, the illiberal left justifies the concentration of power in the name of social justice and the fight against neoliberalism. Research on this topic must overcome ideological biases and consider how different political currents have adopted illiberal positions, assessing their consequences for democracy, pluralism and existing institutions.

**Keywords** — Illiberal left, Latin America, authoritarianism, ideology.

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**Resumen** — El iliberalismo no es un fenómeno exclusivo de una ideología, sino una estrategia política que puede manifestarse tanto en la derecha como en la izquierda. Si bien la derecha iliberal enfatiza el nacionalismo, la tradición y el orden moral, la izquierda iliberal justifica la concentración de poder en nombre de la justicia social y la lucha contra el neoliberalismo. La investigación sobre este tema debe superar los sesgos ideológicos y considerar cómo las diferentes corrientes políticas han adoptado posiciones iliberales, evaluando sus consecuencias para la democracia, el pluralismo e instituciones existentes.

**Palabras clave** — Izquierda iliberal, Latinoamérica, autoritarismo, ideología.

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## INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the debate on illiberalism has taken center stage in both academic and public discourse. The Routledge (2021) and Oxford (2023) handbooks, the launch of a scientific journal (*The Journal of Illiberalism Studies*), and various research initiatives on both sides of the Atlantic have coincided with hundreds of opinion pieces on the topic. Within this dialogue, there is a prevailing view—especially prominent in North American and European academia—that illiberalism, as a political and ideological expression, is exclusively associated with the extreme right. Challenging that doxa, this text, written from a Latin American perspective, critiques the Northern, Eurocentric framing and instead emphasizes the intrinsic plurality of the illiberal phenomenon, which manifests differently depending on historical trajectories, ideological genealogies, and varying social and geopolitical contexts.

One way to explain the refusal to evaluate illiberal and authoritarian variants of the right and left with common standards is the supposed weakening of the extreme left after the end of the communist bloc and the triumph of the West in the Cold War. Thus, as Guhl argues (2024) “Left-wing extremism is often overlooked, in part because the worst state abuses and non-state violence associated with proponents of communist and socialist ideologies occurred several decades ago.” Although, it is acknowledged that “some actors on the broader far left continue to carry out or support acts of political violence and terrorism, adhere to authoritarian beliefs or support authoritarian regimes, and justify discrimination against individuals based on characteristics such as class, political belief, education, religion, and national or ethnic background.”

The problem with this perspective, for Latin America today, is that it ignores the regional presence, strength, coordination and incidence of extreme leftist regimes that combine illiberal elements with other frankly despotic. Thus, the only regime with a totalitarian matrix in the region -the Cuban regime- continues to increase its influence even with the consolidation of a related ecosystem, with the allied -illiberal and authoritarian- regimes of Nicaragua and Venezuela.

We find that, in much of Latin America, moderate leftists who advocate for democratic coexistence and defend the expansion of rights in pursuit of a progressively freer and more egalitarian society, have not been particularly successful in the face of political expressions from the extreme left (Meucci and Chaguaceda, 2024). These more extreme views have an illiberal tendency that leads to populism and seeks to modify the checks and balances characteristic of the constitutional order in a representative democracy, sometimes reaching the point of autocratic rupture. Paradoxically, despite their preeminence in the current political landscape, they receive limited attention in the regional academic field due to ideological and professional bias. These extreme lefts, despite having undergone important changes in Latin America during the last three decades, maintain the anti-liberal revolutionary orientation of the “old left”, in coexistence with agendas of a supposedly hybrid “new left”, where the illiberal coexists with some cases of clear authoritarian rupture. The old revolutionary left has been largely made up of traditional communist parties, as well as other political organizations that, during the Cold War, tended to behave as “disloyal” or at most “semi-loyal” oppositions to the political systems of the day. The new left, on the other hand, is made up of parties, movements, leaderships and intellectuals of



somewhat diffuse “isms”. Such a reality forces us to question the “mainstream” conception coming from the Global North that the supposed majority tendency is for a right-wing illiberalism.

## LIBERALISM AND IDEOLOGIES: NAVIGATING THE DEBATE

In contemporary society, ideological polarity between the left and right fundamentally refers to differing views on redistribution and their corresponding conceptions of social order. As defined by Michael Freeden (2013), ideologies are complexes of ideas and values that guide the perception and political transformation of the world in specific collectivities, and must always be recognized for their diversity, hybridity and concreteness. Recognizing this, we can appreciate how, in the contingent realm of human action, the political sets the framework and allocates resources, while ideology defines the principles and horizons. At the intersection of these two realms, multiple ways of making politics concrete emerge—understood as a specific sphere oriented toward the exercise of power in its various institutional and social expressions, whether of domination or resistance.<sup>1</sup>

The left denounces poverty and inequality, assigning the state a regulatory and redistributive role. It treats social justice as an end in itself and often claims the moral superiority of its cause. The right, on the other hand, is skeptical of broad public intervention—whether from a conservative defense of traditional social order or from a belief in private initiative, driven by individuals in the market, as the engine of production. They too assert the superiority of their agenda, whether on moral grounds rooted in traditionalism or rational grounds based in liberalism. From both ideological positions, illiberal variants of the left and right can be found.

I agree with Arditì (2021) in his characterization of illiberalism—as distinct from authoritarianism—as a specific political phenomenon that challenges and undermines liberal principles from within democracy itself. Unlike openly authoritarian regimes, illiberal states do not formally abolish democratic institutions and processes; rather, they erode and manipulate them to weaken pluralism, restrict freedoms, and consolidate executive power. In such regimes, elections continue to be held, but the ruling party alters the rules to ensure its own permanence, while simultaneously undermining core liberal democratic guarantees such as judicial independence, minority protections, and freedom of the press.

An understanding of the illiberal phenomenon—as we concur with Arditì—cannot be confined to the institutional political sphere. Rather, it must encompass a series of internal shifts and conflicts within liberal democracies that contribute to the rise of illiberalism. One such factor is

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<sup>1</sup> In this process, two forms (the reactionary and the revolutionary) represent radical approaches to maintaining or transforming the social order. Both tend to delegitimize opposing positions and justify violence against dissent, often giving rise to deeply polarized and violent forms of social conflict that are antithetical to democratic politics. The revolutionary path disregards the relationship between means and ends, prioritizing the utopian re-foundation of society as its ultimate goal. In contrast, the reactionary form views hierarchies between nations, classes, races, genders, religions, and cultures as natural and fundamentally immutable. Positioned in equidistance from both extremes, the reformist path brings together diverse actors, ideas, and agendas from plural traditions, advocating for gradual and sustainable change. It seeks to integrate the greatest number of subjects and demands, while minimizing social trauma.



the degradation of political discourse, characterized by systematic lying, defamation of opponents, and the denial of scientific evidence, along with the normalization of abusive, violent, and shameless behavior. Economic inequality is another key driver: growing precariousness, social discontent, and frustration are often exploited by illiberal leaders, who promise order and stability in exchange for the erosion of fundamental freedoms.

Illiberalism has traditionally been associated with right-wing movements, as shown by the studies of Varga & Buzogány (2023). In their work, these authors identify two main genealogies of illiberalism within the right: the New European Right and national conservatism. The New European Right, influenced by interwar revolutionary conservatism, rejects liberalism in favor of an ethnopluralist vision that prioritizes national identity and opposes globalization and multiculturalism. In contrast, national conservatism emphasizes the defense of a traditional moral order, social cohesion, and the strengthening of the state as a guarantor of stability. Both ideological genealogies have influenced movements such as Fidesz in Hungary, Law and Justice (PiS) in Poland, and sectors of the Republican Party in the United States, consolidating illiberalism as a conservative response to political and economic liberalism.

However, in recent years studies have emerged linking illiberalism with left-wing movements. Marlene Laruelle (2023) identifies three traditions that have adopted illiberal strategies: the revolutionary left, social democracy, and the new identitarian left. The revolutionary left, with antecedents in Marxism-Leninism, rejects liberalism as an instrument of capitalism and in some cases adopts authoritarian practices in the name of social justice. Social democracy, although traditionally linked to the moderation of economic liberalism, has faced crises that have allowed the emergence of illiberal alternatives within it. Finally, the new identitarian left has developed an ideological collectivism that, although aligned with progressivism on issues of gender and diversity, sometimes comes into tension with pluralism and freedom of expression.

At the same time, there are studies that, while recognizing the existence of left-wing illiberalism, interpret it more positively. Eklundh (2023) argues that this phenomenon should not be seen exclusively as a threat to democracy but as a response to the limitations of classical liberalism. He contends that liberalism has been exclusionary and that left illiberalism seeks to expand political participation and transform democratic structures in favor of greater equity. In his analysis, Eklundh (2023) distances himself from the notion that illiberalism is necessarily authoritarian, suggesting that it can serve as a tool for democratizing power and challenging entrenched structures of domination.

Despite this perspective, the positions of Eklundh (2023) and Varga and Buzogány (2023) can be criticized for their omissions. First, Eklundh's (2023) interpretation overlooks the anti-democratic and anti-pluralist record of some leftist regimes that have restricted rights and consolidated power in the hands of a ruling elite. Examples such as Chavismo in Venezuela demonstrate that leftist illiberalism can engender authoritarian structures disguised as popular participation. In contrast, Varga and Buzogány (2023) reduce illiberalism to an exclusively right-wing phenomenon, neglecting the fact that certain left-wing movements have employed similar strategies to consolidate hegemony and marginalize opposition to specific radical agendas.



In another contribution from the Latin American intellectual field, Arditi (2021) argues that the radicalization of the traditional right has contributed to the rise of illiberalism. In many cases, conservative parties have adopted positions once considered extreme to avoid losing voters to more radical alternatives. This has led to a convergence between the conventional right and the far right on issues such as immigration, security, and globalization, thereby weakening their commitment to liberal democratic values. The examples of illiberal leaders, movements, governments, and regimes cited by Arditi are all conservative and/or reactionary actors who do not reject democracy outright but instead reshape it to serve their purposes—figures such as Donald Trump, Jair Bolsonaro, and Nigel Farage in the present, and historical cases like Viktor Orbán’s Hungary and Alfredo Stroessner’s Paraguay. However, the exclusionary, violent, sectarian, and dogmatic behaviors and ideas of leftist leaders, movements, parties, and governments fall outside the scope of his analysis, revealing an approach that combines political realism in addressing key aspects of the phenomenon with ideological sectarianism in its selective omissions.

Left illiberalism has been examined in greater depth by authors such as Enyedi (2024) and Kóvats (2024), who analyze how certain progressive projects have adopted illiberal practices that erode democracy, pluralism, and individual freedoms. Enyedi (2024) argues that left illiberalism manifests in regimes that concentrate power in the name of popular sovereignty, thereby weakening the rule of law and institutional autonomy. Kóvats (2024) explores how specific progressive sectors have fostered a quasi-religious moralization that constrains public debate and penalizes dissent, using examples such as inclusive language and gender identity regulations to illustrate this trend. In my view, both perspectives recognize—much more clearly than many of their peers—the transideological nature of the illiberal threat to democracies, originating from both the right and the left.

The great political transformation of our time—the consolidation of the liberal mass republic, supported by a social state grounded in the rule of law—was the result of an intergenerational effort by societies in Europe, Latin America, and other regions of the world. From a historical perspective, the reformist and democratic left have been key socio-political protagonists of this transformation. In contrast, radical and authoritarian leftists have driven a counter-process by establishing mechanisms of centralized control and eliminating citizen autonomy and freedoms. Despite this, many leftist parties across the continent apply a double standard when evaluating human rights violations and processes of autocratization. Within the left-wing camp, the absence of a genuine, organic consensus around the desirability of the reformist and democratic path—embodied in the liberal mass republic—has become increasingly evident.

## ILLIBERALISM AND THE LEFT IN LATIN AMERICA

In the context of Latin America, illiberalism has been seen (Gargarella, 2021) as a political current that restricts fundamental freedoms, limiting both individual autonomy and collective self-government. It is a phenomenon present at different moments in regional history: a recurrent reaction to attempts at democratization and the expansion of rights. It manifests in regimes that



concentrate power in the executive, restrict rights, and promote moralism as a justification for limiting freedoms. Gargarella argues that illiberalism is not exclusive to a single political ideology but has manifested on both the right and the left.

From this perspective, illiberalism has been a constant throughout Latin America's political history, emerging at various times with different justifications. During the 19th century, conservative sectors promoted constitutions that restricted political participation and favored elite rule. In the 20th century, military dictatorships in Argentina, Chile, and Brazil imposed forms of illiberalism through authoritarian regimes that suppressed rights and concentrated power in the name of order and development. Conversely, the post-revolutionary Cuban regime, in its shift from popular nationalism to Marxist-Leninism, exemplifies an illiberal expression of the Leninist model that persists today.

Carrión (2023) argues that in the 21st century, Latin America has witnessed leftist illiberalism, expressed mainly through radical populism. This model of governance weakens institutional counterweights in the name of popular sovereignty. Illiberal and populist regimes such as those of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, Evo Morales in Bolivia, and Rafael Correa in Ecuador rely on a narrative in which the leader embodies the voice of the people, thereby justifying the removal of checks on executive power and the weakening of democratic institutions like Congress and the Supreme Court. These governments have implemented illiberal practices, often justified by the fight against imperialism or the need to strengthen the state to enact social reforms (Gargarella, 2021).

It must be recognized that the governments of Hugo Chávez (1999–2013) and Nicolás Maduro (2013–2021) in Venezuela, and Daniel Ortega (2007–2021) in Nicaragua, resulted in autocratization, marked by growing social conflict, high levels of political violence, and systematic human rights violations. These cases clearly represent an authoritarian left, characterized by neopatrimonialist and personalist practices. The governments of Evo Morales (2006–2019) and Rafael Correa (2007–2017), as well as those of Néstor Kirchner (2003–2007) and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (2007–2015), fall somewhere in between. These administrations were also polarizing, conflictive, and highly mobilized but featured lower levels of political violence. Their actions did not culminate in the establishment of authoritarian regimes, despite personalist tendencies.

A key feature of this illiberalism is constitutional restructuring aimed at strengthening presidential power. In Venezuela, Bolivia, and Ecuador, populist governments promoted new constitutions that enabled indefinite reelection and reduced the powers of the legislature and judiciary. These leaders justified such changes as returning power to the people. However, in practice, the reforms consolidated personalist governments with limited accountability. Additionally, these governments used mechanisms like referendums and legislative reforms to legitimize the accumulation of increasingly authoritarian power.

Another hallmark of leftist illiberalism in the region is its targeting of autonomous civil society organizations, social movements, and independent media that challenge state power. In Venezuela, the Chávez and Maduro governments enacted restrictive laws to persecute NGOs and



unions. In Bolivia, the Morales administration introduced regulations permitting the state to dissolve civil organizations that criticized the government. In Ecuador, Correa implemented policies to censor the press and harass independent journalists. This pattern reflects a disregard for pluralism and a tendency to monopolize political representation by asserting that only the leader and their movement truly represent the people.

Illiberal left-wing populism also undermines liberal democracy by compromising the integrity of free and fair elections. Although these regimes initially came to power through democratic means, they gradually manipulated electoral processes to secure their dominance. In Venezuela, the Maduro government has controlled the electoral system and disqualified opponents. In Bolivia, Morales attempted to remain in power despite losing a referendum on reelection. In Ecuador, Correa used state resources to benefit his party and limit electoral competition. These actions have contributed to a decline in the quality of democracy. Although such governments claim to expand popular sovereignty, they have, in practice, restricted democratic participation and eroded political freedoms. The reduction of liberal checks on power has not strengthened popular sovereignty but rather weakened the institutions necessary to protect democracy.

In Latin America, this illiberalism characterizes new far-left movements that diverge from reformist lefts by promoting authoritarian or hybrid forms of government. Ideologically, these movements exhibit pronounced illiberal traits. Culturally, established academic networks advocate identitarian and radical visions, replacing the concept of "revolution" with a "progressive" ideal framed through "emancipatory" rhetoric aimed at overcoming a supposed colonial legacy. This often includes promises to "empower" allegedly "excluded" groups. These dynamics foster communication and public action models that erode equality before the law and discriminate against certain individuals and groups, thus distorting fundamental principles of the rule of law. Organizationally, they display significant adaptability, blending traditional formats—such as vanguard parties—with more fluid, network-based movements that combine strategic discipline with tactical flexibility. Regionally, these far-left actors collaborate through shared narratives, material support, and participation in joint coordination bodies and political-intellectual forums. Both the "old left" and renewed populist currents are represented in forums like the São Paulo Forum and the Puebla Group, whose converging agendas and declarations underscore this alignment.

Geopolitically, illiberal leftist movements and their conservative counterparts often form strategic alliances grounded in shared opposition to the Western liberal order and U.S. influence. For instance, Venezuela and Russia have deepened diplomatic and economic ties, unified by a common critique of liberal democracies and mutual support in international forums. Despite ideological differences, both regimes exhibit authoritarian practices and promote narratives that justify the concentration of power and restrictions on freedom in the name of national sovereignty and resistance to imperialism. Their collaboration illustrates how regimes with divergent political orientations can converge in authoritarian governance, legitimizing internal repression and expanding influence through rhetoric centered on national defense and opposition to external enemies.



## CONCLUSION

Ideologically, illiberalism can be found on both the right and the left, although it is more frequently linked to populism, nationalism, and authoritarianism. It manifests in political projects that reject liberal institutions and seek to concentrate power in the name of popular sovereignty, cultural identity, or social justice. By challenging core principles of liberal democracy—such as pluralism, individual autonomy, and equality before the law—illiberalism poses a threat to democratic systems. It adapts to various contexts and justifies itself with different arguments, yet it consistently shares the underlying aim of eroding the foundations of political liberalism.

From our perspective, we concur with Enyedi (2024), who defines illiberalism as the rejection of three fundamental principles of liberal democracy: limited power, a neutral state, and an open society. Its rise has been driven by democratic backsliding in several countries, where leaders and movements have promoted policies that challenge traditional liberal norms. Illiberalism is an active political and ideological stance that seeks to concentrate power, promote certain groups or values through the state, and restrict social and cultural pluralism. It does not constitute a unified ideology, as it can take diverse forms depending on the context. Enyedi acknowledges the existence of left-wing illiberalism, rooted in a radical critique of capitalism and liberal democracy, which justifies the restriction of freedoms in the name of social justice and equality. Unlike right-wing illiberalism—which tends to emphasize tradition, authority, and cultural homogeneity—left-wing illiberalism centers on combating inequality, even at the cost of individual rights such as freedom of expression or state neutrality.

Left-wing illiberalism refers to the adoption of authoritarian practices by movements or governments that, while identifying as progressive, restrict fundamental freedoms and democratic pluralism. In Latin America, the democratic transitions of the 1980s led to advances in human rights and citizen participation. However, deep economic and social inequalities persisted. In recent years, a combination of economic recession, austerity measures, rising debt, and the state's inability to meet citizens' demands has fueled social discontent and widespread mobilization.

This context has led certain leftist movements, in their eagerness to implement social justice agendas, to adopt measures that limit freedom of expression, persecute political opponents, and co-opt state institutions to consolidate power. An example of this dynamic is Venezuela, where the government of Nicolás Maduro has been accused of authoritarian practices, such as the suppression of independent media, the persecution of opposition leaders, and the manipulation of electoral processes. Although the regime presents itself as socialist and anti-imperialist, these actions have led the country toward an illiberal model of governance, eroding democratic foundations and restricting civil liberties.

Resistance to illiberalism must combine the defense of core elements of the liberal tradition with the strengthening of mechanisms for democratic innovation and participation. In a reflection that focuses primarily on analyzing and critiquing right-wing illiberalisms, Arditi (2021) acknowledges that certain liberal principles—such as the protection of rights and the rule of law—are fundamental to any functioning democracy. However, as he cautions, defending democratic values requires not only institutional reform but also active citizen mobilization to protect and



expand them. This includes enhancing individual and collective participation, countering the degradation of public debate and discourse, and ensuring greater social equity to prevent discontent from being exploited by illiberal forces. We agree with this perspective, though we do not limit it—given the arguments presented in this text—solely to resisting right-wing illiberalism.

Beyond its ideological orientation, the result of illiberalism has been similar across contexts: the erosion of pluralism and the concentration of power in the hands of leaders with little accountability. From both the right and the left, illiberal movements have weakened democratic institutions, restricted rights, and promoted personalistic leaderships that seek to remain in power. Latin America has experienced recurrent cycles of democratic advances followed by illiberal backlash, resulting in a crisis of representation and growing distrust in the transformative capacity of democracy. In a continent such as Latin America, where equity, justice, and development are still lacking, the left has much to do. To achieve this, it must uphold and defend civil, political, economic, and cultural rights that expand democratic citizenship. Justifying their suppression—whether out of ideology or loyalty—undermines the profound civilizational shift that democratization represents, a shift that makes contemporary struggles for inclusion and recognition possible.

In conclusion, illiberalism is not a phenomenon exclusive to one ideology, but a political strategy that can manifest on both the right and the left. While the illiberal right emphasizes nationalism, tradition, and moral order, the illiberal left justifies the concentration of power in the name of social justice and opposition to neoliberalism. Research on this topic must overcome ideological biases and examine how different political currents have adopted illiberal positions, assessing their consequences for democracy, pluralism, and existing institutions.

No ideological position—defined by its attachment to particular concepts, values, and policy preferences—can claim moral superiority a priori when considering the mixed record of existing leftist regimes over the past century in terms of freedom, equity, and prosperity. As part of an inherently plural field, any leadership, movement, or program—whether left or right—must be assessed based on its outcomes, not on normative assumptions established in advance. It is from this standpoint that we must evaluate the forms and threats posed by illiberalism.



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