

Post-triumphalist Geopolitics: Liberal Selves, Authoritarian Others

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Abstract

This article examines a dominant vision in contemporary geopolitics, in which the world is imagined as divided between liberal and illiberal political systems, clustering around the two conceptual nodes of “democracy” and “authoritarianism”. It considers how these conceptual nodes are imagined, mapped, and brought to life through writing, policies, and institutions related to democracy promotion. Instead of focusing on the definition of these concepts, this essay scrutinizes the ideological underpinnings of efforts to define “authoritarianism” and “democracy”, and shows how these definitional debates themselves produce geopolitical imaginaries that facilitate certain kinds of intervention in an era of “post-triumphalist geopolitics”.

Keywords

Critical geopolitics; political geography; mental maps; authoritarianism; liberalism; democratization; Orientalism; post-Soviet space

Introduction

“Democracy in crisis”: this is the latest diagnosis of Freedom House (2018), an organization that evaluates political freedom around the world to produce yearly “freedom” rankings. Figure 1, from the front page of the group’s website, vividly evokes a sense of precarity, with large swaths of territory color-coded as “not free”, sitting uncomfortably alongside those coded as “free”. Conveying a similar message, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, founded during the Cold War as an anti-communist news outlet and still funded today by the U.S. government, recently published an article titled, “How Autocracy Is Trending Again” (Grojec and Coelho, 2018). Accompanied by a visually-arresting



infographic, it draws from Freedom House (2018) and V-Dem Institute’s Regimes of the World index to introduce its title argument about the alleged rise in autocracy today. The graphic in Figure 2 reduces each country to a little circle, tidily lined up with equivalent units, to plot the rise and fall of autocratic and democratic regimes over time.

Freedom in the World 2018

Democracy in Crisis

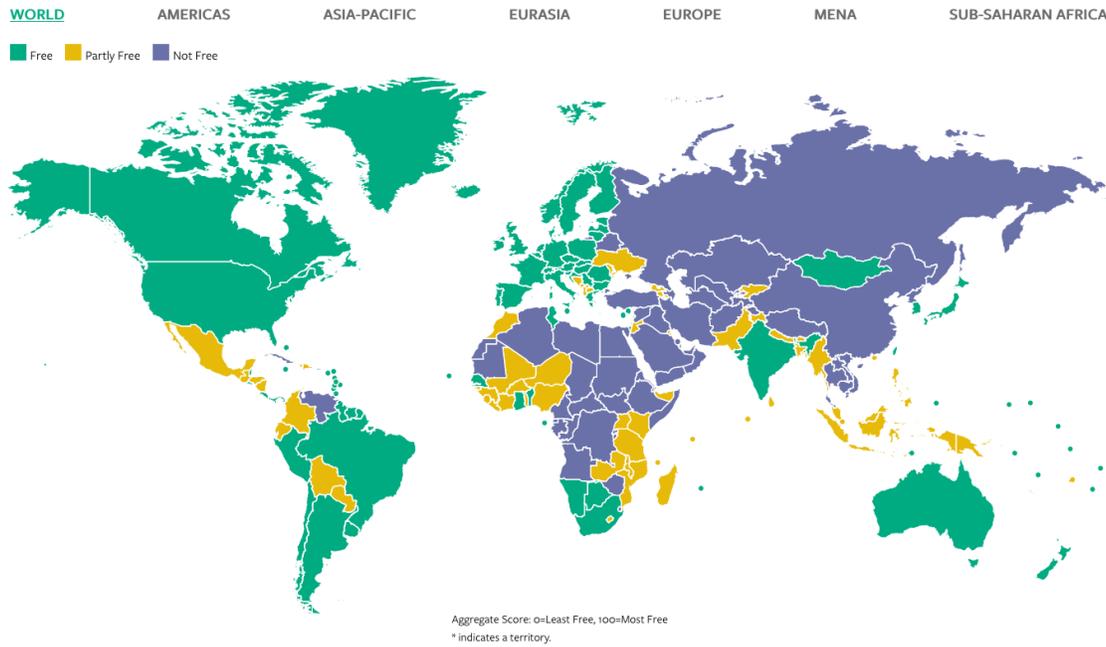


Figure 1: Front page of Freedom House’s website in November 2018. Source: Freedom House, 2018 (fair use).

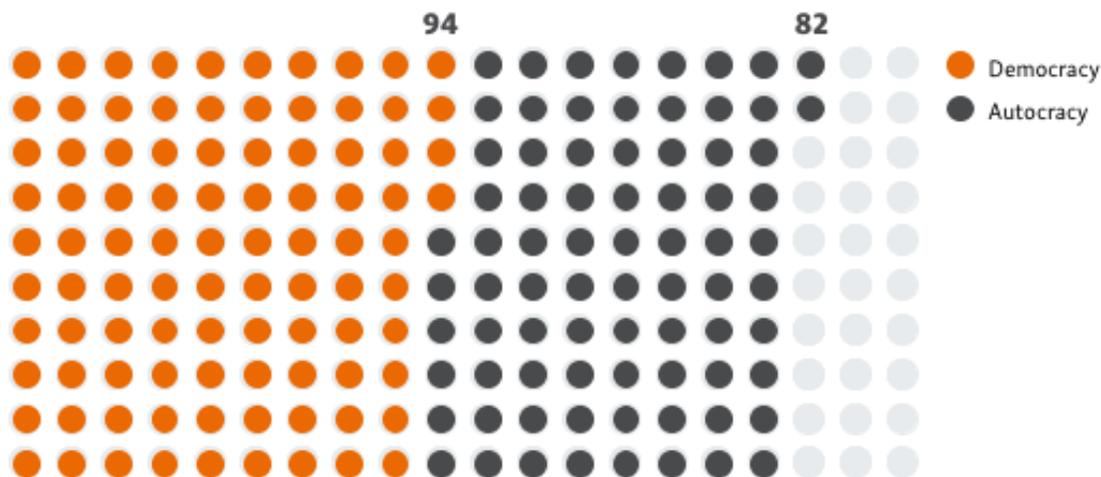


Figure 2: Illustration classifying the number of countries consider as a “democracy” or “autocracy” in 2003. Source: Grojec and Coelho, 2018 (fair use).

These maps exemplify what I see as today's hegemonic geopolitical imaginary: of a world neatly divided between "democratic" and "authoritarian" states. Policymakers, academics, journalists, and ordinary citizens across the West are remarkably comfortable with imagining the globe in this dualist fashion. But it is not "natural" to think of global space in binaries – people must *learn* to imagine the world as divided in such terms (Koch, 2018a, p. 31).

How, then, did we get here? Dualist thinking is common in many realms of social life, but with respect to dominant geopolitical imaginaries, today's way of thinking about political space as divided between "democratic" or "authoritarian" states is most proximately rooted in Cold War frames. During the Cold War, hegemonic narratives about global politics were fractured along the lines of Great Power conflict, whereby the USSR and the United States were reduced to gross abstractions of "communist" and "capitalist" camps (Dalby, 1990; Sharp, 2000). But when the Soviet Union and numerous other communist/socialist governments fell in the early 1990s, a triumphalist narrative about global affairs suggested that a new era had come – one of new democratic unity signaling the "end of history", as Francis Fukayama (1992) famously asserted.

Today, however, that triumphalist narrative of democracy's "victory" lies in ruins. Furthermore, in the nearly three decades since the end of the Cold War, the practice of imagining the world as divided between democratic and authoritarian camps remains firm as ever. Indeed, this bifurcated worldview, of geopolitics fundamentally defined around the authoritarian-democratic axis is a staple of what I refer to as today's "post-triumphalist geopolitics". This is a new era of geopolitical thinking, in which democracy is no longer seen as triumphant, but under attack. While post-triumphalist discourses frame the source of this attack as coming from many vectors, the primary opponent is consistently defined as "authoritarianism", or one of its sundry cognate terms.

An extended critique rather than a traditional research paper, this article explores why the post-triumphalist era continues to pivot around a binary worldview: of democracy versus autocracy. Labels, as any geographer knows, matter. With the discursive critique of critical geopolitics as my guiding method (Dittmer, 2010), I ask: How are the conceptual nodes of illiberal/authoritarian vs. liberal/democratic imagined, mapped, and narrated? And what is at stake in these mappings? My goal is not to join the search for precise definitions or accurate maps, but to instead ask why concepts like "liberalism" and "illiberalism", "authoritarianism" and "democracy" are so fuzzy. What explains their conceptual elusiveness? What kinds of geopolitics maps are conjured, and what kinds of intervention do they facilitate?

The goal of this article is to shed light on why post-triumphalist narratives about global space still revolve around the liberal/illiberal axis – especially in the era of social media, climate change, and an otherwise heightened awareness of global interconnectedness, in which webs of state and non-state actors regularly remind us that dualisms mask more than they reveal. I argue that there is much to be learned about our current moment of post-triumphalist geopolitics by considering public discourse about the difference between liberal and illiberal political systems. Starting with the assumption that geography can never be divorced from political or ideological lenses, this discursive approach aims to develop new insights about contemporary geopolitics by examining the kinds of identities that are imagined and narrated through scripts about il/liberalism today, and what explains the puzzlingly pervasive vision of a world divided between "authoritarian" and "democratic" *states*.

Moral geographies of il/liberalism

White supremacists congregated in August 2018 in Washington, D.C. for a repeat demonstration one year after the deadly "Unite The Right" gathering in Charlottesville. Counter-protesters came as well, yielding signs bearing a by-now iconic slogan of white supremacy opponents in the United States: "NO Nazis, NO KKK, NO Fascist USA". In discussing the opposition with the

media, the organizer of the rally, Jason Kessler, rejected such labels and he went so far as to tell National Public Radio (NPR), “I’m not a white supremacist. I’m not even a white nationalist. I consider myself a civil and human rights advocate focusing on the underrepresented Caucasian demographic” (quoted in Folkenflik, 2018). Kessler’s convoluted wordsmithing is clearly disingenuous, but regardless of whether it reflects a “post-truth” present (or a less romantic view of history recognizing that public speech has always been permeated with falsehoods, some more egregious than others), the fact is that labels matter. However provocative his claims may be to public consciousness, Kessler’s word choice demonstrates his awareness of the dominant moral landscape of labels in the U.S.: that one must not openly accept an association with fascism.

A staple of the contemporary geopolitical moment is that states and selves are imagined to cluster on one end of the liberal-illiberal spectrum, as democratic or authoritarian. But definitional precision is eminently elusive. “Fascist” is but one of many terms falling under the conceptual umbrella of “illiberalism”, which tend to operate more as an epithet than an analytical concept in liberal democracies. “As a word in usage today”, Michael Mann (2004, p. 365) has noted, “it appears largely as the exclamation ‘Fascist!’ – a term of imprecise abuse hurled at people we do not like”. Authoritarianism, fascism, absolutism, despotism, totalitarianism, patrimonialism, sultanism, illiberalism: the various labels for liberalism’s Other are prolific. Compounding this, each term is itself a contested signifier. The term “totalitarian”, for example, quickly shifted from Gentile’s first positive description of Mussolini’s vision for “*uno stato totalitario*”, to subsequently be applied in the negative to movements, parties, leaders, ideas, and political systems around the world and across history. When considering the sheer diversity and contradictory uses of the term, Benjamin Barber (1969, p. 19) brazenly asserted, it is tempting to conclude that “totalitarianism is to modern political science what reason was to Luther: a conceptual harlot of uncertain parentage, belonging to no one but at the service to all”.

Like the terms on the illiberal end of the spectrum, “democracy” has always been a conceptual battlefield as well. Social scientists have made impressive efforts to define and disentangle it from the concept of “liberalism”. Thomas Rhoden (2015, p. 565), for example, emphasizes how democracy, “denuded and reaffirmed as ‘rule by the people’”, does not include practices and institutions today associated with liberal norms, political or economic, and that the sooner analysts recognize this, the better off we will be. Some simply refuse the idea that Western states are democracies, such as Jacques Rancière (2006) who suggests that they are simply oligarchies that leave “enough room for democracy to feed its passion”. Others, like Anthony Giddens (1987), have argued that a looser approach to “polyarchy” – the rule by many – is more helpful.

By zooming out to consider the debates themselves, we see that the confluences, contradictions, and confusions around liberalism and democracy are implicated in how the world is imagined along ideological and practical lines. The act of classifying a regime type is also an act of inscribing a political border. Taxonomies and conceptual precision have their place, but critical discourse analysis pushes us to interrogate such boundary-making practices *themselves*, and to ask how and with what effect definitions of concepts like “democracy” become a battleground for competing visions of political space. As specific actors mobilize these terms and map them on the world, they create moral geographies of the liberal and illiberal, the democratic and autocratic, the good and bad, which are inextricable from the actual conduct of geopolitics.

Indeed, when used as buzzwords or epithets, specific terms’ *denotations* are less relevant than their *connotations*, i.e. the normative statement that a speaker wants to make about a particular person, government, or territory as democratic or not. These normative statements index the “moral geographies” (Cresswell, 2005) that underpin the geopolitical worldviews of ordinary people and

policymakers alike. As Bert Hoffman (2018, p. 118) points out, binary regime descriptions include a “semantic imbalance”. That is,

“Democracy” not only is a descriptive category but also refers to a positive self-identification. “Authoritarianism” does not. It is a default category for all regimes seen as nondemocratic from a liberal democracy perspective. As such, “authoritarianism” is not a regime type with which any government would identify.

This issue of normativity is significant because a central aspect of the post-WWII debates about totalitarianism was that they were just as much about defining “Western-type democracies” themselves and reaffirming Western liberal ideals (Rampton and Nadarajah, 2017). This felt particularly pressing at the time because the totalitarian states that analysts sought to explain and diagnose arose in the heart of Europe. Definitional deliberations about totalitarianism were, in part, a means of coping with this intense challenge to Western self-conceptions rooted in liberalism, rationality, and progress. A term like “despotism”, for example, first used in the eighteenth century, had a much longer history – but it was largely reserved for describing foreign Others, fitting squarely in the of “long European tradition of projecting the most extreme forms of political despotism and otherness onto non-Western societies and imagining beyond the edges of the European universe oddly passive or irrational peoples who mysteriously accept intolerable regimes” (Turits, 2003, p. 4). As Edward Said’s (1978) seminal work on Orientalism demonstrates, though, the discursive production of the foreign and backward “Other” is equally about the self (see also Mazzarella, 2015; Mitchell, 1988; Rabinow, 1989; Todorova, 1997).

These moral geographies are well illustrated in how “authoritarianism” became a buzzword in left-leaning media commentary about the 2016 U.S. presidential election – used both to decry and explain the remarkable rise of Donald Trump and his subsequent steps in domestic and foreign policy arenas. Many of these commentaries were infused with charged references that explicitly Orientalized the phenomenon of authoritarianism, including titles such as “America would be Trump’s Banana Republic” or “America Becomes a Stan”, and Trevor Noah’s famous portrayal of candidate Trump as an “African dictator” on *The Daily Show* (Krugman, 2017; Noah, 2015; Zakaria, 2016). Putting aside the substantive arguments of these commentaries, they offer an important insight into how certain American commentators –largely on the political left but also among those generally opposed to Trump’s activities– have harnessed the concept of “authoritarianism” as a means of critique. As with any identity narrative, there are two sides to the coin: “us” and “them”. These critiques are clearly about the authoritarian spirit and practices of the speaker’s opponent. But they are also a way to narrate one’s own values and commitment to liberal, democratic, and otherwise anti-authoritarian norms (Koch, 2017, 2018b).

The now-widespread script about U.S. democracy under siege is, at root, a geopolitical identity narrative. For those committed to liberal democratic values, the specter of “authoritarianism coming to America” is especially frightening because it also calls into question their understanding of American national identity as a righteous leader on the world stage. This is exemplified in several recent books that received extensive media coverage in the U.S., including Madeleine Albright’s (2018) *Fascism: A Warning*, and Timothy Snyder’s (2017, 2018) *On Tyranny* and *The Road to Unfreedom*. To the extent that the critiques these books make lionize U.S. history and its present, they implicitly advance a form of American nationalism. In both cases, the authors lament the political changes that have taken place in the U.S. since Donald Trump was elected president in 2016. For example, in discussing her book in an interview on NPR’s *Fresh Air* in 2018, Albright explained her shock at the changes wrought by the Trump administration:

So the United States is behaving in exactly the opposite way from what had been expected before. And so that is the issue. America has been viewed as really a country

that stood behind democratic principles, human rights, was not for torture, was not for really undermining aspects of democratic society and that we're not fulfilling the role that we're supposed to. And America, the leader – the chair of the leader of the free world is empty (NPR, 2018).

Albright's nationalist pride shines brightly here: America stands for democracy and human rights, and its *rightful* place is as “the leader of the free world”. But as with any nationalist narrative, it is less about reflecting a particular historical or geographic reality, and more about advocating a political ideal for the country's role in the world and the values its citizens should uphold and advance. American exceptionalism has deep roots (Dittmer, 2005; Jansson, 2018), but the newest iterations of this narrative harnessed to critique Trump and his supporters are unique insofar as they are unfolding in a context marked by the worldwide retreat of liberal democratic norms, including in places traditionally imagined as bastions of liberal values. For those committed to these values, the specter of “authoritarianism coming to America” is especially frightening because it also calls into question their understanding of American national identity as a righteous leader on the world stage. There is nothing inherently wrong with championing liberal democratic values, but the recent narratives about the specter of authoritarianism “coming to” the U.S. often imply that illiberal practices are somehow “foreign” to American soil, history, and national identity (Koch, 2017).

Tapping into this narrative has, of course, served many activists well, as they work to push back against the Trump administration's policies. Yet the racially-charged nature of some critiques about America becoming a “banana republic” or Trump as an “African” dictator suggest another problem for would-be advocates of American liberalism: not only do they reassert a xenophobic perspective they otherwise claim to challenge, they also suggest that the U.S. is immune to illiberal political formations because of the country's ostensible “modernity”. By positioning authoritarianism as “Other” and the U.S. as inherently morally superior, these narratives advance an Orientalist worldview, whereby authoritarian political configurations are portrayed as essentially foreign and “backward” (Koch, 2017; Mazzarella, 2015; Turits, 2003). By spatially fixing authoritarianism as an *elsewhere*, the challenge of illiberalism is mischaracterized as spatially confined, rather than something found in all political contexts, which are bound to be characterized by multiple, overlapping practices of government – liberal *and* illiberal. Indeed, dominant narratives about authoritarianism are constantly inflected by statist thinking, which the following section pinpoints as a key source for the curious persistence of the liberal/illiberal dualism in contemporary, post-triumphalist geopolitics.

Spatially fixing “authoritarianism”

In studies and discussions of “authoritarianism”, academic and otherwise, the unit of analysis is nearly always the territorial state. This statist approach persists even though, when pressed, political observers would likely concede that, even in the most centralized of political systems, state power is never homogeneously expressed within a territorial state, nor is it experienced evenly among different citizens and at different moments in time. Otherwise authoritarian governments may sometimes permit special zones of freedom such as the proliferating American university branch campuses in the Middle East and Asia (Koch, 2014, 2016; Koch and Vora, forthcoming; Vora, 2018). Likewise, authoritarian political relations are pervasive in ostensibly democratic settings, such as in prisons, military institutions, targeted policing and race-based discrimination, migration enforcement domestically and in foreign detention centers across North America and Europe, and beyond (Belcher and Oliver, 2013; Chambers, 2018; Johnson and Jones, 2018).

All states have some mix of liberal and illiberal practices unfolding across their territory, sometimes incorporating democratic input and sometimes not, selectively including some voices and excluding others. But if this is the case, then why do dominant political frameworks so consistently

bind the concepts of democracy and authoritarianism to particular territories? How is it that mapping of the liberal/illiberal binary is so consistently spatialized around territorial states in our mental maps? The broadest answer to these questions lies with the persistence of *state-based* mental maps or “spatial imaginaries”, i.e. modes of thinking about space to make sense of how the social and physical worlds are related. Mental maps are conjured and confirmed through a wide array of practices, norms, and conventions – rhetorical and material alike (Gould, 1966; Tuan, 1975). The habit of imagining the world as characterized by some illiberal and other liberal blocs is defined institutionally, through the presence or absence of certain political apparatuses, but also by policy protocols developed by institutions like the U.S. State Department or the United Nations. It is also narrated through popular speech and in the media, for example when we talk of a “country” backsliding away from or transitioning toward democracy. It is more formally cataloged and mapped yearly by institutions like Freedom House or scholarly databases like Hadenius and Teorell’s (2007) “Authoritarian Regimes Data”, widely used by scholars and policymakers alike.

Like all maps, these heuristic tools simplify the world. They slot all territorial states into one category or another – coloring and coding the earth’s surface equally. This is clearly illustrated in the two figures presented above from Freedom House and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (Figs. 1-2). These are not just “one-off” examples; they are part of a broader grammar with significant effects for how people come to imagine the world as divided in particular ways. The idea of the territorial state as a unit of analysis, which might be categorized as dominated by a form of “liberal” or “illiberal” government, is produced by and produces a specific geopolitical order. The habit of taking the state for granted as a unit of analysis is problematic, John Agnew (1994) and countless other political geographers have argued, because it comes at the expense of reckoning with heterogeneous practices of government within a state, across its borders, and among those defined as citizens and noncitizens. Though we may recognize that no regime slots perfectly into a discrete analytical category, as a paragon of “democracy” or “autocracy” or anywhere in between, the territorial trap facilitates essentialist approaches to political geography and blunts, rather than sharpens, an understanding of the spatialization of politics. In the decades since Agnew’s “territorial trap” critique, IR scholars and political scientists have increasingly worked to examine state power outside of a fixed territory and, in some cases, not taking the state for granted as an appropriate, or even useful, unit of analysis. This is exemplified in the new research on offshoring, kleptocracy, social media and the diverse challenges of “dictators beyond borders” (e.g. Cooley and Heathershaw, 2017; Dalmaso et al., 2018; Diamond et al., 2016; Glasius, 2018a, 2018b; Tucker et al., 2017).

It is easy enough to dismiss statist thinking from a purely academic standpoint, but the state continues to have vast and significant consequences for how global space is imagined, organized, and governed. So, while recent scholarship has made welcome advances in understanding the multiple expressions of state power, extra-territorial approaches are not the solution to all puzzles about the contemporary shape of state power. We live in a world of states and state institutions matter. We also live in a world dominated by nationalist identity narratives, which are not only deeply felt but often come baked into political commentary through a form of “methodological nationalism” (Chernilo, 2006; Koch, 2017). This term is typically applied to the habit of naturalizing the state as a unit of analysis, but we might also see it as a pattern whereby analysts overlook their own nationalist myths and ideological inclinations, mistaking them for objective facts. Methodological nationalism in writing on democracy and authoritarianism can be hard to locate because it is so tightly interwoven with liberal ideals in the West, which are often assumed to be *a priori* universal values rather than norms citizens must actively learn to value (Koch, 2018b).

Orientalizing authoritarianism

The forgetfulness of methodological nationalism can also be found in selective or idealistic readings of Euro-American history, which has been defined by horrific forms of colonial violence, racism, and social and ecological injustice (Hardt and Negri, 2000). At a time when this history is well known and publicly discussed across the West, it is all the more puzzling that liberal commentators continue to “other” authoritarianism. Yet these contemporary commentaries, I want to suggest, are but one iteration of a longstanding identity narrative that Western states are bastions of rationalist modernity. This imperial narrative casts Western intellectuals as arbiters of the very meaning of “progress” and how it should be calculated and mapped on the earth’s surface. This is especially important from the perspective of actors in places designated as illiberal because such maps do not simply “mirror” the world, but *actively constitute it*. European colonialism, for example, was always tied to maps of human geography, which affirmed prevailing views of cultural difference – and European superiority. This colonial condescension also explicitly indexed forms of illiberal rule as signs of backwardness. The civilizational vision of rationality, enlightenment, and free will as being uniquely European has been well catalogued, succinctly summarized in Friedrich Nietzsche’s (1996 [1887], p. 41) observation that the Western ideal of the “free man” is one who sees that very freedom as the primarily “*measure of value*: looking out at others from his own vantage-point, he bestows respect or contempt”. Imperial geopolitics built on these views to pit the liberal West against the illiberal elsewhere, constituting an important map for action: “The pedagogical-imperial impulse of liberalism – the vista of a world remade in its image – is sustained by making the world available to its interventions” (Mazzarella, 2015, p. 105).

Geopolitical visions of the world divided between liberal and illiberal territories are not merely descriptive: they imply a problem that needs resolution. From the Western core, the liberal-illiberal imaginary locates “delinquent” areas requiring liberalization. The recent Freedom House map in Figure 1, for instance, readily points audiences to places in need of liberal intervention – not only tinged with a missionary spirit, but targeted at those seeking to justify preexisting agendas to bring progress to the backward. Like all discourses, they “enable one to write, speak, listen and act meaningfully” (Ó Tuathail and Agnew, 1992, p. 193). Even though the association between authoritarianism and backwardness is no longer explicitly colonial, it seems remarkably hard to shake – even though scholarship has amply demonstrated that modernization and modernism actually created the preconditions for some of the world’s most egregious cases of illiberal rule (e.g. Bauman, 1989; Giddens, 1987; Rancière, 2006). Meanwhile, the intimate connection between authoritarianism and modernization is constantly on display today, as reports proliferate about autocrats and their savvy technocrats, advancing new, digitally-connected forms of authoritarianism. But because of how tightly woven authoritarianism and Orientalism still are, when Western experts critique illiberal leaders and government practices by affixing labels like “unfree” or “authoritarian” to the whole territory of their state and, by association, their whole population, the connotation of backwardness is invariably lurking.

These terms may indeed describe a specific situation – that I do not dispute – but the flip side of any narrative is its reception. Indeed, bureaucrats and citizens in many nondemocratic contexts bristle at the application of the “authoritarian” label. This bristling is often less in response to the accuracy of the label and more at its derogatory implication of “backwardness” and the political repercussions it might hold. Indeed, the broader history of Orientalizing authoritarianism helps to contextualize Krastev and Holmes’ (2018) recent argument that today’s “illiberal revolution” in Central and Eastern Europe is rooted in a “pent-up animosity” toward the assumed expectation that the post-1989 political transformation required “mimicking” the West. To be sure, for many ordinary citizens in post-socialist space, liberalizing reforms undertaken in the 1990s involved welcome changes: blue-jeans were no longer contraband and civil society groups like Russia’s *Memorial* were no longer illegal. For others,

however, the idea that Western exemplars should define the necessary roadmap for those changes entailed uncomfortable normative commitments. Whether accepting or refusing their norms, democratizing states around the world are consistently held up as *imitators* of the West, producing “feelings of inadequacy, inferiority, dependency, lost identity, and involuntary insincerity”, because mimesis is built on the assumption that dominant Western democratic states have the “right to evaluate their success or failure” (Krastev and Holmes, 2018, p. 118).

The exemplar-imitator complex is, of course, fundamental to colonial geopolitics and was not lost on Alexander Solzhenitsyn, when he delivered his famous Harvard commencement speech in 1978:

But the blindness of superiority continues in spite of all and upholds the belief that the vast regions everywhere on our planet should develop and mature to the level of present day Western systems, which in theory are the best and in practice the most attractive. There is this belief that all those other worlds are only being temporarily prevented (by wicked governments or by heavy crises or by their own barbarity and incomprehension) from taking the way of Western pluralistic democracy and from adopting the Western way of life. Countries are judged on the merit of their progress in this direction. However, it is a conception which develops out of Western incomprehension of the essence of other worlds, out of the mistake of measuring them all with a Western yardstick. The real picture of our planet’s development is quite different and which about our divided world gave birth to the theory of convergence between leading Western countries and the Soviet Union. It is a soothing theory which overlooks the fact that these worlds are not at all developing into similarity. [...] Besides, convergence inevitably means acceptance of the other side’s defects, too, and this is hardly desirable (Solzhenitsyn, 1978).

Solzhenitsyn’s words, despite being articulated 40 years ago, are striking for their uncanny resemblance to the ideas and language that are circulating today in Central and Eastern Europe, as well as many post-Soviet states. In all these cases, there is a visibly allergic reaction to the paternalism of Western experts and their allies (or “imitators”) in these countries. Crucially, these allergic reactions are premised on a fundamentally *nationalist* worldview. In articulating their visions for new “national” futures, nationalist leaders and intellectuals like Solzhenitsyn routinely emphasize how they are not merely “importing” or “copying” foreign states, but are asserting their own free will and sovereignty, and attending to the country’s unique national traits, values, or needs. Indeed, nationalism is a staple script to reject Western models of development stretching across the postcolonial and post-Soviet world – found in plans and visions from China’s “socialism with Chinese characteristics” to Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s Hindu nationalism, to Nursultan Nazarbayev’s “Kazakhstan way” or Victor Orbán’s vision of “illiberal democracy” in Hungary.

The core idea of nationalism – of being *exceptional* within a world of nations – is powerful because, within the contemporary territorial state system, people across the world are taught to attach their own pride and integrity to this identity. The striking power of the Olympic movement is just one testament to this, but it pervades so many daily experiences, institutions, and structures – formal and informal alike. At the broadest brush, “prophets of nationalism”, excel by tapping into and stoking this “desire to become a people rather than a population, a recognized and respected somebody in the world who counts and is attended to” (Geertz, 1973, p. 237). The defensive tone of national-pride-under-attack is readily apparent in Solzhenitsyn’s 1978 speech. He is careful to emphasize that the USSR is not perfect, but his deep sense of national pride permeates the entire lecture – just as it did his life in exile and his subsequent return to Russia. So, while Krastev and Holmes are correct to note the significance of the resentment felt by some in Central and Eastern Europe around being treated as

imposters or somehow backward, it is important to emphasize that a strong (under)current of nationalism is fundamental to how these reactions are expressed.

Leaders in these countries and others do not only bristle at labels like “authoritarian” and “illiberal” because of their association with backwardness and the implied insult to national pride, but also because they represent a crucial justification for Western political intervention. In a world dominated by institutions and actors espousing liberal democratic norms, North American and European states seem to assume a preordained *right* to evaluate who is living up to Western standards and who is falling short. “In this sense”, Krastev and Holmes (2018, p. 11) emphasize, “imitation comes to feel like a loss of sovereignty”. The perceived violation of sovereignty is again interwoven with a discomfort at intervention that is predicated on liberal notions of progress and backwardness, which have always been inflected with a certain fetish for expertise – no longer from colonial administrators, but from a globally diffuse body of technocrats and intellectuals in government, international organizations, the NGO sector, academia, and so forth. The underlying attitude of paternalism that “we know better than you”, has a long history of incensing people and politicians across the world.

But in *academic discourse*, this paternalistic attitude is often masked by the technical nature of research on democratization. Despite invariably being predicated on a moral geography that positions liberal as good and illiberal as bad, and more often than not, democratization research nearly always implies a teleological view of democracy as progress (with notable exceptions).¹ Yet terms like “democracy” or “democratic consolidation”, Rhoden (2015, p. 562) notes, “become a grab bag of hopes and dreams of those who either wish for or work for the betterment of society under the democratization process. Everything and anything that is ‘good’ in its broadest sense has come to be affixed to the expectation of a democracy consolidated”. To reiterate an earlier point: there is nothing “wrong” with analysts championing liberal democratic values. But to the extent that they naturalize an ideological mapping of global space, of a world divided between the democrats and their enemies, advocates of liberalism risk missing how the challenges to democracy today are precisely *about* this normative discourse. That is, *while liberals seem to be fixated on evaluating who is and isn’t liberalizing, their opponents are instead challenging the very terms of the debate and questioning their authority to make such judgments.*

Post-triumphalist geopolitics

One curious aspect of the contemporary mapping of the liberal-illiberal divide, of a world divided between liberal democratic selves and autocratic others, is that it is exceptionally one-sided. Not only are those places labeled as authoritarian *silenced* through these mappings, but the political leaders in nondemocratic states are largely unconcerned with participating in the same moral posturing and ideological world-making exercises that characterize the policy justifications of the U.S., other liberal democratic states, and various pro-democracy NGOs and international organizations. That is, while those positioning themselves on the democratic end of the spectrum vocally advocate for democracy-building around the world, those on the other end of the spectrum generally are not interested in promoting some kind of authoritarian ideology. This is not an era of satellite states, as in Cold War geopolitics, but one in which authoritarian regimes and their supporters have rather more

¹ Many scholars have critiqued the “transitology” literature for failing to adequately account for the fact that many (if not most) countries fall into a “gray zone” or experience “regime cycling”, oscillating between more and less liberalization, and countless observers have debunked the teleological view of a democracy-as-end-point, exemplified in Fukuyama’s “end of history” thesis (see especially, Carothers, 2002; Hale, 2002, 2016).

diffuse goals that are oriented toward crafting a world order and friendly regimes, which will allow them to prosper and pursue their agendas without significant financial or political obstacles.

In Russia, for example, Lucan Way (2016, p. 69) forcefully argues that notions of “sovereign democracy” and “Putin’s strident anti-Western rhetoric have been directed more at perceived Western interference than at democracy as such”. Similarly, Andrew Nathan (2015, p. 157) argues that Chinese foreign policy is more targeted at making the international context “regime-type-neutral”, rather than being driven by some sort of “missionary impulse”. Likewise, in the case of Russian cyberattacks on the U.S. elections in 2016, and elsewhere in Europe prior to that and subsequently, the goals are not about crafting another place in the image of the authoritarian state, but rather to undermine perceived adversaries and advance perceived friends, who might also advance elite interests of the autocratic regime and its cronies. What is more, these regimes are increasingly doing so in a neoliberal fashion: drawing upon mercenaries and skilled experts from any country, so long as they have the appropriate skillset. This was most recently exemplified with the revelations about the United Arab Emirates’ Project Raven cyber-espionage program, which has employed numerous American formerly employed by the US National Security Agency to surveil opposition figures, human rights activists, academics, and other perceived critics of the regime – and subsequently to initiate attack on program “targets” (Bing and Schechtman, 2019). Insofar as today’s authoritarian leaders are comfortably contracting out this kind of work to ensure a friendly political environment, domestically and internationally, their approach to entrenching authoritarian power is far more opportunistic, networked, and individualized than the satellite model of replicating entire political systems in other countries.

The false impression that authoritarian leaders are engaged in the same kind of coherent world-making agenda largely stems from the legacy of Cold War geopolitical thinking. The ideological glue binding nearly all political events during this time was the notion of two systemic rivalries, but it was fueled by the fact that leaders in both the U.S. and the USSR openly expressed a desire to make the world in their image – and indeed took steps to do so. With the collapse of the Cold War geopolitics metanarrative, the triumphalist West never quite gave up its missionary bent: they had democracies to build! Yet most political leaders in the post-Soviet world were no longer defining foreign policy agendas around the moral imperative of spreading their political economic system beyond their borders. Thus, the one-sidedness of narratives about the global liberal-illiberal divide: Western observers who map this kind of ideological intentionality onto the policies of authoritarian leaders and their supporters are ascribing an expectation, rooted in Cold War era ideological geopolitics, which does little to explain how and why authoritarian leaders are doing what they are doing. While democracy-building continues to be a core concern of many international organizations, as well as U.S. foreign policy (even in the “Trump era”), autocracy-building is not an explicit doctrine that authoritarian leaders pursue. They are rather more opportunistic, pushing for more breathing room within a global order, which, after the Cold War ended, felt especially unipolar and hostile to nondemocratic states and actors (Cooley, 2015; Nathan, 2015; Way, 2016).

The one-sidedness of liberal triumphalism has also tended to be quite ahistorical. Little mainstream commentary in recent years has acknowledged that it was only in the 1970s that democratic norms and liberal ideals came to figure so prominently in U.S. foreign policy rhetoric and to infuse key international institutions, new and old (Diamond, 2008; Kagan, 2015). Instead, commentators tend to imply a more eternal chronology of liberal values – especially among those in the United States who take to heart the nationalist narrative about being a bastion of democracy and a force for good. Madeleine Albright’s comments quoted above are exemplary. Of course, as David Harvey (2009, p. 8) observes, it is tempting “to dismiss this rhetoric as the friendly mask for the less benign face of authoritarian neofascism at home and militaristic imperialism abroad”. Yet he underscores that this would misread the real commitment to these ideals among much of the American

public's widespread support for "doing good in the world": aid and other ideologically-motivated interventions may be misplaced or poorly conceived, he says, but they cannot be written off as a mere rhetorical foil for larger nefarious agendas (Harvey, 2009, p. 8). Different actors involved in advancing a liberal and/or democratic agenda will have a wide range of motives, some idealist, some venal. Indeed, individuals themselves often have a mix of motives, which are nigh impossible to disentangle.

The overarching thread uniting these diverse actors, in the U.S. at least, is a strong commitment to nationalist ideals. Indeed, evangelizing for freedom and liberty is one of the most consistent themes in contemporary American nationalism (Conroy-Krutz, 2015; Jansson, 2018). The notion that the country possesses consummate liberal credentials is a nationalist vision – less fact than aspirational fiction about who "we" are and what "we" value as U.S. citizens. Other countries have parallel founding myths and, in a world still defined by statist thinking, nationalism remains a powerful force for mobilizing people around certain political agendas. What sets the U.S. apart, though, is how this nationalist mythology came to be woven into interventionist agendas after World War II. The contradictions and violations of the narrative on the ground aside, the Manichean worldview is one that many ordinary Americans have latched onto with great conviction. It is a powerful narrative of self-affirmation and (more often than not) Christian righteousness, casting the national "self" as "the savior or the redeemer, the good angel who protects, vindicates, civilizes, restrains, and safeguards. The savior is the victim's bulwark against tyranny" (Mutua, 2001, p. 204).

But who are the "victims" in this context? Who is being saved through promoting democracy or liberal values more generally? Those in need of saving are ultimately all of us, but in the era of what I have been calling "post-triumphalist geopolitics", liberals concerned about the international decline of democracy tend to highlight iconic minorities, refugees, and political dissidents, who are most readily cast as victims in this discourse. To be unequivocally clear: these groups do face serious threats when racist, xenophobic, misogynist, and otherwise illiberal demagogues come to powerful government positions or simply gain prominence in public discourse. The unfortunate reality, however, is that these individuals also tend to face oppression in the most *liberal* of settings. This is not a reason against striving for liberal cosmopolitanism, but liberal critiques can become pernicious to the extent that they mobilize a nationalist mythology that erases these inconvenient facts – and their foreign equivalent, the countless historical cases of democratic states pursuing inarguably undemocratic policies across their borders. The fictions of nationalism are *comfortable*, though, and readily accessible for advocates of liberal ideology in today's avowedly democratic states. They are also *comforting*, insofar as they suggest a job well done, when perhaps, as scholars have begun to highlight, liberalism never really "won" when democracy was suddenly inscribed on the maps of Latin America in the 1970s and 80s and Eurasia in the 1990s. Nor should we assume that our maps of democracy are static, as norms erode and "democratic deconsolidation" unfolds spatially and *generationally* (Howe, 2017; Krastev and Holmes, 2018; Rampton and Nadarajah, 2017; Rupnik, 2018).

The flurry of writing about the decline of democracy in the past five years reflects a distinct awareness that liberal democratic ideals can no longer be taken for granted as a self-apparent global norm. In contrast to the post-Cold War triumphalism in the 1990s, we are now firmly in a post-triumphalist geopolitical era. Yet the liberal anxiety about illiberal expansions does *not* reflect something new – a dissensus that did not previously exist. It was, in fact, always there. Rather, our post-triumphalist moment is characterized by a recognition that global norm contestation is inherent in international politics and that a commitment to liberal values *must constantly be constructed* rather than simply delivered, as in Fukuyama's end-of-history romance. But like Cold War geopolitics, this post-triumphalist era operates through a similar dualism, conjuring a map of the world divided between territories that might be classified as "authoritarian" or "democratic". The opposing "units" in this geopolitical imaginary are less political-economic systems and more strictly political-institutional

systems. The motivating drama, *the binding glue of this international ordering still revolves around a map populated by states*. Whether concerned with political affairs within states recognized as traditional bastions of liberal democracy or among its fledgling adherents, liberal critiques of illiberal governance in post-triumphalist geopolitics still tend to spatially fix illiberalism as an *elsewhere*, rather than a *practice* that knows no territorial bounds.

It is easy to criticize such essentializing visions of the world as being territorially trapped, as ignoring the networked realities of our daily existence. But geopolitical visions have *always* trafficked in erasing, rather than embracing, nuance. Essentialism is so consistently seductive precisely because it simplifies a world of complexity into something digestible and actionable. And this smooth digestion is precisely why the liberal-illiberal divide remains such an influential geopolitical imaginary, reinforced as it is through the writings of figures like Madeline Albright and the maps of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and Freedom House discussed at the outset of this article. Maps of a world divided between liberal selves and authoritarian others become easy scripts for unthinking action, reducing places to geographical abstractions. In considering the language of post-triumphalist geopolitics, it is not just moral geographies that need to be scrutinized. “The politics of the choice of words and terms needs to be laid bare”, Joann Sharp (2000, p. xvi) has argued, because “there is always a choice of words and phrases that can be adopted when describing a place or people”. Whatever words we choose to employ, it is incumbent upon scholars, commentators, and all advocates of democracy to reflect on whether those terms may be smuggling in certain nationalist myths or ideological assumptions, and whether they can be wielded as precision tools for elucidating complexity or if they are but blunt weapons subsuming geographic nuance.

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