This introductory chapter presents the overall aims of the book. It starts with setting out the empirical puzzle, describing the retreat of liberal democracy globally and in Hungary. The ‘third wave of democratisation’ is over. A series of countries, previously committed to the blueprints of international institutions, are succumbing to illiberal forces. The chapter assesses the state of the art of the relevant literature, identifying the strengths and the weaknesses of existing approaches. The retreat of liberal democracy has taken most democracy scholars aback due to the limitations of popular approaches. This demonstrates the need for a new, theoretically driven causal narrative and a new political-economic concept of the post-2010 Hungarian state. The chapter concludes with an overview of the book.

The Retreat of Liberal Democracy

Liberal democracy is in retreat around the globe. The optimism of the 1990s is gone; today’s future is bleak. The ‘third wave of democratisation’ (Huntington, 1991) is over: each year since 2006, the number of
transitions to nondemocratic regimes worldwide has outnumbered the transitions to democracy, with the rate of democratic backsliding accelerating in the last three decades (Diamond, 2017), as Fig. 1.1 demonstrates. Freedom House’s Freedom Index shows a similar decline in the worldwide quality of democracy since 2006. Some even argue that the world is facing a new ‘wave of autocratisation’ (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019). Even if openly authoritarian regimes are increasingly rare, illiberal\(^1\) politics and hybrid systems are gaining a foothold in new democracies at the global semi-periphery and periphery: Indonesia, Brazil, Hungary and Turkey are some of the prime examples. Even countries with a veritable history of democracy are facing a democratic malaise, from Austria through the United Kingdom to the United States.

The titles of recent political science bestsellers, such as *How Democracies Die* (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018) and *How Democracy Ends* (Runciman, 2018) leave little doubt about the state of democracy today. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to see this as a uniform process: democratic turbulence in the United States is different from illiberalism in Turkey. However, it would be equally problematic to neglect that some of the

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**Fig. 1.1** The rate of democratic breakdown (1975–2016). (Source: Diamond (2017, p. 17))
social foundations of illiberalism are similar across the globe. This book is
dedicated to analysing democratic backsliding in one of the most para-
digmatic cases, Hungary, to construct a causal mechanism that might
offer theoretical insight for other cases also.

To understand the case of Hungary, we need to re-evaluate existing
approaches to democratisation that have been heavily influenced what
Huntington identified as the third wave of democratisation. This wave
started in Portugal in 1974 and spread to Spain, then to the military
regimes in South-America and East-Asia, finally reaching sub-Saharan
Africa and Eastern Europe. The great diversity of countries undergoing
democratic change during this wave gave rise to the view that democracy
is possible at every stage of economic development not just in the core
capitalist countries but in the countries of the global (semi-)periphery as
well (Rustow, 1970).

The lessons of the third wave of democratisation were later formalised
as the ‘transition paradigm’ (Carothers, 2002). This paradigm suggests
that the vital question of democratisation is whether the ‘right’ type of
politicians have the ‘skill and will’ to conclude the necessary elite pacts
and establish the ‘right’ type of institutions (O’Donnell & Schmitter,
1986). The fall of ‘actually existing socialism’ further bolstered the view
that liberal capitalism is the only economic system compatible with lib-
eral democracy (Fukuyama, 1992). Liberal political and modernisation
theory and the transition paradigm thus became intertwined.

The retreat of liberal democracy and the rise of illiberalism in countries
that were committed to the blueprints of international institutions repre-
sent a fundamental challenge to this transition paradigm. In recent years,
a host of countries gave in to anti-liberal and anti-democratic political
forces, which seemed to have ‘good’ institutions and ‘good’ politicians
governing appropriately for decades. Not only was the transition para-
digm ill-equipped to foresee the new wave of democratic decline, but it
also faces similar challenges in providing post hoc explanations as to what
was happening. With the alarming increase in the number of countries
drifting further away from liberal democracy, there is a growing need to
revise our knowledge about the consolidation and the decline of
democracy.
A strand in the literature adhering to the transition paradigm argued that capitalism’s structures have no real impact on the fate of democracies. To use the terminology of Imre Lakatos’s (1978) philosophy of science, they tried to stretch and rearrange their paradigm so that it stands the test of reality. One of the ‘stretching exercises’ attributed democratic decline exclusively to populism\(^2\) which is rooted, they claimed, in an illiberal political culture that emerges in response to progressive cosmopolitanism (Norris & Inglehart, 2019). Another stretching exercise, particularly popular among liberal authority figures, emphasised the emergence of a new type of politicians, or political rogues, who openly break with liberal norms. Populist politicians are masters of stoking up fears and conclude the ‘wrong’ kind of elite pacts and destroy ‘good’ institutions (Fukuyama, 2012a; Galston, 2018; Havel & Michnik, 2009).

By contrast, a recent stream of neo-structuralist political economists contended that the masses have to force the elites to accept democracy as a prerequisite of democratic stability (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2005; Boix, 2003; Piketty, 2014; Rodrik, 2018). Higher levels of economic inequality intensify the conflict of interest between the elites and the masses, which undermines the democratic compromise. This literature echoes an earlier stream of structuralist sociology addressing the role of class politics in democratisation (Przeworski & Wallerstein, 1982; Rueschemeyer, Stephens, & Stephens, 1992; Thernborn, 1977), which also suggests that the intensification of distributive class conflicts undermines democratic stability.

A large body of empirical literature showed that economic inequality indeed negatively correlates with democratic consolidation (Dutt & Mitra, 2008; Haggard & Kaufman, 2012; Houle, 2009; Reenock, Bernhard, & Sobek, 2007). Working-class voters in deindustrialised areas were shown to have a higher proclivity to support radical political change (Becker, Fetzer, & Novy, 2017; Essletzbichler, Disslbacher, & Moser, 2018; McQuarrie, 2017). Regions more exposed to global trade (Colantone & Stanig, 2018b; Rodrik, 2018), import competition (Colantone & Stanig, 2018a), austerity (Galofré-Vilà, Meissner, McKee, & Stuckler, 2017), and robotisation (Anelli, Colantone, & Stanig, 2019), and with a prevalence of the so-called diseases of despair, are also prone
to populist voting (Bor, 2017; Goldman et al., 2019; Koltai, Varchetta, Mckee, & Stuckler, 2019).

Furthermore, a group of critical political economists explicitly linked the rise of illiberalism to the current wave of neoliberal globalisation. They suggested that the exhaustion of the democratic class compromise in the 1980s, and the subsequent fall of debt-driven legitimation regimes, the regime of ‘privatised Keynesianism’ (Crouch, 2009), demanded new, illiberal solutions to restore the dominance of capital (Bruff, 2014; Davies, 2016; Hendrikse, 2018; Streeck, 2014; Tansel, 2017). Anthropologists and sociologists added that the rising culture of neo-nationalism is tightly interwoven with workers’ experience of economic change, sense of status loss and abandonment around the developed world (Friedman, 2003; Gingrich & Banks, 2006; Hochschild, 2018; Rydgren, 2012; Wuthnow, 2018). This is particularly relevant to understanding the rise of neo-nationalism among workers left behind in rust belt areas (McQuarrie, 2017). These qualitative studies also drew attention to the fact that the strict separation between culture and the economy is an analytical artefact, existing only in the heads of political scientists (Ausserladscheider, 2019).

Democratic Backsliding in Hungary

For two decades after the fall of socialism, Hungary was heralded as a champion of liberal reforms. The country was one of the first ones to liberalise its economy and polity from the second half of the 1980s. Centrist parties dominated the political landscape. MSZP (Hungarian Socialist Party) represented the left, while Viktor Orbán’s party, Fidesz (Federation of Young Democrats—Hungarian Civic Alliance) the right, taking over the place of MDF (Hungarian Democratic Forum), the party that had led the first coalition government after the fall of socialism. Despite the existence of a nativist undercurrent harking back to the dissolution of the Hungarian Kingdom and the Austro-Hungarian Empire, mainstream parties did not fully embrace nationalism until the second half of the 2000s. The country joined the European Union (EU), which was supposed to lock in liberal democracy (Levitz & Pop-Eleches, 2010).
Hungary also experienced a rapid inflow of foreign investment during the 1990s and 2000s, which led to significant technological modernisation (Bohle & Greskovits, 2007; King, 2007) and added to the country’s international recognition as a lead reformer. By the 2000s, most analysts considered Hungary a consolidated democracy (Vachudová, 2010).

However, in 2010, following eight years of socialists-liberal coalition, Viktor Orbán conquered the parliament with a sweeping electoral success, building a regime that he infamously labelled the ‘illiberal state’ (Orbán, 2014). The new parliamentary majority unilaterally adopted a new constitution and dismantled the system of checks and balances (Bánkuti, Halmai, & Scheppele, 2012; Bozóki, 2011), including the Constitutional Court and the prosecutor’s office. Fidesz has degraded public service broadcasting into a party propaganda machine (Bajomi-Lázár, 2012), in parallel to facilitating the expansion of right-wing media oligarchs (Wilkin, 2016). In an attempt to encumber the opposition’s political opportunities, the government rewrote the electoral law to favour Fidesz (Tóka, 2014). The ruling party also uses state resources for electoral corruption (Mares & Young, 2019), while the State Audit Office (ÁSZ) hands out arbitrary fines to opposition parties (Freedom House, 2018), and seemingly random, but well-organised skinheads physically prevent the opposition from initiating referendums (Freedom House, 2018, pp. 226–227). On 30 March 2020, relying on the two-thirds majority enjoyed by Fidesz MPs, Hungary’s parliament passed a new set of coronavirus measures that includes jail terms for spreading misinformation and gives no definite time limit to a state of emergency that allows Orbán to rule by decree (The Guardian, 2020).

Showing a lack of appetite for pluralism, the government stripped the Central European University of its right to issue American-accredited diplomas in Budapest (CEU, 2018), wrestled control of the research institutions from the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (MTA) (Scheiring, 2019) and banned gender studies programmes from universities in parallel to entrenching patriarchal values and institutions (Gregor & Kováts, 2019; Grzebalska & Pető, 2018). While state-owned companies graciously fund loyal ‘civil society groups’ organised from above (Hungarian Spectrum, 2017), trade unions’ organisational possibilities have been severely curtailed (Laki, Nacsá, & Neumann, 2013), and independent
NGOs face recurrent attacks (The New York Times, 2018). The government spends over ten times as much on campaigns as the budget of the opposition parties, blurring out Fidesz propaganda (Atlatszo.hu, 2018), capitalising on the migration crisis to stoke up fears and construct moral panic that invites illiberal, strong-handed solutions (Bocskor, 2018).

So far, neither national nor international capitalists have stepped up to challenge these attacks on liberal institutions. National capitalists are better off than ever, while major transnational corporations in the technological sectors, such as German car manufacturers, are also crucial pillars of Hungary’s authoritarian capitalism. Authoritarian practices are used to bolster the enrichment of the elite, while authoritarian populist discourses are used to make the redistribution of resources from the bottom to the top more palatable for the masses. Altogether, these measures completely changed the institutional landscape of the country (for an encompassing overview, see the report by Sargentini, 2018).

Is Hungary still a democracy? Following Robert Dahl’s approach to polyarchy, this book defines liberal democracy as a political system, which is characterised by free, fair and competitive elections, constitutionally guaranteed liberties, competing independent sources of information, independent institutions, a pluralistic civil society and efficient representation of citizens by the parties (Dahl, 1971). This definition diverges from the notion of majoritarian democracy that regards democracy as a form of polity characterised by unlimited power delegated by the people (Lijphart, 1984). Right-wing commentators in Hungary often refer to the idea of majoritarian democracy and argue that as long as the government is freely elected, the political system is democratic. Similarly, political scientist András Körösényi claims that Hungary is still a democracy, although the nature of the political system had changed significantly and turned into what he calls a ‘plebiscitary leader democracy’, a term borrowed from Weber (Körösényi, 2019).

Behind the veneer of seemingly free elections, however, the Orbán’s regime severely undermines the financial and institutional preconditions for political pluralism. Consequently, it fails to ensure even the most basic conditions for fair political competition. Therefore, it cannot be called a democracy. According to János Kornai (2015), for instance, Hungary is an autocracy. Gáspár Miklós Tamás characterised Orbán’s
regime as ‘post-fascism’ (Tamás, 2015), which has its roots in middle-class ethno-radicalism (Tamás, 2000). The 2020 Democracy Report of the Varieties of Democracy Institute classified Hungary as an electoral authoritarian regime, the first non-democracy in the EU (V-Dem Institute, 2020). Most political scientists agree with this characterisation and regard Hungary as a hybrid regime, a variant of competitive or electoral authoritarian systems (Ágh, 2016; Böcskei, 2016; Bogaards, 2018; Bozóki & Hegedűs, 2018; Krekó & Enyedi, 2018). In agreement with these authors, this book considers Orbán’s illiberal state as a competitive authoritarian regime. Fidesz is a centralised party machinery, increasingly intertwined with the state. It has constrained the manifestation of political pluralism and thus severely curtailed liberal democracy.

Even if we conceptualise Hungary as a vestigial democracy, it is undeniable that the quality of democratic institutions has declined significantly during the past decade. The evolution of Freedom House’s democracy scores illustrates this decline (Fig. 1.2). This index is an aggregation of a detailed scoring in seven areas: electoral process, civil society, independent media, central government, local governments, the

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**Fig. 1.2** Democratic quality in Eastern Europe (2006–2018). (Source: Freedom House, Nations in Transit Reports)
judiciary system and corruption. ‘One’ represents the highest level of
democratic progress and ‘seven’ the lowest. Hungary’s overall score has
been steadily declining since 2006, but the real drop occurred after 2010.
In 2015, Freedom House stopped classifying Hungary as a consolidated
democracy.

The democracy index created by the Economist Intelligence Unit also
shows a decline from 7.53 points in 2006 to 6.63 points in 2018 (EIU,
2019). The Bertelsmann Stiftung’s transformation index also indicates
significant deterioration in the quality of democracy and governance in
Hungary since its peak in 2008 (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2018). Of course,
the sensitivity of such indicators is disputable because of the one-
dimensional, euro-centric application of standards from developed coun-
tries, based on the linear modernisation theory (Melegh, 2006). Despite
their limitations, these scores provide a sound basis for concluding that
the quality of democracy has severely declined in Hungary.

How can we explain this puzzling retreat of liberal democracy in
Hungary? How can we interpret the political-economic nature of the
post-2010 regime? Who were the crucial social actors behind the process?
How does the Hungarian regime compare to similar cases in the world?
What lessons can we draw from Hungary’s case concerning democratic
consolidation and illiberal hegemony elsewhere? These are the questions
this book seeks to answer. To do so, the book develops a new, theory-
driven causal mechanism that captures a so far neglected dimension of
the retreat of liberal democracy, advancing the literature beyond its cur-
rent state. To demonstrate the relevance of this task, let us first take
account of the strengths and limitations of the existing research.

Alternative Explanations
of Democratic Backsliding

Political Rogues

The research on the causes of democratic backsliding in Hungary mirrors
the broader academic debates on populism and democratic backsliding.
One of the most popular explanations of democratic decline refers to the violation of liberal norms by political elites—the wrongdoings of political rogues. Fukuyama, for instance, claimed that Hungarian democracy collapsed even though the constitution of the Orbán regime is fundamentally no worse than the political foundations of the United Kingdom (Fukuyama, 2012a, 2012b). Fukuyama concluded that ‘good’ institutions could not provide the necessary protection against ‘bad’ politicians.

Many variants of this argument exist in the literature. Rupnik (2012) and Müller (2011) attributed the decline of Hungarian democracy to political demagogues. In her programmatic article, Herman (2016) also emphasised the infringement of norms by the illiberal elites, suggesting that the commitment to democracy (elite loyalty) among party leaders is diminished. Ekiert (2012) underlined the significance of the elites’ strategy of illiberal political mobilisation and claimed that economic factors alone do not explain the emergence of illiberal political movements. Others stressed the dissolution of the liberal elite pact that characterised the 1990s (Lengyel, 2014) and the negative consequences of the growing political polarisation (Enyedi, 2016b; Körösényi, 2013; Palonen, 2009).

When there is a high level of political polarisation, the dominant political group may be less tolerant towards its opponents, which could undermine the chances of accountability and correction (Körösényi, 2013). Fierce competition during the elections may result in a ‘bidding war’, which may lead to over-spending and amplify political budget cycles (Gedeon, 2017). Researchers also linked excessive polarisation to the growing rift between responsive and responsible governance, leading to cycles of overspending and austerity, which in turn undermined the stability of liberal institutions (Ádám, 2019, 2020; Bohle & Greskovits, 2012; Enyedi, 2016b). The negative political campaigns that frequently characterise fierce political polarisation may, in the long run, also undermine citizens’ trust in politics (Besir, 2012), and prepare the ground for exclusionary elite strategies and lead to ‘selective democracy’ (Varga & Freyberg-Inan, 2012). Batory (2016) and Palonen (2012) suggested that the rise of populism in Hungary is the direct result of extreme political polarisation.
Others examined the rise of right-wing illiberal ideologies and rhetoric to explain the decline of Hungarian democracy. The Hungarian right strategically used populist and conservative-nationalist discourses to attract disillusioned voters (Buzogány & Varga, 2018; Csillag & Szélényi, 2015; Greskovits, 2015; Murer, 2015; Szilágyi & Bozóki, 2015). Researchers provided detailed analyses of how Fidesz extended its social embeddedness through the ‘civic circles movement’ (Greskovits, 2020; Halmai, 2011) and how conservative think tanks contributed to the rise of illiberal hegemony (Bluhm & Varga, 2019; Buzogány & Varga, 2018). Others showed how Fidesz used state power to extend the network of loyal capitalists (Csillag & Szélényi, 2015; Scheiring, 2018), resonating with an earlier wave of research focusing on post-Soviet states further to the East, which pointed to the role of economic elites in illiberalism (Hellman, Jones, & Kaufmann, 2003). These writings interpreted right-wing illiberal strategies in the context of liberalism’s failure to deliver. By contrast, others emphasised the role of political rogues irrespective of liberalism’s performance (Enyedi, 2015, 2016a).

Not only domestic politicians can be ‘bad’ but foreign ones as well. Many pointed out the weakness of European elites to enforce democratic norms (Jenne & Mudde, 2012; Pech & Scheppele, 2017; Sedelmeier, 2014; Tomini, 2014). The increasing role of the European Parliament also empowered illiberal politicians, which is illustrated by the case of Fidesz defended by the European People’s Party (Kelemen, 2017, 2020). In a broader context, the emergence of a multipolar world order also facilitates the rise of illiberal practices (Szalai, 2018) and strengthens the geopolitical power of ‘gravity centres of authoritarian rule’ (Kneuer & Demmelhuber, 2016). Authoritarian powers, spearheaded by Russia and China, try to bolster authoritarian practices abroad (Hall & Ambrosio, 2017; von Soest, 2015; Walker & Ludwig, 2017). However, the openness of the Hungarian government towards Russian leadership is primarily not the result of Russian pressure but of Orbán’s efforts to expand his room for manoeuvre (Buzogány, 2017).

It would be a mistake to deny the role of political will in institutional change. The constitutive role of politics forms an integral part of the causal narrative put forward in this book. Some elite-oriented explanations acknowledge the role of social-structural tensions in opening the
door for the conservative-nationalist response. Others, however, emphasise the role of political rogues as an alternative to economic-structural interpretations. Bourdieu (1985) calls this political fetishism. Politics does not take place in a vacuum; it is only able to shape social relations within the confines of structural opportunities.9 There is robust literature exploring Fidesz’s political moves in detail; however, much less is known about the social dynamics in the background. Why was there less demand for illiberal politics before 2010, and what were the structural opportunities that allowed the illiberal right to dominate? Answering these questions requires us to look beyond the political rogues.

Anti-liberal Cultural Legacies

Another group of explanations looks at the cultural prerequisites of illiberalism. While the literature focusing on political rogues claims that democracy is violated from above, this approach suggests a bottom-up process. The essence of this argumentation is that the anti-liberal deficit of political culture is a historical legacy that undermines democratic consolidation. This argument is particularly popular among Hungarian social scientists (Csizmadia, 2014; Tölgyessy, 2013; Tóth & Grajczjár, 2015) and the literary elite. Hungarian writer György Spiró argued that the ‘persistence of feudal serf-mentality’ is the leading cause of the democratic decline in Hungary (hvg.hu, 2018). Philosopher Mihály Vajda claimed that ‘Hungarian people do not understand, do not like, do not know, nor do they want to accept liberal democracy… In Hungary, this [Orbánism] is the natural way of exercising power’ (168ora.hu, 2018). Similarly, philosopher Ágnes Heller argued that Hungary had never been democratic and the majority of the population expects solutions from above, adding that this is entirely unrelated to class inequality as Hungary, she claimed, is a mass society (Krytyka Polityczna, 2018).

In his essay, Robert Skidelsky (2019) referred to nationalism and anti-Semitism, passed down in Hungarian history, as an explanation for the success of illiberal politics. Dawson and Hanley (2016) argued that economic explanations of democratic backsliding do not work; the problem, in their opinion, is not that liberalism did not deliver but that Eastern
European countries had never been democratic enough. Rupnik (2016) drew on similar arguments when disputing the validity of economic interpretations, claiming that the legacy of ethnonationalism diverted the region’s countries from the path of democratisation. Others accepted the role of economic factors but also pointed to the legacy of anti-liberal politics from the interwar years as a precursor to the current wave of democratic backsliding (Fekete, 2016).

One version of the culturalist argument blamed the legacy of state socialism. Pop-Eleches and Tucker (2011) hypothesised that the communist regimes intensified people’s anti-democratic attitudes, which undermined democratic consolidation later.10 Liberal critics of state-socialism argued that late socialism under János Kádár11 derived its legitimacy from material concessions made to the population. They argued that these material benefits led to an ‘overly consumerist’ disposition and ‘egotism’ inhibiting cooperation that would be required to underpin liberal democracy. Simply put, these liberal accounts blamed socialist subjects for their preference for consumption and their lack of willingness to take an active part in building liberal democracy.

According to liberals, this legacy paralysed democratic culture after 1989. Postsocialist politicians abused voters’ alleged consumerism; thus, ‘goulash communism’ lived on after the regime change in the form of a ‘premature welfare state’, ‘goulash capitalism’ or ‘goulash populism’ (Benczes, 2016; Bretter, 2014; Kornai, 1996). This flawed—according to these liberals—political culture inherited from the socialist past is believed to render Hungarians incapable of accepting ‘rational’ economic policies, and resulted in an irresponsible political ‘bidding war’, which led to overspending and chronic budget and foreign economic deficit. These deficits, in turn, undermined economic growth and resulted in an economic crisis that ultimately prepared the ground for anti-liberal populist politics.

Empirical research has challenged this type of essentialising, culturalist argument. Illiberalism arose in former constitutional democracies in East-Central Europe, which for decades were thought to be liberal lead reformers and where the overwhelming majority of the population backed democratisation. Even though the support of capitalism declined profoundly in Hungary, surveys also found robust support for liberal values before 2010, exceeding the levels of every other country in
East-Central Europe (Pew Research Centre, 2009). The overwhelming majority of voters lacked an appetite for authoritarianism and supported democracy just a few years before the recent illiberal breakthrough (Ekiert, 2012; Tworzecki, 2019). This book will also demonstrate that the Hungarian welfare state cannot be considered ‘premature’ or ‘irrational’ either in an economic or in a political sense. The most important limitation of the cultural legacy argument is that it treats culture in a superficially uniform way. Society consists of many sub-cultures that are bound to change over time. Just as Germany became one of the strongholds of liberal democracy after the Second World War, values and attitudes are not written in stone. Culture and norms play an essential role in regime change, but they can only be interpreted in the context of local and global economic and power relations.

The Failure of Liberalism to Deliver

Some authors emphasised liberalism’s failure to deliver during the postsocialist transformation. Contrasting the concepts of legal constitutionality and political constitutionality, researchers drew attention to the fact that the regimes that emerged in the postsocialist region following the regime change were too technocratic, depoliticised society, and thus contributed to a constitutional anomie (Blokker, 2013; Bugarič, 2015). Drawing on Carl Schmitt’s political theory and Weber’s notion of leader democracy (Antal, 2017), these researchers claimed that Fidesz’s political constitutionalist approach is a protest against this technocratic legal constitutionality. This stream of research shed light on the social traps inherent to the constitutional fundamentalism of postsocialist liberalism, capturing an essential premise of the collapse of Hungarian democracy: the inability of the system to adequately integrate society into politics.

Some authors criticised the research focusing on political rogues for neglecting the social, economic and political dynamics that formed the opportunity structures of political agency. The contribution of growing social and economic problems to the loss of legitimacy of liberal democracy has been well analysed (Ágh, 2013, 2016; Böcskei, 2016; Pogátsa, 2016; Rauschenberger, 2013). In his paradigmatic essay, Ivan Krastev
(2016) argued that the regime change did not fulfil the initial hopes but engendered social inequalities and economic crises. The global crisis of the liberal hegemony, related to the decline of the power of the EU and the United States, further amplifies the perception of liberalism’s failure. These studies provided valuable insights into liberalism’s performance deficit.

The research tradition focusing on the failure of liberalism to deliver is mostly rooted in new modernisation theory that is critical of the liberal fallacies of early modernisation theory (Lipset, 1959; Rostow, 1960). A central tenet of the new modernisation theory is the emphasis on the positive association between the middle class and democracy. If supported by well-designed institutions, economic development leads to improved access to education, growing interpersonal and institutional trust, growth of the middle class and the concomitant spread of self-expression values. All this should translate into human development and empowerment, which helps people to keep elites in check (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005). Based on this theory, the lack of a robust middle class has been often associated with the weakness of democracy in Hungary.

However, economic development does not lead automatically to democratisation, only through the incorporation of distributive class conflicts into mass politics. The classics of historical-structural sociology have shown that democracy emerged in Western countries earlier than strong middle classes (Przeworski & Wallerstein, 1982; Rueschemeyer et al., 1992; Therborn, 1977). Urban middle classes that embraced classical liberalism had been, in fact, sceptical about democracy for a long time. Working-class organisations, trade unions and workers’ parties were instrumental in channelling the interests of propertyless masses into the political arena. The democratic class compromise between workers and elites was a crucial factor in facilitating the consolidation of democracy in the West (Streeck, 2014). Democracy only works if it rests on a democratic class compromise (Tilly, 2007). The studies that focus on the elitism of postsocialist liberal institutions face a similar challenge. Analysing the actors, their interests and their conflicts who drive institutional change is a necessary step we need to take to complete institutional analysis.
Cultural materialists offered a more in-depth insight into how liberalism’s failure contributed to the erosion of liberal democracy (Bartha, 2011; Feischmidt, 2014; Feischmidt & Szombati, 2017; Gökarıksel, 2017; Hann, 2018b, 2019; Kalb, 2009, 2018, 2019; Ost, 2018; Szalai, 2002; Szombati, 2018). They highlighted how the political weight of the working class eroded with the transition, in parallel to the decline of communities and the devaluation of labour power and income. Analysing interviews conducted with workers in the early 2000s, Bartha (2014) showed that workers grew suspicious of foreign investors as well as domestic political elites involved in the privatisation of socialist companies. She argued that this experience rendered workers ‘susceptible to neo-nationalist populism’ (Bartha, 2011, p. 97). In his ethnographic account, Szombati (2018) showed how Fidesz and Jobbik competed for rural middle classes that grew increasingly disillusioned with the post-1989 liberal regime. These cultural materialist accounts made significant headway towards connecting the lived experience of class and the rise of illiberalism. However, a large part of the literature remains polarised into elite, culture- and economy-oriented camps without paying enough attention to how working-class identities and the economy are dynamically interlinked.

Dependent Capitalism

Followers of the liberal transition paradigm borrowed their understanding of economic modernisation from economists uncritical of the postsocialist dependent transformation, which brought certain disciplinary limitations. The transition paradigm has been dominated by institutionalism; therefore, contextual-processual approaches (Goodin & Tilly, 2006) have been marginal. This was compatible with economic analyses dominated by neoclassical theory and the modernisation paradigm, while structuralist-heterodox economic approaches have been underrepresented. Even critical structuralists (such as the varieties of capitalism approach) tended to emphasise the positives of the region’s dependent capitalist model.
In their influential transition reports, international institutions equated successful democratic consolidation with institution-building and successful economic transition with growing GDP and balanced budgets. According to these reports, this could be achieved by implementing a set of liberalising policy reforms, known as the ‘Washington Consensus’, meaning the prevalence of neoclassical economics and the concomitant liberal policies over the transition paradigm (O’Donnell, 1995). The main shortcoming of this approach was its failure to foresee democratic backsliding and the subsequent difficulties in explaining the stability of illiberalism in Hungary and Poland. Cianetti, Dawson, and Hanley (2018) rightly pointed out that we need to ‘pull away from understanding (de-)democratisation in terms of a political science-based agenda of institutional design and institutional (de-)consolidation’, but we similarly should be critical of the ‘growth delusion’ (Pilling, 2018) rampant in most economic analyses.

A body of research successfully moved away from neoclassical economics and identified East-Central European economies as dependent market economies (King, 2007; Lane, 2009; Nölke & Vliegenthart, 2009). Also challenging the world-systems research on the postsocialist transition (Burawoy, 1996), varieties of capitalism scholars emphasised that foreign investment dependence in the productive sectors acts as a catalyst of economic upgrading (Bohle & Greskovits, 2012; Negoita, 2006), and a stabiliser in times of crises (Bohle, 2018). Most comparatists, even the critics of neoliberal policies, hypothesised that the dependent development model combined with welfare policies would stabilise democracy (Bohle & Greskovits, 2012; Bruszt, 2006), and lead to a ‘convergence with the political systems of the advanced capitalist core’ (King, 2001, p. 522). In their seminal book, Bohle and Greskovits (2012) highlighted how imminent tensions of the region’s dependent economic model could lead to democratic backsliding. However, in their more recent article, they seem to be more cautious in linking the structures of dependency to illiberalism (Bohle & Greskovits, 2019).

Proponents of world-systems theory did not share this optimism (Lane, 2013). Questioning the methodological nationalism inherent to most of the approaches discussed so far, they emphasised the asymmetrical structure of global capitalism as a crucial determinant of
democratisation and backsliding. They also argued that the failures of the market transition and democratisation do not stem from domestic policy failures but the immanent contradictions of global capitalism. Echoing neo-Marxist reservations about the dual transformation—that is the inherent difficulty of simultaneous political and economic liberalisation—world-systems theory advocates questioned the possibility of establishing stable democracy on the grounds of capitalism (Farkas, 1994).

József Böröcz drew attention to the role of the EU—as a transnational alliance between West-European political elites and capital—in curtailing domestic policy choices, thus emptying democracy from above (Böröcz, 2001; Böröcz & Sarkar, 2005). In this sense, the EU functions as a post-colonial institutional structure dedicated to furthering the interests of West-European transnational corporations. This requires the strict disciplining of the European and global semi-periphery to ensure continued capital accumulation for the European core. Such a critical analysis of the EU is relevant to the decline of democracy, even if Böröcz does not directly address the subject of democracy in his writings. Echoing some of these arguments, Johnson and Barnes (2015) also emphasised that the austerity policy expected by the European Union played a role in the success of Orbán’s illiberalism.

A recent stream of historical political-economic analyses depicted the Orbán regime as a novel attempt to bolstering capital accumulation in reaction to the 2008 crisis of the neoliberal world order (Antal, 2019; Éber, Gagyi, Gerőcs, & Jelinek, 2019; Fabry, 2019; Gagyi, 2016; Gerőcs & Pinkasz, 2018; Rogers, 2020; Stubbs & Lendvai-Bainton, 2019; Wilkin, 2016). These studies identified two competing political and economic interest groups. On the one hand, there is the socialist-liberal power coalition allied with foreign capital, and on the other hand, the right-wing power coalition in an alliance with the national capital. The post-2010 illiberal state is the consequence of the rise of the power bloc allied with the national capital, without changing the dominance of transnational capital. Qualitative interviews conducted with domestic capitalists around 2010 showed a rising nationalism and increasing demands for state protection among the interviewed businessmen (Kolosi & Szélényi, 2010; Laki & Szalai, 2013).
Peter Wilkin’s (2016) book about the decline of Hungarian democracy showed the strengths as well as some of the weaknesses of the world-systems approach. According to Wilkin, globalisation created a ‘parasitic, rentier class’ of non-productive capitalists, who dominate the global economy and siphon away the resources from the industry and from workers and consumers. To maintain its dominance, global capital forces neoliberal policies on postsocialist countries, which run counter to the interests of society, resulting in impoverishment and inequalities. Thus, Wilkin argued, neoliberalism undermines liberalism and democracy. Fidesz cashed in on the disillusionment that emerged as a result of neoliberal policies and integration into the world system. According to Wilkin, Orbán’s illiberalism is an attempt at building a new developmental state, without challenging the hegemony of international capital. Therefore, under the disguise of nationalist chest-beating, Fidesz’s real politics serves the needs of global financial investors.

Followers of the world-systems theory often downplay the differences between transnational capital and the national capital. We cannot reduce the retreat of liberal democracy to the linear causal mechanism that underpins Wilkin’s approach: capitalist world economy \( \rightarrow \) parasitic rent-seeking transnational capital \( \rightarrow \) resource extraction from the semi-periphery \( \rightarrow \) the decline of democracy. The picture, of course, is more complex. Dependency theory’s strong version faces a crucial empirical challenge: How is it possible that dependent capitalism had been compatible with a limited form of democracy for 20 years? Why does democracy not collapse everywhere, where global capital has appeared? How is it possible that modernisation based on foreign capital was more successful for a long time than, for instance, the Russian approach of shock therapy privatisation? What is the role of national capital in the post-2010 regime?

World-systems theorists are right to broaden the analysis beyond the confines of the nation state, capturing asymmetric global interdependencies. However, they do not place sufficient emphasis on the distinction between international and national capital’s accumulation interests. Neither do they highlight the role of independent national-level developmental state policies that could transform the structures of dependency. In short, world-systems theory’s forte lies in capturing a common
international factor, but this leads to its weakness as well, which lies in neglecting the varieties of dependency and the resultant varieties of illiberalism.

**Debates on the Nature of the New Regime in Hungary**

Research on the nature of the post-2010 regime in Hungary is less elaborate than the literature on the causes of the illiberal turn. The hybrid regime literature emphasised the political aspects of the post-2010 state (Ágh, 2016; Bogaards, 2018; Bozóki & Hegedűs, 2018; Krekó & Enyedi, 2018; Szilágyi, 2012). These authors analysed the question of how elections can be free but profoundly unfair at the same time, a feature that the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) also stressed in assessing the Hungarian elections (OSCE, 2014).

Hybrid regimes do not eradicate all elements of democratic institutions but curtail them to such an extent that they no longer function as a democracy. These systems hold regular elections that are more or less fair, where opposition parties can freely register and participate, and the legitimacy of power comes from winning the elections. In this respect, these systems can be called competitive. However, as Levitsky and Way explain in their programmatic article, the outcome of the elections in competitive authoritarian systems is pre-determined due to the uneven playing field (Levitsky & Way, 2002 1576). Hybrid regime scholars help us understand the political nature of these regimes, but they pay less attention to the underlying social and economic factors. Accepting and extending on the theory of hybrid regimes, this book focuses on the political-economic nature of Hungary’s new political system.

**State Capture**

There are two versions of the thesis of state capture; their differences are related to their roots in different social science traditions. The Weberian version analyses the relationship between the state and capital based on
Weber’s neo-patrimonialism theory (Csillag & Szelényi, 2015; Innes, 2014, 2015; Sallai & Schnyder, 2020; Schoenman, 2014; Szanyi, 2017). This Weberian version of state capture theory does not presuppose the idea that state intervention distorts the market, and does not reduce the retreat of liberal democracy to ‘irrational’ politics. This approach, therefore, fits in well with world-systems theory and critical modernisation theory that highlighted liberalism’s failure to deliver.

Csillag and Szelényi (2015) described how ownership shifted, from an individual ownership structure to a neo-patrimonial and neo-prebendaral one. Here, political loyalty plays an increasing role in wealth accumulation. Building on the combination of Weberian and Marxian legacies, Erzsébet Szalai (2016) argued that after 2010, feudal-like dependencies became prominent in the Hungarian economy. Szalai also recognised that this shift does not represent a linear move from a well-functioning, idealised market to a corrupt, politically driven capitalism. The inherent tensions of new capitalism prepared the ground for re-feudalisation (Szalai, 2016).

Analysing the interactions between the economy and the polity, Sallai and Schnyder (2020) identified four mechanisms that led to a divergence from what they call the ‘regulatory state’ to ‘authoritarian capitalism’ in Hungary. These mechanisms are the creation of state dependence of economic actors, reducing economic pluralism to align the economic elite’s interests with the governing elite’s interests, using the state for the pursuit of the governing elite’s interests, and authoritarian shareholding. The features that distinguish regulatory and developmental states from authoritarian capitalism are the extent of state intervention and the way they are implemented by a state that is captured by the ruling elite.

Similarly, Szanyi (2017) described the emergence of the ‘patronage state’, which he sees as a reaction to the failures of the foreign investment dependent growth model. Empirical sociologists studying corruption voiced similar arguments. Their analyses revealed that increasing political polarisation within the economic elite has led to the centralisation of corruption networks after 2010 (Fazekas & Tóth, 2016). Such informal relations to politics created left-wing and right-wing economic elite groups, competing to colonise the state (Stark & Vedres, 2012).
Instead of building on Weberian sociology and heterodox developmental economics, the second version of the state capture thesis is rooted in neoclassical economics and public choice theory, using the concepts of rent-seeking and crony capitalism. This is what Peter Evans (1989) called neo-utilitarian state theory. Neo-utilitarian theories of state capture regard crony capitalism as a deviation from liberal capitalism, which is supposed to lead to a divergence from liberal democracy also. Transparency International’s report, for example, differentiated between the winners of Orbán’s illiberal state that they call the ‘inner circle’ of business elites close to Fidesz, and the ‘outsiders’, the vast majority of businesses that are the victims of illiberalism (Transparency International, 2014).

A radical, political version of the neo-utilitarian state capture theory is Magyar’s notion of the mafia state (Magyar, 2016). Magyar defined the mafia state as a mechanism enforcing the interests of the ‘patriarchal family’ and its head through systematically occupying the institutions of the state. A single person controls the state, who forces other actors to obey, using illegitimate methods to secure the wealth of the politically organised family, thus creating a system of top-down dependencies. This system is devoted solely to facilitating the accumulation of wealth of the political family. The mafia state is thus an extreme version of crony capitalism. The logical conclusion of the theory is that everyone, who is not a member of the mafia family is the victim of the new regime; therefore, the state relies on illegitimate means to rule. The post-2010 system is authoritarian because it institutionalises non-liberal, mafia-like crony capitalism.17

The authors studying state capture are right to point out the increasing level and centralisation of corruption. The sociological version of state capture theory offers a nuanced understanding of how Fidesz and a loyal group of capitalists use the state to further their capital accumulation. This book adds to this stream of research with a detailed analysis of changing revolving doors between various factions of the elite, situating competing political-economic interest groups in the context of global dependencies, and providing a detailed description of the tools used by the post-2010 state.

The neo-utilitarian version of state capture theory, however, is plagued by several limitations. First, if the regime is so ineffective and so
detrimental to the interests of outsiders, how can it remain so stable, why is it still supported by a broad spectrum of the economic elite? Second, neo-utilitarian theorists often regard Hungary as a historical exception, failing to interpret it in the context of other authoritarian capitalist systems (Bloom, 2016), or other forms of captured states that have been thoroughly discussed in the literature. Peter (Evans, 1989), for instance, coined the notion of the predatory state three decades ago, which captures the phenomenon described by Magyar relatively well, without falling into the trap of neo-utilitarian state theories. However, the notion of the mafia state is not situated in this existing theoretical context; it regards the recent example of Hungary as an exceptional case requiring an entirely new analytical vocabulary. Third, neo-utilitarian state theory rests on the neoclassical view of an idealised market and a malfunctioning state. Therefore it cannot handle the fact that, throughout history, the state has always been involved in creating markets and supporting capital accumulation (Block, 2008; Chang, 2002; Mazzucato, 2013; Polanyi, 1957; Roy, 1997).

Developmental State

Some authors described the post-2010 Hungarian regime as a developmental state that aims to correct the errors of the neoliberal transition (Bod, 2018; György, 2017; Wilkin, 2016). They described the illiberal state as a modernisation attempt that draws on the lessons of East-Asian developmental states. In his book, former minister of industry of the first conservative government, Péter Ákos Bod concluded that increased public intervention after 2010 yielded some results (such as increased employment rate, reduced level of external vulnerability). Although Bod is aware that the illiberal state differs from East-Asian developmental states, he maintains that his analogy is correct.

Another right-wing political figure, László György, former lead researcher at Századvég (Fidesz’s key think tank), and since 2018 the secretary of state responsible for economic strategy, also described the post-2010 political turn as a shift towards a developmental state (György, 2017). György’s book demonstrated that the Hungarian political right is
still more open to heterodox economics than the political left. Similarly to Péter Ákos Bod, György also started his analysis with the failures of the pre-2010 model. He examined the conditions of dependency through a critical analysis of global value chains and argued for activist economic policy. However, the way he analysed the post-2010 state is erroneous. György attempted to demonstrate that the post-2010 state overcame the imbalances caused by the dominance of international capital, as well as the imbalances between capital and labour. Consequently, he believed in post-2010 Hungary’s successful shift to a developmental state. However, György failed to analyse income trends, wealth inequalities and the fact that the level of dependency remained the same despite the Fidesz government’s preference for national capital. Therefore, György’s belief is unfounded.

In order to assess the validity of the developmental state thesis, let us look at its definition more closely. The goal of the developmental state is to institutionalise new comparative advantages that enable domestic economic actors to specialise in more and more profitable segments of the international division of labour (Amsden, 1989; Evans, 1995; Johnson, 1982). Successful developmental states have the following characteristics: (a) organised, unified and robust state bureaucracy; (b) the state’s sufficient financial capacity; (c) policies to ensure the supply of high-quality human capital; (d) strategic industrial policies with protective, market-creating functions, and policies that facilitate technology transfer or capital formation. The developmental state is a capitalist state, where the market is the primary mechanism of accumulation. However, it does not consider markets as given; instead, it seeks to actively shape markets and the economic structure. To this end, the developmental state constrains the short-term interests of both transnational and national capital in order to secure the implementation of its long-term goals.

Capitalist core countries also use the tools of the developmental state (Block, 2008). For example, until the Second World War, US foreign policy maintained the highest level of protective industrial tariffs in the developed world (Chang, 2002, p. 22). State-managed and funded innovation policy is still vital to the development of the US economy: from the Internet, through Google’s search algorithm, all the way to the touch screen, there is a long list of innovations developed in the framework of
state-funded research. All of the technological innovations of the iPhone, considered to be evidence of the superiority of the market mechanism, were created with the helping hand of the state (Mazzucato, 2013).

Many elements of the international economic institutional system, such as the protection of intellectual property rights, investor protection mechanisms and clauses prohibiting state interference, are also intended to ensure the dominance of transnational companies registered in the core countries. In this international economic context, manufacturers of the late industrialising semi-peripheral countries need developmental state policies to successfully break into the higher value-added segments of international markets (Nölke, 2014; Schrank & Kurtz, 2005). Semi-peripheral states that specialised in cheap primary and intermediary products without developmental states specialise in poverty. Without developmental state policies, it is close to impossible to break the vicious cycle of dependence and upgrade to higher value-added production.

Authors following the thesis of the developmental state are right to point out that the post-2010 state emerged in response to the policy failures of the pre-2010 state. However, we have to distinguish between interventionism and developmentalism. A state can be interventionist in many ways without being a developmental state. The following chapters will demonstrate that if there is a systemic change in present-day Hungary, it points towards the downgrading of industry, despite increasing state interventions, locking the economy into a low value-added mode of production. Therefore, the post-2010 Hungarian state cannot be considered a developmental state.

The Aims of This Book

Hungary is not an exceptional case. The country went further in adapting avant-garde neoliberalism (Appel & Orenstein, 2018) than most other countries in Europe, and it is now the avant-garde of the illiberal counter-movement (Kalb, 2019). The country turned from a laboratory of neoliberalism into a laboratory of illiberalism. However, Hungary’s experience resonates well with the research conducted on the causes of populism in the West, such as the rise of Trump or the Brexit vote. Working-class
populism in the West is also connected to rising social and regional polarisation, the sense of being left behind as new regional economic centres emerged. In addition, other semi-peripheral, late-moderniser countries have also experimented with various forms of authoritarian capitalism, relying on the support of the national bourgeoisie. From bureaucratic authoritarianism (O’Donnell, 1973) in Latin America to authoritarian developmental states in East Asia (Kim, 2007), several countries offer comparable lessons. It would be misleading to analyse Hungary’s case in isolation.

Drawing on lessons from other hybrid authoritarian state capitalisms, as well as from the fate of the democratic compromise in core countries, the book aims to address the above-identified gaps in the literature in three ways.

First, it analyses the socio-economic roots of Hungary’s authoritarian turn and proposes an innovative, theory-driven causal mechanism. The book aims to demonstrate that the Hungarian authoritarian turn is the consequence of the transformation of the dominant power bloc and the ensuing accumulation strategy, in the context of dependent development. It describes how Hungary’s international economic integration led to internal socio-economic disintegration, the rise of working-class neo-nationalism and the revolt of the national bourgeoisie.

Second, the book offers a new conceptualisation regarding the political-economic nature and stability of the post-2010 Hungarian regime: the accumulative state. The accumulative state is a new political solution to manage the tensions of dependent capitalism. The book substantiates this claim by analysing the state’s instruments to further capital accumulation and the ensuing social conflicts. Through this, the book contributes to the revival of class analysis, demonstrating that a non-deterministic, relational class concept represents a significant social scientific contribution to the analysis of democratic and authoritarian systems.

Third, the book aims to build a new theory that captures a so far neglected aspect of the causal mechanism that leads to the retreat of liberal democracy. The book situates Hungary’s authoritarian turn in the context of regional and international trends, highlighting the theoretical and practical implications to understand and prevent the decline of democracy and combat authoritarianism, not just in Hungary but elsewhere as well.
Fourth, the book also offers a methodological contribution to the literature by adopting a theory-building process tracing approach (Beach & Pedersen, 2013), backed by mixed-method empirical techniques that are novel in the social science literature on democratisation. The book builds on three years of empirical research combined with extensive fieldwork, while also utilising the author’s experience in politics. It describes regional and national socio-economic trends and the processes of international integration and internal disintegration using macro-data covering Central Europe. Eighty-two interviews with workers serve to uncover how neo-nationalism is rooted in the everyday experience of class. A new dataset on the economic elite and another one on the policy elite help to explore the revolving doors between the state and capital. Finally, based on a close reading of the literature and news coverage on economic policymaking in Hungary, the book identifies the most significant policy decisions and political tools during the 2010–2018 period, which have a substantial effect on the institutional foundations and the structure of the economy.

The book is structured in a way to substantiate the new causal narrative both theoretically and empirically. Chapter 2 outlines the book’s conceptual framework, taking a step-by-step approach to constructing the categories necessary to build the causal narrative. Based on the assumption that democracy is the result of a compromise between different social classes, the chapter introduces the key categories such as the competition state, revolving doors, dominant power blocs, accumulative strategies, dependent development, the national bourgeoisie, transnational capital, working-class neo-nationalism and the accumulative state. Chapter 2 also presents the methodology of the three-year empirical research.

The following five chapters constitute the empirical backbone of the book. Chapter 3 begins with an empirical analysis of the revolving doors connecting various factions of capital and the state. Next, it gives an outline of the views and careers of economic policymakers moving in and out through these revolving doors. The chapter empirically shows how the competition state institutionalised the dominance of transnational capital between 1990 and 2010, which was compatible with a top-down simulated democracy. Chapter 4 analyses a large set of data and the relevant literature to examine the social and economic consequences of the competition state. The central contribution of the chapter is showing
how the accumulation strategy of the competition state led to social and economic disintegration, which undermined the legitimacy of liberal democratic institutions. Chapter 5 narrows the focus on the working class, examining the dynamics of its disillusionment with the market transition and the political left. Relying on 82 in-depth interviews conducted with workers in four medium-sized industrial towns in Hungary, the chapter presents a cultural materialist analysis of the rise of working-class neo-nationalism as an essential precursor to the illiberal turn.

Chapter 6 describes the characteristics of the rightward turn of the national bourgeoisie, drawing on a new database containing data on their political orientation and economic profile. The chapter shows that the revolt of the national bourgeoisie against the power bloc that institutionalised the competition state had started already before 2010, with emerging capitalists from non-technological sectors and ideologically committed right-wing capitalists playing a pivotal role. Chapter 7 examines the way the post-2010 government used the endorsement deriving from the revolt of the working class and the national bourgeoisie for entrenching illiberal hegemony. The chapter analyses the social and economic consequences of the new regime of accumulation. It argues that Fidesz tackles the social tensions arising from the new regime of accumulation by relying on a two-pronged strategy that combines institutional authoritarianism and authoritarian populism. Finally, Chap. 8 widens the perspective again and examines the theoretical lessons of the retreat of liberal democracy and the emergence of hybrid authoritarian state capitalism in Hungary. After drawing out the causal mechanisms analysed in the book, the chapter concludes by expanding the focus to the international context the broad lessons for social theory and political economy.

Notes

1. This book defines illiberalism as a set of contemporary political practices of government and social relations in the economy and culture, comprising a divergence from the norms and practices of pluralist, constitutional liberal democratic governance as defined by Dahl (1971), leading to varying degrees of regime change towards hybrid or openly authoritarian
regimes. Illiberalism might have different endpoints and speeds. Weaker forms of illiberalism do not achieve a substantial regime change but alter fundamental institutions and socio-economic relations pointing in that direction. A divergence from the Dahlian ideal type (‘polyarchy’) is not equal to a diametric opposition to liberalism. Singapore, a prime example of illiberal regimes (Mutalib 2000), combines a high degree of economic liberalism with rational planning, economic nationalism and a repressed democracy, and is one of the most important hubs of the global liberal world order in Southeast Asia. Singaporean illiberalism clearly is not diametrically opposed to liberalism. It is also important to see that an ideal type is not equal to the political practices of Western democracies, as critiques of Dahl rightly pointed out.

2. Most frequently, populism is defined as a political style that frames the fundamental political cleavage as one between the ‘elite’ and the ‘people’ (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). Analyses of illiberalism very often deal with instances of populist political style and the related discourses as a divergence from the norm of poliarchy. However, populism might remain within the rank of democratic practices; some forms of populism might even signal the functioning of the immune system of democracies rather than their decline. Populism can be centrist, or even liberal. Therefore, populism as a political style refers to a much broader set of phenomena than illiberalism. The central dividing line between populism and illiberalism is in the sphere of practice. Illiberalism might be conceptualised as a strong version of anti-liberal, mostly—though not always—right-wing populism in power long enough to achieve fundamental change in socio-economic relations and institutions.

3. Some liberals were sceptical about the possibility of simultaneous political and economic liberalisation. They feared that too much democracy would allow the victims of economic liberalisation to stop the transition from socialism to capitalism. Therefore, they advocated for rapid reforms that are hard to reserve, also known as shock therapy, implemented by a technocratic elite insulated from democratic pressures (Aslund, 1995, p. 11; Sachs, 1990; Woo, 1994, pp. 288–300). Later it became clear that those economies that did not follow this advice, did not insulate economic policymaking but responded to redistributive demands were more successful in democratic consolidation (Bruszt, 2006).

4. The party changed its name in 1995 and 2003. The original abbreviation, Fidesz (from ‘Fiatal Demokraták Szövetsége’) was kept and
appended with Hungarian Civic Party (in 1995) and Hungarian Civic Alliance (in 2003). ‘Federation of Young Democrats’ is no longer used in the name of the party.

5. The government claims these unprecedented new powers are needed to fight the coronavirus. However, critics of the bill point out that it is very hard to trust the government to rescind the measures when the pandemic is over. Fidesz has constantly eroded democratic freedoms over the years, and the ‘state of emergency’ related to the migration crisis in 2016 is still in force. Although the emergency power to rule by decree was phased out in June 2020, other recent measures will have lasting effects on Hungary’s democracy. The government has halved the funding of political parties, under the pretext of reallocating money to the coronavirus responses, which impacts much more severely on the operation of opposition parties than on the well-lubricated mechanisms of Orbán’s party. The last bastions of the opposition in local government have also been stripped of what little financial autonomy they possessed.

6. I regard liberal democracy as an ideal type that is not equal to the political practices of Western democracies, as critiques of Dahl rightly pointed out.

7. The V-Dem database is one of the largest-ever social science data collection efforts with a database containing over 28.4 million data points. The latest version of the dataset, V10, covers 202 countries from 1789–2019.

8. There is a large variety of labels and concepts used by researchers who subscribe to the hybrid regime thesis (see the review by Bogaards, 2018). This book does not focus on the question of how best to classify the post-2010 political regime but on the political-economic causes of the regime change and the political-economic nature of the new regime, which allows the question of regime typology to be bracketed.

9. A crucial political task lies in building and sustaining social coalitions using the state apparatus and political cultural institutions. Politics, however, cannot conjure up these coalitions from nothing.

10. However, they also add that their own data point to the opposite: they found that the younger generations in their Eastern European sample demonstrated less trust in democracy than older generations who spent more time under state-socialism.

11. János Kádár was the General Secretary of the Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party, presiding over the country from 1956 until his retirement in 1988.
12. Hungary was ranked as the best performing country in the EBRD’s Transition Reports for seven consecutive years around the turn of the millennium (Pogátsa, 2009).

13. As Claus Offe put it in his oft-cited article about the challenges of building democracy and capitalism simultaneously in Eastern Europe: ‘The only circumstance under which the market economy and democracy can be simultaneously implanted and prosper is the one in which both are forced upon a society from the outside and guaranteed by international relations of dependency and supervision’ (Offe, 1991).

14. As I will explain later, the two power coalitions and their discursive strategies (anti-democratic populism vs. democratic anti-populism) described by Ágnes Gagyi took the shape only in the second half of the 2000s—they were not given as such. My analysis adds to Gagyi’s article by exploring in detail through what political and socio-economic mechanisms these two political blocks were forged.

15. There are some important exceptions (Artner, 2017; Gagyi, 2016; Lane, 2017; Szalai, 2018).

16. The strong version of dependency theory builds on Marxist analyses of imperialism and presupposed a unified global capitalist logic that is contrasted with the developmental needs of (semi)peripheral states (Amin, 1991; Baran, 1952; Frank, 1978). The weak version of dependency theory is also critical about asymmetrical global interdependencies but does not presuppose a unified global capitalist logic (Cardoso & Faletto, 1979; Evans, 1979). Weak versions of dependency put emphasis on the local varieties of the ‘situations of dependence’ (Cardoso & Faletto, 1979) that might lead to different developmental outcomes. These local varieties are the results of global capitalist pressures and the actions of domestic social coalitions that try to intervene into these pressures using the state. I apply the weak version of dependency to the variety of illiberality in East-Central Europe elsewhere (Scheiring, 2020).

17. For a detailed critique of Magyar’s mafia state theory see Fabry (2017) and Hann (2018a).

18. The case of János Kóka, Bálint Magyar’s fellow party member at the Alliance of Free Democrats (Szabad Demokraták Szövetsége, SZDSZ), former Minister of Economy and chair of SZDSZ, offers the most striking rebuttal of the neo-utilitarian approach. Clearly, as former leading liberal politician, Kóka was not ‘created’ by Orbán and is not a member of the ‘mafia family’. However, he enthusiastically cooperates with the illiberal state in smoothing the path for the national bourgeoisie helping
them to gain a foothold in other countries, using a diplomatic passport that he received from Viktor Orbán (Magyar Narancs, 2015). Kőka’s example draws attention to the fact that we cannot understand the relationship between the Hungarian capitalist class and the authoritarian state if we only talk about Viktor Orbán’s hunger for power and his mafia-like methods.

19. With respect to the elites, the book uses the terms of ‘left’ and ‘right’ in a political positional sense, that is, as the synonyms of the MSZP-SZDSZ (left) and the MDF-FIDESZ camps (right). On rare occasions—such as in interview quotes—the book uses ‘left’ and ‘right’ in terms of content and ideology. The context should make it clear in every case which sense is being used.

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