

Liberalism and Its Critics: National Identities and Institutions in Transition

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Across the European continent, liberal institutions have come under increasing attack by nationalist movements. From judicial autonomy to fair elections, and from freedom of expression to religious freedom, liberal institutions and practices that were once sources of national pride are now being called into question, along with the legitimacy of international organizations that promote ostensibly universal norms of human rights. Examples of this backlash span Europe. In Turkey, critical journalists and academics are detained on terror charges, while politicians talk of removing secularism from the constitution. In Hungary, universities and newspapers are decried as agents of malign global forces, while the prime minister pledges to preserve his country's "Christian culture" by denying entry to Muslim refugees. In France and the United Kingdom, countries widely viewed as the birthplace of liberal universalism, ethnic and religious exclusivism has also proven popular in elections and referenda. The vocal objections of local and international human rights organizations, and of intergovernmental bodies like the United Nations and the European Union, lend inadvertent support to nationalists' claims that liberal institutions have been captured by foreign interests, and that they must be recaptured and made to serve the national will.

This workshop aims to bring together scholars of history, sociology, political science, and law for a comparative exploration of these changes. We ask: what are the sources of this wave of hostility toward liberal institutions and practices and what are the historical antecedents of this global phenomenon? What are its practical consequences for the functioning of national and international institutions built on liberal principles? Finally, what are its implications for the coherence of the liberal nation-state and the ideal of an international liberal order? Our geographical focus is on greater Europe--a region broadly understood to encompass Eastern and Western Europe, Russia, and Turkey--while our historical lens is trained on the struggles over liberalism in 19th-century Ottoman and European society and their resonances with contemporary struggles in their successor states.

Much historical scholarship has tended to presume a fundamental harmony between liberalism, secularism, and the modern nation-state, through a genealogy that traces all three concepts back to the French Revolution. Scholarship in sociology and political science, meanwhile, has addressed threats to liberal order in the context of nationalism, populism, and authoritarianism, paying close attention to the structural context of political preferences and the cultural processes that enable mobilization of public support for illiberal ends. Institutional consequences of rising hostility were, on the other hand, grasped as a symptom of democratic decay and grounded either in existing flaws in the functioning of liberal institutions or in political actors' violation of existing norms of political practice. The empirical basis for these studies drew on the Western European experience of fascist regimes in the first half of the twentieth century, and on the military regimes of Turkey, southern Europe, and Latin America in the 1970s and 1980s.

What this literature fails to adequately address, however, is the question of how liberal norms of secularism, human rights, and judicial autonomy have come to be perceived as at odds with national

sovereignty, national identity, and justice itself. This workshop aims to provide a deeper understanding of this seeming paradox through a multidisciplinary inquiry into the relationship between identity formation and institutional change in a greater European context. We are interested in tracing the parallels and divergences in the emergence of nationalist movements both in Western and Eastern Europe and in the Ottoman Empire and its successor states. Our explicitly comparative approach seeks to excavate buried connections between the emergence of modern ethno-religious (and secular) identities in national and international contexts across these geographies. By underscoring the reciprocal nature of identity formation in “Christian” and “Muslim” Europe, we hope to shed new light on the challenges faced by liberal ideas and institutions in a part of the world widely viewed as liberalism’s global standard-bearer.

Accordingly, we invite contributions that explore the historical and socio-legal processes through which secularism, human rights and judicial autonomy have developed and evolved, and the relationship between expressions of national identity and these institutions in the domains of law and public discourse. We are interested in studies that address how these institutions became foundational for national identities; how they functioned, flourished, and became targets of critique in different national contexts; and how contemporary populist, nationalist and/or authoritarian actors continue to transform secularism, human rights and judicial autonomy in our times as they redefine national identities. We also welcome explorations of the role of international institutions in supporting or undermining the practices of secularism, human rights, and judicial autonomy in individual national contexts. Finally, we are interested in tracing the genealogy of critiques of secularism and human rights, and seeking to incorporate the history of anti-liberal movements into the history of liberalism itself. Accordingly, we invite studies of historical and contemporary critiques of liberalism, ranging from the anti-egalitarian to the radically egalitarian, and from proponents of chauvinistic nationalism to champions of more radical forms of inclusion.