Illiberal Political Economics after Neoliberalism

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This section discusses concrete causal links between political economies of neoliberalism and political economies of illiberalism. It does so from a political scientist's point of view, reminding us that when it comes to vocabularies of analysis, political scientists and economists are often divided by a common language.

As a political scientist, I have found that a great deal of the scholarship about illiberalism misconstrues illiberalism's political origins, attributing the emergence and institutionalization of illiberal ideas mainly to anti-systemic masses or populist anger. Such accounts focus on emotions: the wells of discontent that carry populist leaders into office, the opportunistic manipulation of mass sentiment by those politicians. Yet while affect may account for some support for populist or illiberal leaders, much of the support we have seen to date for illiberal politicians is rooted in neoliberalism, but not in the ways one might think.

Coming to these questions as a political ethnographer, I have been interested in how economic change affects people's lives and how this impact translates into changes in local, national, and global politics. I have

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spent my career studying rural communities and company towns along national borders in Russia and Ukraine, where many people regularly have supported illiberal politicians.

These have included communities on each side of the Russia-Ukraine border, especially in and around the Ukrainian city of Kharkiv and Voronezh region in Russia[1], and in Ukraine's southwest, where Hungarian-speaking Ukrainians have been courted by Viktor Orbán's party since the turn of the millennium.

What I learned during decades of field research and in writing the books that came out of that research was that support for illiberal politicians was rarely programmatic.[2] Although people seemed to respond in ways that expressed programmatic support in opinion polls, in staged demonstrations, or at the ballot box, notwithstanding political illiberalism's heavy accent on cultural politics, I found that ideology in illiberalism is often epiphenomenal.

Importantly, political economies in illiberalism draw, but do not draw on, boundaries within the demos: while illiberalism *produces* something that looks like ethnonationalism, it often *starts* from an economic compact, a transactional politics.

This transactional politics should give us pause when we are tempted to see fascism, or proto-fascism, when we look at illiberalism – whether we're considering Putin or Orbán or Erdoğan, Modi, Bolsonaro, or Trump. Fascism depends on societal mobilization. Yet, with the possible exception of North Korea, there are no more closed ideological fields at the national level. Despite controls states may impose upon communication and exchange of information, people tend to find a way around these controls. For example, we see that today in wartime Russia, state

1 See, for example, my book *The Post-Soviet Potemkin Village: Politics and Property Rights in the Black Earth* (Cambridge University Press, 2007); or my article "From Iron Curtain to Golden Curtain: Remaking Identity in the European Union Borderlands," *East European Politics and Societies*, 23:2 (May 2009), pp. 266–290. https://doi.org/10.1177/0888325409333056

2 The following pages draw on the argument and findings of my book, *Staging Democracy: Political Performance in Ukraine, Russia, and Beyond* (Cornell University Press, 2022).

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surveillance and the unavailability of certain social media platforms notwithstanding, people continue to find ways to access Telegram channels and other sources of information. People who want to learn from sources other than state media have options; whether they choose to do so is a different question.

Second, in illiberalism, politicians have played a role in the creation of political opacity, obscuring from view how politics are playing out at the local level. Efforts to limit free expression creates blind spots, not only for social actors but also for politicians themselves – including politicians with ambitions to charismatic forms of leadership.

One way to think about the resulting signaling problem is that in contemporary illiberal regimes, performances of democracy function less like an orchestra and more like a set of jazz combos: if at the start of the twenty-first century regimes that today are known as "illiberal" coordinated imitations of democracy from the capital cities following detailed plans specified in advance, today central authorities often outsource the task of manipulating publics to regional authorities. Those authorities draw on resources already at hand to organize improvised shows of support. For example, to optimize resources, illiberal politicians at the national level impose unfunded mandates on the regions, demanding electoral returns from regional leaders who need support from the center. To cope with these unfunded mandates, party agents use existing social institutions to deliver votes. Mobilization occurs not in response to ideological motivation, but rather because of the pressures delivered through these institutions.[3]

In such contexts, the center does not really know what is going on in peripheral areas: they do not know what the song sounds like out there. They know that there is an audience, and that they are getting the results that they want, but politicians at the center do not have a sense of people's programmatic desires or senses of affiliation. Therefore, although in certain cases we may observe formal similarities with fascist formations, we should be careful about assuming that the social foundations that could support fascist regimes are intact in illiberal regimes in the way that we would expect them to be.

3 I elaborate this metaphor at length in Chapters 4 and 5 of *Staging Democracy*.

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Through my research, I also learned that people's support for illiberal politicians often was not a response to contemporary versions of the "iron rice bowl" that we see in the European right's co-optation of the post-war social welfare consensus, in which electorates express their appreciation for security and an improved standard of living by supporting certain politicians. Instead, what I found was that people very often supported illiberal politicians out of fear of material loss in a context characterized both by highly orchestrated political threats and the redefinition of public goods and the monetization of social benefits. Even supposed positive incentives that brought people out onto public squares or to the ballot box (including in demonstrations for hire or vote buying) for most people represented mitigation of greater financial loss and a hedge against risk for household economies, not a net gain.

It's important to note that in such contexts, economic anxiety intersects with and amplifies contemporary or historical experiences of bondage, occupation, theft, and exposure to police states. So, while I'm referring here to my findings in Eastern Europe, such processes and their reverberations transcend national boundaries.

This all leads to a situation in which an illiberalism that looks like statism or authoritarianism, or even some version of totalitarianism or fascism, depends on a bargain anchored in neoliberal precarity. That bargain is a contemporary version of Bayart's politique du ventre in which politicians, their agents, and their followers form rigidly hierarchical clientelist relationships that carve out constituencies within the demos.[4]

Until February 2022, the consequences of these arrangements and performances of support driven by a material bargain were visible largely in electoral outcomes. Today, we can see them playing out in the largest land war in Europe since 1945, in which participants and supporters in Russia are often motivated to sign up for, or silently tolerate, their country's imperial aggression by politicians leveraging consumer debt or the threat of loss of employment.

4 Jean-François Bayart, *L'Etat en Afrique: La Politique du Ventre* (Fayard, 1989).

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Because of the elements of dramaturgy present in the contemporary politics of Moscow, the global seat of illiberalism, and because of the economic bargains at the heart of contemporary illiberalism, we cannot deduce from demonstrations of popular support for illiberal regimes any form of durable, genuine, or programmatic alignment with illiberal politicians. This can be a cause for hope. As we look forward to alternatives to illiberal orders, it behooves us not to forget that politicians such as Viktor Orbán in Hungary are dependent for their popularity in large part on the support and cooperation of liberal societies and their institutions: in Orbán's case, on various subsidies from the European Union, including for Hungary's transportation system.

Russia's war against Ukraine can also offer other insights, such as understanding the imbrication of Kremlin-based economic interests in the neoliberal experiment in Ukraine prior to the current expanded war. Nearly a decade ago, policymakers in Ukraine began a process of decentralization, devolving economic decision-making to communities, breaking up territorialized institutional structures that had been colonized by oligarchic interests. This move sought to strengthen sovereignty and broad societal unity while maintaining a form of capitalism. Now community-based work within an explicit framework of multiculturalism, such as the university-based volunteer networks I work with in the Ukrainian city Kharkiv, is playing a key role in the survival of democratic politics under literal physical attack. The model that this decentralized, community-based approach offers for the future of democratic politics is something that deserves further attention.[5]

5 The work of Ukrainian scholars points the way. See, for example, Oleksandra Keudel, *How Patronal Networks Shape Opportunities for Local Citizen Participation in a Hybrid Regime: A Comparative Analysis of Five Cities in Ukraine* (Ibidem Press, 2022).

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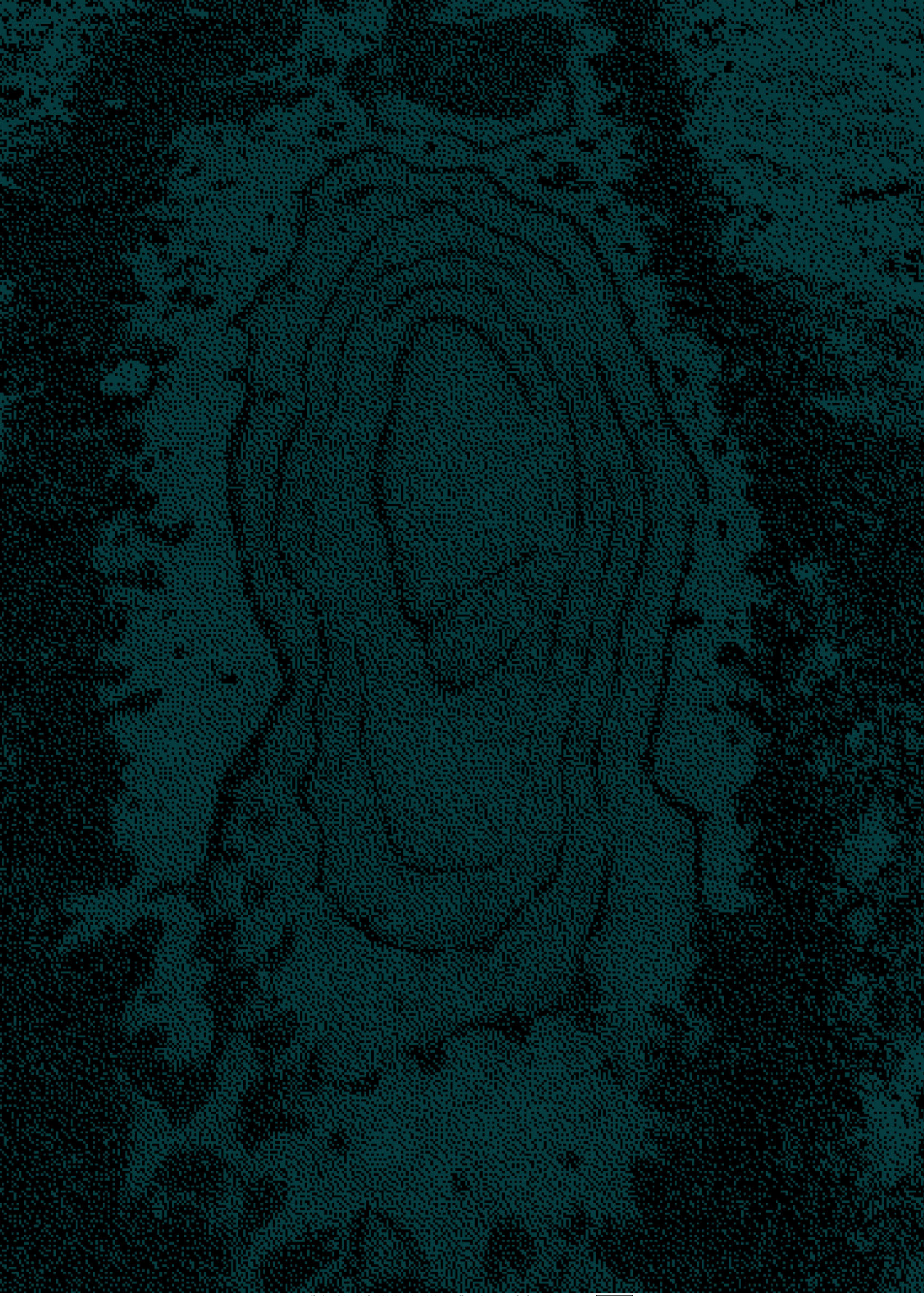

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