



AGAINST DEMOCRATIC FREEDOM: A BRIEF TAXONOMY OF THE THREAT

CONTRA LA LIBERTAD DEMOCRÁTICA: UNA BREVE TAXONOMÍA DE LA AMENAZA

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ABSTRACT — This essay examines the defining characteristics of three positions opposed to the liberal project today—anti-liberalism, illiberalism, and post-liberalism—by identifying their similarities and divergences along a continuum ordered by their respective proximity to, or distance from, liberalism.

KEYWORDS — ideologies, political theory, liberalism, antiliberalism, illiberalism, postliberalism

RESUMEN — Este ensayo examina las características definitorias de tres posiciones opuestas al proyecto liberal actual —antiliberalismo, iliberalismo y posliberalismo— identificando sus similitudes y divergencias a lo largo de un continuo ordenado por su respectiva proximidad o distancia respecto del liberalismo.

PALABRAS CLAVE — ideologías, teoría política, liberalismo, antiliberalismo, iliberalismo, posliberalismo

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Introduction¹

The challenge to the liberal order today comes from a diversity of actors with distinct narratives, mindsets, and, in some cases, replacement ideologies. From the extreme fringes of both the right and the left, these critiques advance more or less radical revisions of the foundations of open societies and of the international relations established after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Within this context, it has become increasingly common in the press to encounter the often undifferentiated use of terms such as “post-liberalism,” “illiberalism,” and “anti-liberalism.”

As authors such as J. G. Merquior (1991) and Michael Freeden (2015) have convincingly demonstrated, liberalism—characterized by plurality and dynamism—cannot be reduced to mere possessive individualism or to an oligarchic rejection of the social question. Rather, liberalism has sought to construct models of society that guarantee—albeit imperfectly—the protection and advancement of individuals and groups vis-à-vis the dominant powers of their respective eras. It sustained opposition to religious intolerance and monarchical absolutism in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, repudiated the violence of revolutionary and counterrevolutionary movements in the nineteenth century, and confronted both totalitarianism (Cherniss, 2021) and populism (Fukuyama, 2022).

To these ends, liberals—particularly their more progressive representatives—drafted laws designed to disperse and restrain concentrated power, implemented reforms to combat extreme inequality and poverty, and expanded institutions to channel citizen representation and participation. Across its various developments—opposed both to reductive interpretations of its own creed and to its outright enemies on the right and left—the liberal democratic project over the past century has sought to establish pluralism and consensus as intrinsic values of the good life, to defend the rule of law and the separation of powers, and to combine private liberty with public participation.

Nevertheless, the fragile liberal hegemony that prevailed socially, culturally, and politically after 1989 is now under sustained challenge. The figures and currents confronting it encompass a wide array of intellectual references and political-cultural positions. In the still largely democratic “Global North,” illiberal populist leaders and nativist movements stand out. In East Asia and Eurasia, anti-liberal threats emanate from China and Russia, while in parts of the Islamic world they arise from distinct political-theological projects. In Latin America—situated at the intersection of West and South—the most politically organized geopolitical challenge to liberal democracy over the past three decades has come from authoritarian leftist movements.

This essay examines the defining characteristics of three positions opposed to the liberal project today—anti-liberalism, illiberalism, and post-liberalism—by identifying their similarities and divergences along a continuum ordered by their respective proximity to, or distance from, liberalism, with a particular focus on reactionary right-wing positions. The challenge to the liberal project spans a panoply of articulated ideologies, collective mentalities, and expansive communication narratives. In the United States, for instance, elements within the governing coalition reflect an extreme right-wing ideology—nativist, isolationist, and fundamentalist—linked to racist and xeno-

¹ The original version of this essay appeared in the Mexican and Spanish editions of the magazine *Letras Libres*, in November 2025.

phobic mentalities among broad segments of the population and reinforced by narratives circulating through memes and posts grounded in conspiracy theories or in the “great replacement” trope.

Anti-Liberal Coherence

Anti-liberalism originated as a conservative, and often religious, reaction to the effects of the French Revolution and the ideals of the Enlightenment, as detailed by Helena Rosenblatt (2018). Over three centuries, this reaction has crystallized into political thought and practice fundamentally opposed to the liberal project. The process has combined realities external to the European Enlightenment—such as updated traditions of Islamism and Confucianism—with currents that emerged within the West in the twentieth century, most notably totalitarianism.

Totalitarian regimes, fascist, Nazi, and communist, challenged liberalism’s political, social, and cultural order. As Rosenblatt recalls, Benito Mussolini boasted that fascism was part of “all the political experiments of the contemporary world” which, he declared, “are anti-liberal,” while Stalin denounced the “corrupt liberalism” that masked “the interests of the bourgeoisie.” These anti-liberals, on both right and left, recycled accusations that counterrevolutionaries had already articulated a century and a half earlier, portraying liberalism as an ideology tied to Western domination.

Here, both convergences and divergences among anti-liberal attitudes become apparent. Communist totalitarianism, while claiming inheritance from the modern Enlightenment project, denied its emancipatory ideals in practice. By postulating a universalist vision of human realization and liberation, communism proved anti-liberal in its concrete praxis. Fascism, particularly in its Italian variant and even more clearly in German Nazism, was forthright in its brutality and in its challenge to liberalism, openly appealing to orders grounded in racial hierarchies and cultural regression. In both cases, selective liberal remnants survived, such as limited freedom of enterprise under fascism, sexual liberation under communism, and freedom of religious belief in both—always subject to the repressive fluctuations of regimes hostile to autonomy.

Illiberal Hybridity

Rosenblatt draws attention to how, by the mid-nineteenth century, when liberalism had become dominant in Europe and was defending capitalist property as well as restrictive suffrage and representation, various progressive sectors denounced this turn as “illiberal.” Almost in parallel, the rise of a proto-populist regime embodied in the Caesarism of Napoleon III reinforced the perceived linkage between liberalism and democracy. Within these distortions and deviations from liberalism’s original content lie antecedents of today’s illiberal debate.

One of the earliest reformulations of the concept after the Cold War (Zakaria, 2003) focused on growing contradictions in new democracies across East and South between core democratic elements (free, fair, and competitive elections) and the foundational pillars of any liberal order (the rule of law, separation of powers, and individual guarantees). Subsequently, linking illiberalism to the rise of populism, Yascha Mounk (2018) expanded upon this rift between the liberal and the democratic, offering stronger empirical support than Zakaria had provided a decade and a half earlier.

More recently, scholars have sought to delineate the global contours and content of illiberalism. For Marlène Laruelle (2022), illiberalism offers a critique of liberalism and an alternative political project, though not necessarily one opposed to all of liberalism's legacies, such as neoliberalism. It privileges executive power, weakens institutional checks and minority rights, promotes a sovereigntist discourse of the nation-state, and advances a civilizational foreign policy that defends national traditions against multiculturalism and global progressivism. Zsolt Enyedi (2024), in turn, conceptualizes illiberalism as a general notion that, in practice, has taken forms ranging from traditionalist or libertarian right-wing variants to populist and paternalistic left-wing ones. These variants are grounded in the concentration of power within a partisan state and a closed society. András Sajó, Renáta Uitz, and Stephen Holmes define illiberalism as a set of phenomena associated with the erosion of individual freedom that, without constituting an ideology or a regime type, remains compatible with democratic rituals. Even so, its practices tend to strengthen executive power, restrict social diversity, and attack political pluralism.

From these perspectives and cases, it is evident that illiberalism distances itself from liberal democracy without fully breaking from it. It respects economic freedom while favoring oligarchs close to power; rejects cosmopolitanism even as its elites engage in global consumption; and repudiates individualism, diversity, and equity as understood in liberal-progressive terms, yet does not restore premodern, estate-based societies. It distrusts checks and balances but maintains elections, albeit skewed in favor of the status quo. To grasp these hybridizations, it is useful to distinguish between illiberalism as an analytical concept and its deployment in populist narratives. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, for example, stated at the Bálványos Summer University in 2014 that "democracy is not necessarily liberal... something that is not liberal may still be a democracy," and asserted that "the new state we are building is an illiberal state." Four years later, at the same venue, he clarified that "there is an alternative to liberal democracy: so-called Christian democracy," designed to protect "ways of life rooted in Christian culture" and defend "human dignity, the family, and the nation"; hence, "by definition, Christian democracy is not liberal—it is, if you will, illiberal."

Post-Liberal Confusion

Post-liberalism, by contrast, is a more ambiguous phenomenon that, until recently, was largely confined to academic debate. Unlike illiberalism, and even more so unlike anti-liberalism, early references to post-liberal ideas (McPherson, 1973) and policies (Schmitter, 1995) pointed toward potentially democratic developments that sought to temper liberal individualism while advocating higher levels of social equality. From this perspective, a future post-liberal order would preserve freedom as an organizing principle of institutions and processes while fostering greater collective freedom through republican mechanisms of deliberation and participation.

Classical post-liberalism combined ideas from theorists and commentators critical of the individualist and elitist cosmopolitanism of certain liberal currents, proposing instead communitarian conceptions of the common good. In short, post-liberal democracy aimed to protect the values and institutions of liberal democracy while adapting them to a postmodern era marked by social demands distinct from those of the previous century. Yet this early meaning, conceived as a dialectical overcoming of liberal tradition without systematic opposition, has shifted.

Today, the post-liberal label encompasses diverse figures from both right and left, alongside unclassifiable veterans such as John Gray (1996), who are distant from the original meaning but largely concentrated in academic and intellectual spheres. In the United States, post-liberalism has decisively turned rightward, advocating regime change toward more monistic and homogeneous forms of government, society, and culture guided by Christian and nationalist visions of order. The work of Patrick J. Deneen (2023) has attracted the attention of prominent figures in the current administration, such as J. D. Vance and Marco Rubio, as well as that of Viktor Orbán, who has met with Deneen to discuss the importance of family and God. Meanwhile, across the North Atlantic, within a culturally conservative left framework, British thinkers John Milbank and Adrian Pabst (2016) celebrate the New Labour government of Prime Minister Keir Starmer, advocating a blend of social economy, communal solidarity, local power, and robust associational life.

Minimum Criteria

“If fascism is not a spiritual flame spreading across borders,
it is merely a technique for attaining and maintaining power,
without that metaphysical justification that can only derive from absolute values...
If democracy is convinced that it has not yet fulfilled its destiny,
it must combat on its own terrain that technique which serves only power.
Democracy must become militant.”

Karl Loewenstein, *Militant Democracy and Fundamental Rights* (1937)

Any coherently liberal position entails valuing diversity and pluralism, seeking moderation and political consensus, and respecting the rule of law and minority rights. Defending and renewing this legacy is the task of those of us who, beyond our minor differences and debates, consider ourselves fundamentally democratic. Against these principles, and the institutions and practices they animate, stand ideologies, mentalities, and narratives of an anti-liberal, illiberal, and, less clearly, post-liberal bent (see Table 1).

Table 1.

Analytical dimensions of post-liberalism, illiberalism, and anti-liberalism

Analytical Dimension	Posliberalism	Illiberalism	Antiliberalism
Temporality	Recent (late 20th century and so far in the 21st).	Variable (origin in the 19th century; revival at the end of the 20th and beginning of the 21st century).	Stable (from the end of the Ancien Régime to the present).
Nature	Primarily intellectual; more recently, political.	Political and, to a lesser extent, intellectual.	Political and intellectual.

Table 1 (continued)

Analytical Dimension	Posliberalism	Illiberalism	Antiliberalism
Internal consistency	Low Level	Medium Level	High Level
Political and epistemic horizon	Postmodern (ideologically variable) overcoming of the liberal order.	Restrictive mutation of the liberal order; attack on its progressive variant.	Anti-modern negation – in its western version – or developing of an “alternative” modernity that attacks the liberal order.

Source. Author's elaboration.

There are cases in which these phenomena overlap. Post-Soviet Russia, for example, harbored post-liberal critiques, such as neo-Marxism, new social movements, and identity politics, of the transition experience. Putinism itself evolved from an early illiberal phase, in which authoritarianism accommodated neoliberal oligarchies, to its current anti-liberal stage: an openly personalist dictatorship with totalitarian features. In the background persist centuries-old religious and conservative social traditions that are clearly alien, that is, non-liberal, to the project of modernity.

A final remark follows, from the standpoint of one who has suffered “progressive” illiberalism and anti-liberalism, yet defends the liberal democratic order against all forms of authoritarianism, including reactionary ones. We need greater clarity in our intellectual analyses and political stances. To that end, I propose the criteria of symmetry, proportionality, and relevance. Symmetry is intended to reject, at an abstract level, any extreme ideology, mentality, or narrative, whether right or left, that undermines liberal principles and achievements. Proportionality is intended to recognize, in each context, the range of adversarial positions confronting liberal democracy. Relevance is intended to act locally against the force whose predominance makes it the principal authoritarian threat. By avoiding the Charybdis of dogmatic equivalence, which uncritically homogenizes unequal threats, and the Scylla of militant opposition, which reserves criticism exclusively for “the enemy of my enemy,” liberals may better rearm their diagnosis and resistance.

Dimidium facti, qui coepit, habet: sapere aude.

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