

Badano, Gabriele, and Nuti, Alasia. *Politicizing Political Liberalism: On the Containment of Illiberal and Antidemocratic Views*. United Kingdom, OUP Oxford, 2024. 224 pages. Hardcover, \$100.00.

The underlying rules of a political regime typically operate quietly in the background. Our own form of democratic governance and its underlying liberal political philosophy are usually treated as common sense and eternal, in no need of defense. A global turn toward explicitly illiberal ideologies has caught many defenders of liberalism flatfooted, therefore. Abstruse debates around the philosophy of liberalism have always quietly bubbled among academics. As authoritarian political movements enjoy electoral success around the globe, though, the value and defense of liberalism are not only academic questions, but ones that demand practical answers. In intellectual contests, however, liberalism has always suffered a handicap against its challengers.

For defenders of liberalism, one of its strengths is that its principles are founded in reasoned justifications. Reason guides us to the rights of free expression and religion, the equal protection of the laws, and so forth, because it is the only means of living together while disagreeing on important questions. The weak link is revealed when some members of the community reject reason itself and appeal to some other—any other—justification for their politics. To these liberals, it is no weakness that their ideas are not the product of reason; they would simply impose their preferences and shut down the discussion before it starts.

In academic circles that privilege reason, this may simply be considered bad form. The real trouble comes when illiberal movements gain traction in a liberal society. What to do when some segments of society reject the foundation of liberalism? It would appear that they must be reasoned with and their illiberalism given a fair hearing. For a system that prizes individual rights and the reasoned exchange of ideas, it would be contrary to its own principles to void the rights of some individuals to express themselves. It would be the liberals who shut down the

discussion before it starts. Of course, there's no reasoning with the unreasonable, and the attempt could be self-extinguishing.

Liberals might accept this limitation and move on, arguing that liberal institutions can only be justified to liberals and that there is no requirement to extend the courtesy of debate to those who would not do likewise. We can only tell them they are *personae non gratae* and show them to the door. This would leave liberals in the uncomfortable position of excusing a grave inconsistency in principles, though, and most liberals are reluctant to declare that liberalism should simply be imposed on those who do not recognize its legitimacy.

In *Politicizing Political Liberalism: On the Containment of Illiberal and Antidemocratic Views*, University of York political philosophers Gabriel Badano and Alasia Nuti consider the many attempts to square this circle and offer their own solution. Liberal philosophers have taken many approaches to argue that reasoned justification can be given for the exclusion of illiberal ideas. Badano and Nuti find these unsuccessful. Ultimately in their view, it will be necessary to exclude unreasonable elements without justification to them.

In taking this view, they remove the defense of liberalism from the philosophically idealized models often employed in these discussions. They recognize the need to engage with flawed people in flawed societies. As the title suggests, they argue that the task is more a political one than a philosophical one. Rather than trying to contort political liberalism into a shape that resolves the fundamental paradox, direct political action must be taken to counter authoritarian threats.

The book's analysis does not conclude that liberals must adopt the antidemocratic practices of their adversaries, however. Badano and Nuti claim that liberals can muster the energy necessary for self-defense without suspending their ethics. In their interpretation, the

sincere commitment to liberalism is enough justification for its defense and remains internally consistent. Further, such defense need not require circumscribing rights. They provide a novel framework for the political approaches to be used in containing illiberal threats of varying levels, relying for the most part on conventional political actions by civil society. Only in cases of imminent danger to the political order should the state resort to coercion.

By returning focus to the political potential of liberalism, Badano and Nuti have provided a valuable—even necessary—springboard for defenders of liberalism to confidently push back against illiberalism. Writing for a scholarly audience, however, their proposals are not ready for consumption in the public square. To realize its end, this philosophical treatment of a politicized liberalism must itself be translated into the politicized language of our discourse.

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