Authoritarian Practices in a Global Age

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This book emerged from a growing conviction that my research project Authoritarianism in a Global Age, on how authoritarian regimes handled various forms of globalization, did not go far enough in challenging received understandings of authoritarianism. I want to thank, first of all, my fellow researchers in that project: Jos Bartman, Emanuela Dalmasso, Adele Del Sordi, Aofei Lv, Marcus Michaelsen, and Kris Ruijgrok. They willingly engaged with my theoretical musings while they themselves were doing research in and on national and subnational authoritarian regimes. I am also grateful to my senior colleagues in the project, Imke Harbers and Ursula Daxecker, for their constructive criticisms of my first attempts to ‘get away from the state’. A mention of the Authoritarianism in a Global Age project is not complete without acknowledging the administrative and research support of Meta de Lange, who took so much of the burden of running a large research project off my plate, and our funder, the European Research Council.

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Introduction
Expectations of Accountability

Are powerful individuals and institutions getting less and less accountable to the people whose lives they affect? Not long ago, for the first time in more than two hundred years, a president of the United States altered a weather forecast. Days after President Trump mistakenly named Alabama as one of the states under threat from hurricane Dorian, he appeared on television with a manually drawn loop on the weather map, extending the hurricane's potential path to Alabama. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) then issued a statement that Dorian might after all have some impact on Alabama. State-employed meteorologists were instructed to refrain from comment (Gwynne 2019, 12). The incident stands out, not as the president’s worst lie, but as one of the most silly and gratuitous, creating an elaborate cover-up rather than admitting to a minor human error. It is indicative of a wider pattern of secrecy, disinformation, and quashing of dissent, not only from the Trump Administration, but also by other elected leaders in established democracies.

In the same month as ‘sharpie-gate’, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson attempted to prorogue parliament to prevent parliamentarians obstructing his Brexit policy (Swinford and Zeffman 2019). And in Poland, it emerged that the deputy justice minister was behind an online smear campaign against a judge critical of the governing party PiS (Applebaum 2020). Political scientists have noted in recent years that while democratic states rarely experience coups anymore, the quality of democracy has gradually eroded in many countries (Waldner and Lust 2018; Maerz et al. 2020).

Or are powerful people and institutions getting more and more accountable to the people whose lives they affect? Not long ago, for the first time in more than 2,000 years, a Catholic Pope laicized a cardinal for sexual abuse. In a church trial, Cardinal Theodore McCarrick was found guilty of abusing his power to have sex with young adults and minors (Holy See Press Office 2019b). Four months later, Pope Francis set up a worldwide system requiring clerics to report and investigate sexual abuse and its cover-up within the Church (Holy See Press Office 2019a). The Catholic Church’s profound repudiation of abuse that it formerly condoned is not unique.

Months before the defrocking of Cardinal McCarrick, film producer Harvey Weinstein’s career ended in ignominy after the New York Times broke the story of decades of sexual predation, enabled and covered up by his company (Kantor and Twohey 2017). The case sparked the #MeToo movement, exposing sexual harassment and abuse in many industries and forcing top-level resignations at global organizations.
including taxi company Uber, search engine giant Google (McGregor 2018), and NGO Oxfam (Rawlinson 2018 (see also Bacchi 2018). And recent sea changes in accountability of formerly untouchable institutions have not only been about sexual misconduct. Decades of vote-rigging, bribery, and intimidation by the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (Sugden and Tomlinson 2017) ended in 2015 when fourteen top officials were arrested in Switzerland and the United States, eventually forcing FIFA’s long-standing president Sepp Blatter to resign (BBC 2015).

On closer inspection, these two contrasting sets of incidents have more in common than at first sight. The Trump Administration’s efforts to cover up the President’s hurricane slip-up achieved the opposite of what they aimed to do: NOAA’s chief scientist, the Commerce Department, and the House of Representatives all launched investigations, which eventually corroborated that meteorologists had been pressured to alter their findings (Gwynne 2019). Prime Minister Johnson’s attempt to send parliament home was rescinded by a unanimous Supreme Court decision (Bowcott et al. 2019). And the Polish deputy minister of justice was forced to resign over the trolling campaign. On the other hand, the Catholic Church still does not require its priests and nuns to report suspected abuse to secular authorities, and very few sexual abuse cases against powerful men are successfully prosecuted. Football association FIFA’s new ethics code, developed after the scandals, has deleted the word ‘corruption’ and added a clause prohibiting ‘defamatory’ statements by FIFA officials, impeding whistle-blowing (Brown 2018). In sum, there are many indications that it has become more difficult for powerholders in all fields to immunize themselves from accountability, and at least as many signs that they are trying as hard as ever.

The two sets of incidents demonstrate neither a global trend towards ever-greater accountability by powerful people and institutions towards those whose lives they affect, nor its opposite. What they demonstrate is that struggles over accountability have become central to contemporary politics. Not only states, but also institutions like universities, charities, churches, companies and international organizations are now widely deemed to be subject to an ‘accountability paradigm’ (Coy et al. 2001; see also Grant and Keohane 2005; Ebrahim and Weisband 2007).

This does not mean that such institutions have actually become very much more accountable than they were in the past. It means that expectations have been raised. In the past, only governments of parliamentary democracies were considered as having obligations to be ‘answerable’ to their electorates. Since the 1970s, and at a more global scale increasingly since the 1990s, it has become normal to think that all manner of power-holders other than elected politicians also have an obligation to explain and justify themselves to those whose lives they affect. Powerholders have to respond to such expectations of accountability, either by making themselves more accountable, or by disabling such demands and obstructing those who claim them. This is an empirical observation, regardless of what legal or ethical duties of accountability they might actually have.
The premise of this book is that with the proliferation of expectations of accountability, incentives for powerholders to find ways of evading accountability have also proliferated. In theorizing and operationalizing such ‘accountability sabotage’ in the first chapter of this book, I attach the adjective ‘authoritarian’ to such practices. It resonates with common sense understandings of authoritarianism as being about a powerful individual or institution being secretive or mendacious and not tolerating dissent. For political scientists however, this is a novel and unusual use of the term ‘authoritarian’. The term has been reserved to apply only to unelected or unfairly elected regimes, or in political psychology to people who value hierarchy and obedience in political leaders. In both cases, ‘authoritarian’ refers to states and their national leadership alone.

But since the late twentieth century, the topography of politics has profoundly changed. As a result, these traditional conceptualizations of authoritarianism cannot be meaningfully applied to large swathes of the contemporary political landscape. They miss many manifestations of accountability sabotage from other political actors who may profoundly affect people’s lives. In this book, I will show how, instead of focusing exclusively on authoritarian regimes, or on authoritarian personalities, political scientists can and should study (that is, define, operationalize, observe, classify, analyse) authoritarian practices. Used in this way, ‘authoritarian’ can remain an analytically useful, empirically valid, and socially relevant term to describe a particular type of political practice, which comes in many more guises than we currently recognize.

The qualification ‘in a global age’ in the title of this book refers to two recent and intertwined developments, much described in the literature on globalization. National governments of states were never quite the sole apex of power and authority that political scientists imagined them to be, but in recent decades they have become much less so than half a century ago. Their authority has both leaked sideways, in the direction of more governance by constellations of quasi-governmental, corporate, and non-profit entities, and spilled across borders, towards much closer collaboration between state agencies and with international organizations. Consequently, authoritarian practices in a global age also go ‘beyond the state’ in the sense that they cross borders, and that they are not carried out by government agents alone. That is not to say that agents of the state have withdrawn, or are no longer important actors engaging authoritarian practices. On the contrary, they loom large, especially in the early chapters of this book. But we see them working together with each other as well as with international organization staff, religious leaders, criminal enterprises, or corporate entities, sometimes with and sometimes without knowledge and mandate from their national governments.

The front cover of this book features an adaptation of the famous frontispiece to Thomas Hobbes’ *Leviathan*, etched by Abraham Bosse with close instructions from Hobbes. Looking closely at the body of the *Leviathan* in this striking image, one notices that it is made up of hundreds of individual men and women. Hobbes’ intent
was to visualize his position that ‘a multitude of men are made one person when they are by one man, or one person, represented; so that it be done with the consent of every one of that multitude in particular’ (Hobbes 1651, 101). His interpretations of ‘representation’ and ‘consent’ were of course stretched to such an extent that the treatise is actually best read as a brilliant defence of authoritarian rule.

My purpose in choosing this image for the cover is also to highlight that authoritarian practices begin and end with people, but they function in quite different ways from the representation in Hobbes' treatise. While Hobbes has a crowned head directing the actions of the ‘body politic’, my Leviathan is headless. It consists not of people who have freely consented to be directed by a single sovereign, but of configurations of people who, exercising their agency, sabotage accountability. They act in an organized context, but they rarely respond organically and in unison to a single hierarchical 'head'. Instead, to return to Hobbes' imagery, the left hand may not always know what the right hand is doing, but jointly they engage in patterns of silencing, secrecy, and disinformation.

Chapter 1 provides the theoretical framework for this book. Parts of this chapter have appeared, in an earlier version, in the article ‘What Authoritarianism Is . . . and Is Not’, in International Affairs, (Glasius 2018). The chapter makes two important conceptual moves to get to a redefinition of authoritarianism. First, drawing selectively on practice theory, it explains the advantages of studying 'authoritarian practices' rather than only 'authoritarian regimes' as a unit of analysis. Second, it introduces the term ‘accountability sabotage’ as the constituent core of authoritarian practices, and defines these as practices of disabling voice and disabling access to information (through secrecy and disinformation).

The rest of the book illustrates five different forms of authoritarian practice in a global age. The empirical chapters cast a wide net. The unit of analysis is always the ‘authoritarian practice', but its manifestations are quite diverse. Each chapter starts by connecting the particular manifestation to a broader literature, then provides two case studies that illuminate the workings of authoritarian practices at the micro-level, before demonstrating how these are representative of broader patterns. The chapters then address the configurations of actors that collaborate in these authoritarian practices, and the common understandings between them. Finally, each chapter addresses the sources of vulnerability and resilience of the people affected by authoritarian practices, and their representatives. The empirical chapters are intended to provide a springboard for further studies on authoritarian practices beyond authoritarian regimes.

Chapter 2 concerns ‘extraterritorial authoritarian practices’. It challenges the assumption that governments exert control over populations only within their state's territory. Connecting to an emerging literature on ‘transnational repression’ (Moss and Furstenberg 2023), it disaggregates the configurations of actors, mainly but not exclusively agents of authoritarian states, that interfere in migrant communities. It demonstrates the manifold ways in which such configurations covertly or
openly attempt to silence their ‘subjects’ abroad, even when these are also citizens of democratic states. The chapter focuses on people of Turkish and Iranian descent in the Netherlands: taking the same host country as the site of investigation for two groups allows us to see differences and commonalities in the practices of different states of origin. As such, it shines a light on the affordances and limitations extraterritorial state agents have when operating in the context of a particular liberal democratic host state, and the collaborations they enter into with other actors. The chapter also shows that even within the same migrant group, not all individuals affected are equally vulnerable or protected and empowered.

The next two chapters examine how authoritarian practices manifest themselves in multilateral collaborations between state agencies. While both focus on anti-terrorist policies, Chapter 3 is about largely informal and covert collaboration in covering up the CIA-led ‘rendition’ policy of detaining and interrogating terrorist suspects in the aftermath of 9/11. There has already been extensive research on extraordinary rendition, in the form of parliamentary inquiries, judicial investigations, NGO reports, and scholarly work, but it has focused primarily on the inhumane treatment, torture, and lack of fair trial rights of those detained. This book’s interest is in the sabotage of accountability to different forums relating to rendition: to the detainees themselves, to everyone (relatives, lawyers, human rights defenders, and journalists) who sought to find out what happened to them and to seek redress, to the people whose governments were coreponsible for extraordinary rendition and secret detention, and to the people on whose territories rendition was played out without their knowledge. The extraordinary rendition programme, the chapter argues, was a classic ‘covert op’, just on a bigger scale than ever before. This kind of accountability sabotage is best understood in the context of a crisis response, improvised, informal, and ultimately unsustainable.

Chapter 4 by contrast focuses on formal multilateral collaboration within the framework of the Security Council, regarding the placing and maintaining of terrorist suspects on its Sanctions List. While mandated by international law, the decision-making on who gets listed or delisted and why is surrounded with secrecy and denies individuals the opportunity to communicate directly with the decision-making body. The chapter draws on mainstream and sceptical treatments of multilateralism and on critical security studies to analyse how multilateral collaborations can actually come to facilitate and stabilize authoritarian practices.

Chapter 5 of the book analyses how corporate actors engage in authoritarian practices in collaboration with various state agents. It assesses potential drivers of corporate authoritarian practices. A specific region and a specific industry are considered: copper and cobalt mining in Katanga, DRC. The chapter deliberately focuses on an ‘overdetermined’ case, full of drivers and low on impediments or counter-incentives, to provide insight into how the corporate-authoritarian nexus functions in such circumstances. The chapter shows how different configurations of actors, including multinational mining companies and local and national state
agents, maintained secrecy and repressed critical voices concerning their purchase of the concessions, about pollution and about treatment of workers.

The final empirical chapter considers authoritarian practices within a religious institution. Chapter 6 looks at the cover-ups and discrediting of whistle-blowers surrounding sexual abuse of minors in the Catholic Church. Like the previous case studies, the focus on the Catholic Church was chosen in part because it was a ‘likely case’: there is an embarrassment of riches, now well-documented, when it comes to accountability sabotage regarding sexual abuse of minors in the Catholic Church. But equally, the case provides a puzzle: while it is unsurprising that clerical abusers would use intimidation, secrecy, and lies to cover their own tracks, it is much harder to understand why non-abusive Catholic officials so often took part in covering up abuse. Condoning sexual abuse of minors is antithetical to the teachings, but also to the interests, of the Church. In order to illuminate the workings of ‘institutional authoritarian practices’ in detail, the chapter focuses on two institutions within the Church in two different geographies: the diocese of Cloyne in Ireland, and the Salesian order of Don Bosco’s Australia-Pacific Province. The chapter finds a set of cultural, sociological, and organizational explanations for accountability sabotage: in historic relations between church and state, in the organizational structure of the Church, in its organizational culture and theological tenets, and finally in the actions and words of the highest Vatican officials, into the twenty-first century, when confronted with clerical sexual abuse scandals.

The five forms of authoritarian practice analysed in this book are not meant to be exhaustive. It leaves out, for instance, subnational authoritarianism or authoritarian practices in the sphere of NGOs. In terms of empirical case studies, the book only scratches the surface of what could be studied. The chapters generally focus on relatively ‘easy cases’, in two senses. First, the case studies do not concentrate on border-line cases of what might or might not be considered authoritarian practices, but on entrenched routines that are relatively easily characterized as sabotaging accountability. Second, the cases in question have received a considerable degree of publicity. Research on secretive practices is generally difficult by nature, but in these cases what was being kept secret has already been—to some extent—uncovered. This focus on relative egregious and well-documented cases is warranted by the novel framework that binds the case studies together. The purpose of this book is not to bring new facts to light, but rather to introduce the analytical lens of ‘authoritarian practices’ and bring it to bear on existing information.

The empirical chapters therefore rest largely on factual material already in the public domain. All chapters make considerable use of media reports. Chapter 3 on rendition-related secrecy and Chapter 6 on sexual abuse in the Catholic Church also rely on parliamentary or government-mandated investigations. Chapter 4 on terrorist listing owes an important debt to the monograph on the same topic by Gavin Sullivan. Chapters 3 and 4 also use Wikileaks cables as sources. Chapter 5 on mining-related practices in Katanga has a number of NGO reports as its primary sources.
The final chapter does three things. First, it revisits the definition of authoritarian practices, reconsidering its constituent elements and clarifying the threshold of what can be considered authoritarian practices. Second, it draws out commonalities and unique features from the case studies, thereby setting out a research agenda for future studies. Authoritarian practices, once operationalized as demonstrated in this book, can and must be classified and compared, and causal connections established with other phenomena, if we are to suggest ways of responding to them. Subsequent studies could disaggregate and focus on specific types of authoritarian practices to systematically answer further questions about their emergence, endurance, and spread, the configurations of actors involved in them, and the types of impacts they have on the people affected by them. Finally, the chapter shifts the spotlight from the political actors involved in authoritarian practices to consider, across the empirical chapters, the attributes of ‘accountability demanders’, their methods, and their strengths and vulnerabilities. It examines the particular roles of journalists, NGOs, parliamentarians, lawyers, activists, and whistle-blowers, in relation to disabling voice and secrecy and disinformation. This overview provides an entry point to considering how demands for accountability can actually spark authoritarian practices, but also how authoritarian practices can be and are being exposed and resisted.

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1

Authoritarian Practices as Accountability Sabotage

1. Introduction

The central aim of this book is to shed light on manifestations of authoritarianism that are not confined to the ‘territorial trap’ of the modern state, and are not captured by the concept of an ‘authoritarian regime’. In order to recognize, study, and compare such different manifestations of authoritarianism in contemporary politics, we need to reconsider its conceptual properties. This chapter introduces and elucidates an alternative, practice-oriented concept of authoritarianism, which is then applied to all subsequent empirical chapters. This redefinition allows us to recognize and analyze such phenomena as extraterritorial authoritarianism, multilateral authoritarianism, corporate authoritarianism, and institutional authoritarianism, as will be demonstrated in the five empirical chapters in the remainder of this book.

The next section will provide a brief history of authoritarianism as a political science concept, concluding that its evolution has culminated in a usage that now produces blind spots in empirical observation. Three main problems with current conceptualizations of authoritarianism are identified: the fact that authoritarianism is treated as a negative, residual category of non-democracies; the excessive focus on elections; and the assumption that authoritarianism is necessarily a state-level phenomenon. What follows from this is that we need a definition that is substantial rather than residual; that focuses on accountability rather than on the quality of elections alone, and that can be applied to governance arrangements other than sovereign states.

Two conceptual moves are made in this chapter to get to such a redefinition. The first is to use a more dynamic benchmark, seeking to characterize and identify authoritarian practices, rather than authoritarian systems, as a unit of analysis. Second is a move up the ‘ladder of abstraction’ (Sartori 1970, 1040), from elections to accountability. Struggles over accountability are central to contemporary politics, and increased demands for accountability, not only on governments but also on many other powerful actors, have given such actors new incentives to actively circumvent or impede accountability. This chapter adopts a parsimonious definition of accountability, and turns it on its head to introduce the concept of ‘accountability sabotage’.

Authoritarian practices are then defined as ‘a pattern of actions, embedded in an organized context, sabotaging accountability to people over whom a configuration of actors exerts a degree of control, or their representatives, by disabling their voice
and disabling their access to information. Each element of this definition is clarified in turn. In the concluding section, a distinction is made between authoritarian practices—the main subject of this book—and illiberal practices.

2. **Authoritarianism: a brief conceptual history**

The terms ‘authoritarian’ and ‘authoritarianism’ derive from the Latin *auctoritas*, meaning authority, but also influence, sanction, advice, origin, command, coming from *actor*, which means master, leader, actor, or author. By the mid-nineteenth century, authoritarian had come to denote ‘favouring imposed order over freedom’ ([Online Etymology Dictionary n.d.](#)), and from there it travelled further away from the term authority to denote ‘relating to, or favouring a concentration of power in a leader or an elite not constitutionally responsible to the people’ ([Merriam Webster Dictionary n.d.](#), second meaning) or ‘favouring or enforcing strict obedience to authority at the expense of personal freedom’ ([Oxford Dictionaries n.d.](#)).

Most polities in history have been under authoritarian rule in these dictionary senses. Since the ideas of free and equal citizenship or constitutional responsibility to the people were largely unknown both in theory and in practice until at least the eighteenth century, and still exceptional and contested in the nineteenth century, it is unsurprising that authoritarianism does not have a long pedigree as a concept. Describing their rulers as authoritarian would have made no more sense to our forebears than describing their planet as containing oxygen. Even during the first wave of de-democratization, in the 1920s and 1930s, communism, fascism, and Nazism were still not lumped together as democracy’s other. And in the post-Second World War attempts at making sense of the twentieth century, totalitarianism rather than authoritarianism was the concept that drew fire from writers like Karl Popper (1945), George Orwell (1946), or Hannah Arendt (1951).

One political science study of totalitarianism from this era, by Friedrich and Brzezinski (1956), also provides a parsimonious definition of autocracy: it identifies as a common characteristic of all autocratic regimes ‘that the ruler is not accountable to anyone else for what he does. He is the autos who himself wields power; that is to say, makes the decisions and reaps the results’ (4). While the presumption of a single individual master-puppeteer is artificial and at odds with their treatment of totalitarianism, the focus on non-accountability, as well as the notion of ‘wielding power’, provides fertile ground for a twenty-first century reconceptualization, to which I will return.

Authoritarianism first received more extensive conceptual attention, still as a category in-between totalitarianism and democracy, in Juan Linz’s 1975 classic *Total-
Authoritarianism and Authoritarian Regimes. Linz’s somewhat awkward but still much quoted definition of authoritarian regimes runs as follows:

...political systems with limited, not responsible, political pluralism, without elaborate and guiding ideology, but with distinctive mentalities, without extensive nor intensive political mobilization, except at some points in their development, in which a leader or occasionally a small group exercises power within formally ill-defined limits but actually quite predictable ones.

(Linz 1964, 255)

Linz, however, set the tone for many subsequent studies that characterize authoritarianism first as a shortfall in pluralism, and second as a container concept that only gains substance in its subcategories (see for instance Geddes 1999; Hadenius and Teorell 2007 for seminal categorizations). In the decades that followed, the third wave of democratization went hand in hand with the morphing of remaining totalitarian into post-totalitarian regimes, climaxing with the ostensible democratic triumph of the 1990s. Political science became overwhelmingly concerned with democratization processes and hybrid regimes, and authoritarianism turned into the understudied residual other of democracy.

The fall of the Berlin Wall also fuelled a quite separate literature across the social sciences, preoccupied with the depth and meaning of globalization. It focused on the transformation of state sovereignty through global flows, and corresponding changes in international law and regulation, norms and identity-formation (see for instance Castells 1996; Held et al. 1999; Scholte 2000; Sassen 2006). The main focus in this literature has been how these processes were affecting the nature and quality of democracy in developed western contexts (see for instance Kymlicka 1999; Bohman 2005; Ypi 2008; or for empirical treatment Kriesi et al. 2008), and, to a lesser extent, in fragile states and conflict zones (Kaldor 2012; Duffield 2001).

Since the early 2000s, there has been a renewed interest in the endurance of authoritarianism. However, in sharp contrast to the previous fierce debates over the character of totalitarianism, conceptual investigation of contemporary authoritarianism has been practically absent. Moreover, while there has been increased attention to how other states affect authoritarian regimes (Bader et al. 2010; Brownlee 2012; Levitsky and Way 2010; Tansey 2016; Vanderhill 2013), the literature on political consequences of globalization has been largely ignored in these recent studies (Cooley and Heathershaw 2017 are a rare exception). There has been no systematic consideration in either the globalization or the authoritarianism literature of whether and how states under authoritarian rule may have been affected by the posited transformation of the state. It is against the background of the rise of the accountability paradigm on the one hand, and the effects of processes of globalization on the other hand, that I argue renewed attention to the concept of authoritarianism, and a reorientation, are necessary.
3. Three problems with the current use of ‘authoritarianism’ in political science

The vacuum at the core

One of the peculiarities of the study of authoritarianism is that, unlike most fields of study, it does not take the definition of its main concept, contested or otherwise, as its point of departure. Two classic definitions of democracy dominate the study of authoritarianism. The first is the definition formulated by Joseph Schumpeter (1943): ‘the democratic method is that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people’s vote, or a ‘free competition for a free vote’ (260, 271). Schumpeter explicitly eschewed the idea that democracy had anything to do with the demos having a voice, or with collective preferences being realized. Przeworski (1999) and others have defended this thin conception of democracy on the basis that democracy thus understood constitutes a non-violent procedure for regulating societal conflict, no more. However, as we will see, not all followers of this definition adhere to Schumpeter’s deeply sceptical view of democracy, and some tend to adopt the minimal definition for methodological ease rather than as a conceptual choice (Boix et al. 2012, 1525–1527; Cheibub et al. 2010).

The second school of thought, based on Robert Dahl’s (1971, 3) requirements for ‘polyarchies’ approximating the democratic ideal, insists that a democracy is about more than an open leadership contest. It also entails respect for certain civil and political rights, specifically the right to freedom of expression and access to information, and freedom of association, as preconditions for effective participation and enlightened decision-making (Linz 1975; Diamond 1999, 7–15; McMann 2006; Levitsky and Way 2010, 5–6). By extension, authoritarian regimes are those who fail to organize free elections and fail to respect these rights. The Dahlian formulation of authoritarianism gives more information about what authoritarianism is actually like than the Schumpeterian one, as well as giving more conceptual flesh to possible hybrids, variously characterized as illiberal democracies, defective democracies, diminished sub-types, etc (Zakaria 1997; Merkel 2004; Collier and Levitsky 1997). But ‘the core is still a vacuum’ (Brownlee 2010, 47), since the meaning of authoritarianism still relies on an absence, on lack of freedoms, rather than on substantive conditions.

Instead, authoritarianism should be conceived of neither as democracy’s residue nor its yin and yang opposite. Democracy has multiple opposites, including anarchy, civil war, imperial rule, or apartheid, and all manner of hybrids can be imagined, which vary on multiple scales: of governing capacity, of presence of competitors to the state, or formal equality between citizens (see O’Donnell 1993 and Tilly 2007 for conceptual explorations along these lines). Think for instance about the following three non-democracies: Saudi Arabia, South Sudan, and apartheid South Africa. It becomes readily apparent that these three regimes have little in common other
than the absence, for completely different reasons, of free and fair elections with universal suffrage. If this is the meaning we wish to reserve for authoritarianism, we might as well abandon the concept. If Milan Svolik (2012, 20) is right that ‘whereas democracies are all alike, each dictatorship may be undemocratic in its own way’, we should all give up on the study of authoritarianism as a subject. We might only study a particular regime for its own sake, without any attempt at generalization. Few political scientists would go this far.

A more common avenue has been further classification within the ‘authoritarian’ category, starting of course with Linz (1975), and more recently applied by Geddes (1999), Diamond (2002), and Hadenius and Teorell (2007). Great analytical work has been done on some of these subcategories, for instance by Collier (1979) on bureaucratic authoritarianism, by Gause (1994) on monarchies, or by Schedler (2013) on electoral authoritarianism. But they do not help much in defining ‘authoritarianism’ as such. If sub-classifications were the only salient way to analyse authoritarianism, we should not study authoritarianism at all, but only engage in ‘monarchy studies’, ‘one-party state studies’, etc. Clearly, it makes sense to attempt to investigate all authoritarian regimes, not just sub-sets, in terms of what they have in common rather than by what they lack. In practice, there is valuable empirical work that does this, including Svolik’s own study on ‘the shadow of violence’, as well as Gandhi’s (2008) seminal book on authoritarian institutions, but conceptually, such studies rest on a negative understanding of their own core subject.

**Reification of ‘free and fair elections’**

As seen, the presence or absence of free and fair elections is generally considered the primary touchstone of whether a state is authoritarian or democratic. This reification of elections, never entirely unproblematic, is less so today than ever. Authoritarianism studies have widely recognized one side of the problem: the world is now populated with states that hold elections with some element of pluralism but with what Levitsky and Way (2010, 4) have termed an ‘unequal playing field’. The spread of elections is generally attributed to the broader international legitimacy of democracy in a post-Cold War context, the feasibility of manipulating elections, and the possibility of deriving useful information from them (Schedler 2013). While we now understand a great deal more about how election manipulation works, it is telling that there is still no consensus on whether these ‘electoral’ regimes are indeed hybrids between democratic and authoritarian rule (as according to Diamond 2002; Morlino 2009; Ottaway 2013), or just a subtype of the latter (following Schedler 2013; Gandhi and Lust-Okar 2009).

Until very recently (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Waldner and Lust 2018), the literature on elections that are ‘real but unfair’ remained insulated from research on the flaws and limits of elections in established western democracies. Even now, many
Three problems with the current use of ‘authoritarianism’ in political science

1. Scholars of authoritarianism do not appear to take the analytical connection with democracy, which all in their negative definitions insist on, very seriously. They have a blind spot for the widespread scepticism, amongst scholars of western democracies and general publics alike, that elections are actually a vehicle for engendering policy change in response to popular demand. Leading scholars on authoritarianism such as Cheibub, Gandhi, and Vreeland (2010) state that ‘elections allow citizens to influence policy by their control over leaders’ (71), while Geddes, Wright, and Frantz (2014) assert that in democracies ‘a ruling coalition of 50 percent (plus) of voters can tax those outside the coalition to distribute benefits to those inside’ (315). But their dummy-variable categorizations of authoritarian and democratic states, which hinge on contested elections, do not begin to test whether citizens are actually enabled to influence policy, or organize redistribution.

   While scholars of democracy disagree on the extent of, and reasons for, public distrust of politicians and political parties, and more lately, the turn to populist candidates and parties, they generally agree that these are real phenomena (see for instance Hay 2007; Norris 2011; Dalton 2013; Norris and Inglehart 2019). A few authors have even argued that there may be a convergence between what were formerly starkly different authoritarian and democratic national governments (Cavatorta 2010; Teti and Mura 2013; Bruff 2014; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). The point is not that free and fair elections have become meaningless. But the ‘traffic light’ conception of states being democratic when they hold free and fair elections and authoritarian in all other cases does not help.

   Democracy scholars have long ceased to identify democracies merely by the presence of free and fair elections, and authoritarianism scholars should cease to identify authoritarianism merely by their absence. Rather, we should contemplate what elections originally stood for in the democratic/authoritarian divide: a mechanism of accountability by rulers to the demos. As seen above, Friedrich and Brzezinski (1956, 4) identified ‘that the ruler is not accountable’ as the distinguishing feature of authoritarian rule. At the other end of the definitional spectrum, accountability rather than elections as such was the core concept of democracy as developed by Philip Schmitter and Teri Karl (1991) in the context of the post-1989 democratizations: ‘Modern political democracy is a system of governance in which rulers are held accountable in the public realm, acting indirectly through the competition and cooperation of their elected representatives’ (76). In a later piece, Schmitter (2004) explicitly dropped the word ‘elected’ before representatives, opening the way to the inclusion of more informal types of representation as accountability mechanisms (59). A focus on accountability could still include elections as a frequent, and to some extent valid, mechanism of accountability, but it would not conflate an indicator with the category.
The national government as the only unit of analysis

A third blind spot in authoritarianism research, related to the electoral tunnel vision, has been its failure to notice the impact of globalization on politics. Scholars of the democratic West, as well as of developing countries, have extensively researched how, why, and to what extent ‘the autonomy of democratically elected governments has been, and is increasingly, constrained by sources of unelected and unrepresentative economic power’ (Held 2003, 519). Authoritarianism research by contrast overwhelmingly presupposes (with a few recent, critical IPE-inspired exceptions such as Bruff and Tansel 2019 and Jenss and Schuetze 2021) that the relevant arena for studying politics, authoritarian or democratic, is the national government. This was not always so. The founding fathers of authoritarianism and democracy studies had a much broader focus. Harry Eckstein and Ted Gurr (1975), who stood at the cradle of the Polity project, aimed originally to identify ‘authority patterns of social units’, which could in principle include any unit ranging from the nuclear family to the international organization. Robert Dahl (1956), too, in his early work addressed conditions for democracy in a ‘social organization’ (2, 48) which was by no means necessarily a national state. The dominance of the state in the political imagination, together with a quantitative predilection for country-year units, may explain why foundational ideas on authoritarianism and democracy were narrowed down to an exclusive state focus. Today, this narrow focus gets in the way of addressing some of the most urgent citizen concerns of our time.

The most significant exception to this ‘methodological nationalism’ (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002) has been the burgeoning literature on subnational authoritarianism (see for instance McMann 2006; Gibson 2013; Giraudy 2015; Harbers et al. 2019, with antecedents in Key 1949 and O’Donnell 1993). By focusing on a different unit of analysis than the national state, these studies could open the way to examining many other sites of authoritarianism, but so far, this literature has almost exclusively focused on ‘states’ within federal states. The potential for moving on to studying cities, rural communities, or functional rather than geographic entities within the state has yet to be mined.

The analytical conundrum resulting from the separation between the authoritarianism literature and the globalization literature can be illustrated by the Greek debt crisis. The Greek people repeatedly had the opportunity to choose between different parties in free and fair elections between 2011 and 2015, and made different choices at different times. But even after the radical left-wing party Syriza won a landslide victory on a platform of renegotiating the country’s debt repayments, Greece’s negotiating position did not substantially alter, and Syriza eventually accepted terms that kept the austerity measures largely intact. National elections were of limited relevance to the imposition of austerity policies on the Greeks, since the real source of the policies was not national. It was, rather, the so-called Troika (the European Commission, the European Central Bank, and the International Monetary Fund), which
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held no voter mandate. Should the Troika therefore be considered authoritarian? Or is the notion of authoritarianism inapplicable to the situation of the Greek people because they had a choice between different parties? Political science today lacks the conceptual tools to answer such a question.

The Greek situation may be an extreme case, and some may find David Held’s conclusion, that ‘some of the most fundamental forces and processes which determine the nature of life-chances within and across political communities are now beyond the reach of nation states’ (Held 2003, 521) overstated. But the claim that state autonomy has been diffused, and that the international system has moved towards multilevel, sometimes overlapping or competing, governance arrangements, has been affirmed in many strands of contemporary political science literature, including public policy, international relations, political economy, and democratic theory (see for instance Ruggie 1998; Keohane 2002; Hooghe and Marks 2003; Dryzek 2006).

If we take this claim seriously, the question naturally arises whether and how new forms of authoritarianism may manifest themselves at levels below, above, or beyond the state.

To give but one example, the European Union famously suffers from democratic deficits. But does it follow that it is, or can be, authoritarian? Even to be able to answer such questions, we need to think of authoritarianism in such a way that the label could in principle apply to transnational governance arrangements, but this would not automatically follow from the absence of elections. The notion of accountability can lead us towards such a better definition. There has been attention in various literatures to forms of accountability in the absence of elections, especially at levels other than the state. Such forms are often identified at the local level, where the mechanisms enabling accountability may include informal institutions, civil society, or the media, or even the central state, which may turn to local accountability structures as a means of solving its own principal-agent problem vis-à-vis local officials (Tsai 2007; Choup 2010; Manion 2000; Malesky and Schuler 2010). Similarly, there is literature on accountability via civil society at the transnational or the suprastate level (see for instance Dingwerth 2007; Scholte 2007; Glasius 2008; Héritier and Lehmkuhl 2011; Koenig-Archibugi and MacDonald 2013). The depth and significance of these alternative forms of accountability is, as it should be, much contested. The point here is not to identify what types or conditions of accountability might count as sufficiently democratic, but instead to pinpoint what would count as definitely authoritarian. In order to do so, I will introduce the notion of ‘accountability sabotage’, which manifests itself in political practices, not necessarily in constitutional arrangements.

In sum, to understand contemporary politics we need a definition of authoritarianism that is substantive and agentic rather than residual and systemic; that focuses on accountability rather than on the quality of elections alone; and that lends itself to assessing political institutions within, below, or beyond the state. Below, I will spell out why a practice-oriented definition, rather than a system-oriented definition,
is better suited to understanding authoritarianism today, and why sabotage of accountability should be considered the constitutive feature of contemporary authoritarianism. Then I will define the concept of authoritarian practices that animates this book, and explain each of its elements.

4. A practice approach

Practices are, simply put, ‘patterned actions that are embedded in particular organized contexts’ (Adler and Pouliot 2011, 5). According to Theodore Schatzki (2001a), one of their prime theorists, ‘practice approaches can . . . analyze (a) communities, societies, and cultures, (b) governments, corporations, and armies, and (c) domination and coercion as either features of, collections of, or phenomena instituted and instantiated in practices’ (15).

In using the term practices, this book takes no position in debates between more Bourdieu-inspired versus Latour-inspired or other conceptions of practices. Indeed, it concurs with Adler and Pouliot (2011, 3–4), who ‘do not believe that using the concept necessarily entails an exclusive “ism”, but instead, a practice-oriented theoretical approach comprises a fairly vast array of analytical frameworks that privilege practice as the key entry point to the study of social and political life’ (see also Bueger and Gadinger 2015, 458, as inspired by Reckwitz, for a ‘thin’ approach to practices). I approach practices primarily as a ‘unit of analysis’ (Bueger and Gadinger 2015, 449). Calling something ‘a practice’ does not have explanatory power in and of itself. It identifies the object of inquiry. A focus on practices allows a shift away from designating only ‘regimes’ as potentially authoritarian, recognizing that in contemporary politics, governance arrangements can be more fluid.

At the same time, practices do not narrow the focus to the individual (Schatzki 2001a, 14). While political science may be too concerned with state structures, in common parlance we sometimes fall into the opposite trap, referring to individuals like Putin or Trump as if they were all-powerful and uniquely responsible for all political life inside and emanating from their respective states. Practice theory by contrast gives particular emphasis to the organizational and social context in which practices arise. According to Schatzki (2001b), ‘a practice is a set of doings and sayings organized by a pool of understandings, a set of rules’ (61). When considering the possibility of ‘authoritarianness’ in Russia or the United States, too, we must not get obsessed with the personalities of Putin or Trump alone, but equally consider the indispensable ‘doings and sayings’ of clusters of politicians, civil servants, and public figures, at different levels, who are associated with them. This chimes with what we know from case studies of authoritarian regimes. People do not obey an isolated dictator out of pure fear, or collaborate with him out of pure greed or hunger for power. They develop common understandings of how things are done within their social context, whether they are true believers in the government’s legitimation narratives, or just pragmatists, or somewhere in between.