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Illiberalism and Islam

(forthcoming in the *Routledge Handbook of Illiberalism*)

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Abstract

This chapter analyzes the role of anti-Islam and anti-Muslim discourse in North American and European ‘illiberal’ parties, movements, and ideologies. Its first aim is to situate those deployments in a longer history. Occidental engagements with Islam and Muslims, including anti-Islamic tropes, long predate the emergence of liberalism, let alone illiberalism. It should not be a surprise that liberalism as it emerged in the nineteenth century partook of such ideas. Contra some theorists, however, I argue that there is no strong evidence that anti-Islam was constitutive of liberal theory or early practice. Rather, it was in the second half of the twentieth century, as mass migration from Africa and Asia to Europe and North America came to be viewed through a fraught geopolitical lens, that various conflicts emerged over ‘assimilation’ and ‘integration.’ These precipitated today’s perceived (if not actual) juxtapositions between Islam and liberalism. It is out of these disjunctions that the current anti-Islamic discourse of illiberal political formations emerges. Such illiberal deployment of Islam hence reflect an extension and modification of liberal political discourse. Ironically, at the extreme, they are transformed into justifications of mass murder and violent ethnic cleansing. The history of anti-Islamic conceptions in illiberalism hence illuminates the unintended and paradoxical trajectory of political ideas.

Introduction

Two snapshots, distant in time and place, capture the slipperiness of this chapter’s domain. In the first, George Sale is a practicing solicitor in London in the early eighteenth century. A minor player in the early Georgian publishing scene, Sale attended neither of England’s universities at the time, and there is no record of how he might have acquired skill in other languages. Nevertheless, in 1734 Sale published the first English prose translation of the Koran. His project, according to the book’s dedication, was to acquaint readers with “laws and constitutions of civilized nations, especially those who flourish in our time” (quoted in Bevilacqua 2018: 69). Some thirty years later, Voltaire would lean on Sale’s translation to issue a complex and subtle judgment on Islam’s founder as “a powerful and terrible man, established his dogmas through his courage and his arms; nevertheless his religion became indulgent and tolerant” (quoted in *ibid.* 182-83). Such nuance contrasts with the coarser racialism sentiments for which Voltaire is better known (cf. Frederickson 2015: 62-63). This subtlety is easy to elide when the conventional historiographic view is that Enlightenment philosophes such as Voltaire “reached into the established anti-Islam discourse to

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advance their own agenda, principally an assault on the dangers of unchecked rule,” or “despotism” (Lyons 2012: 158).

Some two hundred and fifty-off years later, the Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán offered an account of European identity that both traded on and repudiated the secularizing and rationalist strands of Enlightenment thinking. In a speech to Bálványos Free Summer University and Youth Camp, in Băile Tușnad, on 26th July, 2014, Orbán declared his ambition of an “illiberal state,” one that “does not deny foundational values of liberalism, as freedom, etc. But it does not make this ideology a central element of state organization, but applies a specific, national, particular approach in its stead” (quoted in Pech and Scheppele 2017: 4). The following year, as a wave of Syrian and Middle Eastern refugees surged across the Mediterranean, the Orbán government described them as “raid,” a “conquest,” and as a “penetration” of Christian Europe (Goździak and Márton 2018: 127). A hundred-mile-long razor-wire-topped fence along the southern Hungarian borders with Serbia and Croatia gave practical, physical form to that sentiment. In 2018, Orbán would pridefully say that he had “prevented the Islamic world from flooding us from the south,” and would condemn European peers who had “opened the way for the decline of Christian culture and ... Islamic expansion” (quoted in Boffey 2018). It may be a mistake to ascribe theoretical rigor to Orbán’s rhetoric. Nevertheless, it is striking that not just Islam but only Enlightenment secularism manifest to him as hostile interpolations in an otherwise continuous historical identity. As we shall see, Orbán’s configuration of binary oppositions is not unique. Its use of Islam, in particular, has come to be symptomatic of broader illiberal movement in both the United States and Europe.

The postures taken by Sale, Voltaire, and Orbán are fleeting spotlights on a complex and contested terrain, but establish useful coordinates for the inquiry that follows. To begin, they imply that any simple model of illiberalism’s relationship to Islam is inapt. There is no one ‘Western’ or ‘liberal’ view of Islam, and never has been. They also hint at ways in which the uses of ‘Islam’ in the ‘liberal’ political tradition are not wholly distinct from its uses in the ‘illiberal’ tradition (such as it is). Their ontology of Islam in these debates, finally, is unstable, and only loosely moored to lived experience. Both of these ‘encounters’ are devoid of *actual* Muslims. Even the migrant hordes of the Hungarian populist rhetoric are imagined rather than met: Thanks to Orbán’s policies, they are not, in fact, a significant presence in the country. To speak of the liberal or illiberal orientation to Islam, then, is to describe how an elusive and imaginary figure is located with a larger rhetorical (political or intellectual) scheme.

Adding further complexity, the three baseline terms of this chapter’s inquiry—‘liberalism,’ ‘illiberalism’ and ‘Islam—are all coarse terminological abbreviations for more plural and internally disputed landscapes. The map here is not the terrain, and the cartography is not innocent. Take each term seriatim. It is commonly agreed that the term ‘liberal’ was first adopted openly as a political epithet for constitutional opposition to autocracy within the Spanish Cortes, or parliament (Fawcett 2014: 7; Rosenblatt 2018: 62). Yet the label has since then been affixed to a wide range of (oft contradictory) political, social, and economic positions, as well as being read back to conjure a deeper ‘tradition’ of political thinkers (Bell 2014). The result is “no due understanding of liberalism” but rather a loosely concatenated series of “preoccupations” that includes “people’s rights, toleration, constitutional government, the rule of law, and liberty” (Fawcett 2014: 90; see also Geuss 2002, for

a similar catalog). Care must thus be taken to flag whether one is talking of liberalism as theory or political practice, and if so which such practice.

Offering a definition of illiberalism is so tricky that even the editors to this volume in their threshold invitation to authors punt on the task. Orbán's own description, quoted already, is deeply ambiguous. Beyond its strongly nationalist tenor, I find it hard to extract much determinate content from its whipsawing clauses. An alternative approach to thinking about illiberalism might be to reason by analogy from avowed cases; the Hungarian one being the most obvious departure point. This seems to me a useful definitional strategy, even if it begs the usual questions about the mechanics and limits of analogical arguments. It is facilitated by the fact that Fidesz is embedded in a series of transnational networks of parties, social movements, and ideologues that share ideas and tactics (Becker 2018; Caiani 2018). Digital platforms, such as 4chan and 8chan, provide a particularly effective means of creating personal networks, sharing resources, and diffusing ideas (see, e.g., Reicher, Haslam, and Van Bavel 2019). Because these platforms operate as a "site of important identity work," the resulting networks provide a useful heuristic for thinking about the bounds of the illiberal political formation of interest here (Scrivens, Davies and Frank 2018: 1).

A related, but more difficult problem concerns the relevant unit of analysis: Should the terms liberal and illiberal be affixed to whole political systems, such that one can speak, say, of the "liberal beginnings" of the United States (Kalyas and Katznelson 2008)? To do so is useful, but misleadingly implies the immiscibility of liberal and illiberal elements within a particular political conjunction. Or is the term better reserved for political formations, such as Orbán's Fidesz party or its Polish confrere Law and Justice? How then would one characterize the U.S. Republican Party circa 2019, which has both (economic) liberals and libertarians in its congressional caucus, and yet is captained by a man whose instincts are plainly and profoundly illiberal in character? Alternatively, perhaps the disjunctive terms might be applied to individual actors or ideas within a larger political system. Yet to reduce the terms to that level risks robbing them of much analytic utility: We are usually interested in the path that polities, not persons, take. The 'unit of analysis' problem also has a temporal dimension: Both political systems and formations within them change over time. The mix of liberal and illiberal elements contained therein may be unstable over time. Indeed, individual politicians such as Orbán can (and in his case do) migrate from the liberal to the illiberal category (Ginsburg and Huq 2018). As we shall see, it may be most useful to locate anti-Islamic ideas within a process of ideological reorientation, not as a static endpoint.

Nor is it any easier to define "Islam" with any precision. In its origin, that faith tradition had powerful theological and textual continuities with other monotheisms (cf. Donner 2012: 68-72; Khalidi 2001). Fourteen hundred years later, no shortage of schismatics or apostasy talk is apparent among those who denominate themselves Muslim. Who counts varies on whether one asks in Riyadh, Karachi, or Kuala Lumpur. At a moment at which most victims of violent Islamist movements such as ISIS and al Qaeda are Muslim, the idea of a Muslim unity is a naked and embarrassing fallacy. To the extent it has rhetorical force, this idea is "inseparable from the claim that Muslims constitute a race" (Aydin 2017: 5). Hence, talk of Islam as a faith that "has not been hospitable to democracy" (Huntington 1984: 208) might be facially innocuous but rests on assumptions about identity of a most insalubrious character. Such talk also occludes a more complex

history characterized by “the defeat of dogma by proven knowledge, the demotion of the clergy [and] the ascendancy of democratic principles” (De Bellaigue 2017: xxiv). Rather than being taken at face value, the allure of “Islam” as a fetishistic totem for use in arguments about the sanctity of one’s polity should be strenuously resisted.

So we are working in a fragmented and internally fissiparous political terrain divided into an inchoate and uncertain binary of il/liberalism. Above both sides float imagined philosophical traditions only loosely tethered to the ground of practical action. And engaged with both is a shadowy, half-conjured figure, who will do time in rhetorical and ideological schema but also might emerge as an actual lived counter-tradition of politics or social practice. In this context, it is implausible to think that there is some straightforward and mechanical relationship to trace between the key terms of this chapter’s topic.

Rather, against this murky context the chapter offers a historically embedded account of the relationship between liberalism, illiberalism and Islam that is aimed at illuminating the present political conjuncture. Occidental engagements with Islam, I shall argue, long predate the emergence of liberalism, and has also long traded in bilious stereotypes and useful antagonisms (Idriss 2019). It is no surprise that liberalism, which emerged in the nineteenth century, partook of those background ideas. But, I will contend, Islam did not play a constitutive role in either liberal theory or early practice. Instead, in the second half of the twentieth century, as mass migration from Africa and Asia to Europe and North America had significant cultural effects, a sequence of conflicts emerged over ‘assimilation’ and ‘integration.’ These precipitated a rhetoric of juxtaposition between Islam and liberalism. It is out of these perceived disjunctions that the current anti-Islamic discourse of illiberal political formations emerges. Those deployments of Islam reflect an extension and modification of liberal political discourse.

The uses of Islam for liberal and illiberal formations, therefore, derive from a common intellectual stock. But they eventuate in different policies and contrary normative commitments. I also stress the role that Islam plays in transitions from liberal and illiberal postures within political systems. Simply stated, it is proven n instrument for the reorientation of political systems from predominantly liberal ends to illiberal ones. The causal etiology of this role, I suggest, remains uncertain. Several theories have been propounded, but it remains to be seen which garners decisive empirical proof.

These claims work within a delimited temporal and political domain: My focus here is solely on the European and American illiberal parties, individuals and systems—in particular those that have evolved out of liberal political systems in the last fifty years. I am not concerned with the many illiberal Islamic polities extant today. Nor am I concerned with whether Islam as a comprehensive moral doctrine can be accommodated within political liberalism (March 2006). Rather, consistent with this volume’s thematic focus, my emphasis here is on the instrumental role of Islam in the transition from liberal to illiberal positions.

Liberal and Preliberal Beginnings

Occidental engagement with Islam long predates any plausible birth date of liberalism (Idriss 2019). Sale's translation of the Qu'ran, for example, followed almost exactly a century after both Oxford and Cambridge established chairs in Arabic (Brotton 2016: 304), and 16 years before Edward Pococke's landmark historical study *Specimen Historia Arabum*. The Elizabethan Court had engaged in considerable correspondence with Muslim kingdoms to the east, seriously weighing them as bulwarks against Catholic Europe (id.: 13-14). On the other side of the channel, by contrast, texts such as Petrus Alfonsi's *Dialogue Against the Jews* (1105) had long before set out the case against Islam as a faith "grounded in force and coercion," one founded by a "false prophet, driven by sexual fantasies and a lust for power and coercion" (Lyons 2012: 66-69). Enduring geopolitical conflicts with the Ottoman and other Muslim empires (e.g., in Andalusia), and later colonial encounters in North Africa, the Levant, and Asia, all supplied a rich geopolitical loam for negative stereotypes to flourish. By the nineteenth century, these ideas had comingled with the racial ideologies of Gobineau to underwrite "contempt" for Muslims (Rich 1999: 447) and thick popular and elite discourses of "orientalism," discourses that variously subsisted in "uneasy exchange with various kinds of power (Said 1978: 16)

An "anti-Islam discourse" so "pervades the Western histories of ideas" that it would be surprising if liberalism did not partake of it. And so there is evidence that even in liberalism's early days that aversive stereotypes filtered into important liberal works. Early liberal thinkers such as the French historian Edgar Quinet deployed anti-Islamic stereotypes as convenient exculpations for Europe's moral blemishes (Losurdo 2014: 312-13). There is no plausible argument that liberalism was immured from such animus.

In a recent ambitiously synoptic treatment, Joseph Massad argues further that Islam has been "central to liberalism as ideology and identity" (Massad 2015: 11). To this end, Massad assembles a mosaic of historically disparate evidence that various thinkers have engaged in the "production of Europe as 'democratic' and Islam as 'despotic' (id.: 13). Massad's analytic scope, however, does not map upon any obvious definition of liberalism. It instead ranges across a coterie of disparate figures from turn-of-the-century intellectuals such as Edmond Fazy and the Baron Carra de Vaux to neoconservatives such as Bernard Lewis and Samuel Huntington. Because no concentration on liberalism qua liberal political practice or theory is apparent from his coverage, his claim of a tight linkage between liberal and Islam does not persuade. To be sure, Massad invokes Orientalist tropes in the work of Montesquieu, Locke, and Mill. But the rather off-the-cuff quality of their disdain for the colonized more generally (in the case of Locke and Mill) and the complexity and empathic ambiguity of their position (at least in Montesquieu's *Persian Letters* (see Turner 1978)) does not support the kind of tight and necessary connection that Massad asserts. His argument is also at odds with the sheer paucity of references to the faith tradition in recent histories of liberalism as theory and political practice (Fawcett 2014, Gray 2013, and Rosenblatt 2018, are exemplary) and the admiring portraits of Muslim figures in the work of Walter Scott and Gottfried Lessing.

More persuasive than Massad's claim of a necessary theoretical antagonism between liberalism and Islam are a coterie of recent studies that plot an "extended and deep" connection

between liberalism in its British and French varieties and the imperial enterprise of the nineteenth century (Mehta 2018: 3; Pitts 2009). While the entanglement of liberal thought in the justificatory defense of empire implicates an orientation toward Islam, such chaperoning of imperial rules does not imply a constitutive role for Islam in either liberal political theory or practice. To the contrary, actual imperial practice entailed efforts to integrate Islam into colonial regimes as a means toward Islamic legitimation for empire (Motadel 2012: 833). Liberalism, Islam, and empire might in some instances have comfortably coexisted within the same conceptual space.

If the history of liberal theory provides only a partial explanation of a perceived antagonism with Islam, it may instead be worth considering recent liberal practice more closely. This, in my view, means situating not just Islam but *Muslims* as a perceived problem for policy-makers in liberal jurisdictions. That perceived problem arises most crisply in a postwar context. In the second half of the twentieth century, several Western European countries relaxed migration controls to allow significant number of Asian, Middle Eastern, and Africans to enter and settle in Europe. The decision to allow this migration was in part a concession to economic realities, and in part was a strand in the more general unraveling of colonial projects (Alexander 2013). In the 1970s, that migration came to be construed in light of both Middle Eastern tensions and spillover terrorism, and also the increasing fraught economic and strategic relationship with predominantly Muslim oil-producing nations of the Gulf (Mamdani 2005; Zarrugh 2016). Suddenly, the far enemy was also close to hand.

In the decades that followed, these minorities—many (although not all) Muslim—have been subject to increasing scrutiny for their capacity to act as properly socialized actors in a liberal polity. Policies of assimilation and integration in Europe are motivated by the perception that Muslim migrants in particular do not ‘accept’ liberal values of religious tolerance, gender equality, and free speech (Norris & Inglehart 2012; Connor 2010), and must be kneaded into a “civilized” posture (Bowskill, Lyons, and Coyle 2007). The ideologically truculent, for example, may be screened through citizenship tests. These intend to weed out those particularly committed to their cultural priors; most notorious among them is the “Muslim test” implemented in 2006 in the German state of Baden-Württemberg (Michalowski 2011). Such tests made manifest an implicit connection between assimilation worries and liberalism.

Yet another source of anxiety was terrorism. After the September 2001 attacks, policing and intelligence agencies on both sides of the Atlantic have experimented with both ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ tools such as surveillance, ideological warfare, group proscriptions, religious profiling, and derogations from due process and other constitutional norms (Huq 2019). An important part of these efforts involved efforts to shape the ideological contours of Western Islam, and to create mechanisms of self-policing within Muslim communities (Huq 2012). It was in the cauldron of these social and political conflicts, rather than on the refined eyrie of liberal theory, that a common knowledge emerged to the extent that “Western society and well-integrated immigrants are granted a monopoly on liberal values,” precisely as a way of denying that the West itself “include[s] itself ... illiberal values” (Abu Lughod 2013: 123). Such rhetorical binaries are thus a consequence, not a cause, of confrontations over assimilation, gender norms, and free speech.

Debates about assimilation, integration, and terrorism can seem to suggest an inevitable conflict between Muslims and liberalism in ‘liberal’ polities. But this assumption is deeply questionable as an empirical matter. To begin with, the notion that Muslims are distinctive in the trouble they have accepting gender equality, tolerance for other faiths, or principles of free speech does not survive contact with a Western political context saturated with casual, often coarse misogyny, flecked with contempt for other faiths (especially Islam), and beset by mocking taunts of ‘snowflakes’ and vehement conflicts over the putatively censoring effects of ‘political correctness’ (cf. Song 2007). Claims that Western Muslims are incapable of conformity to Western norms are belied by the numerous stories of quiet local flourishing from Hamtramck, Michigan, to the suburbs of Brussels (for excellent academic studies, see Korteweg and Triadafilopoulos 2015; Heath and Demireva 2014). This is achieved, moreover, notwithstanding a torrent of discriminatory animus that keeps Muslims (or those perceived as Muslim) from opportunities in education, the labor market, and the civil sphere (Adida, Laitin, and Valfort 2016). Assimilation talk is commonly blind to the exclusionary economic and social equilibria attained through diffuse yet pervasive discrimination. As such, it may well be best understood as a protracted exercise in political bad faith.

Illiberalism Sallies Forth

It is against this context of liberal polities grappling with both cultural differences and violent terrorist movements associated with Islam that a wave of illiberal parties, movements, and ideologies have made headway in Europe and the United States by identifying Islam as a particular threat to the security (in the most capacious sense) of the polity. Their presence, as noted, can be discerned in parliamentary coalitions at the transnational and national level, party platforms, civil society organizations, digital platforms, and ideological productions. Across these organizational forms, there is a consistency of anti-Islamic rhetoric, public policies, and even—as the March 2019 Christchurch, New Zealand shooting shows—violent individual action. Anti-Islam postures thus form “a shared political and discursive terrain for the vast majority of racial right parties and movements” (Kallis 2018: 53; see also Betz 2018: 98; Camus and Lebourg 2017: 198; Hafiz 2014).

These movements foreground arguments about the incompatibility of Islam and European or American norms in ways that that echo, but also decisively refract and transform, liberal debates about assimilation and integration. The stated concerns about cultural and physical security that notionally animated the liberal construction of ‘Islam’ as a problem are mirrored, but then sharpened, in the illiberal contexts. Here, Islam, and ‘the Muslim,’ are no longer configured as a ‘problem’ amenable to smart policy solutions. Bad behavior on the part of Muslims is no longer ascribed to “culture,” as, for example, the German media framed the Cologne 2015/16 New Years Eve assaults (Stürmer, Rohmann, Froehlich, and van der Noll 2019). Rather, the term ‘Islam’ in illiberal discourse operates as an “enemy” as that term is defined by Carl Schmitt: It denotes a relationship between groups in which there is the “utmost degree of intensity ... of an association or dissociation” (Schmitt 2008: 26-38). For Schmitt, and within the illiberal political imaginary at issue here, in-group association is defined by the willingness to fight and die for and together with other members of one’s group, while out-group relations are characterized by the willingness to kill others for the simple reason that a person is a member of an ‘enemy’ group. This Schmittian frame is evident, for example, in the manifesto of the 2019 Christchurch shooter, who conceded that is

indiscriminate killing was “distasteful [and] damaging to the soul,” but also “necessary [as] any invader you spare, no matter the age, will one day be *an enemy your people must face*” (quoted in Reicher, Haslam, and Van Bavel 2019; emphasis added).

The Christchurch manifesto invoked a theory of “le grand replacement,” or the great replacement, associated with the French thinker Renard Camus, but traceable to Jean Raspail’s 1974 novel “The Camp of the Saints” and implicit in Alain de Benoît’s 1999 tract “Manifesto for a European Renaissance.” On Camus’s rendition, which is currently the most heavily circulated, European populations are being deliberately replaced at a cultural and demographic level by migration from primarily Muslim cultures, which in turn are culturally incompatible with the ‘West.’ He argues that all Occidental countries face varying threats of replacement, whether from Asian, African, or Hispanic populations. Although he denies membership in the far right, Camus has publicly expressed support for the Front National as a voter who “wanted France to stay French” (Williams 2017). Little here is original. A similar conspiratorial theory to Camus’s was earlier circulated under the banner of ‘Eurabia’ by Bat Ye’or (Davey and Ebner 2019), and invoked by Anders Brevik, perpetrator of a July 2011 attack on Oslo and Utøya Island (Bangstad 2013). Still, groups inspired by Camus’s theory argue for the forced repatriation, or ethnic cleansing of Muslims from Europe (Davey and Ebner 2019: 9). That they urge these positions so on the ground that Islam is a totalitarian faith is an irony they overlook. But it is also an unintended recapitulation of an argument within the liberal tradition about the moment at which free speech and association necessarily give way to the goal of social preservation. In the European context, this debate was played out under the eminently liberal rubric of ‘militant democracy’ (Müller 2012).

Camus’s themes have been taken up by a transnational ‘identitarian’ movement, which began in France and is represented in the United States by figures such as Richard Spencer (Williams 2017). But those ideas are not confined to a violent fringe, even if that margin is hardly numerically trivial (Fekete 2018: 13-15). To the contrary, the themes of the Christchurch shooter’s creed are invoked in a larger ‘identitarian’ movement, and among politicians of the Alternative for Germany (AfD), the Front National, and Vlaams Belang (Davey and Ebner 2019). One Front National politician, for instance, described Islam as an “invading civilization” (Kallis: 2018: 52).

Politicians acting with an overall liberal political frame have ample space to advance illiberal impulses by framing them as security matters targeting Islam. By the 1980s, parties of the far right had identified immigration as a wedge issue, a focal point where they could blend rational-sounding arguments about “capacity” with invitations to animus-filled fear (Kallis 2018: 46). Right-of-center populist parties such as the Dansk Folkeparti, the Bündnis Zukunft Österreich (Alliance for the Future of Austria), and the Dutch Party for Freedom have coalesced around restrictive immigration measures aimed at stanching Muslim migration partly in the name of ensuring security. In the United States, anti-Muslim presidential campaign rhetoric precipitated into a ban on certain Muslim noncitizens entering the country, a ban justified on naked spurious, even laughable, security ground (Huq 2019). Beyond immigration, illiberal formations have conjured a variety of other political fronts. In France, the Front National has promoted a series of “culture wars” over ‘burkhanis,’ halal meat, and mosque construction (Fekete 2018: 37). In Switzerland, the Swiss People’s Party (SVP) campaigned for, and then won, a national referendum banning the construction of minarets. The

SVP's campaign framed mosque construction as a security issue with no religious liberty connotation. It garnered its largest vote shares in rural cantons with few, if any, Muslims or immigrants (Kallis 2018: 50). Even where the empirical claims of illiberal anti-Islamic rhetoric are publicly refuted as fabrications, support for the illiberal party does not wane (Bergmann 2018: 36). Perhaps this should be no surprise. As Raymond Geuss has observed, positions based on 'identity' are often immune to the claims of reason or the refuting force of empirical evidence (Geuss 2019).

Implicit in this discussion is the potency of anti-Islamic figures among voters. The illiberal parties discussed here frame their anti-Islamic policies and concerns in anti-elitist terms: Immigration, on their account, appears as a sinister plot by political elites, who have ignored or overridden the concerns of the 'common citizen.' (Camus and LeBourg 2017: 49). Islam becomes a wedge issue that can be deployed to reorient the longstanding left-right political axis, in favor of a new 'somewhere v. nowhere' distinction (Goodhart 2017). From the perspective of the leaders of illiberal movements within a liberal polity, Islam is useful precisely because of its capacity to serve as the engine of beneficial (to them) party realignment (Jennings and Stoker 2017). In effect, liberal anxieties about Islam are refracted and pooled into a hard and categorical form that admits of no compromise, enables a form of anti-elitist 'shaming,' and thereby opening the door to illiberal dominance within political systems previously infused by liberal norms. This dynamic can be observed across much of Western Europe; in the former eastern Europe nations such as Poland and Hungary, by contrast, the illiberal mobilization of Islam comes after initial electoral wins and considerable institutional change designed to entrench illiberal formations in national political office (Ginsburg and Huq 2018; Goździak and Márton 2018).

This account, however, elides an important issue: Why is Islam so potent an 'issue'? After all, misogyny and homophobia are also mobilized by illiberal movements to iniquitous effect too (Binnie 2014; Sowerwine 2017). The empirical evidence on this point is mixed. Provisionally, I suspect that monocausal answers are likely to mislead. Some studies find that fears of terrorism, rather than the demographic strength of local Muslim populations, predict animus toward Islam (Huq 2018; Wike and Grim 2010). Indeed, the strength of anti-Muslim sentiment has been found to peak in jurisdictions, such as Poland and Hungary, with relatively few Muslims (Strabac and Listhaug 2008; see also Goździak and Márton 2018). Other studies suggest that conditions of labor-market competition between Muslims and non-Muslims within a polity conduce to such sentiment (Savelkoul, Scheepers van der Veld, and Hagendoorn 2012: 1623). Yet other quasi-experimental studies suggest that media exposure to high-profile terrorist events, even in nations that do not experience that political violence directly, causes increased anti-immigrant sentiments (Legewie 2013). Yet another theory looks to the decline of a left that resisted a 'neoliberal' framework of global capital markets on behalf of a working class, which suddenly found itself bereft of meaningful political voice (Betz 2018: 95). I suspect that several of these theories have explanatory power. Perhaps more important than parceling out credit between them is the observation that in combination, they vest anti-Islamic tropes—up to and including calls the mass murder and ethnic cleansing—with a political utility in forcefully shifting a jurisdiction's political norms from the liberal to the illiberal.

Conclusion

Whither illiberal anti-Islam? A decade ago, it would have been unimaginable for a British prime minister to prorogue parliament to crash out of the European Union, or for the American president to explicitly call for, and then enact, a ban on Muslim non-citizens entering the country. The very function of anti-Islamic discourse—itsself a distorted and bitter fruit of liberal political practice’s own internal conflicts—is to shift the bounds of the political plausible, and to alchemize a liberal into an illiberal polity. That it has done so with such great success in so many jurisdictions is some indication that we should not assume that what seems unimaginable to us now will not come to pass.

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