

**Review of Michael A. Wilkinson's *Authoritarian Liberalism and the Transformation of Modern Europe*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2021, xvi + 335 pp.**

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This book characterizes the EU in more than one way. The EU allegedly exemplifies *inter alia* economic constitutionalism, benign despotism, welfare corporatism, executive federalism, technocratic managerialism, and authoritarian populism. This might suggest that the author prioritizes flowery description over analytical precision. Not so, as the central claim that the EU should first and foremost be characterized by the first two words of the title, 'authoritarian liberalism', remains clear throughout. As such, the argument has two components. First, the name of the game in the EU—and previously in the European Economic Community—is liberalism. Second, this liberalism is authoritarian.

Wilkinson's aim is to "open the space to develop critical theories of European integration, not as some form of external constraint, or experiment gone awry" (viii), but as a project destined to become what the title of the book claims it is. He contrasts himself with academics who view the EU as a 'sacred object' that is not without flaws but also not inherently authoritarian.

The book develops the argument in four parts. In the first part, *Interwar*, the inherent tension in interwar liberalism—that is, how to reconcile political equality with economic inequality—is addressed with the work of Hermann Heller, who coined the term 'authoritarian liberalism'. The second part, *Post-War Europe*, understands the early European project as a 'new political constitutionalism' that seeks to integrate through law. The third part—*The road from Maastricht to Lisbon*—interprets the two constitutions as the outcome as well as the accelerator of an increasingly authoritarian pressure for convergence. *Euro crisis*, part four, finally argues that the euro crisis concentrated power in the executive branch of government.

Not many readers will actually have to be convinced of the proposition that the EU is liberal. The European Commission would probably agree,

itself arguing that the single market “by removing technical, legal and bureaucratic barriers, [...] allows citizens to trade and do business freely” (EU, n.d.). This fits with Wilkinson’s understanding of liberalism as a praxis-cum-ideology that “depoliticizes the economy, naturalizes inequalities, and values markets, competition, and private ownership” (3). The author does not spill any beans over other possible interpretations of liberalism. This is not a hiatus, as the crucial element is present: depoliticization of the economy. This foreshadows the second part of the argument, that identifies depoliticization with de-democratization.

Empirical exhibit A of the authoritarian nature of the Union is the shock-therapy of Greece in 2015. Before election day, Wolfgang Schäuble already indicated that “New elections change nothing” (BBC 2014). After having won the elections in January and despite over 61% of the voters saying ‘*Όχι*’ (No) on July 5, the Syriza-government did indeed capitulate. It accepted all conditions and agreed to refrain from any unilateral action. In return Greece was ‘allowed’ to borrow from the European Stability Mechanism in order to pay off the Troika (ECB, IMF, EU-countries), who in turn lent to Greece in 2010 and 2012 in order to repay the banks who now lent to the ESM.

Wilkinson qualifies the ‘rescue’ of Greece as authoritarian, the latter being understood as the opposite of democratic. Parliament was indeed *de facto* suspended, when it chose the first of two options, either to set aside campaign promises or financial Armageddon, which would be unleashed by the ECB. Within 24 hours after announcement of the referendum, the ECB had already restricted liquidity to Greek banks on June 28, 2015 necessitating a cap of 60 euros on ATM-withdrawals. It made clear, if it wasn’t already, that the ECB is not so much independent from member-states as it is superior to them. Here and elsewhere Wilkinson tacitly assumes readers to be familiar with events. After brief, almost hurried descriptions he takes the time to fit the *histoire événementielle* in a broader understanding of the EU. Although the book is organized chronologically the author is then more a political scientist than a historian. In his reading, during the euro crisis the EU mutated from a rule-based order into bureaucratic Caesarism with power even more concentrated in the executive. Euro crisis management was ‘emergency neofunctionalism’ that replaced ‘integration through law’ by ‘integration through fear’.

These characterizations are on point, but one could argue that drastic times call for drastic measures. The book is largely devoted to refuting *this* position. The authoritarianism on display during 2010–2015 is seen

as neither incident nor accident. It is a built-in feature. The treaties of Paris (1951) and Rome (1957) were meant to finally resolve the dilemma that figured in all Western countries in the 1930s: how to reconcile democracy and capitalism in the presence of a demos that could always turn to expropriation, nationalization, and redistribution. The solution was simple enough and consisted of separating the economy from democracy. The *trente glorieuses* (1945–1975) did not constitute a lasting compromise between capital and labour, but a surrender in slow-motion of the latter. Capitalism was managed but not subjugated, while democracy was choked by being restricted to the non-economic domain. The liberal separation of economy and democracy was buttressed by counter-majoritarian institutions, many of which were European. The EU then was not only meant to keep fascism at bay but was also aimed to restore capitalism and reign in socialism. And that wasn't without its urgency as in 1951 communist parties seized 37% of the vote in Italy and 29% in France.

The 1960s–1990s paved the road to authoritarianism by the concomitant Europe-wide replacement of mass mobilization by interest representation, and the deradicalization of socialist parties. Of course, left parties let themselves be pacified. Wilkinson briefly mentions the volte-face of Mitterand in 1983, characterizing it as the collapse of national Keynesianism for fear of currency devaluation. The historical description is overtly thin here; Wilkinson does not flesh out the historical trajectory of the capitulation. He also does not discuss whether this crucial episode epitomizes the 1980s 'soft authoritarianism' of the EU, interstate rivalry, economic civil war, or political opportunism of social(ist) democratic parties for whom European integration became an empty signifier promising much but delivering little.

Colonial wars waged by member-states are also not integrated into the analysis, and the Algerian war is mentioned once. Instead, the book fully focuses on the internal dynamics of the EU eco-system, in which "state sovereignty is restrained, but without being scaled up to the supranational level" (74). This leaves member states "with politics but no policies" and the EU "with policies but no politics" (206). The key is that not the demos but 'the economic' serves "as the principal ground of authority for the 'constitution' of the polity as a whole" (118). While acknowledging the permissive consensus in the pre-Maastricht era, the European project was, and is, a revolution from above, resulting in juristocracy and the rise of the executive. This all constitutes the soft authoritarian prehistory of

the post-2010 subjugation of parliaments and national governments in Ireland, Cyprus, Italy, Spain, Portugal, and Greece by the ECB-led troika.

There are discontinuities as well. First, in the 1950s the European market was “a means to connect consumers and producers beyond national borders within established productive structures”; yet, in the 1980s it became “a tool to *modify the productive structures themselves*, in order to improve their competitiveness” (130). Second, and most relevant here, the last 12 years saw a deconstitutionalization with the ad hoc formation of informal, extra-legal entities as the ESM, the Eurogroup, and the Troika. This followed years of (over)constitutionalization, but it served the very same aim: to de-politicize the economic sphere. As this authoritarian element already figures in the definition of liberalism, authoritarian liberalism is essentially a pleonasm in this book. The EU being authoritarian is the final verdict, and it is a convincing one.

## REFERENCES

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