

Mulieri, A (2024) *Contro la democrazia illiberale. Storia e critica di un'idea*. Rome: Donzelli

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For some years now, the formula “illiberal democracy” has entered academic and political debate. The expression was first introduced into political-science discourse by Fareed Zakaria in the late 1990s. The U.S. analyst of Indian origin employed it to designate those political regimes which, after 1989, had embarked upon democratic transitions without yet guaranteeing the rights associated with the liberal tradition. Subsequently, however, the notion assumed an explicitly political meaning. What opened the way, above all, was the Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán, who made “illiberal democracy” the cornerstone of a political project that presents itself as an alternative to liberal cosmopolitanism. A number of scholars have therefore questioned whether it is theoretically sound to speak of an illiberal democracy, or whether the pairing of the two terms – “democracy” and “illiberalism” - does not in fact generate an oxymoronic expression. In other words, insofar as some maintain that democracy can only be liberal, the idea of an illiberal democracy would be inherently contradictory. For other scholars, the matter is more complex, since the encounter between democracy and liberalism is relatively recent, and because, on closer inspection, the liberal tradition long regarded popular government in highly negative terms.

In *Contro la democrazia illiberale. Storia e critica di un'idea*, Alessandro Mulieri reconstructs the major stages of this debate and highlights the limitations of the concept's political uses. Returning to the Athenian paradigm, Mulieri observes that the democracy celebrated by Pericles in the fifth century BCE was undoubtedly illiberal – at least according to contemporary standards. This is also because, as Benjamin Constant clarified two centuries ago, the ancient conception of liberty differed substantially from the modern one. Athenian democracy, in Mulieri's interpretation, was illiberal primarily because it pursued the equality of citizens as its central aim. And it was precisely for this reason that Aristotle identified it as the

“government of the poor,” that is, the form of rule in which power is exercised by the majority of the population, composed largely of the less affluent.

By contrast, the uses of the concept proposed by today’s populist right point, according to Mulieri, in an entirely different direction. For in this case the objective appears not to be equality, but rather the restriction of minority rights. The Italian scholar therefore offers a defence of liberal democracy and recommends abandoning the expression “illiberal democracy,” which is at the origin of multiple conceptual confusions. As he writes in his conclusion:

In light of these considerations, it would be important to stop using the term ‘illiberal democracy’ in the way in which it is adopted within the ideology and rhetoric of right-wing populism, because it has no relationship whatsoever with the history and theory of democracy; if anything, it reconnects with traditions – such as the right-wing authoritarianisms of the twentieth century – that have little to do with democracy¹.

Ultimately, given the antiliberal history of democracy as an ideological framework that promotes radical ideals of equality, we must find a way to reclaim that history and transform it into the ideal engine of those changes capable of reducing the social and economic inequalities of liberal democracy. In this process, reading and engaging with the topic of illiberal democracy is essential in order to show how this term has now become an example of a slogan that redefines the very meaning of the word “democracy” in a wholly untenable manner. As I emphasized in an earlier volume on totalitarian democracy, ever since classical Athens the definition of terms such as “democracy” and “freedom” has been, above all, the outcome of a thoroughly political struggle over the meaning of those words” (Mulieri, 2024: 157).

Mulieri also sets himself the task of rehabilitating the tradition of democracy as the government of the poor:

Never before, in a world in which a tiny percentage of the global population owns most of the world’s wealth and social and economic inequalities are growing exponentially, has the history

¹ All translations from Italian are by the author, unless otherwise stated.

of democracy – its appearance also as a subversive ideal criticised harshly for more than two millennia because it embodied the government of the poor – been able to serve once again as a point of reference and a hope for the future. Are we ready to commit ourselves to making this hope a reality? (Mulieri, 2024: 158)

The concept of illiberal democracy is indeed a genuine theoretical puzzle. The main difficulty is that neither democracy nor liberalism – when considered in their historical evolution – possesses a clearly defined meaning. The concept of democracy was, in fact, largely “re-invented” from the late eighteenth century onwards, in the context of intense ideological struggles. But liberalism, too, has many faces. It may be understood as a technique for limiting power, which, through institutional mechanisms, ensures that citizens enjoy the classic negative liberties – freedom of movement, freedom of expression, freedom of assembly and association. In this sense, the roots of liberalism already reach back into medieval history, the Magna Carta, and the habeas corpus, whereas its encounter with democracy came much later.

But liberalism may also be understood in a more demanding sense: as a doctrine requiring the state to remain entirely neutral with respect to the values pursued by individuals, who are therefore wholly free to determine their own ends and ways of life. The sphere of liberty thus becomes far broader than that defined by the classic negative liberties, as it expands to encompass new freedoms – those emerging from cultural transformations, social demands, and claims for recognition made by minorities previously excluded from public debate. If liberty is understood in this way, however, the problem is that the democracies of the past are almost inevitably destined to appear illiberal, insofar as they did not provide space for these “new” liberties. And, in principle, the democracies of the present will be judged illiberal tomorrow if future claims for new spheres of freedom emerge.

The difficulties revealed by the political uses of the notion of “illiberal democracy” also concern another issue. From its Greek origins, the word “democracy” has carried a series of fundamental ambiguities. As Mulieri rightly notes, the “people” to whom power belongs can be conceived either as the totality of citizens or as the

majority composed of the “poor.” But the *demos* may also assume the face of the *ethnos* – a people deemed homogeneous by virtue of common origins or a shared national identity. In Athens, moreover, not only slaves and women but also resident foreigners were excluded from political rights. It is especially to this component of the people that today’s advocates of illiberal democracy appeal. For what they promise – more or less instrumentally – to defend is almost always the national tradition, which they perceive as threatened by globalisation and by the values of cosmopolitan elites. And it is, ultimately, for this reason that – beyond the ideological distortions and authoritarian tendencies that often accompany it – the concept of illiberal democracy forces us to revisit the old question of whether a democracy can truly dispense with the anchoring provided by a national identity. And thus, the question of whether a democracy extending beyond the borders of the states in which democratic institutions were born and developed is genuinely practicable.

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