Illiberal Reactions to Higher Education

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Abstract Higher education has expanded at astonishing rates around the world. We seek to understand the oppositions that periodically arise, which may produce enrollment declines and/or imposition of political controls. The post-1945 growth of higher education was – to a greater extent than is often recognized – propelled by the liberal, and later neoliberal, international order. Oppositions arise from illiberal alternatives, which also may organize globally. The recent weakening of the global liberal order, associated with growing populism and nationalism, creates conditions for a new wave of oppositions. We hypothesize that attacks on higher education emerge in countries less integrated into world society and in countries linked to international structures that support illiberal alternatives. We examine cross-national data on higher education over the period 1960–2017. Enrollments and funding are higher in societies more tightly linked to world society and lower in countries tied to illiberal international organizations. Analyses of enrollments in various fields, constraints on academic freedom, and terrorist attacks on education institutions show similar pattern. Finally, we observe heterogeneity in the forms of illiberal opposition: countries that suppress academic freedom generally are less likely to restrict enrollments.

Keywords Higher education · Illiberalism · World society · Neo-institutional theory

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Introduction

In the period since World War II, higher education expanded dramatically across the globe, viewed as engine of economic growth and human progress (Schofer and Meyer 2005; Trow 2007; Baker 2014). In recent years, however, opposition is on the rise (Douglass 2021). Hungary and Russia enacted legislation to close international universities (Inside Higher Ed 2017), and criticized, de-funded, or even banned specific fields, such as gender studies. China has tightened political controls over higher education (Scholars at Risk 2019), as have Thailand and Turkey (Scholars at Risk 2017). Far-right groups in India have criticized universities as anti-nationalist and launched attacks (Bhatty and Sundar 2020). Physical attacks are increasing elsewhere, too – for instance by Boko Haram in Nigeria (Scholars at Risk 2017). And in the United States, surveys find that conservatives increasingly hold negative views of the university (Parker 2019; see Gross 2013).

We see such growing opposition to higher education as part of a broader backlash against the liberal international order that has dominated the globe since the end of World War II (Guillen 2018; Mearsheimer 2019; Börzel and Zürn 2021). The cultural framework undergirding global liberalism spurred not only post-1945 trends toward democratic politics, free markets, and human rights (Elliott 2007; Simmons et al. 2008) but also the expansion of higher education, seen as principal foundation for a model of society built around individual knowledge, rights, and competencies (Frank and Meyer 2020). Today, we see a backlash against this model. This includes democratic decline (Diamond 2008; Kurlantzick 2013; Bromley et al. 2020), opposition to free markets (Kotz 2015), rejections of liberal norms of gender equality and LGBT rights (Hadler and Symons 2018; Velasco 2020), and the resurgence of nationalism and populism (Bonikowski 2017). While contestations over liberalism are not new (recall the Cold War), we live in a contemporary “age of reaction” (Heller 2020: 1).

Reactions against higher education are rooted in this broader decline in the legitimated authority of liberal world society, which has invigorated alternative cultural frameworks. Some of these are built around statist or nationalist models, others around religious doctrines; but importantly, they are themselves institutionalized in international organizations and alliances (e.g., Bob 2012; Hadler and Symons 2018; Motadel 2019; Bromley et al. 2020; Velasco forthcoming). In this context, patterns characteristic of the liberal age can no longer be taken-for-granted but are increasingly contested. Specifically, we suggest that illiberal frames institutionalized in the international arena propel efforts to constrain or suppress higher education.

To support our argument, we examine cross-national data on higher education from 1960 to 2017. Our regression analyses show that country linkages to illiberal international organizations are associated with lower enrollments and funding as well as higher levels of academic repression and terrorist attacks on universities. We also examine patterns that reflect cooptation more than suppression (e.g., soaring enrollments in China). We show that constraints on academic freedom – while generally reducing enrollments – attenuate the negative impacts...
of illiberal ties, suggesting that illiberal polities may permit enrollment expansion if the educational system is successfully coopted. Moreover, we find that countries’ ties to illiberal models are positively associated with enrollments in technical fields (e.g., engineering) even as they reduce enrollments in the humanities and social sciences.

We expand our understanding of resistance to liberal world society with an analysis of contestations over higher education, an institution that came to enjoy enormous and worldwide legitimacy during the contemporary era. Our key contribution is to show that these contestations are linked to fragmentations in world society rather than rooted solely in domestic structures.

**Global Liberalism and University Expansion in World Society**

Our arguments expand on world society theory (Meyer et al. 1997), which offers a unique perspective for understanding the higher education expansion that characterized the liberal era. Through this lens, similar trends observed in diverse countries during this era reflected the influence of a global culture and its institutions – a world society – more than local needs or realities. We begin by outlining the support for higher education in liberal world society before turning to our core focus on reactions against this model.

Higher education institutions have arisen in many historical contexts, including China and the Islamic world, but it is the European forms, particularly the modern university, that spread worldwide. After World War II – and even more after the breakdown of Communism – higher education grew explosively (Schofer and Meyer 2005; Trow 2007; Zeleza 2016). A century ago, a fraction of one percent of a cohort pursued higher education. Today, the country average of higher education enrollments is around 35 percent -- and over 70 percent in wealthy countries. Figure 1
shows the global trend. Beyond expansion, more and more aspects of society came under the umbrella of academic knowledge (Baker 2014; Brint 2018; Davies and Mehta 2017). Schooled professions became dominant occupational groups (Brint 2001) and knit together the elites of a rapidly globalizing world as part of a global “knowledge society” (Gibbons et al. 1994).

There is a tendency to naturalize this expansion as obvious or functional. In fact, all these changes came despite resistance. For much of the 20th century scholars and policymakers were critical of higher educational expansion. It involved wasteful status competition (Boudon 1973; Collins 1979; Dore 1976). Rising expectations might produce disorder (Huntington 1968). Or expansion might undercut class solidarities (Lenhardt and Stock 2000; Baker et al. 2004). Overall, concerns reflected Schumpeter’s (1950) judgment that the entire liberal capitalist system might be destroyed by the schooled intellectuals it produced.

Despite these dour assessments, university enrollments exploded, and did so virtually everywhere (Schofer and Meyer 2005, 2007). The expected collapse did not occur. Critics had failed to recognize a fundamental dynamic: rather than responding to predictable social needs, university teaching and research created new ones, yielding a “knowledge” society and economy (Baker 2014; Gibbons et al. 1994; Frank and Meyer 2020; Schofer et al. 2020). Whole new arenas of life became central features of the economy, with material production overshadowed by growing sectors of university-educated personnel: psychologists, consultants, lawyers, and managers constructing and addressing new societal problems.

While many factors were involved, world society scholars have argued that the expansion was linked to the global liberal era that emerged after World War II (Schofer and Meyer 2005; Frank and Meyer 2020). Aggressive nationalism was seen as having produced the horrors of World War I and II. American success on the global stage propelled the legitimacy of liberal models and key international institutions, such as the UN system, were built around liberal principles (Ruggie 1988). Of course, the Soviet Union developed competing Communist structures (e.g., the Warsaw Pact) that helped curb liberal pressures. But its collapse in 1989 wiped out the main global alternative, producing an era of triumphalist neoliberalism (Ruggie 1998; Fukuyama 1992). Often mistakenly reduced to economics, the era involved a general intensification of liberalism (Lerch et al. 2022). Pro-free market ideologies flourished (Centeno and Cohen 2012), but so did human rights movements (Stacy 2009), civil society activism (Reimann 2006), and democratization (Huntington 1991). In all these cases, the individual (with choices and rights) was brought front and center, as opposed to the state or other collective entities.

This liberal and later neoliberal international order rendered education – and especially the university – a most central social institution. Education had played a limited role in statist or corporatist societies (Jepperson 2002). A liberal individualistic cultural framework, however, created conditions for envisioning education as essential for development and a fundamental human right (Chabbott 2013). If progress in every institution of society – economy, polity, religion, family, and all of civil society – is thought to rest on the choices and capacities of individuals, schooling these individuals becomes a central collective good. Thus, in the whole post-War period, the reform and improvement of individuals – through schooling – became
a preferred solution to societal problems of order and growth, as well as a right of individuals (Baker 2014). Higher education became a core concern of liberal international institutions (Buckner 2017), seen as essential for creating empowered individual “actors” (Hwang and Colyvas 2011) and a society rooted in individual human knowledge and competent action (Frank and Meyer 2020).

This is not to suggest that expanded higher education systems were purely the result of the institutionalized myths of liberal world society (see, e.g., Collins 1979 for the role of credential inflation or Goldin and Katz 2010 for technological change). But a world society perspective is uniquely positioned to account for the global nature of this expansion, encompassing societies with vastly different histories and economies. And indeed, existing scholarship shows that a main predictor of higher education expansion is embeddedness in world society (Schofer and Meyer 2005).

Oppositions to Liberal World Society and Reactions Against Higher Education

We expand this argument by exploring resistance to liberal global models, using the case of higher education. We begin by delineating the possibilities for conflict and opposition inherent in liberal world society. We then suggest that recent declines in the legitimacy of global liberalism have heightened these possibilities and allowed alternative frameworks to regain authority in world society, fueling efforts to suppress or constrain higher education.

Theorizing Conflict in World Society: Declines in Liberal Legitimacy

Though best known for stressing monotonic and isomorphic patterns of diffusion, world society scholars have long noted that global structures and culture are rife with “inconsistencies and conflicts” (Meyer et al. 1997: 172). For one, the structure of world society provides conditions for potential opposition. It is a decentralized assembly of discourse, activity, and organization, rather than a monolithic or hegemonic proto-state (Drori 2008; Schofer et al. 2012). Throughout the liberal era, for instance, statist and corporatist models of governance remained institutionalized in various places (Jepperson 2002). Most notably, as we observed above, Communism developed its own transnational structures and patterns of diffusion. Even today, liberal women’s rights are supported by core international institutions, but alternatives remain institutionalized, for example in the Catholic Church and religious INGOs (Boyle et al. 2015; Wang and Schofer 2018; Velasco, forthcoming). Given a decentralized global structure, alternative frameworks can coexist alongside dominant models (Adamson 2005; Beckfield 2010).

Second, liberal world culture itself has features that may sow conflict (e.g., Boli 2008; Kymlicka 1995). The liberal order empowers its constructed actors with ever expanding rights (Meyer and Jepperson 2000) thus propelling global mobilization (e.g., Hironaka 2014; Tsutsui 2018). These rights can be mobilized toward
illiberal ends, for example to practice a religion that discriminates against LGBT people (Bob 2019). Not only that, but global liberalism embodies internal divisions (Kymlicka 1995; Finnemore 1996). International institutions enshrine national sovereignty, but also human rights that challenge state authority. They celebrate equality but also market solutions that produce inequality. Universalism looms large, but individual and local diversity is also empowered (Boyle 2005).

The task is to explain when and where these possibilities for heterogeneity and conflict, always present, actually produce opposition. For example, existing work shows that non-conformity is often observed in peripheries (Schofer et al. 2012) and that strong national or local alternatives can blunt global influence (e.g., Jepperson 2002; Mathias 2013; Wang and Schofer 2018; Boyle 2004; Wotipka and Ramirez 2008).

We consider the question of legitimacy and suggest that declines in the legitimacy of dominant models can allow alternative frameworks to regain authority in world society, taking advantage of its decentralized structure, empowerment discourses, and internal divisions. Legitimacy is central to diffusion (Strang and Meyer 1993) and is shaped by historical shifts in the international status order that legitimate particular cultural models (Hironaka 2017; also see Strang 2006). For example, the rise of Prussia on the world stage in the late 19th century propelled a wave of policy diffusion and isomorphism. The subsequent disasters of the World Wars and genocide weakened the legitimacy of German policies and ideologies (Weiss 1977), creating space in the international arena for alternatives.

The key observation for our purposes is that after a long period of liberal dominance, the legitimacy of liberal models is in decline. There is a growing sense that global liberalism has failed (Guillen 2018). Liberal and neo-liberal economic models are held responsible for the Asian financial crisis in the 1990s, the 2008 global crisis (Campbell 2010; Stiglitz 2010), and rising inequality (see Mills 2008 for a review). Geopolitically, the legitimacy of the liberal hegemon, the United States, has come under question after debacles in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan and the rise of China (Ikenberry 2002). More broadly, elite-driven projects such as the European Union and World Bank/IMF structural adjustment programs expanded without representative global institutions, yielding popular resentments and the perception of “democratic deficits” (Held and Koenig-Archibugi 2005).

These “failures” of global liberalism have material effects – generating precarity and crisis – as literature on the anti-liberal backlash tends to stress (see, e.g., Eichengreen 2018; Rodrik 2018). But a broad cultural consequence is that the myth-like status of liberal policies and institutions is undermined (Hironaka 2017; Bromley et al. 2020): faith in the model has weakened. This is intensified by the over-reaching claims associated with liberalism and especially neoliberalism. For example, markets and democracy were to empower ordinary people and transform Iraq, the former USSR, and so on; all too often, entrenched inequalities and interests won out.

With liberalism less legitimized, other frameworks have gained influence. Recent work points to the growing influence of international organizations that legitimize alternative cultural frames, such as religious doctrines, authoritarian or nationalist ideologies, or traditional views regarding the individual and family. For example, scholars highlight international alliances that challenge liberal gender and sexuality.
norms (Bob 2012; Hadler and Symons 2018; Velasco 2020; Cupać and Ebetürk 2020; Lerch et al. 2021) and liberal democracy (Kneuer et al. 2019; Obydenkova and Libman 2019; Bromley et al. 2020; Debre 2020). As noted, these possibilities for heterogeneity are always present in world society, but they tend to be muted when the dominant model is highly legitimated. Declining faith in this model can create space for organized opposition to (re-)emerge.

Reactions Against Higher Education: Suppression and Cooptation

These growing fragmentations in world society mean that patterns associated with the liberal age are increasingly vulnerable -- including the expansion of higher education. Of course, this phenomenon is not unique to the most recent era. Communism was an influential alternative during the Cold War. On the one hand, the Soviet model emphasized national development, catalyzing educational investments. But it was an illiberal and statist model that remained suspicious of academia as a competing basis of authority. Soviet higher education was thus tightly controlled (Smolentseva 2007). In fact, as higher education grew, leaders in the Soviet sphere became concerned that educated elites challenged class-based solidarities and the state, and began limiting higher education expansion in the 1970s and 1980s (Lenhardt and Stock 2000; Baker et al. 2004).

Suppression and cooptation of higher education, rooted in supranationally institutionalized illiberal orientations, thus has a long history. But it is on the rise again today, given the weakened legitimacy of global liberalism and growing influence of illiberal alternatives. To illustrate more recent oppositions, our online Appendix 1 provides four country vignettes of reactions against higher education – Hungary, Turkey, Afghanistan, and Nigeria – where governments or non-state groups have sought to assert control over higher education.

In the case of Hungary, we chronicle the illiberal shift under the Orbán regime. The forced relocation of the Central European University to Vienna received global attention, but the repressive turn has been much broader and involved remarkable reductions in the length of compulsory schooling and in budgets, as well as growing political controls over higher education institutions. A striking result has been a dramatic decline in higher education enrollments since the late 2000s.

Turkey presents a case where enrollments have continued to expand (a point we explore below), but amidst an increasingly restricted illiberal environment cultivated by the Erdogan regime. We describe a vast crackdown on higher education institutions that intensified in the aftermath of an attempted coup in 2016, when thousands of university personnel and students were detained and arrested, and in some cases charged, dismissed, and banned from public service.

For Afghanistan, we outline the Taliban’s suppression of higher education in the 1990s. As part of a general effort to erase non-Islamic influences, universities were often closed while others were severely restricted, excluding women and

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1 We introduce specific organizations relevant to our paper below.
limiting non-religious fields of study. While we focus primarily on the Taliban’s earlier rule, their recent takeover suggests similar patterns, with Afghan scholars reportedly fearing the “creeping closure of universities” (Lem 2022).

Finally, in Nigeria we point to the attacks on higher education launched by Boko Haram, an insurgent group aiming to create a pure Islamic state in northern Nigeria. Infamous for its abductions of schoolgirls, the destruction of schools and universities has been a hallmark of Boko Haram’s violent rejection of Western-style education. Enrollments in Nigeria have declined since the mid-2000s, but the extent of the decline is unknown because data reporting ceased after 2011.

These examples suggest that contestations over higher education can take multiple forms. First, oppositions can seek to suppress (Western) higher education entirely. As noted, the Taliban rule decimated Afghanistan’s higher education sector and Boko Haram seeks to do the same in Nigeria.

Another common reaction is to coopt higher education. This characterizes highly modernized competitors to Western liberalism, such as the Communist countries and modernizing authoritarian regimes. Turkey is a good example, with governments asserting control over higher education and establishing new institutions loyal to the state. A common pattern is to emphasize technical training, while restricting the humanities and social sciences, seen as a source of “intellectuals” or “Western values” that undermine traditional orders. For instance, in Turkey we see efforts to bring education in line with politicized Islam.

While many cases involve a mix of cooptation and suppression (Hungary is a good example), anecdotal evidence suggests that cooptation sometimes obviates the need for direct suppression. Turkey offers a clear example: even as political control over higher education has grown, enrollments have expanded. The case of China suggests a very similar pattern (Perry 2020).
Empirically, these oppositions may manifest in a variety of ways. Our hypotheses, developed below, seek to capture these dimensions and to distinguish suppression and cooptation.

Higher education has certainly not collapsed; Figure 1 indicates that the global average tertiary enrollment ratio has continued to increase. But Figure 2 shows that the number of countries experiencing enrollment declines has increased in recent years, after a low point in 1990s. Following an earlier wave of reactions during the Cold War, today’s questioning of liberal models again seems to be providing fertile grounds for reactions against higher education.

### Hypotheses

Drawing on the discussion above, our analyses test four hypotheses. The first prediction follows conventional world society thinking. Given higher education’s external legitimation by a liberal, and later neoliberal, world society, we expect that oppositions to higher education should be more common in countries with fewest ties to world society:

**Hypothesis 1**  
Oppositions to higher education – in the form of enrollment or funding cuts, constraints on academic freedom, or physical attacks – are more likely in countries that are less integrated into world society.

As is conventional, we proxy countries’ embeddedness in world society via their ties to international non-governmental organizations (INGOs).

A main contribution of our paper, however, is to attend to countries’ embeddedness in alternatives to the liberal international order that are organized on an international scale. We thus theorize that contestations over higher education should be more likely in countries with ties to international organizations that reject, or offer alternatives to, various dimensions of the liberal model – economic, political, or social:

**Hypothesis 2**  
Oppositions to higher education – in the form of enrollment or funding cuts, constraints on academic freedom, or physical attacks – are more likely in societies linked to internationally organized illiberal alternatives.

As observed above, illiberal oppositions to higher education tend to pursue two main strategies: repression and co-optation/control. Our remaining hypotheses seek to capture these variations in reactions. For one, we theorize that rather than engaging in wholesale suppression of higher education, countries linked to illiberal alternatives may curtail enrollments in the social sciences and humanities (seen as potential sources of intellectual threat), but promote them in applied and technical fields (seen as essential for development):
Hypothesis 3  Countries linked to internationally organized illiberal alternatives are likely to produce greater enrollments in technical and applied fields, but lower enrollments in the social sciences and humanities.

Moreover, we theorize that successful co-optation (bringing higher education under the control of an illiberal state) may obviate the need for curtailing enrollments, with an expanded higher education system no longer seen as threat (and perhaps even as a source of allegiance to the state, as Perry (2020) has argued in the case of China). This gives rise to a final hypothesis:

Hypothesis 4  States linked to internationally organized illiberal alternatives that successfully co-opt higher education are less likely to curtail enrollments.

Quantitative Analyses

We explore the issue with cross-national and longitudinal data on higher education enrollments and related measures. Our main analyses cover the period from 1960-2017. The unit of analysis is the country-year. In addition to enrollments, we examine other measures that may reflect suppression or co-optation: higher education funding, shifts in enrollment away from fields associated with liberalism (e.g., social sciences) and toward applied and technical fields (e.g., engineering); measures of academic freedom; and terrorist attacks on higher education institutions or students.

Dependent Variables

Higher Education Enrollments

We use the gross tertiary enrollment ratio -- the total number of students divided by the population in the relevant age group. Enrollments have been increasing rapidly in most countries, so stagnation or decline may reflect growing opposition to higher education. The measure includes students enrolled in ISCED levels 5 through 8. Data come from the World Development Indicators (World Bank 2021).

Higher Education Funding

To determine whether state support for higher education may be declining in countries, we use data on government spending on tertiary schooling, taken from the World Development Indicators (World Bank 2021). The measure is standardized as a proportion of state educational spending; we transform it to tertiary spending as a percentage of a country’s GDP. Data are not available until 1970, and the country coverage varies annually from roughly 50 to 100 countries.
Illiberal Reactions to Higher Education

Higher Education Enrollments in Engineering, Agriculture, and Business; Enrollments in the Social Sciences and Arts/Humanities

Illiberal opposition may shift enrollments toward applied and technical fields linked to national economic development and away from the social sciences, journalism, arts, and humanities, which have in some contexts been bases for liberalism. To assess this, we use data on tertiary enrollments by field of study, taken from the UNESCO website (UNESCO 2017). We combine the following enrollment categories: “Engineering, Manufacturing, and Construction Programmes”, “Agriculture, Forestry, Fisheries, and Veterinary Programmes”, and “Business Administration and Law”. Our second measure combines the following categories of enrollments: “Social Sciences, Journalism, and Information Programmes” and programs in “Arts and Humanities”. Enrollments in each set of fields are measured as a percentage of total enrollments. The measure is available from 1999-present.

Academic Repression (vs. Freedom)

We measure academic freedom using a 5-point measure taken from the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Dataset Version 10 (Coppedge et al. 2019; Pemstein et al. 2019). The measure is inverted so that high values indicate greater repression of higher education. Countries at the “repressed” end of the scale are characterized in the following manner: “Censorship and intimidation are frequent. Academic activities and cultural expressions are severely restricted or controlled by the government.” By contrast, in countries at the opposite end of the scale, political authorities fully respect academic freedom and cultural expression.

Terrorist Attacks on Higher Education Institutions

We draw on the Global Terrorism Database (GTD) to identify terrorist attacks that target higher education institutions. The GTD includes over 170,000 terrorist incidents between 1970 and 2016: bombings, assassinations, and the like. The name of the terrorist target is generally included, which allows us to identify attacks that specifically target higher educational institutions. The data mainly report zeros and ones, so we created a dummy variable indicating the presence of any attack within a given country-year.

Independent Variables

Gross domestic product (GDP) per capita captures a country’s level of economic development. Conventional explanations of educational expansion often stress

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2 Engineering or technical fields are not inherently illiberal. But, illiberal movements and regimes have often celebrated their contributions (e.g., to material production).

3 Alternative versions, such as those with raw counts, required zero-inflated negative binomial models. Results were similar. The dichotomous model simplified presentation.
economic and labor market changes associated with development, making this a crucial control (e.g., the rise of labor markets demanding skills or technologies produced by higher education). We use real GDP based on purchasing power parity (PPP) in inflation-adjusted US Dollars. Data are taken from the Penn World Table Version 9.0 (Feenstra et al. 2013). The measure is logged to reduce skewness.

**Democracy**

Democracy, another important control (and measure of liberalism), is measured by the twenty-one point “Polity IV” scale, which distinguishes between autocratic and democratic societies (Marshall et al. 2013).

**Secondary School Enrollment**

Secondary education is measured by the gross enrollment ratio, taken from the World Development Indicators (World Bank 2021). Secondary school enrollments determine the size of the pool eligible to attend higher education and thus capture the inflationary pressures of the “credential society” (Collins 1979): as more people access secondary schooling and degrees, there is greater pressure to pursue higher education credentials.

**Country Links to World Society (INGO Memberships)**

A country’s linkage to the liberal culture of world society is measured in the conventional manner, using data on International Non-Governmental Organization (INGO) memberships from the Yearbook of International Association (UIA 1971 to 2016; see Boli and Thomas 1999). The measure is the total number of different INGOs in which a country’s citizens are reported to hold membership, logged to reduce skewness.

**Membership in Illiberal Inter-governmental Organizations**

We surveyed the literature to identify major international organizations active during our period of study that espouse a range of cultural alternatives to liberalism, such as conservative religious doctrines, authoritarian or nationalist ideologies, traditional views regarding the individual and family, and so on. Our online Appendix 2 describes each of the organizations on our list and justifies their inclusion. Our final list of illiberal international organizations expands the lists used in Bromley et al. (2020) and Lerch et al. (2021) and includes the following organizations: Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON), Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), League of Arab States (LAS),

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4 Net enrollment ratios (which include only enrollees in the designated age group for a given level of schooling) yield similar results, but are available for fewer years.
Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and Warsaw Treaty Organization (WTO).

We constructed a time-varying count of countries’ memberships in these organizations (including provisional membership status) in a given year. Ties to these organizations may be proxies for countries’ illiberal orientations; but these organizations may also directly bolster and propagate illiberal frames and discourses (e.g., Hadler and Symons 2018).

Descriptive statistics for our main measures can be found in Appendix 5.

Methods

Higher education enrollments are analyzed using panel regression models with country fixed effects. We use the same modeling approach for our analyses of educational funding, enrollment by field, and academic freedom. The occurrence of terror attacks on higher education in a given country-year is modeled using a panel logistic regression model with fixed effects.5

Fixed effects models were chosen based on a Hausman test, though in practice both fixed and random effects models yielded similar findings (see robustness checks below). We settled on fixed effects for our main tables as they represent a more conservative approach and help address time-invariant omitted variable bias. They focus on within-case variability and thus control for all time-invariant features of a society that might affect the outcome variable, such as region, colonial history, dominant religion, or geographic location (Wooldridge 2002). Allison (2009) suggests a “hybrid” approach that provides separate estimates of within-case and between-case variation. As our arguments do not suggest specific patterns (or differences) regarding within versus between variation, we opted for the simpler fixed effects model. That said, models that incorporate between-case variation (e.g., random effects models) yield similar results.

Our independent variables are not lagged, as joining an IGO (our key variable of interest) usually involves preparations in the years prior to the actual join date (such as preliminary meetings or participation in conferences) and reverse causality dynamics are unlikely. However, we also estimated models with lagged independent variables and our findings are robust (available upon request).

We conducted numerous robustness checks. In one set of robustness analyses, we addressed alternative explanations of higher education expansion (for instance, labor market changes or ceiling effects) and alternative explanations of illiberal oppositions (for example, inequality or immigration). Focusing on enrollments, our measure with the best quality and coverage, we present additional control variables capturing some of these explanations in Table 5. Another set of robustness checks sought to ensure that our findings are not unique to the fixed effects models

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5 Terrorist attacks on universities are a count variable (non-negative integer), but most values are zero or one. We used a logit model, examining whether any attacks occur in a year. Alternatives, such as a zero-inflated negative binomial model, tell the same story.
we present, but consistent across a range of alternative panel regression models. We report these in Appendix 4. Beyond these core checks, we periodically note supplemental robustness analyses in footnotes – for instance, addressing relevant controls for some of our outcomes. Overall, our robustness checks indicate that our results are stable. Finally, we looked for outliers and influential cases. We found a few moderate outliers; their removal did not alter findings.

Results

The Effect of Illiberal Ties on Higher Education Enrollments and Funding

Table 1 presents results of panel regression models with country fixed effects examining tertiary enrollments and government funding for tertiary education. Control variables have expected effects: economic development and the expansion of secondary schooling are associated with greater enrollments and funding. These support conventional explanations of higher educational expansion, which often stress economic changes or the expansionary pressures of the credential society.

We observe that country embeddedness in the liberal culture of world society – operationalized by INGO memberships – is associated with higher enrollments and funding, consistent with our Hypothesis 1. In analyses of enrollment the coefficient is particularly large and highly significant. Democracy, another measure of liberalism, has no effect once INGO memberships are controlled.

We also see that ties to international illiberal organizations are negatively associated with enrollments and government spending on tertiary schooling. This is

|                          | Enrollments | Funding |
|--------------------------|-------------|---------|
| GDP (log, p/cap)         | 10.01***    | 0.16+   |
|                          | (1.98)      | (0.08)  |
| Secondary enrollment     | 0.38***     | 0.005***|
|                          | (0.05)      | (0.001) |
| Democracy                | −0.00       | −0.00   |
|                          | (0.11)      | (0.01)  |
| INGO membership (log)    | 2.62**      | 0.12+   |
|                          | (0.99)      | (0.07)  |
| Illiberal IGO membership | −5.25***    | −0.16*  |
|                          | (1.30)      | (0.06)  |
| Constant                 | −102.06***  | −1.63*  |
|                          | (17.64)     | (0.63)  |
| N (country-years)        | 6,834       | 2,615   |
| R-square                 | 0.582       | 0.191   |
| Countries                | 147         | 138     |

Cluster-robust standard errors in parentheses
***p<0.001; **p<0.01; *p<0.05; + p<0.10

Table 1 Panel regression models with fixed effects: the effects of illiberal organization membership on tertiary enrollments and funding, 1960–2017

\[ \text{Enrollments} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{GDP} + \beta_2 \text{Secondary enrollment} + \beta_3 \text{Democracy} + \beta_4 \text{INGO membership} + \beta_5 \text{Illiberal IGO membership} + \beta_6 \text{Constant} + \epsilon \]

\[ \text{Funding} = \gamma_0 + \gamma_1 \text{GDP} + \gamma_2 \text{Secondary enrollment} + \gamma_3 \text{Democracy} + \gamma_4 \text{INGO membership} + \gamma_5 \text{Illiberal IGO membership} + \gamma_6 \text{Constant} + \eta \]
consistent with Hypothesis 2, the idea that oppositions to higher education are linked to alternative ideological programs that challenge the liberal international order. Our country cases from Appendix 1 illustrate possible mechanisms. In Afghanistan, an alternative rooted in religion manifested in extremely low enrollments under the Taliban. Mechanisms included the exclusion of women, the closing of universities, and the fleeing of academics and students. In Hungary, recent illiberal shifts tied to Orbán’s populist and authoritarian agenda have also manifested in remarkable declines in funding and enrollments. Underlying dynamics include heavy cutbacks on state-funded university places and reductions in the compulsory school-leaving age.

In supplementary analyses, we found that the negative effects of illiberal organizations on enrollments are larger for female enrollments (shown in Appendix 3). Illiberal movements may especially affect female enrollments by celebrating traditional understandings of gender and family and/or directly excluding women. This underlying dynamic is most dramatically illustrated by our cases from Nigeria, where Boko Haram has abducted schoolgirls, and from Afghanistan, where the Taliban explicitly excluded women from higher education. Yet in Hungary, too, the illiberal turn has involved a celebration of traditional gender roles (and Appendix 1 shows a steep decline for female enrollments).

**The Effect of Illiberal Ties on Higher Education Repression and Attacks**

In Table 2, we analyze reactions in the form of academic repression and terror attacks on higher education. Countries scoring high on repression are those in which

|                    | Academic repression | Terror attacks |
|--------------------|---------------------|----------------|
| GDP (log, p/cap)   | − 0.05              | − 0.40         |
|                    | (0.10)              | (0.63)         |
| School enrollment  | − 0.01+             | − 0.02         |
|                    | (0.00)              | (0.01)         |
| Democracy          | − 0.14***           | − 0.00         |
|                    | (0.01)              | (0.03)         |
| INGO membership (log) | − 0.19***         | 0.75           |
|                    | (0.06)              | (0.49)         |
| Illiberal IGO membership | 0.30***             | 1.43***        |
|                    | (0.06)              | (0.29)         |
| Constant           | 1.33+               | − 1.94         |
|                    | (0.77)              | (5.48)         |
| N (country-years)  | 6,995               | 2,769          |
| R-square           | 0.610               | 0.207          |
| Countries          | 148                 | 148            |

Cluster-robust standard errors in parentheses

***p<0.001; **p<0.01; * p<0.05; + p<0.10
academics and students routinely experience direct political repression and censorship. Democratic societies tend to score low on academic repression, as one would expect. Connections to world society are also associated with reduced repression, consistent with hypothesis 1. Importantly, we also find that countries with ties to illiberal organizations score higher on academic repression, lending further support to hypothesis 2. Again, the mechanisms involved are varied. In Turkey, an illiberal regime purged large parts of the university system through detainment and arrests as well as charges and dismissals. In Hungary, the regime sought to coopt higher education both by bringing existing institutions under greater state control and by establishing new institutions loyal to the state.

Table 2 also addresses direct assaults on higher education, in the form of terrorist attacks on higher education institutions. Few variables have significant effects on attacks (which are not common). But we see a statistically significant association between illiberal membership and terrorism, consistent with Hypothesis 2. Again, our Appendix 1 offers examples from Afghanistan and Nigeria.

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Table 3 Panel regression models with fixed effects: the effects of illiberal organizations on university enrollments in selected fields of study (% of total enrollment), 1999–2016

| Engineering, agriculture business, law | Social science, journalism, arts, & humanities |
|----------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|
| GDP (log, p/cap)                       |                                               |
| − 3.62                                 | 0.01                                          |
| (4.24)                                 | (2.41)                                        |
| Secondary enrollment                   |                                               |
| 0.01                                   | − 0.04                                        |
| (0.03)                                 | (0.02)                                        |
| Democracy                              |                                               |
| − 0.10                                 | 0.09                                          |
| (0.17)                                 | (0.10)                                        |
| INGO membership (log)                  |                                               |
| 1.62                                   | 4.47+                                         |
| (6.28)                                 | (2.47)                                        |
| Illiberal IGO membership               |                                               |
| 3.63*                                  | − 2.82**                                      |
| (1.72)                                 | (0.89)                                        |
| Constant                               |                                               |
| 64.93**                                | − 8.09                                        |
| (21.42)                                | (15.82)                                       |
| N (country-years)                      |                                               |
| 806                                    | 794                                           |
| R-square                               |                                               |
| 0.032                                  | 0.043                                         |
| Countries                              |                                               |
| 105                                    | 104                                           |

Cluster-robust standard errors in parentheses

***p<0.001; **p<0.01; *p<0.05; + p<0.10

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We also explored additional controls such as civil war and the Banks “weighted conflict index”. These did not alter our findings.
The Effect of Illiberal Ties on Enrollments by Field of Study

Many countries with illiberal ties make cutbacks to higher education. But anecdotal evidence suggests that patterns may be more complex, with illiberal orientations boosting enrollments in some fields but bringing cutbacks in others. To examine this possibility, Table 3 analyzes the relative size of tertiary enrollments in different fields. We draw a contrast between engineering, agriculture, and business, which are linked to state interests of economic development, versus the social sciences and the arts/humanities which are often associated with liberalism (e.g., free speech and liberal political views). Generally, field-specific enrollments are hard to predict, so the overall R-square is low (Drori and Moon 2006). But key results fit our suppositions. In models of engineering/agriculture/business enrollments, country membership in illiberal organizations is positive and significant. Conversely, in models of social science and arts/humanities enrollments, illiberal ties are negative and statistically significant. These findings are consistent with Hypothesis 3. Our appendix suggests examples from Hungary and Turkey, where illiberal regimes favor technical fields (“practical higher education”) and cut back the social sciences. Examples of underlying mechanisms, for instance for Hungary, include reductions of funding for certain subjects as well as outright bans (here on gender studies).
Illiberal Ties and Enrollments: The Moderating Effect of Academic Repression

Our final table explores patterns of cooptation further, testing our fourth hypothesis which theorizes that illiberal states that successfully bring the higher education system under control may not see a need to curtail enrollments. Notable examples include Turkey and China, which continue to expand enrollments in recent years. Table 4 evaluates this idea by examining whether the effect of illiberal ties depends, in part, on whether the higher education system has been repressed.

Indeed, we see that the interaction between illiberal ties and academic repression is positive (while the main effects for illiberal ties and academic repression are both negative). Constraints on academic freedom (while generally lowering enrollments) reduce the dampening effect of illiberal international linkages (the negative illiberal organization effect is smaller when repression is high). This is consistent with our fourth hypothesis: illiberal regimes that successfully repress the university do not focus as much on limiting enrollments.

Robustness Checks

Table 5 presents enrollment models with additional variables to ensure our findings hold up when we control for other factors commonly seen as affecting higher education enrollments. We include the following measures: fertility rate (a measure of family structure that also indirectly reflects the status of women); the age dependency ratio (a measure of the relative size of the youth population, the group available to enter higher education); a dummy for countries with high values of (lagged) tertiary enrollments (the enrollment “ceiling”); expansion of the service sector as % of GDP (sometimes viewed as an indicator of the expanding “knowledge economy” and demand for skilled workers and technology); and unemployment (which might affect demand for higher education) (all measures from World Bank 2021). The main findings generally hold steady with the inclusion of additional controls. In one instance, when a measure of unemployment is added, our illiberal IGO measure is not significant. This lowered significance is not due to the unemployment measure, itself, but rather it is due to the much smaller sample of cases.

Models in Table 5 also check that our findings persist when controlling for common explanations for the rise of illiberal reactions like populism (e.g., Eichengreen 2018; Kaufmann 2019; Rodrik 2018). We control for economic crisis (measured by economic decline of 5% or more), the size of the industrial sector (capturing deindustrialization); economic inequality (gini score), and migration (incoming migrants per capita) (measures are from World Bank 2021). Again, our main findings hold up.7

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7 We also delved into the issue of state religion, societal religiosity, and particular religious traditions (available upon request). Generally, state and societal religiosity were negatively associated with higher education, but effects varied by religious tradition. The issue warrants future study, but our key findings are robust with these religious variables controlled.
| Variable                        | 1960–2017 Coefficients | 1960–2017 Standard Errors |
|--------------------------------|-------------------------|---------------------------|
| GDP (log, p/cap)               | 9.78***                 | (2.02)                    |
| Secondary enrollment           | 0.45***                 | (0.05)                    |
| Democracy                      | 0.09                    | (0.10)                    |
| INGO membership (log)          | 3.94***                 | (1.17)                    |
| Illiberal IGO membership       | −5.04***                | (1.23)                    |
| Fertility                      | 2.78***                 | (0.82)                    |
| Youth population               | −0.02                   | (0.07)                    |
| Tertiary ceiling dummy         | 36.05***                | (3.79)                    |
| Service sector (% GDP)         | 0.09                    | (0.07)                    |
| Industry sector (% GDP)        | −0.42***                | (0.09)                    |
| Unemployment                   | 0.19                    | (0.26)                    |
| Economic crisis                | 1.96**                  | (0.63)                    |
| Economic inequality Gini       | 3.16                    | (28.38)                   |
### Table 5 (continued)

| Variable          | Intercept 1 | Intercept 2 | Intercept 3 | Intercept 4 | Intercept 5 | Intercept 6 | Intercept 7 |
|-------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
|                   | −123.72***  | −99.01***   | −83.36***   | −103.23***  | −110.14***  | −237.20***  | −104.00***  |
|                   | (20.63)     | (20.89)     | (13.91)     | (25.93)     | (22.61)     | (32.80)     | (17.91)     |
| N (country-years) | 6,837       | 6,836       | 6,820       | 4,339       | 4,559       | 3,099       | 6,839       |
| R-square          | 0.594       | 0.580       | 0.680       | 0.500       | 0.546       | 0.671       | 0.582       |
| Countries         | 147         | 147         | 147         | 147         | 142         | 139         | 147         |

Cluster-robust standard errors in parentheses

***p<0.001; **p<0.01; *p<0.05
Appendix 4 presents additional robustness checks to ensure that our findings hold up when alternative panel regression models are used, such as random effects (with regional controls), two-way fixed effects, panel corrected standard errors, and dynamic fixed effects. As the Appendix shows, our findings are robust.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

Higher education has grown in participation and centrality worldwide in a period of liberal dominance. Our analyses suggest that oppositions to liberalism, sometimes anchored in international structures, become a basis for attacks on higher education. Our statistical analyses provide evidence that countries with ties to liberal world society tend to support higher education compared to countries without such ties (Hypothesis 1). By contrast, countries with illiberal links tend to have lower enrollments and funding but more academic repression and terrorist attacks (Hypothesis 2). Adding nuance, we also show that countries with illiberal international ties tend to restrict the social sciences and arts/humanities, while expanding fields such as engineering and agriculture (Hypothesis 3). Finally, we see some evidence of bifurcation in possible reactionary responses, with co-optation serving as an alternative to enrollment cuts (Hypothesis 4).

Conventional analyses tend to see schooling as principally linked to the economy. As a result, they have difficulty explaining the hyper-expansion of schooling around the world, and some have predicted an imminent collapse as higher education outpaces labor market needs and/or the willingness of people to pay tuition. Our paper offers an alternative perspective, linking higher education expansion and retrenchment to liberal world society and its oppositions.

More broadly, our study outlines the dynamics of opposition in world society, which is not simply a monolithic regime that propels global conformity. As scholars have long pointed out (e.g., Inglehart and Baker 2000; Beckfield 2010; Wimmer 2021; Ferguson 2021), alternative cultural frames are available, both within world institutions and embedded in regional, national, or local structures. Episodes of diffusion are propelled by the legitimation of cultural models on the global stage and the build-up of international structures around dominant models. Following a more contentious Cold War period, the immediate post-Cold War era was historically unusual, with a high level of global liberal legitimacy and bold liberal international structures. Today, the eroding legitimacy of liberalism and establishment of structures rooted in alternative cultural programs create new possibilities for mobilized opposition, undermining patterns characteristic of the liberal age – such as vastly expanded higher education systems.

A key contribution of our study is thus to conceptualize national reactions against world society models – including in higher education – as linked to oppositional structures within world society itself. We see such memberships as proxy for more diffuse patterns of embeddedness in alternatives. Rather than any one organization directly transmitting alternative principles to its member countries, memberships capture linkages to what are bound to be a host of anti-liberal discourses and pressures.
Given broad erosions in the legitimacy of liberalism, we would expect such illiberal ties and orientations to predict pushback against liberal world models in other domains as well. A particularly interesting future direction might be to explore illiberal reactions against the authority of science, which is intertwined with the standing of higher education. Science is questioned in many domains, from vaccination to climate change to the origins of the universe. We suppose measures of these reactions would show results similar to those we find here. And probably there are direct associations between policies and attitudes toward science, and toward higher education.

Our results also illuminate the synergistic relationship between liberalism and higher education. While we have stressed the influence of liberal world society on higher education expansion, the relationship also runs the other way. In the contemporary period, intellectuals are seen as a liberalizing force (e.g., Lipset 1959; see the striking empirical effects in Schofer et al. 2021). The illiberal trends documented here – and patterns of cooptation in particular – suggest that this contemporary synergistic relationship may be changed as illiberal influence over the university grows, at least in some contexts (Perry 2020). In its long history, of course, the university has often been in opposition to liberalisms of all sorts.

Of course, reactions against higher education are not isolated to illiberal polities. For example, in the United States, enrollments at some institutions are in decline (Conley and Massa 2022), conservatives hold increasingly negative views of higher education (Parker 2019), restrictions on academic freedom are on the rise (see e.g., recent attempts to prevent University of Florida professors from testifying in a voting rights lawsuit), and we see contestations over universities’ diversity initiatives (see e.g., the recent suspension of a diversity course at Boise State). This suggests that the weakening legitimacy of liberal world society has effects above and beyond national ties to illiberal alternatives. There is a general disenchantment with the liberal model that can engulf even countries that have historically been strongly embedded in the liberal global system. Future research could explore this question more directly, for instance by constructing world-level measures of illiberalism or, especially relevant for the U.S. case, carrying out subnational analyses that illuminate within-country variations in illiberal tendencies.

What does the future hold? The post-War growth of higher education was bound up with the global liberal order. Some factors that are weakening this order are likely to continue, such as the decline of American economic influence and the emergence of (illiberal) China. Other events, such as economic crises or wars, are more unpredictable, as the war in Ukraine has shown. The key point is that the trends traced by world society scholars hinge on a distinctive institutional order that solidified after World War II. The fragility of that order is becoming more apparent day by day. With the weakening of liberal international institutions, illiberal oppositions may shrink higher education or bring it under control, bending it toward nationalist or instrumentalist goals.

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