

THE TROUBLE WITH LIBERALISM:  
A CAUTIONARY TALE ABOUT POPULISM AND THE ACADEMY

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**I. Introduction**

At the very latest, 6th January 2021 marked the moment when it became clear. Trump, Bolsonaro, Orban, Modi, Putin, Kaczyński and Johnson are not slight deviations from our established modes of governing; in the case of Trump, a toe-curling, but harmless showbiz incursion into staid political structures. No. Our contemporary strongmen might not be identical with one another. But, whether we class each individual as authoritarian, neo-liberal, nationalist or nihilist, they all pose an existential challenge to the liberal state. This is not a dress rehearsal, rather the rule of law is under threat, a new breed of authoritarian, proto-fascist even, will not hesitate to call upon misinformation and the spurious notion of ‘The People’ in its violent assault on the structures of liberal democracy. The academic as well as political stakes have fundamentally altered. We are learning in real time what it means to be a dissenter, to owe an immediate duty to democracy and the rule of law and how easy it is to fail, be compromised or simply lose your way in that duty.

This contribution concerns itself with liberalism, the rule of law and the renewed academic-political impulse to protect them. It does not do so however, because the author is a ‘Liberal’ with a capital ‘L’. Rather, liberalism necessarily stands in this analysis as an ambivalent framework, which also remains an enduring challenge to majoritarian democratic expression. Yet, in all of its sometimes anti-democratic, and sometimes elitist (expert-based) character, a liberal message might be argued to have doubled in importance in our times, standing as an implicit challenge to a contemporary academic debate which can be argued to overemphasise the ‘neutral’ study of a ‘so-called’ populism. In other words, one of our problems may be an academic debate, which sometimes makes unnecessarily light of dangerous authoritarian impulses, neutralising them as ‘objects’ for study, rather than recognising them as dangerous ideological movements to be opposed, as well as conflates a critical democratic-socialism with nationalistic, racist and xenophobic ideologies.

Clearly, an argument that we should engage actively with the world around us, in order to defend normative frameworks of government, such as the rule of law, poses its own challenge to scientific academic method. Has the act of scientific observation, the basis for academic study, been left too far behind? Identifying initially with a dissenter-academic of the Nazi era, the ordo-lib-