

Post-COVID, 'Post-Triumphalist Geopolitics': A Critical Review

Paper Reference: Koch, N. (2019). Post-triumphalist Geopolitics: Liberal Selves, Authoritarian Others. ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies, 18(4), 909-924.

Preceding the transformative global events of 2020, Natalie Koch put forward a critical perspective on the mapping practices and discourses of “today’s hegemonic geopolitical imaginary: of a world neatly divided between “democratic” and “authoritarian” states” (Koch, 2019: 911). Resulting from global geopolitical narratives of the ‘triumphalism’ of democracy over authoritarianism after the Cold War (*e.g.*: Thomson, 2005; Gilley, 2010), her critical narrative questions the myopic, dualist and statist labelling of nations as either ‘illiberal/authoritarian’ or ‘liberal/democratic’ by “zooming out to consider...the conflations, contradictions, and confusions around...how the world is imagined along ideological and practical lines” (Koch, 2019: 912). With the COVID-19 pandemic causing “an unprecedented rollback of democratic freedoms in 2020” (The Economist, 2021) and an “increase acceptance of authoritarianism” (Ringe & Rennó, 2023: 1), Koch’s notion of democracy being ‘under attack’ has never been more relevant. This critical review adopts a hybrid approach by examining the paper and its argument[s] in context of the myriad of peri-COVID and post-COVID geopolitical literature, noting the continued importance of Koch’s critique in both analysing and representing contemporary geopolitics. The main tenets of the paper are outlined individually and broadly contextualised, with discussion of select areas of geopolitical research which would benefit from critical re-examination in a post-COVID age sustained throughout.

Fundamentally, Koch’s argument centres around a nexus of imagined bifurcation between liberal and illiberal political systems, with nation-states classified into democratic or authoritarian regimes respectively. The prominence of such a statist approach is evident in Freedom House’s maps [*see: [Freedom House](#), (n.d.)*], where various metrics form a quantitative ranking; with all states fitting within “one category or another – coloring and coding the earth’s surface equally” [*sic*] (Koch, 2019: 915). Despite geography, among other political-science disciplines, struggling to produce concrete definitions of ‘democracy’ and ‘authoritarianism’ (Talbot, 1995; Munck, 2016), Freedom House uses set quasi-binary categorisations and clearly-marked representations to track global authoritarianism. Such a political framework is not unique to Freedom House, as Koch explains, with “[p]olicymakers, academics, journalists, and ordinary citizens across the West...remarkably comfortable with imagining the globe in this dualist fashion” (911). Such homogenisation presents numerous issues, with the paper explicitly discussing the ‘spatial fixing’ of authoritarian practices to the nation state, the continued enforcement of Westernised ideals of uniform liberal democracies, and the normative associations within the moral geographies of authoritarianism. All topics will subsequently be discussed in turn.

Whilst it is commonly recognised that illiberal practices are not uniformly exercised *within* nation states, influential public resources and institutional apparatuses/protocols [*i.e.*:

Freedom House] continue to create static political frameworks which operate at the nation-state level. Such an assumption of 'methodological nationalism' (Wimmer & Schiller, 2002; Beck, 2007) can be reduced to a problem of representation, yet Koch notes the importance of integrating "the mix of liberal and illiberal practices unfolding across [a state's] territory" (914) into a holistic approach; thus questioning the spatial fixation of post-triumphalist narratives. Outside of the more traditional dialogues of 'special zones of freedom' (e.g.: Koch & Vora, 2019) and 'prison authoritarianism' (e.g.: Drake, 2018), peri-pandemic research notes the relational and fluid nature of inter-country authoritarianism. Various 'tiered' systems of [arguably] necessary localised authoritarian rule were implemented *within* nation states to manage infection rates during the COVID-19 pandemic, with the UK implementing a three-tier system to control travel and face-to-face communication (Department of Health and Social Care, 2021). Such policies were deemed "necessary for the greater good" (Hirsch, 2022: 491), yet their rapid and largely unquestioned introduction during times of uncertainty consequently "reset people's attitude to figures of authority and broadened the boundaries of what was deemed an acceptable exercise of power" (Simandan, 2023: 9). The question as to whether such a "situational embrace of authoritarianism" (*ibid.*) can only be reserved for global disasters is still debated (Hirsch, 2022). However, Cooper & Aitchison (2020: 3) state that "there are good reasons to believe that the existing trend towards authoritarian government will continue in the post-virus world", citing numerous economic and socio-political factors for its prolongation. Consequently, Koch's questioning of the nation-state as the sole unit for authoritarian/democratic analysis has become even more important, uncovering the relational and dynamic nature of authoritarian rule and overall futility of essentialist categorisation. Nevertheless, the role of the nation-state and the geopolitical importance of uniform categorisation is *not* diminished, with Koch adopting a multi-scaled approach.

Returning to the nation-state scale, underlying Westernised ideals of liberal and illiberal practices continue to dominate academic and public discourse; with Koch noting how such imaginations "are not merely descriptive: they imply a problem that needs resolution" (916). Stemming from the dominant modernist-colonial discourse of the 19th/20th century (Giddens, 1987; Saïd, 2003), the occident has had near-universal power in the categorisation of states as either democratic or authoritarian, with comparison generally drawn against the United States' [neo-]liberal democratic vision (Laruelle, 2021; Smilova, 2022). Consequently, leaders in Western nations strongly object to associations with illiberal or authoritarian labels and practices, as to both protect their nationalist identity and justify political intervention (Koch, 2019; Börzel, 2017; Layne, 2014). As discussed, essentialist categorisation of states is unrealistic and unrepresentative; yet Western democracies continually disassociate themselves from potentially authoritarian practices and states. This presented a significant challenge to the occident during the pandemic, as approaches adopted by authoritarian/illiberal countries in Asia were eschewed. Despite differences in political ideology, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Taiwan worked cooperatively to manage infection rates and impose uniform measures (Ho, 2020; Khondker, 2021; Kim *et al.*, 2022). Conversely, "the incapacity of the Western comparative matrix to integrate together various political regimes [was] very problematic" (Mérieau, 2021: n.p.). Resulting from a fear of association with alternative regimes, poor supra-national, inter-regime collaboration significantly delayed Western pandemic recuperation (Leach *et al.*, 2021), presenting numerous geopolitical avenues of investigation for pandemic-centric retrospective research, prospective

international relation research *inter alia*. Koch's analysis of orientalism and 'backwardness' can, again, be mobilised to elucidate the complex realities of cosmopolitan geopolitics; additionally supplemented by the discussion of normative/moral geographies.

Whilst the clustered polarisation of states at either extremity of liberal/illiberal spectrum is consistently reproduced through maps, media and other discursive means, Koch moves beyond empirical representation to encompass the normative and moral geographies which "[underpin] the hegemonic liberal order" (Zhang, 2023: 2). This theme has been previously explored by Koch (*cf.*: Koch, 2013; 2016), building on a wider methodological literature of 'critical discourse analysis' (Thrift, 2000; Dittmer & Bos, 2019) to explore rhetorics in context of their social construction. Axiomatically, terms such as 'democracy', 'authoritarian' and 'fascist' have specific connotations, with the latter two often used as inflammatory insults. Koch utilises Hoffman's (2018: 118) notion of a "semantic imbalance" to explore the normative assumptions which delineate such terms, noting the deployment of a particular lexicon by both institutional and public spokespeople. Specifically, the pandemic and its uncertainties provided politicians with "a window of opportunity for mobilizing popular support, albeit in fundamentally different ways" [*sic*] (Belder *et al.*, 2023: 337). Such a modified form of populism is immediately evident in Brazil (*ibid.*; Resende & Reinke de Buitrago, 2022), where President Jair Bolsonaro preyed on pandemic apathy by "sowing enough discontent, resentment, anger, and distrust to allow for rules and norms to be ignored" (Ringe & Rennó, 2023: 287); consequently "deepening the crisis of democracy...by advancing an agenda of power centralization and neutralizing checks and balances" [*sic*]. Such opportunities to spread pro-authoritarian illiberal democracies were unprecedented given the wider political landscape, exacerbating the potential for "definitions of concepts like 'democracy' become a battleground for competing visions of political space" (Koch, 2019: 912). However, the widespread media coverage and over-use of previously inflammatory, authoritarian language arguably diminish the vernacular's innate power (Wang *et al.*, 2022; Morelock *et al.*, 2024). Whilst Koch did reference the tendency for 'populist' *inter alia* to be used as buzzwords, the increased usage during the pandemic *may* have worked to de-stigmatise the words and desensitise the population. With upcoming UK and USA elections looming, the post-COVID effect of populist rhetorics will become clearer.

Overall, Natalie Koch's re-definition and re-integration of authoritarian geopolitics has shifted paradigms within both academic and public spheres. The paper presents an innately critical geographic perspective in line with contemporary discourse analysis, working to break-down the modernist and [*post*-]colonial narratives that dominate authoritarian literatures. By re-contextualising the paper in a peri-COVID and post-COVID age, actionable research agendas can be synthesised in context of wider papers; with this review noting areas of potential investigation across the paper's main tenets. Initially questioning the scale/spatiality of analysis both disproves the essentialist and binary categorisation of states, whilst also inviting further inquiry into the dynamic nature of localised authoritarianism. Further discussion of international, multi-regime cooperation exposes the continued relevance of modernist and [*post*-]colonial constructions of authoritarianism, synoptically linking with the normative moral geographies which create il/liberal political borders.

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