

# SPS

PROF. HUGO CANIHAC

*Illiberalism, anti-liberalism and the  
populist challenge*

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The tension between (democratic) popular sovereignty, that populists typically claim to restore, and (liberal) limitations on its exercise, that populists are keen on blaming, is far from new. Yet, conceptually as well as empirically, the relations between populism and liberalism remain rather understudied. While most authors have attempted to conceptualize populism by exploring its relation with representative democracy, this presentation is concerned with a different, yet equally pressing issue: How is populism related to the other building block of contemporary democracies – political liberalism? Most commonly, populism has been described as “illiberal”. But surprising conceptual confusion surrounds the issue of illiberalism, which this presentation aims to clarify. The central argument is that contemporary liberal democracies are facing an “illiberal challenge” that overlaps with, but is not identical to, the “populist challenge”. Indeed, not all of populism is concerned with attacking every aspect of liberalism, while not all attacks against liberalism are populist. While the populist challenge relates to democratic institutions, norms or practices, the illiberal challenge is specifically concerned with political liberalism.

Discussant: Prof. Gianfranco Baldini



ALMA MATER STUDIORUM  
UNIVERSITÀ DI BOLOGNA  
DIPARTIMENTO DI SCIENZE POLITICHE E SOCIALI

