

## **Orientalizing authoritarianism: Narrating US exceptionalism in popular reactions to the Trump election and presidency**

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“Authoritarianism” has rapidly become a buzzword in left-leaning media commentary about the 2016 US presidential election. Reports and commentaries have both decried and sought to explain the remarkable rise of Trump as the Republican candidate and his subsequent election under titles such as: “An American Authoritarian” (Ben-Ghiat, 2016), “The Rise of American Authoritarianism” (Taub, 2016), “Donald Trump and the authoritarian temptation” (Hamid, 2016), “America would be Trump’s Banana Republic” (Zakaria, 2016), “How Autocracy Will Come to America” (Brenner 2016), and “America Becomes a Stan” (Krugman, 2017), and “Get Used to This Phrase During the Trump Years: American Authoritarianism” (Pierce, 2016). No less visible in other media, Trevor Noah (2015, 2016) of *The Daily Show* famously portrayed candidate Trump to an African dictator (see **Figure 1**) and later is exhibiting all the characteristic traits of a fascist leader.



**Figure 1.** Trevor Noah compares Trump to a stereotypical “African dictator.” (Source: Noah, 2015)

Leaving aside the “validity” of these commentaries, this now-widespread script about authoritarianism coming to America is important because it functions as a geopolitical identity narrative. That is, narrating the specter of illiberalism has long been implicated in “othering” practices in the United States, which are ultimately about defining the national “self”: America is set apart as a shining exemplar of democracy and liberalism (see Agnew, 2003). What makes these ostensibly critical media accounts of authoritarianism coming to America worth further scrutiny is the fact that they actually reaffirm the idea of America’s global exceptionalism: the implication is that there was some more “pure” state of democracy that is presently under assault by Trump and his supporters.

None of this is to say that the challenges posed by the new administration are not real. Rather, the point I want to stress is that, regardless of the political agenda behind them, these narratives about the specter of

autocracy in the US advance the normatively-laden idea of American exceptionalism as a staple of the country's nationalist ideology. To the extent that these scripts critiquing Trump as an autocrat position him as fundamentally "un-American" or an evil "other" threatening the core values of the country, they are less analytical claims, and more political claims about the "proper" shape of US national identity.

The often sensational narrative about authoritarianism coming to America has also been flavored by a fair degree of Orientalism, whereby authoritarian political configurations are portrayed as inherently foreign and belonging to more "backward" places around the world. Again conforming to the dominant narratives of US exceptionalism, authoritarianism is something that happens elsewhere and certainly not in America. This is of course a fiction, which I will return to in a moment. But the Orientalist lens is especially visible in some of the news reports, which characterize America under Trump as a "banana republic" or an "African" dictatorship. These narratives are not only racialized, but they are also key to imagining the US as somehow immune to illiberal political formations because of the country's ostensible "modernity." As geopolitical identity narratives, then, these critiques of the Trump administration help to normalize normative maps of global space characterized by US exceptionalism.

By raising this issue, I want to first call attention to the Orientalizing effect of these narratives, which position authoritarianism as "other" and the US as somehow inherently morally superior. This is of course problematic for all the reasons that Said (1978) and subsequent scholars have laid out for years. But it is also problematic because it tends to mischaracterize the challenge of illiberalism as one that is spatially confined, rather than acknowledging that all political contexts are characterized by multiple, overlapping practices of government – liberal *and* illiberal.

Here we come to the challenge of defining "authoritarianism," which has not been the subject of any sustained attention in geography. While the concept has long been an important research area in political science, it remains curiously understudied given geographers' longtime interest in democracy, liberalism, and social justice. Social scientists and theorists, by contrast, have made significant efforts to theorize authoritarian political relations, albeit with reference to a wide range of monikers: fascism, despotism, patrimonialism, sultanism, illiberalism, etc. (Arendt, 1951; Linz, 2000; Mann, 2004; Weber, 1968). All indexing liberalism's "other," the label of choice is most often applied to the state scale – cordoning off large blocs of global space as being characterized by such system or another (Koch, 2014, 2016). This way of imagining the world as characterized by some illiberal and other liberal blocs of space extends well beyond academia. It is key to the media narratives discussed above, but it is also confirmed by the mapping practices of global institutions, like the US State Department or Freedom House ranking systems.

Critical geographers should be quick to notice, however, this sort of spatially-determined attribution of authoritarianism is problematic because it obscures the multiple, co-existing practices of government in any given setting. That is, polities characterized as authoritarian often make use of many liberal technologies of government, while authoritarian political relations are pervasive in ostensibly liberal democratic polities. The latter point is not lost on geographers, who have done a great deal of research on the oppressive political relations in democracies, such as those related to policing, migration enforcement, and carceral geographies in the United States and beyond.

However, given the stereotypes of authoritarian countries circulating in Western media, the fact that they also deploy liberal tactics is easily overlooked. Reduced to caricatures of top-down rule lacking any spaces for political expression, authoritarian systems become the faceless "other" in these imaginaries. This is what Said describes as the "culturally sanctioned habit of deploying large generalizations by which reality is divided into various collectives" (Said, 1978, 227), which reduce complexity to narrative fiction and make nuance "either irrelevant or trivial in comparison with the circular vision by which the details of Oriental life serve merely to reassert the Orientalness of the subject and the Westernness of the observer" (Said, 1978, 247). Narratives about the threat of authoritarianism coming to the US in the reporting on

Trump's candidacy and current presidency do precisely this: affirming the US nationalist imaginary about the country's exceptional democratic credentials, they erase the complexity of power and politics as it works in authoritarian systems, but most fundamentally, erase the pervasiveness of authoritarian practice in the US, geographically and historically.

Yet as scholars of authoritarianism have so vividly illustrated, these political systems vary widely. This has in fact been a challenge for scholars seeking to define the concept without spatially fixing it, but also acknowledging the hegemony of the territorial state in the contemporary organization of political global space. In theorizing authoritarianism in my own research and forthcoming book, I have found it most useful to approach it as a question of saturation of political practices. That is, if we recognize, as Foucault (2001, 2003, 2007, 2008, 2010, 2014) suggests, that government (of the self and others) works through a *range* of co-existing political tactics, what we call an "authoritarian" country will have a higher saturation of illiberal power relations (governing through spectacle and discipline) vis-à-vis "democratic" countries. Governing primarily through freedom, these contexts will be characterized by a stronger concentration of liberal relations.

Simple (or simplistic) as this heuristic may be, it is useful because it accentuates the dynamic nature of any political context's configuration of political practices. From this perspective, then, it may well be that under a Trump presidency, illiberal practices of government will intensify within the United States. But crucially, this is not spatially confined within the country, meaning that pockets of liberal practice will indeed continue and even thrive. Nor would such a transformation be temporally rigid. This means that, just as US history has been far more authoritarian in the past, it may yet liberalize further in the years after Trump. Lastly, focusing on authoritarianism as a kind political practice, rather than a spatial trait, calls attention to the fact that certain individuals may be more or less likely to experience illiberal power relations than others. To me, this is one of the most important elements that the current sensational media accounts obscure. While many forward-thinking liberal advocates in the US have been right to decry the changes already underway under Trump's administration, they often occupy privileged social positions, which insulate them from the most painful effects of illiberalism. By attributing these changes as a wide-reaching and nebulous process of "authoritarianism," the effect is ironically depoliticizing insofar as it tends to subsume each individual's unique positionality as more or less equivalent.

Yet residents of the United States and the countless others whose lives are affected by US foreign policy abroad are not equally impacted by authoritarianism practice. To the extent that this simple fact is overwritten by the Orientalist narratives about the specter of authoritarianism as somehow "other" or foreign to American soil and practice, these real experiences of injustice are quickly steam-rolled. Scholars and other commentators would therefore be remiss to lionize US history as a response to the onslaught of Trump's policy agenda. While the threat of authoritarian practice may serve as a powerful rallying cry for liberal scholars and advocates, it should be used with care if it implicitly advances a white-washing nationalist narrative of US exceptionalism. Only by attending to the very precise individual experiences and spaces of liberal or illiberal practice can we locate spaces for progressive action open to multiple worldviews. Most importantly, this is not a nationalist vision: this is the vision of cosmopolitanism.

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