

# Jerusalem Letters

## **There's No Such Thing as an 'Illiberal'**

By Yoram Hazony, September 6, 2017

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The American and British media have been inundated lately with denunciations of “illiberalism.” That word was once used to describe a private shortcoming: A person who was narrow-minded or ungenerous was said to be illiberal. But in the wake of Donald Trump’s election and Britain’s vote to leave the European Union, “illiberalism” is being treated as a key political concept. In the writings of Fareed Zakaria, David Brooks, James Kirchick, the *Economist* and the *Atlantic*, among others, it is now assumed that the line dividing “liberal” from “illiberal” is the most important one in politics.

Who are these “illiberals” everyone is talking about? Respected analysts have ascribed illiberalism to the Nazis and the Soviets; to Vladimir Putin, Xi Jinping and Kim Jong Un; to Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Abdel Fattah Al Sisi; to the Shiite regime in Iran and the military regime in Myanmar; to the democratic governments of India, Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic; to Donald Trump, Theresa May and Brexit; to the nationalist parties in Scotland and Catalonia; to Marine Le Pen, Bernie Sanders, Jeremy Corbyn and the lefty activists demanding political correctness on campus; to Venezuela, Pakistan, Kenya and Thailand.

Not everyone raising the hue and cry about illiberalism has exactly this same list in mind. But the talk follows a consistent pattern: A given

commentator will name some violent, repressive regimes (Iran, North Korea, Russia). Then he will explain that their “illiberalism” is reminiscent of various nonviolent, democratically chosen public figures or policies (Trump, Brexit, Polish immigration rules) that he happens to oppose.

At first glance, it looks like taint by association. If you hate Trump or Brexit enough, you may be in the market for a way to delegitimize their supporters, 40% or 50% of the voting public. Making it out as though Trump is a kind of Putin, Erdogan or Kim Jong Un—not Hitler exactly, but at least Hitler lite—may feel like progress.

But that isn’t enough of an explanation. A battalion of our best-known journalists and intellectuals are straining to persuade readers that there exists some real-world phenomenon called “illiberalism,” and that it is, moreover, a grave threat. This isn’t routine political partisanship. They really feel as if they are living through a nightmare in which battling “illiberalism” has taken on a staggering significance.

It’s vital to understand this phenomenon, not because “illiberalism” really identifies a coherent idea—it doesn’t. But because the new politics these writers are urging, the politics of liberalism vs. illiberalism, is itself an important, troubling development.

Start with the exaggerated sense of power many Americans and Europeans experienced after the Berlin Wall fell in 1989. Anything seemed possible, and a remarkable number of normally tough-minded people began telling one another fanciful stories about what would happen next. A series of American presidents giddily described the prosperity and goodwill that were about to arise. George H.W. Bush declared in 1990 that after 100 generations of searching for peace, a new world order was about to be born, “a world quite different from the one we’ve known, a world where the rule of law supplants the rule of the jungle.” Utopian political tracts by Francis

Fukuyama (*The End of History and the Last Man*, 1992), Tom Friedman (*The Lexus and the Olive Tree*, 1999), and Shimon Peres (*The New Middle East*, 1993), described the imminent arrival of the universal rule of law, human rights, individual liberties, free markets and open borders. These speeches and books raised expectations into the stratosphere, asserting that decent men and women everywhere would embrace the liberal order, since all alternatives had been discredited.

Even at the height of all this, one caveat was consistently repeated: A rogue's gallery of holdouts would continue to resist until the mopping-up operations were complete. Fukuyama referred to these irrationalists, clinging to nationalism, tribalism and religion, as "megalothymic." It wasn't a very catchy brand name. The term that stuck instead came from "The Rise of Illiberal Democracy," an insightful 1997 essay in *Foreign Affairs* by Zakaria, which argued that resistance to the new order was far more widespread than had yet been recognized.

In this context, "liberalism" was understood as the belief that it was both possible and desirable to establish a world-wide regime of law, enforced by American power, to ensure human rights and individual liberties.

"Illiberalism" became a catchall term that lumped together anyone opposed to the project—just as Marxists used the word "reactionary" to describe anyone opposed to the coming communist world order.

"Illiberalism" doesn't objectively describe any natural grouping of political phenomena. It's a synonym for opposition to—and now, perhaps, the impending failure of—the regime of universal individual rights that American power was supposed to establish. Anyone whose goals are counter to this particular aim—whether he is a socialist, conservative, nationalist, tribalist, Islamic fundamentalist, or whatever else—contributes to what one headline calls "Illiberalism: The Worldwide Crisis."

Except that there is no crisis. People are simply much less interested in becoming liberals than liberals had supposed.

## **II.**

In the 20 years since Zakaria's article, the habit of understanding politics as a fight between liberals and illiberals has hardened into what can be called the "liberal internationalist" paradigm. Like all paradigms, it nourishes many dogmatic adherents, along with some who are far more sensible. What such individuals have in common is a tendency to force reality into their dichotomy, in the process displacing older concepts and distinctions that were better framed and therefore more useful.

During the Cold War, for instance, political theorists such as Jeane Kirkpatrick developed categories to distinguish enemies from potential allies. What made the Soviet Union the enemy was not only its expansionism, but its "totalitarian" character. It was a one-party dictatorship seeking to impose its atheist materialism and Marxist economic planning in every sphere of life and on all nations.

Ranged against these designs were political figures of very different kinds, from democratic nationalists such as Charles de Gaulle, Jawaharlal Nehru and David Ben-Gurion, to nondemocrats and "authoritarians" such as the shah of Iran, Chiang Kai-shek and Alexander Solzhenitsyn. None of these men were liberals. But in those days, that wasn't what mattered. What mattered was whether they would resist Soviet totalitarianism and defend a measure of freedom—whether greater or lesser—in their own countries. If so, they were potential allies, perhaps even friends.

These Cold War political categories, reflecting both moral and pragmatic considerations, permitted America to identify its enemies, set priorities

in choosing allies, and ultimately defeat the Soviet Union. But after 1989, this way of thinking was displaced by the new, much simpler paradigm, and the goal became getting everyone on board with being liberal. Leaders who were overtly “illiberal”—Slobodan Milosevic in Serbia, Saddam Hussein in Iraq or Moammar Gadhafi in Libya—had their regimes bombed out from under them. The message was that being illiberal wouldn’t pay, and it was supposed to force the rest of the holdouts to come along.

Instead, truculent and unaccommodating regimes and movements proliferated. America couldn’t go to war against all of them, and the liberal internationalist paradigm proved virtually worthless in determining priorities. In a world full of illiberals, how to choose whether to go after Russia or China? Saudi Arabia or Iran? India or Pakistan? Bashar Assad or the al Qaeda-dominated Sunni rebels?

By the time Barack Obama was elected in 2008, the American public was ceasing to care whether the Balkans or the Middle East were liberal. Not so American elites and intellectuals, many of whom continued to talk and write as if Western civilization had, since antiquity, been defined by a manly hostility toward illiberalism, and the only way forward was to keep bombing.

### **III.**

Elites and intellectuals defined an unattainable end—universal liberalism—as the purpose of Western foreign policy, creating a simplistic and ultimately incapacitating division of the world between liberals and illiberals. Yet the effects of this on the domestic politics of the U.S. and other Western nations may yet be even greater than its consequences in foreign policy.

During the Cold War, the basis for electoral politics in the democratic West was the opposition between liberalism and conservatism, both regarded as legitimate movements. The conservative parties had been holdouts against utopian theories at least since the French Revolution.

As Irving Kristol emphasized in 1993: “The three pillars of modern conservatism are religion, nationalism and economic growth. Of these, religion is easily the most important.” Although Kristol endorsed the free market as the best engine for growth, he believed that, in the absence of powerful religious commitments, the bonds that hold the nation together would be pulverized by the action of the market.

Neither nationalism nor support for religion can be derived from liberal theorizing about universal human rights or individual liberties. They are conservative principles, not liberal ones. Nevertheless, such conservatism was sufficiently legitimate in America, even in the eyes of liberals, to permit its standard-bearers to win high office and govern.

But where does a conservatism of this kind fit into a politics that has been reimagined as a universal effort to eradicate illiberalism in all its forms? We know the answer. Anyone who advocates nationalist and religious ideas in the wrong circles gets tossed straight into the basket of illiberals, with Putin, Erodgan and Kim.

This is worth thinking about with care. A country where you can no longer advocate a nationalist or religious viewpoint without being stigmatized in this way is a place where only one political party is legitimate: the liberal one. The illiberal party is going to be put out of business, whatever it takes.

The politics of liberals vs. illiberals, if adopted as the basis for public discourse, will mean the end of the old democratic system of two legitimate political parties. A few conservatives, hoping to maintain their standing in

the face of increasing intolerance, will break left, framing their support for human rights and economic growth as a form of liberalism. But most conservatives will continue to see nationalism and religion—no less than individual liberty and the free market—as indispensable in maintaining a strong and free nation. These will find themselves members of an illegitimate party, even as journalists and public intellectuals discover that, for them, stamping out illiberalism is simply more important than maintaining a two-party system of democratic government.

“Illiberalism” is a theoretical construct currently being auditioned for a central role in political discourse in America, Britain and other Western nations. Many brilliant minds have been tempted by its simplicity. But it should be rejected as an ill-framed and destructive way of looking at the political world. There is no such thing as illiberalism. No reasonable purpose is served by using a term that lumps together totalitarians, autocrats, conservatives and democratic nationalists, as though these are all varieties of a single dark worldview. The way back toward an intelligent and tolerant politics is to learn to draw such distinctions again, and to wield them in distinguishing genuine enemies from potential allies and friends, abroad as well as at home.