In the larger public debate, it is often suggested that neoliberalism has been swept aside by an upsurge of what are commonly referred to as right-wing populist movements, parties, and figures but are, in fact, authoritarian ones. It is the more or less explicit assumption of this narrative—namely, that there is a conflictual and dichotomous relationship between neoliberalism and authoritarianism—which is the focal point of the critical inquiry contained in this paper, thus building on recent scholarly accounts, which also challenge this assumption. The argument proceeds in two broad steps, prefaced by a theoretical-historical conceptualization of neoliberalism. First, an admittedly cursory survey of authoritarian parties and movements is conducted to show that there is ample reference to typical neoliberal ideas and arguments in their party platforms or concrete reform proposals. Secondly, the issue is approached from the converse perspective in order to ascertain the extent to which there are authoritarian potentialities in neoliberal thought. Here, calls for a strong state by some neoliberal thinkers are discussed as well as the link between some of them and the military dictatorship in Chile. Finally, the paper argues that the neoliberal view of politics is—possibly inadvertently but still systematically—drawn toward authoritarian politics and the respective actors because neoliberal thinkers largely lack any alternative option to account for the possibility of neoliberal reform. Neoliberalism and authoritarianism are not intrinsically tied to each other, but even less are they inherently opposed to one another; an amalgam of “authoritarian neoliberalism” thus seems far from impossible and may very well become the dominant shape of neoliberalism to come.

INTRODUCTION

Donald Trump had hardly been president-elect for a week when Cornel West gave his assessment of the significance of the election, which is representative of an influential current in the public debate when it comes to the relation between neoliberalism and what is typically referred to as ‘right-wing populism.’ The very first sentence of the op-ed piece that appeared in the Guardian (UK) on November 17, 2016, provided a succinct and somewhat blunt summary of West’s (2016) reading: ‘The neoliberal era in the United States ended with a neofascist bang.’ In the same newspaper and the same year, Martin Jacques had already come to a strikingly similar conclusion with regard to the British context in the aftermath of the Brexit referendum. His op-ed piece heralded “[t]he death of neoliberalism and the crisis of western politics” (Jacques 2016), allegedly brought about by an upsurge of populism that had just swept David Cameron out of office and Britain out of the European Union. And while Cornel West may be an eminent theorist and public intellectual but no real expert on neoliberalism, Jacques used to be one of the more perceptive commentators and critics of Thatcherism in the 1980s, so his analysis could hardly be disparaged as a diagnostic shot from the hip. The common denominator of these assessments, which are emblematic of the dominant view in public debates, is the more or less explicit assumption that there is a strictly antagonistic political and conceptual relation between neoliberalism and what is commonly referred to as (right-wing) populism. Furthermore, in many accounts, this dichotomy is supplemented by a narrative that is reminiscent of Marx’s famous description of the antagonism between bourgeoisie and proletariat: neoliberalism destroyed the public infrastructure; produced rampant inequality accompanied by political, social, and economic strife; and thus contributed to the conditions of emergence
of right-wing populism. Just as the bourgeoisie produced the proletariat, neoliberalism spawned populism and thus created its own gravedigger (see Cayla 2019; Watkins and Seidelman 2019). In some versions of the narrative, the blame is shared between neoliberalism and social democracy, which is considered to have paved the way for the ascent of populism by abandoning its traditional social base (Mouffe 2013, 2018). But since this happened mostly by adopting neoliberal policies in the framing of the “Third Way,” this is only a variation on the overall theme. The purpose of this paper is not to question these explanatory accounts of the rise of right-wing populism and the role neoliberalism and/or social democracy play in them. Rather, what will be scrutinized is the more fundamental question regarding the relation between neoliberalism and right-wing populism—both in theory and in practice. The main claim is that a strictly dichotomous conceptualization of this relationship is not convincing, thus building on and enlarging accounts that share the skepticism regarding the strict incompatibility of these two forces, such as Wendy Brown’s (2019) and Quinn Slobodian’s (2018a). While there may indeed be elements in the respective agendas that are incompatible, there are considerable areas of overlap and points of correspondence between them. Therefore, we ought to be cautioned against declaring neoliberalism dead at the hands of right-wing populism—not the least because the premature obituaries for neoliberalism are legion—and we should, instead, take into consideration an amalgam between the two seemingly hostile formations in what has come to be called “authoritarian neoliberalism” (Bruff 2014). This neoliberalism is far from over; it will be a force to be reckoned with for the foreseeable future.

The paper proceeds in two broad steps, prefaced by a historical-theoretical conceptualization of neoliberalism. First, I will give a rather cursory overview of the agendas, party platforms, and actual policies endorsed and pursued by a range of right-wing populist movements and parties from Italy and Austria to Germany and the United States. Needless to say, this survey does not claim to be exhaustive by adopting neoliberal policies in the framing of the “Third Way,” this is only a variation on the overall theme. The purpose of this paper is not to question these explanatory accounts of the rise of right-wing populism and the role neoliberalism and/or social democracy play in them. Rather, what will be scrutinized is the more fundamental question regarding the relation between neoliberalism and right-wing populism—both in theory and in practice. The main claim is that a strictly dichotomous conceptualization of this relationship is not convincing, thus building on and enlarging accounts that share the skepticism regarding the strict incompatibility of these two forces, such as Wendy Brown’s (2019) and Quinn Slobodian’s (2018a). While there may indeed be elements in the respective agendas that are incompatible, there are considerable areas of overlap and points of correspondence between them. Therefore, we ought to be cautioned against declaring neoliberalism dead at the hands of right-wing populism—not the least because the premature obituaries for neoliberalism are legion—and we should, instead, take into consideration an amalgam between the two seemingly hostile formations in what has come to be called “authoritarian neoliberalism” (Bruff 2014). This neoliberalism is far from over; it will be a force to be reckoned with for the foreseeable future.

The approach I suggest in order to come to terms with neoliberalism is briefly summed up as a historical-theoretical one that takes its starting point from those who described themselves as neoliberals and tries to conceptualize neoliberalism as an intellectual and political project by reconstructing the context of its thought toward using populist solutions to implement marked-based policies. While the ‘conventional’ narrative presumes a mutually repellent relation between the two formations, the agenda consists in identifying mutual attractors on both sides, thus substantiating claims raised by Brown (2019), Slobodian (2018a), and others.

Let me conclude these introductory remarks with a brief clarification with regard to political semantics. I have been referring to right-wing populism so far because it is the predominant terminology at the moment. However, in my view, the term populism comes with a great number of difficulties and is prone to overgeneralizations—in this regard, it might be even worse than the already notorious neoliberalism. Therefore, in the remainder of the paper, I will instead refer to authoritarianism (see Brown, Gordon, and Pensky 2018), which, in my view, captures what “right-wing populism” is about at the end of the day and does not give it the semidemocratic credentials of the populist label. Political semantics are never just semantics because it matters what we call things; therefore authoritarianism—despite its own terminological vagaries (see Linz 2000)—is by far the preferable term. Moreover, given that scholarship on (competitive) authoritarian regimes typically highlights their common thrust toward an unequal political playing field within a still rudimentarily democratic context and the ensuing depolarization of the political landscape (see Levitsky and Way 2012), authoritarianism in this sense captures what I think are the crucial characteristics of “right-wing populism”—at least in its highly influential liberal interpretation (see Müller 2019).

**WHAT IS NEOLIBERALISM?**

If one imagines the world of neoliberalism to be characterized by deregulated markets, unfettered individual freedom, and a healthy dose of creative hedonism as the human resource fuel on which the entire accumulation model runs, there seems to be little room for authoritarian leanings. But then again, to imagine neoliberalism in this way would be tantamount to falling for the ideological self-description as well as the cliché notions of critics of neoliberalism. Accordingly, we must first—in all brevity—clarify what we mean by neoliberalism.

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emergence. This context is the crisis of liberalism, as the
discussions at the Colloque Walter Lippmann
made clear, at the end of which the participants agreed
more or less explicitly on neoliberalism as the
appropriate and shared label for their endeavors (see
also Burgin 2012; Peck 2010; Walpen 2004).

In the words of Louis Rougier, who was the convener
of the meeting that took place in Paris in 1938, "This
non-pre-established harmony [of the meeting], this
unconcerted concert, sketched the outline of a
doctrine called by some 'constructor liberalism'
[libéralisme constructeur], referred to by others as
'neo-capitalism' and for which the use of the name
'neo-liberalism' seems to prevail" (Reinhoudt and
Audier 2018, 93). The participants agreed on the basic
aim of revitalizing the liberal agenda against the
iliberal zeitgeist they faced in the aftermath of the
Great Depression, the slow but steady rise of
Keynesian ideas, and the ascent of antiliberal political
forces from National Socialism to Communism, or
what they referred to as various kinds of "collectivism."
However, the large majority of the participants and the
first generation of neoliberals more generally agreed
that it was not enough to restore ‘classical’ liberalism
and simply return to the great insights of Adam Smith.
Liberalism needed to be thoroughly modernized in
order to regain relevance, which implied the need to
revise its agenda and even abandon certain notions,
of which the credo "Laissez-faire!" was high up on
the list, together with what the participants of the
Colloque referred to as 'Manchesterianism'.

Neoliberalism is thus an endeavor made up of two
components—namely, to revive and to revise
liberalism in order to confront its crisis. More
specifically, we can infer the contours of this
combined project if we identify what it defines itself
against: collectivism in all of its varieties is
undoubtedly the main adversary of neoliberalism,
with the welfare state and Keynesianism being of a
more secondary and indirect nature—at least in early
neoliberalism until the late 1950s. Importantly, this
'field of adversity,' to borrow a term from Michel
Foucault, also includes what one of the participants,
Alexander Rüstow, would later come to call “paleo-
liberalism”—that is, an "unreconstructed" liberalism
sans phrase, positions of which were even present at
the Colloque, although clearly in the minority.3

What conclusions can be drawn from these
triangulations with regard to the neoliberal project?
In my view, the most important one is to steer clear
from deceivingly parsimonious definitions that either
deductively proceed from some essence (e.g.,
unwavering belief in markets) to a typical policy
portfolio or inductively build an account of
neoliberalism on the basis of allegedly neoliberal
policies such as privatization, liberalization,
deregulation, and the like. The second method begs
the question what is specifically neoliberal about
these policies and why the list of them consists of
these policies in particular and not others. The first is
simply too narrow to capture the range of positions
we find within the neoliberal thought cosmos and is
forced to—partially—exclude even uncontroversial
figures such as Hayek or Friedman because their
oeuvres are simply not fully covered by such
references to some "kernel" of neoliberalism.
Accordingly, the conceptual solution does not lie in
attempts to ‘fix’ neoliberalism by pinning it to some
essence. What is common to all neoliberal thinkers
is not a doctrine that can be expressed positively but
rather a common problematic that may be expressed
in the form of the following question: what are the
conditions of possibility of functioning markets—that
is, markets on which the price mechanism reigns as
unperturbed as possible (see Biebricher 2019)? The
market still lies at the heart of this conceptualization,
and it is the price mechanism that is key to its proper
neoliberal understanding, as the participants in the
Colloque already concurred in 1938: "Economic
liberalism recognizes as a fundamental premise that
only the pricing mechanism functioning in free
markets allows for obtaining an organization of
production likely to make the best use of the means
of production..." (Reinhoudt and Audier 2018, 177).
This is what distinguishes neoliberalism from, for
example, Keynesianism. Importantly, though, while
the market remains the crucial point of reference in
neoliberal thought, its proper functioning is no longer
deemed securable through governance that orients
itself toward the ideal of laissez-faire. In other words,
following markets rely on certain preconditions,
and questions pertaining to this infrastructure of
markets, made up of social, political, and legal
spheres, are not just an annex but part and parcel
of neoliberal thought. Accordingly, exploring the
ambiguous roles that the state and democracy play in

2 See, for example, Lippmann’s exhortation: ‘And we should think of liberalism not as a thing accomplished in the olden days and
dated today, but [rather] as something not yet achieved and still very young’ (Reinhoudt and Audier 2018, 106). On laissez-faire and
Manchesterianism: ‘The problem of Manchester liberalism comes from the fact that its development has led to a situation such
that everyone has found himself more or less [financially] ruined or without work’ (Detoeuf, cited in Reinhoudt and Audier 2018, 121).
‘Liberality, for many, is the laissez-faire, laissez passer, and one adds the let suffer [laissez-souffrir]. Without wanting to be opportunistic,
I think that this worn-out word is dangerous’ (Baudin, cited in Reinhoudt and Audier 2018, 111).

3 ‘One group does not find anything essential to criticize or to change in traditional liberalism, such as it was and such as it is... We, on the
other hand, we seek the responsibility for the decline of liberalism in liberalism itself; and, therefore, we seek the solution in a fundamental
renewal of liberalism’ (Rüstow, in Reinhoudt and Audier 2018, 170).
securing these preconditions preoccupies neoliberals at least as much as narrowly economic questions related to the internal workings of markets. This has implications for what I would call a more “decentered” approach to neoliberalism that would shift the critical attention toward such infrastructural questions. But while interesting in themselves, these programmatic issues are of no immediate concern for what is at stake in the present context, which is neoliberalism’s relation to authoritarian politics.

Still, before we commence this investigation with a look at authoritarian actors and neoliberal policies, we have to address the question of whether there are genuinely neoliberal policies, and if so, what are they? Given the conceptualization of neoliberalism I have put forward here, there is no straightforward, definitive link between the neoliberal problematic and a set of policies that could be deductively derived from it. However, we can still establish connections in a number of ways. For example, policies espoused by thinkers such as Milton Friedman, Friedrich Hayek, and James Buchanan, who are properly referred to as neoliberal since their work is animated by the neoliberal problematic, but also representatives of German ordoliberalism such as Walter Eucken or Wilhelm Röpke can be prima facie considered to be neoliberal (for a similar position, see Stedman Jones 2012). Considering that engaging with the neoliberal problematic generates a range of strategies and positions, it must be acknowledged that there is also a considerable range of policies that qualify as neoliberal in this sense: they range—at the least—from attempts to limit potential state action through balanced-budget amendments and similar policies of state austerity designed by James Buchanan (and embraced by many other neoliberal thinkers) to approaches that focus on reining in attempts at corrections of market outcomes through fiscal redistribution, assuming that this would indirectly jeopardize the proper functioning of the price mechanism of markets. So while it is possible to provide grounds for referring to certain policies as neoliberal, it must also be admitted that there are gray zones and room for contestation here, as will become clear in the following sections—for example, with regard to the policy domain of foreign trade.

AUTHORITARIAN ACTORS AND NEONEROLIBERAL POLICIES

The conventional wisdom about authoritarian political parties, movements, and figures typically attributes to them an agenda that combines the strengthening or restoration of national sovereignty with an economic and social policy profile that is highly reminiscent of what social democratic parties used to promote before they fell for the fatal attraction of Third Way neoliberalism from Bill Clinton to Tony Blair. To be sure, I have no aspirations to rebuke this conventional wisdom tout court but rather to give reasons to doubt whether the classification of authoritarian parties as right-wing nationalists in combination with left-wing economic and social policies can, in fact, be made in such a straightforward manner, turning them into poster boys of anti-neoliberalism.

Let us thus embark upon a brief and very cursory tour d’horizon of some of the more noteworthy manifestations of contemporary authoritarianism. This survey will be confined to some cases in the North Atlantic world, but this is mostly attributable to reasons of space. In fact, the argument would be even stronger if one were to include figures like Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil or Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey.

Our starting point is the South of continental Europe, where, until very recently, one of the prime exemplars of contemporary authoritarianism was even part of a coalition government—namely, La Lega, in Italy, under the chairmanship of former minister of the interior Matteo Salvini. The coalition was undoubtedly a very curious one since it brought together what in conventional parlance are termed right-wing (La Lega) and left-wing (M5S) populist parties. The coalition agreement bears testimony to this highly heterogeneous constellation as it, at times, reads like a list of everything each party deemed important and pressing, irrespective of whether there was much coherence to this conglomeration of proposals. One of the few areas where there was not just room for a compromise but actual consensus among the coalition partners was their hostility toward the economic governance structures of the European Union, which is the first issue to be discussed here.

True, La Lega had not even tried to veil its contempt for the European Union and, particularly, the euro regime. Ever since 2014, when Claudio Borghi, La Lega’s economics mentor and spokesperson, drafted a manifesto for the party with the telling title Basta Euro, it has been outspoken about its criticisms of the eurozone and the austerity politics it demands of its members. Indeed, Borghi maintained this stance 4 For a different approach that also could be considered to aim at such a decentralized understanding of neoliberalism, see the research on the Mont Pelerin Society that establishes the ‘identity’ of neoliberalism on the basis of interpersonal connections through this international network without positing any theoretical ‘essence’ of neoliberalism. See, in particular, Mirowski and Plehwe 2009 as well as Plehwe, Slobodian, and Mirowski 2020.
in various interviews throughout the dispute with the European Commission over the budget deficit before the recent change in government, when he announced that in case of an absolute majority of La Lega in the impending election, Italy would leave the eurozone. This election never occurred, and so we can only conjecture whether this statement was to be taken at face value or rather as incendiary rhetoric that would ultimately refrain from such drastic steps.

Still, there can be no doubt that La Lega is opposed to the economic and financial regime that has been established in the eurozone, not the least in response to the eurozone crisis. Given the thoroughly neo- and ordoliberal underpinnings of this regime as well as the Common Market in general (see Streeck 2017; Blyth 2013), it is not a stretch to say that this is a position that seems at odds with neoliberal tenets.⁵ Taken together with the strict anti-immigration policies Salvini had been pursuing as minister of the interior while he was in power, this seems to confirm the view of authoritarianism as a largely anti-neoliberal project.

But this view does not take into consideration any proposals in economic policy except for the ones related to the eurozone, which is naturally what international observers tend to focus on. And even in these European matters, the stance of La Lega and the Italian government did soften in many regards. After all, the party initially nominated the radical euroskeptic Paolo Savona as finance minister but reconsidered after President Mattarella had indicated his resistance to Savona’s appointment. Savona ended up minister of European Affairs, which was still a slight directed at the European Union, but a mostly symbolic one given the few competencies of this ministry. Instead of Savona, Giovanni Tria was nominated, someone who is not even officially affiliated with the party. Similarly, after much uproar over the initial proclamation of a deficit that would be significantly above what the European rules demand, the Italian government ended up producing a budget proposal that was almost in line with European requirements and, in this sense, no more anti-European than France’s budget.

More importantly, however, Italian economic policy was not confined to budgetary disputes with the European Commission. At least, there were very concrete plans, arguably stopped short in their implementation by the self-inflicted ouster of La Lega from the government at Salvini’s behest in August 2019. The main plan the party promoted in the area of economic policy generally and fiscal policy in particular was the introduction of a flat tax. Now, here as in other cases where policies of authoritarian parties are only proposed and never implemented, either because the party is not yet or is no longer in power, it is hard to assess whether and how the realization would have taken place. Accordingly, we do not know what the specifics of such a reform would have looked like; it even changed in its planning stages from an all-out flat tax of 50 percent for individuals and companies to a more differentiated version. What we know with sufficient certainty is only that La Lega has been proposing a flat tax as a crucial strategy to refloat the economy. And we also know that historically, one of the most outspoken proponents of a flat tax system was Milton Friedman—whose standing as a leading figure among the core of neoliberal thinkers can hardly be doubted.

The idea was developed in his seminal Capitalism and Freedom (1962), and Friedman continued to propagate it throughout the years: ‘I have come to the conclusion that the best tax would be a flat tax rate on all income without any deduction,’ he stated in an interview in 1972 (Friedman 1972).⁶ Now, to be sure, with flat tax proposals, the devil is in the details, and as mentioned above, we do not know the specifics of La Lega’s plan and to what extent it would have accorded with Friedman’s suggestions. However, it is not a stretch to state that a flat tax regime, generally, can be considered to be a central element in the neoliberal policy portfolio, not only because it is associated with Friedman but also because of its effect of curtailing market-correcting fiscal policy by the state through progressive taxation. It adheres to the maxims of supply-side economics in assuming that tax reductions will stimulate economic activity and, importantly, is willing to trade economic growth for distributive justice and also sufficient tax revenue. After all, flat tax rates are regressive since taxpayers with lower income pay a higher proportion of their income in taxes, relatively speaking. Furthermore, the empirical experience with flat tax regimes that were, tellingly, introduced as part of the neoliberal ‘shock doctrine’ (Klein 2008) in postcommunist Eastern European countries such as Estonia, Latvia, Ukraine, or the Slovak Republic suggests that the shortfall in taxes is often compensated for by raising consumption taxes, which has an equally regressive effect. Not the

⁵ Still, neoliberal views with regard to the European Union are complex: while the European Union adheres to many requirements of a supranational federation as Buchanan or Hayek envisioned it, others such as Röpke were skeptical of its non-neoliberal aspects such as the Common Agricultural Policy from the beginning. For a survey of anti-European neoliberal perspectives, see Slobodian and Plehwe 2020.

⁶ For further discussions by Friedman, see Friedman 2002 and 1996. For an assessment of his proposal, see, for example, Boskin 2016. The idea of a flat tax was further developed and popularized by Hall and Rabushka 1995; their proposal served as a blueprint for tax reform in several postcommunist countries in Eastern Europe.
least due to some of these effects, a few countries have, in the meantime, terminated the flat tax regime—for example, the Slovak Republic, which introduced it as part of the second wave of major tax system overhauls in Eastern Europe in 2004, only to eliminate it eight years later.

Let us conclude that the domestic agenda in economic policy pursued by La Lega had at its center a project that can be uncontroversially labeled neoliberal, which should give us pause regarding the anti-neoliberal bona fides of contemporary Italian authoritarianism.7

The case of Austria is one that deserves a more detailed discussion than I can provide here, given that it is one of the few instances where an authoritarian party made significant inroads long before the current wave and became a junior partner in a governing coalition starting in 1999. It would be interesting to investigate the continuities and divergences between the two episodes of Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (FPÖ) government. However, for our purposes, it will be sufficient to focus on the recent tenure of the FPÖ; if anything, a cursory look at the literature suggests that including the earlier instantiations of Austrian authoritarianism in government would only further bolster the argument presented here (see, in particular, Tálos 2019).

The recent Österreichische Volkspartei (ÖVP)-FPÖ government was short-lived and came to an abrupt end in the aftermath of the so-called Ibiza affair in the spring of 2019. Therefore, similar to the Italian case, some projects on the government’s economic and social policy agenda, such as a major tax reform, were not implemented, or at least not in their entirety. The plans for such a reform entailed a great number of measures, and not all of them are relatable to a neoliberal agenda; for example, reducing the tax rate for lower-income households is not exactly neoliberal in nature and was also part of the proposed tax reform. However, the overall picture is a familiar one as it follows the precepts of supply-side neoliberalism that have been well rehearsed since the days of Ronald Reagan’s tax reforms (see Rossmann and Rohringer 2019) and is in line with the neoliberal strategy of curtailing the use of state power for redistributive market-correcting purposes. Income taxes were to be reduced across the board and not just for low-income taxpayers. Importantly, corporate taxes as well as taxes on profits were also to be reduced in order to provide incentives for increased economic activity. This tax-cutting agenda did not come as a surprise as the coalition treaty of 2017 lauded the ideal of the “lean and efficient state” and committed the government to the goal of reducing the overall ratio of taxes and fees to below 40 percent of GDP (see ÖVP/FPÖ 2017, 128, 125). And this was not an exclusive concern of the senior partner, the ÖVP, but was very much in accordance with the basic parameters of the FPÖ party program. In its most recent version, from 2011, the party vows to maintain a balanced budget over the business cycle. Concretely, this means that the FPÖ deems “low taxes and incentives” preferable to “subsidies and redistribution” (FPÖ 2011), but in order to keep the promise of balanced budgets, it also has to cut state expenditure—even if this is veiled in the abstract reference to fighting bureaucracy, when it is not couched in straightforward anti-immigrant measures such cutting social support for asylum seekers and the like. Overall, the aspirations of the program are hardly different from the conventional neoliberal scenario: “The state redacts its responsibility and compensates the foregone revenue through reduced public services” (Rossmann and Rohringer 2019, 191).

This pattern also holds for labor market policies: here the overall thrust is directed against the power of labor unions—for example, by reducing their number of representatives on the boards of health care providers. Financially speaking, the government reduced the budget for labor market policies in general and cut €50 million in labor market reintegration funds as well as an entire program focused on the reentry of the elderly unemployed. Finally, it extended the maximum workday to twelve hours and the maximum workweek to sixty hours. As Roman Hebenstreit, chairman of Austria’s largest sectoral labor union, put it, “The war has only just begun—it will continue for many years” (quoted in Riedl 2018).

The supposedly leftist social and economic policy of the recent ÖVP-FPÖ government thus is reduced to measures far and few between, such as raising pension levels for those who paid into old-age insurance for more than forty years and the already mentioned plans for the reduction of the minimum tax rate.8 Overall, the neoliberal imprint is hard to overlook, including the familiar socioeconomic effects that mainly consist of a redistribution of income and life chances from the bottom to the top.9

Germany is the next case to be considered. In the context of European politics, it is a laggard in the

7 For more detail and a nuanced assessment of the overall profile of La Lega with regard to economic and social policy, see Becker et al., who refer to it as a “heterogeneous ensemble of heterodox and neoliberal policies.” Becker et al. 2018, 34.
8 The so-called Familienbonus—that is, an additional tax credit for families that mostly benefits middle-class families, who can gain up to €1,500 from it, while low-income earners receive only the minimum of €250—so it does not necessarily qualify as a piece of evidence for a quasi-social democratic social policy.
contemporary trend toward authoritarianism. While in most of its neighboring countries, at least one right-wing authoritarian party existed—and in Austria the party had even been in power as early as the late 1990s—it was not until 2013 that a party was founded that would eventually elevate right-wing authoritarianism to the status of a force to be reckoned with in German politics. To be sure, on the level of the Länder (states), there had been predecessors such as Die Republikaner, which claimed two-digit results in some Länder elections in the 1990s, or the radical right-wing NPD, which continues to have a significant following in northeastern Germany. However, only the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) managed to establish itself in politics at the federal level, with ninety-one seats in the Bundestag at the moment, the equivalent of 15 percent of the votes in the last general election, in 2017. In contrast to La Lega and the FPÖ, there is no evidence of any governmental activity for the AfD, since they have never been part of any governing coalition, either in the Länder or at the federal level. Therefore, we have to rely on the AfD’s programmatic profile in order to ascertain whether and to what extent an anti-neoliberal inflection is discernible.

In fact, in the case of the AfD, such an inflection would be somewhat surprising given that it was founded as a one-issue party driven by mostly ordoliberal concerns over the way the eurozone crisis was managed under the official auspices of the European Union and the unofficial auspices of the Eurogroup and the ‘reluctant hegemon’ Germany (see Bulmer and Paterson 2015). Initially, it served as a reservoir for conservatives and liberals who thought that the rather draconian Troika regime was still too lenient and that the ‘rescue’ mission for the GIIPS countries (Greece, Ireland, Iceland, Portugal, and Spain) opened up a constellation of large-scale moral hazards, while the unorthodox policies of the European Central Bank as well as the European Banking Union (then still in its planning stage) would eventually come to mutualize European debt in a stealth manner, to the detriment of German taxpayers. From the beginning, an economic chauvinism animated the AfD, but in its founding phase it was still unclear which specific path its development would take. In fact, the AfD was on a downward trajectory until the turbulence over migration politics in 2015 revived it, albeit in a new form that combined authoritarianism with an aggressive anti-immigration and anti-EU stance. These controversial trademark characteristics of the AfD aside, how has its economic policy profile evolved since its founding phase? The short answer is that there is not much of a development to be detected (see Havertz 2019). If one compares the various versions of the party program—and there are only these and the discursive production of the party members, in debates and statements, to serve as the basis of an assessment—there is a continued commitment to a broadly neoliberal/ordoliberal outlook: it goes without saying that the party espouses the model of the social market economy—because there is no political force in the German context that could afford to oppose this empty but extremely powerful signifier. While the social market economy is a catchall term that one can embrace with no political cost, the commitment to an ordoliberal grounding of the social market economy is less trivial, and it is therefore noteworthy that the party manifesto makes explicit reference to the founding fathers of the ordoliberal tradition within neoliberalism—namely, Walter Eucken, Wilhelm Röpke, and Alfred Müller-Armack, who are credited with developing an ‘ordering ethic’ animating the social market economy. To put this commitment into perspective: neither the Free Democratic Party nor the Christian Democratic Union, both of which had historically very close ties to representatives of the ordoliberal tradition and are typically seen as the main promoters of the latter, make any such references in their party manifestos. Still, all three party manifestos coincide in their more or less frequent reference to another key term of the ordoliberal tradition—namely, Ordnungspolitik (‘the politics of ordering’), which refers to the political task of establishing and maintaining a framework for markets without directly intervening in them (see AfD 2016, 157).

With regard to the social aspect of the social market economy, the AfD manifesto somewhat expectedly and similarly to the FPÖ extols the importance of supporting German families and child-rearing. Beyond that, there are some minor reform proposals for the way unemployment insurance is set up and transfers are calculated that are indeed against the grain of some aspects of the deeply neoliberal reforms of German unemployment insurance as part of Agenda 2010, passed early in the twenty-first century by a governing coalition of Social Democrats and the Green Party. But this slightly social democratic bent directed against a policy reform passed by Social Democrats pales in comparison to the significance of other demands in financial and fiscal policy: here the manifesto spells out the programmatic commitment

9 As an aside, it should be added that the conformity with neoliberal ideas also extends to international trade policy. While in opposition, the FPÖ was opposed to CETA; when in power, the party was ready to ratify it.
10 For an exploration of the neoliberal roots of the AfD tracing them to various civil society organizations and networks, see Plehwe and Schögl 2014.
11 On the trajectory of the AfD since its founding, see Arzheimer and Berning 2019.
to ordoliberal ideas in a mostly stringent manner. In another striking similarity to the FPÖ, the AfD demands a reduction of taxes and fees to below 40 percent of GDP. And while it predictably affirms the so-called debt brake in the German constitution—that is, a constitutional balanced-budget amendment—it doubles down on it with the call for a ‘fee brake’ (Abgabenbremse), to be installed on the constitutional level (AfD 2017, 50). The necessary complement of the combination of tax reductions (the AfD also wants to reform the structure of the tax code and replace the progressive rate with several tax levels and thus stops short of a flat tax regime) and a commitment to a balanced budget is, of course, austerity. And indeed, the AfD lauds the ideal of the ‘lean state’ as the fitting correspondence to ‘free citizens’ (AfD 2016, 17), vowing to make the state ‘leaner and more efficient’ (AfD 2017, 53), just as the FPÖ would. Add to this a general acceptance of multilateral trade regimes and the opposition to protectionist policies (see AfD 2016, 154–55), and you have a profile whose basic neoliberal outlook is not even put into question by the espousal of the minimum wage and the call for a cap on atypical employment forms in companies. While one must hasten to add that this profile may be subject to change, as some factions in the AfD would like to see it exhibit a more social outlook, there are key players in the party, such as the economics professor Bernd Meuthen and the former business consultant Alice Weidel, who are known to be strongly opposed to such a turn. For the time being, we must conclude that besides some rather minor positions that can be interpreted as corresponding to a leftist agenda in labor market or social policy, the AfD, for the most part, is a party with an economic policy profile that is easily squared with the tenets of neoliberalism/ordoliberalism as they are conventionally understood.12

The last example of authoritarian politics under scrutiny is the United States. Donald Trump won the election with the slogan ‘America First,’ considered symbolic of an agenda of nationalism combined with anti-immigrant zeal, which it turned out to be. Most observers also assumed that the motto would translate into an economic nationalism that would pair political isolationism—for example, questioning the commitment to NATO or abandoning the United States’ role as global police—with its economic equivalent. And indeed, the Trump administration was quick to opt out of the Pacific free-trade treaty, the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), and also placed a memorandum on the (already clinically dead) Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) negotiations with the European Union. The administration also left NAFTA, against which Trump had railed continuously throughout the campaign as a ‘bad deal’ for the United States. Finally, it embarked upon a protracted trade conflict with China, including punitive tariffs, and at least threatened to challenge the European Union in a similar way, citing the exorbitant trade surpluses of both the European Union and China vis-à-vis the United States as evidence of ‘unfair’ terms of trade.

Now, it would be a real stretch to try to square all of this with a broadly neoliberal agenda, and I will steer clear of such a futile endeavor. But trade policy is by far the strongest piece of evidence for those who argue that a neonationalist agenda is replacing a neoliberal one as the dominant paradigm of US politics, and I will at least show that even this admittedly strong case does not completely hold up under critical scrutiny.

After all, Trumpist trade policy has no aspirations to achieve economic autarchy along the lines of classic conservative isolationist arguments that can be traced back to nineteenth-century thinkers such as Friedrich List, or ideas that were entertained in the context of dependency theory pertaining to the Global South. As Trump’s trade czar put it, somewhat surprisingly, in a congressional hearing in 2018, ‘The basic philosophy that we have is that we want free trade without barriers’ (quoted in Slobodian 2018b). This statement may seem at odds with the administration’s aggressive stance and its willingness to resort to protectionist measures. However, on closer inspection, it becomes clear that Trump is not opposed to trade and globalization per se; for him, it is simply a matter of securing what are considered superior conditions for the United States. Consider NAFTA, which the United States left, only to open up negotiations for a new trade agreement that would entail better terms for the country—an undertaking that was still rather modest in its success; the new agreement, called the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA), in all likelihood will be ratified by Congress in early 2020. Admittedly, this must not be interpreted as a commitment to multilateralism. And to the extent that the latter is considered to be the only orientation in keeping with neoliberal tenets, there is still a massive tension between US policy and neoliberalism. But even those who make the case for a globalist orientation that is part and parcel of neoliberal thought (see Slobodian 2018c) would likely concede that this is only one subcurrent among many in neoliberalism. After all, ‘free’ trade is also achievable on the basis of bilateral agreements, and the United States is simply making use of its threat potential to hammer out such bilateral or trilateral agreements, as in the case of USMCA, that will be favorable to the most powerful party to the agreement. However,

12 For a similar and more detailed view, see Becker et al. 2018, 15.
what Bhagwati and Patrick refer to as 'aggressive unilateralism’ on behalf of the United States to pass trade agreements is by no means novel or even unprecedented (see Bhagwati and Patrick 1991). As they show, US trade policy in the Reagan era could be characterized in a very similar way, only in this case it was Japan and not China that was the prime target. In fact, the Reagan case was—as of today—the more extreme one, as Dani Rodrik observes: 'The reality is that Trump's measures to date amount to small potatoes. In particular they pale in comparison to the scale and scope of the protectionist policies of President Ronald Reagan's administration in the 1980s. Reagan raised tariffs and tightened restrictions on a wide range of industries, including textiles, automobiles, motorcycles, steel, lumber, sugar and electronics. He famously pressured Japan to accept 'voluntary' restraints on car exports’ (Rodrik 2018, 40).

At the very least, this tells us that Trumpist trade policy is certainly not less neoliberal than Reagan’s, whose economic policies are, of course, widely considered to be synonymous with neoliberalism. If we want to question the neoliberal credentials of Trump's trade policies—and I am not denying that there is room for contestation here—this goes a fortiori for Reagan’s.

The reference to the Reagan years is instructive in a number of ways because beyond trade policy, there are numerous parallels that should cast additional doubt on the view of the Trump administration as being opposed to neoliberal views.

Consider Trump's approach to the state, which comes quite close to the mantra of the lean, efficient state that we found in Austrian-German authoritarian neoliberalism: the administration has declared hiring freezes and, just like the Reagan administration, pursues the dismantling of state authority not only through deregulation measures but also through the deliberate understaffing and underfinancing of departments and agencies. The brunt of these measures, including the redaction of the Dodd-Frank Act, which was passed in response to the deregulatory failures leading up to the financial crisis of 2008, is borne by environmental agencies, with the United States' departure from the Paris Agreement on climate being only the tip of the—literally melting—iceberg (see Hejny 2018).

The most obvious correspondence by far between the Reagan and the Trump administrations as well as the clearest indicator of the latter's neoliberal impregnation is fiscal policy. The single most 'successful' legislative project of the Trump administration as of today is the tax reform of 2017–18, and the thrust of this reform and the narratives supporting it at the time are deeply ingrained with the supply-side economics belief system also underlying the fiscal policies of Reaganomics—a fiscal regime that is deeply opposed to any market-correcting redistributive efforts by the state. The evidence is striking: it was Arthur Laffer who famously is said to have persuaded Reagan of the logic of cutting taxes by drawing the so-called Laffer curve on a napkin. The curve simply formalizes the reasoning hinted at above with regard to the flat tax system: at some point, increased taxation reduces economic activity and thus overall tax revenue. The Laffer curve allegedly identifies the point at which a reduced tax rate creates the maximum overall revenue; both a higher as well as a lower tax rate would lead to a smaller volume. It is according to this logic that it is possible for tax breaks to 'pay for themselves’—a theorem famously disparaged by Reagan's then primary rival George H. W. Bush as 'voodoo economics.' If Laffer was the most prominent promoter of Reagan's tax cuts and provided the most comprehensive-sounding justification, he has acquired a rather similar role with regard to Trumpist fiscal policy. After all, he is the coauthor of what might be read as a manual of the economic policies of the Trump administration, tellingly entitled Trumponomics (see Moore and Laffer 2018). The main point of the book is to lay out the supply-side economics case for tax cuts along the lines of those introduced by the current administration, and this is by no means just a theoretical, a posteriori argument. Laffer was part of Trump's campaign team, was consulted during the tax reform process, became chairman of Trump's National Economic Council in the spring of 2018, and was awarded the prestigious Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2019.

Finally, the parallels also extend to the effects of the determined pursuit of Lafferian supply-side economics, only one of which is readily subsumable under neoliberalism and is already familiar to us: a notable redistributive effect, but at the expense of the lower echelons of the socioeconomic pyramid. The other effect is actually what is anathema to almost all varieties of neoliberal thought—namely, aggravated deficits and ensuing public debt of staggering magnitudes: Reagan’s ‘warfare state’ in combination with tax cuts was infamous for ratcheting up deficits and debt that burdened the state significantly.

13 Laffer’s coauthor Stephen Moore was tapped to be installed as a member of the Federal Reserve Board, arguably to ensure a monetary policy in accordance with the wishes of the executive, but at the last minute, his impending nomination was withdrawn. As an aside, it must be noted that Trump's overt attempt to interfere with the Fed’s monetary and currency policies is strongly at odds with any variety of neoliberal thought.
Trump's fiscal policy will have similar outcomes: the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office projects that the deficit will rise to over US$900 billion in 2019, a 15 percent increase from the preceding year. Public debt is projected to increase accordingly over the next years.

This concludes our brief and admittedly selective tour d'horizon of actually existing authoritarianisms. As mentioned above, this is not (yet) to suggest that there is a necessary connection between authoritarianism and neoliberalism. Neither is it to suggest that there is an empirical affinity between the two that holds across all possible cases in a variety of contexts: Poland would be a clear example to the contrary. What it does show, however, is that there are cases—and not necessarily minor ones—in which authoritarian politics is welded together with a squarely neoliberal economic agenda. In other words, prima facie, there is no reason to assume that there is a strictly antithetical relation between the two. On the basis of this preliminary empirical argument, let us now proceed to look at things from the side of neoliberal thought and explore to what extent there might be a theoretical affinity between it and authoritarian politics.

**NEOLIBERALISM AND AUTHORITARIAN POLITICS**

Taking the neoliberal problematic as a starting point, we can explore the potential authoritarian leanings of neoliberal thought, as such a conceptualization sharpens our understanding of the importance of state and governance in neoliberal accounts. Ensuring that the state does what it needs to do in addressing the neoliberal problematic while simultaneously keeping it from undermining the functioning of markets is one of the crucial questions within this problematic, and it is no surprise that as far back as the Colloque, one emblematic question in this regard is raised over and over again: "The essential problem, that which holds all others in abeyance, is that of delineating the admissible interventions [by the state], that is to say those [interventions] that are not incompatible with the [market] pricing mechanism" (Reinhoudt and Audier 2018, 187). The repertoire of neoliberal political theory contains a number of different strategies to ensure the state's proper role, and one of them, indeed, is the authoritarian option, which provides the first link between neoliberal thought and authoritarian politics.

**ORDOLIBERALISM AND THE STRONG STATE**

Ordoliberalism is one variety of neoliberalism (see Biebricher 2017), and while it is not the only strategy at the disposal of ordoliberal thinkers such as Walter Eucken, Wilhelm Röpke, Franz Böhme, or Alexander Rüstow, the postulate of a 'strong state,' as well as the concomitant politics that at least borders on the authoritarian, is a particularly prominent one (see, for example, Bonefeld 2017). Ordoliberal thought emerged toward the end of the Weimar Republic, which left a clear stamp on the former's political views. Eucken, Röpke, and Rüstow actually agreed to a large degree with the critique of democratic pluralism that had been powerfully advanced by Carl Schmitt. One of the two loci classici of the respective arguments is Eucken's "Structural Transformations of the State and the Crisis of Capitalism," first published in 1952. In this piece, Eucken laments the collapse of what he considers a trademark distinction established under classical liberal auspices—namely, that between state and society/economy: "Insofar as the liberal nineteenth-century state clearly separated state and the economy from one another and left economic leadership almost entirely to private enterprises, it formed the basis from which capitalism could flourish—something that has been described often enough" (Eucken 2017, 56). However, the twentieth century witnesses the 'emergence of the economic state' (Eucken 2017, 56), which is an amalgamation of both spheres and which eventually comes to be dominated by economic forces: ‘For the most part it is a case of individual economic groups; entrepreneur and worker induce the state to intervene in order to strengthen their position within the framework of the capitalist economy . . . it is supposed to lend support to individual groups or even individual firms engaged in the capitalist economic struggle’ (Eucken 2017, 57).

In the words of Alexander Rüstow, who provides the other locus classicus: ‘The state is ripped apart by interested parties and their greed. Each interested party tears out its own portion of state power and exploits it according to its own purposes. . . . What we are facing here, is, to use another term from Carl Schmitt, pluralism, and a pluralism of the worst kind. What takes place here accords with the motto: ‘The state as prey’ ‘(Rüstow 2017, 146–47). In order to overcome this deplorable state of affairs, which is not confined to the admittedly semipathological conditions of the dying days of the Weimar Republic, it is necessary to rebuild the state and insulate it from the erosive dynamics of mass democracy: ‘The new liberalism, which I and my friends promote, demands a strong state, a state that is positioned above the economy, above the interested parties, in the place where it belongs’ (Rüstow 2017, 149). Eucken echoes this assessment, albeit with more cautious and somewhat oblique formulations, when he writes, ‘Nevertheless, much more serious is the way in which close integration with the economy has undermined independent decision-making on the part of the state, something upon which its very existence depends’; he adds that ‘only rarely is it in a position to realize purely state interests’ (Eucken 2017, 59–60). What we see emerge here is the vision of a depoliticized state and the ensuing politics that has a clearly detectable authoritarian aspect to it: the premium that is put on the independence and unified nature of state will form in combination with an almost organist notion of the state as a macro subject that can—and
should—pursue its own interests is at least highly compatible with authoritarianism. Such authoritarianism would also ensure what the ordoliberalists highlighted in their specific way of spelling out the neoliberal problematic. States needed to provide the framework of functioning markets in the form of a competitive order, which was, in turn, embedded in a social totality understood as an ‘interdependence of orders.’ Given this highly fragile interdependence, the politics of the competitive order must proceed with utmost caution and deliberation, in order not to undo this complex architecture. Politics that is subject to the volatility of an electorate that tends toward the irrational in the eyes of many an ordoliberal hardly seems to qualify in this regard. Finally, the strong state is needed not only to make political-economic decisions independent of social forces and thus exhibit what Theda Skocpol refers to as state ‘autonomy’; it also requires what she refers to as state ‘capacity’—namely, the power resources to enforce these decisions even if they are to the detriment of powerful (economic) actors (see Skocpol 1985). This is the background to the call for a strong state, and while the tonality and the vocabulary of the ordoliberal discourse do change with the transition to the postwar liberal democracy of Germany, and the strong state is never mentioned again, the structural reasons prompting this call, which are rooted in the conditions of mass democracy, have hardly changed in any comprehensive manner (see Biebricher 2020).

**AUTHORITARIANISM VS. TOTALITARIANISM**

The ordoliberalists may have been the first among the neoliberal to experiment with authoritarian ideas and designs, but they are not the only ones. The evidence backing this claim comes in various more or less indirect forms. Consider some rather circumstantial textual evidence first that can be found in Röpke and Hayek: both go to great lengths to resuffle the conventional conceptual and semantic alignments regarding democracy, liberalism, authoritarianism, and totalitarianism. Röpke’s attempt is the more basic one that puts an emphasis on the strict and rather counterintuitive distinction between authoritarian regimes and totalitarian/collectivist ones: ‘Yet anyone who would maintain that the authoritarian direction of state and economic life . . . represents an approximation to the collectivist principle of society, makes it thereby clear that he cannot distinguish between dictatorship and the collectivist state’ (Röpke 1942, 256). Furthermore, Röpke (1942, 246) notes, ‘every well-knit state comprises some more or less powerful elements of a hierarchic and authoritarian nature . . . .’ Thus, there is a clear attempt to salvage authoritarianism as a political option by demarcating it strictly from collectivism and by normalizing it along the lines of the second quote. The more comprehensive effort can be found in Hayek’s work, which presents us with a semantic realignment. While one may think that liberalism and democracy, on the one hand, and authoritarian rule and totalitarianism, on the other, go together, Hayek claims the opposite: from democracy, a slippery slope leads to totalitarianism, and it is possible, albeit not likely, that liberalism and authoritarianism are brought into an alliance: ‘ . . . a democracy may well wield totalitarian powers, and it is conceivable that an authoritarian government may act on liberal principles’ ([1960] 2009, 90). It is important to note that this rearticulation of political-terminological affinities is already contained in *The Constitution of Liberty*, from 1960, in order to preclude a widespread exculpation strategy pursued by Hayekians and neoliberals more generally, which is tied to another statement on the topic. Here Hayek was even more outspoken: ‘Personally, I prefer a liberal dictator to a democratic government lacking in liberalism’ (*El Mercurio* 1981, D9). Now, this statement is part of an interview with a Chilean newspaper conducted during one of Hayek’s visits to the country while it was under military rule. It is not an interpretive stretch to read the statement as crediting Pinochet for being a ‘liberal dictator’—not the least since Hayek describes the ousted Allende government as the antithesis (i.e., a totalitarian democracy) in another interview given in Venezuela in 1981. Hayekians have used the contextuality of these statements in order to relativize them: what is on display in the interview with *El Mercurio* is not the reflected eminent thinker of liberty but rather the scholar who suddenly gets embroiled in the controversies of practical politics and gets carried away, in the heat of the moment, to the effect of a political misjudgment—an error all too common among thinkers who dabble in real-world affairs and, therefore, an excusable one. But this cavalier way of discounting Hayek’s position in the interview is less persuasive if one is aware, as we are, that Hayek only fleshes out a claim in the interview that was already in nuce present in one of his scholarly treatises.

**CHILE**

This brings us, finally, to the more practical-performative evidence—not the least related to Chile. It is not just Hayek, after all, who took a keen interest in the military dictatorship of Chile (and of other countries, such as Portugal under Salazar, to whom Hayek sent a copy of *The Constitution of Liberty*), visiting the country several times and offering advice on economic reforms (see Fischer 2009; Farrant, McPhail, and Berger 2012). The Chilean connection also extends to Milton Friedman. Of course, the role of the Chicago Boys, Chilean students educated at the Economics Department of the University of Chicago, is by now well-established, including the tome of neoliberal reforms (‘the brick’) they compiled for the dictatorship. But aside from his logistical role in establishing the link between the Catholic University of Santiago de Chile and the University of Chicago,
Friedman also offered his expertise as an economist, albeit in a more indirect way than Hayek—namely, in the form of one or more letters addressed to the regime that followed a visit in 1974 (see Fischer 2009; Meadowcroft and Ruger 2014). Still, there seems to be a systematic appeal of (borderline) authoritarian states to the neoliberals, Friedman’s enthusiastic laudation of Hong Kong being another case in point: from the end of World War II until its return to China in 1997, Friedman (1997) famously argued, the ‘Hong Kong experiment’ outdid its ‘control groups,’ the United Kingdom, Israel, and the United States, in every conceivable way. Burdened with refugees after the end of the war, just like Israel, it still ascended to the top of the income-per-capita ladder of the world, boasting economic parameters unrivaled by its former colonial ‘master’ Britain or the economic superpower that is the United States. For Friedman, the explanation is straightforward: while all other countries engage in semisocialist redistribution, Hong Kong maintained a steadfast commitment to ‘free markets.’ Still, there is a more fundamental level on which the real key to the puzzle may be found, which, unsurprisingly, is only hinted at in Friedman’s (1997) account: ‘I take Britain as one control because Britain, a benevolent dictator, imposed different policies on Hong Kong from the ones it pursued at home.’ Let us note, first of all, that there are apparently benevolent dictators, which is a rare concession, coming from neoliberals even if they are not dyed-in-the-wool public-choice adherents. Second, one must spell out what is only hinted at here: Hong Kong was not a democracy throughout the period Friedman celebrates. Up until 1997 its governor was officially appointed by the queen at the recommendation of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. If one were to take Friedman’s quasi-experimental framing seriously, comparative method would suggest that democracy, being absent in one but none of the other cases, is a prima facie candidate to account for the varying outcomes.

Finally, there is James Buchanan, who has the strongest democratic credentials among the neoliberals even if his overall theoretical strategy is to drain democratic governments of what he considers to be excessive revenue by imposing balanced-budget amendments and ‘reverse revenue sharing’ in multilevel systems of governance. Still, even Buchanan succumbed to the lure of Chilean authoritarianism; at least this is what Nancy MacLean claims in Democracy in Chains. Having scrutinized a plethora of unpublished documents from the late Buchanan’s estate, she writes: ‘Buchanan responded with detailed advice on how to bind democracy, delivered over the course of five formal lectures to top representatives of a governing elite that melded the military and the corporate world, to say nothing of counsel he conveyed in private, unrecorded conversations’ (MacLean 2017, 158). For all the merits of MacLean’s account, it is full of conjectures aimed at painting the most problematic picture of Buchanan, so it must not be taken at face value in its entirety. But even if we take into consideration the diligent reconstruction of Buchanan’s second visit to Chile in 1981 by Farrant and Tarko, who make a strong case for Buchanan actually chiding defenders of the dictatorship and instead arguing for universal franchise in Chile (see Farrant and Tarko 2019), this still leaves us with the earlier visit MacLean concentrates on, which continues to throw an at least questionable light on Buchanan’s stance vis-à-vis the Pinochet regime in the late 1970s.

**EXCURSUS: NEOLIBERALISM, SOCIAL CONSERVATISM, AND IMMIGRATION**

At this point, one possible option for making the case for an alignment of neoliberalism and authoritarianism even more comprehensive would be to explore the panorama of social conservative and even nativist-racist positions that are associated with at least some currents and (splinter) groups within neoliberalism. The conventional view of neoliberalism in this regard is one of firm opposition, underlined by the public testimony of two protagonists: both Hayek and Buchanan wrote treatises in which they rejected conservatism for various reasons (see Hayek [1960] 2009, afterword; Buchanan 2005). Still, if only those who emphatically identified with a particular label were to be considered part of the respective traditions and movements, there would be no neoliberalism—or it would be a neoliberalism without neoliberals.

As recent research endeavors show (see, in particular, Cooper 2017; Brown 2019), there are indeed analogies and overlaps between social conservatism and regard to family, sexuality, and morals more generally and the evolutionary thought of the late Hayek; Friedman’s praise of the family (not just the individual) as a foundational social form as early as in Capitalism and Freedom, and Buchanan’s fairly conservative complaints over the ‘excesses of democracy’ during the late 1960s, when he had a brief

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14 Farrant and Tarko note with regard to Buchanan’s attending of a Mont Pelerin Society meeting in Chile in 1981: ‘Indeed, El Mercurio reported that Buchanan had provided a passionate defense of democracy (a ‘spontaneous intervention’) during an unspecified MPS session and upbraided a number of MPS colleagues who defended dictatorship.’ Farrant and Tarko 2019, 4. This contrasts starkly with MacLean’s account. Farrant and Tarko also challenge Fischer’s assessment that Buchanan’s paper (originally he had even declined to give a paper at all) at the Mont Pelerin Society meeting ‘provide[s] theoretical support for the regime.’ Fischer 2009, 325.
stint at UCLA: “Methods, manners, morals, and standards were cavalierly tossed on the junk heap of history” (Buchanan and Musgrave 1999, 22). Beyond mainstream social conservatism, there are also outright nativist, racist, and anti-immigration positions to be found among neoliberals. This may seem counterintuitive, but it is far from impossible (see Slobodian 2018a). True, some of the cases might appear to be blown a little out of proportion at first sight. For example, Slobodian points to the undoubtedly outrageous defense of South African apartheid by the later Röpke, which was echoed by many neoliberals, albeit in much less outrageous words (see Slobodian 2018c). Still, the Röpke of the early 1960s was an all-out reactionary bursting with resentment that was directed at everything and everybody, including white Western elites (see Röpke 1962). Nevertheless, this will not suffice to defuse the charge because even the younger champion of what he called the ‘humane economy’ had some questionable ideas with regard to nation, immigration, culture, or race.

In a piece from 1945, Röpke (1950, 611) starts out by depicting limits on immigration as ‘an important part of economic nationalism’ and one of the ‘major causes of the international economic disintegration.’ So far, so expectable, but Röpke also realistically assesses the sheer impossibility of lifting all restrictions on immigration, from which he derives the first conclusion that the more restricted the movement of people is, the more unrestricted trade should be, thus compensating for those restrictions. Furthermore, with regard to the movement of people, this right is particularly affirmed for capitalists, while Röpke is more wary of labor. While he is adamant that “the common fear of the immigrant, as a man who is likely to deprive a national of his job, rests on crude economic notions which are unworthy of thinking people” (Röpke 1950, 636), he still thinks that it is important for a country to take in the right kind of immigrants that bring the human capital needed in a particular economy. So we can already see that the cherished right to free movement of people is already unevenly distributed and tied to certain conditions.

More generally, Röpke defends the right of countries to control the influx of immigrants and restrict it, which in itself is not necessarily an untenable position, but, tellingly, this is not just a matter of economics and human resources but also of culture and race. Nations have an ‘essential right to safeguard’ their populations from immigrants ‘who might endanger them by their qualities (lack of assimilability, language, etc.) or even by their sheer quantity’ (Röpke 1950, 626) and ‘as for the immigration of labor, there is no disputing of the necessity of qualitative control of immigration which safeguards the spiritual patrimony, the political tradition, the ethnico-linguistic character and the social structure of a country. . . .’ (Röpke 1950, 645). Thus, the right to ‘defend the biological and spiritual patrimony’ (Röpke 1950, 626) is eventually asserted against the free movement of people, and the vocabulary used is a clear indicator of the racialized reasoning behind it.

While it is tempting to pursue these matters further, a proper assessment of this strain of neoliberal thought lies beyond the scope of this paper, not the least because there is still a dearth of studies on this issue, which is only slowly being taken up by scholars interested in the history, theory, and practice of neoliberalism. 15 Instead, I will conclude with another link between neoliberalism and authoritarianism that is based on a particular view of politics prevalent in neoliberal thought.

**NEOLIBERAL POLITICS, OR, HOW (NOT) TO GET FROM A TO B**

Neoliberals developed numerous critiques of the state and democracy, to name only the two most prominent targets; and the pictures painted in these accounts are rather bleak. Consider, for example, Hayek’s (2003, vol. 1, 2) gloomy assessment in *Law, Legislation and Liberty*: ‘The predominant model of liberal democratic institutions . . . necessarily leads to a gradual transformation of the spontaneous order of a free society into a totalitarian system conducted in the service of some coalition of organized interests.’

Neoliberal thinkers also conceived of a plethora of reform proposals or a vision of what a more neoliberal society, state, and democracy might look like. What is curious, however, is the dearth of concrete and plausible strategies for implementing these reforms and moving closer to what would be the ideal state of affairs from a neoliberal point of view. A quick overview reveals the problem the neoliberals face.

The ordoliberals have the least to show when it comes to strategies for building the strong state that they espouse more or less explicitly. Eucken has hardly more to offer than admonitions: the state ought to

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15 See also a later assessment that is clearly compatible with social conservative discourses on the decline of the family: ‘The family, rather than the individual, has always been and remains today the basic building block of our society, though its hold has clearly been weakening—one of the most unfortunate consequences of the growth of government paternalism’ (Friedman and Friedman 1990, 33).

16 For an early exception, see, for example, Plehwe’s reconstruction of Mont Pelerin discussions regarding economic development in what is now referred to as the Global South. See Plehwe 2009.
Röpke at least knows who the actors would be in theory: ‘clerks’ who would act as representatives of the common good, or what Röpke ([1958] 1960, 151) sometimes calls ‘aristocrats of the public spirit.’ But the emergence of such a well-intentioned modern guardian class is exceedingly unlikely, as Röpke himself elaborately admits. In the highly unlikely event of the appearance of such “secularized saints” (Röpke [1958] 1960, 150), they are bound to disappear again due to the inhospitable environment of actually existing nation-states and democracies. It is not overstatement to call this a typical deus ex machina motive—which does not reflect well on the theory underlying it.

Hayek chooses a different route to deal with the problem of neoliberal reform, which does not come as a surprise in the light of what we already know: for him, the ills of ‘unlimited democracy’ are not self-correcting, or, to be more precise, they seemingly cannot be corrected for within the bounds of democracy. This is the obvious conclusion from the Chilean case, about which Hayek had this to say: ‘My personal impression . . . is that in Chile . . . we will witness a transition from a dictatorial government to a liberal government . . . . During this transition it may be necessary to maintain certain dictatorial powers, not as something permanent, but as a temporary arrangement’ (El Mercurio 1981, D9). And once again, this concrete diagnosis is foreshadowed in Law, Legislation and Liberty, in which he writes that the principles of the rule of law and the like may “have to be temporarily suspended when the long-run preservation of that order is itself threatened” (Hayek 2003, vol. 3, 124).

Consider, finally, Buchanan, who is faced with a conundrum similar to the one the ordoliberalists were grappling with: who are the actors that could be expected to pass, for example, a balanced-budget amendment, when Buchanan’s entire framework and his trenchant critique of actually existing democracy rest on the assumption that politicians are rationally utility-maximizing actors who actually benefit from rent-seeking arrangements? Although Buchanan explores various ways to come to terms with this problem—for example, the use of referendums—all of them ultimately fail. In the end, two equally unsatisfactory options remain. Either the restrictive assumptions of *Homo economicus* have to be relaxed, or there is simply no plausible way to explain how a society would get from A to B—that is, from actually existing democracy to the favored regime of each variety of neoliberal thought: ‘To hold out hope for reform in the basic rules describing the sociopolitical game, we must introduce elements that violate the self-interest postulate’ (Brennan and Buchanan 1985, 146).

But even after this rather extraordinary concession, hope is all there is. The politics of reform remains a politics of the extraordinary, which is affirmed by Buchanan’s conviction that what is needed is a “constitutional revolution” (Brennan and Buchanan 1985, 154) and by Friedman, who muses on the time of rupture when the “tyranny of the status quo” (the title of a book by Friedman and his wife, Rose) will finally be overcome and ‘what seemed impossible suddenly becomes possible’ (Friedman and Friedman 1984, xiv).

This almost eschatological view of politics is the final link between neoliberalism and authoritarianism because neoliberal thought has backed itself into a theoretical corner and needs authoritarian means to find a way out: the conditions of actually existing democracy are depicted as so engrained and locked in that there is simply no way to conceive of the transition toward a more neoliberal state of affairs—unless it is through extraordinary actors and exceptionalist conditions. To put it differently, neoliberal thought inadvertently comes to yearn for authoritarian political actors who paint themselves as destroyers of the established status quo. Only they can cut the Gordian knot of mass democracy and dissolve the iron triangles that enchain any kind of transformational dynamic for the better. It is disruptors like Salvini or Johnson and their authoritarian call to “drain the swamp” (Trump) or “clear out the stables” (Björn Höcke) that neoliberal thought is forced to turn to because it has systematically deprived itself of any other conception of politics that holds the promise of neoliberal success. It goes without saying that ‘populist’ leaders such as Johnson, Trump, Bolsonaro, and others are the opposite of ‘aristocrats of the public spirit,’ and I believe that Hayek and Friedman would be appalled by them. Still, this type of politician is the catalyst of neoliberal change that neoliberal thought is driven toward by default, turning the (‘populist’) politics of rupture into the link between neoliberalism and authoritarianism that is located on the most fundamental level.

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17 Björn Höcke is the informal leader of the radical right-wing platform within the German AfD. He is also the cochairman of the Thuringian AfD, which received 25 percent of the votes in the provincial election in October 2019.
CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have confronted a widespread, more or less explicit assumption underlying the way that the political landscape of today is measured and interpreted. The assumption is that there is a dichotomous, antithetical relationship between neoliberalism and authoritarianism, the latter being the gravedigger of the former. In concurrence with accounts that are also critical of this framing, such as Wendy Brown’s or Quinn Slobodian’s, I have attempted to cast doubt on this assumption from two converse sides. First, I have conducted a brief and admittedly selective survey of some major cases of actually existing authoritarianism in order to show that party manifestos and/or actual policies pursued by authoritarian parties often contain ample reference to neoliberal arguments and designs. Second, I have examined the relationship from the other side, scrutinizing neoliberal political thought with regard to its authoritarian potentials. The latter range from calls for a strong state and the espousal of authoritarian neoliberalism, to adapt a famous expression coined by Weimar jurist Herrmann Heller, to performative evidence in the form of neoliberal flirtations with actually existing authoritarian/nondemocratic regimes such as Chile or Hong Kong. Finally, I have argued that the most fundamental link exists on the level of politics, where neoliberal thought is more or less inadvertently driven toward an authoritarian politics capable of cutting through the institutional red tape that supposedly locks in the democratic status quo. The conclusion to this preliminary exploration of the subject matter is relatively straightforward, although its wider ramifications are rather complex: authoritarianism is not a countermovement against neoliberalism; to a significant degree, the former is part and parcel of the latter. Still, a final word of caution is in order—namely, not to conflate neoliberalism and authoritarianism and collapse one into the other. True, authoritarian neoliberalism is a feasible combination as this article has tried to show, thus substantiating claims raised in a growing body of work on this concept (see Bruff 2014 and the special issue of Globalizations [2018] edited by Ian Bruff and Cemal Burak Tansel). Nevertheless, while there may be a strong elective affinity between the two, I would not go as far as to say that neoliberalism is necessarily authoritarian. The world of actually existing neoliberalism offers examples of neoliberal articulations that cannot easily be summed up as just authoritarian in nature,—for example, third-way neoliberalism in 1990s Europe. To be sure, that does not necessarily mean that this was a kind of ‘progressive neoliberalism,’ as Nancy Fraser (2017) has suggested, but even William Davies (2016, 128) refers to what he calls the ‘normative neoliberalism’ of the 1990s—for example, in the United Kingdom, as a ‘self-consciously progressive project, fueled by a reformist desire to produce a fair society unhindered by constraints of culture or tradition.’ So at the very least, a neoliberalism that is not inherently tied to authoritarianism is imaginable. Similarly, the authoritarian option is but one among a number of strategies within neoliberal thought addressing the neoliberal problematic that is considered applicable to the state. Others include designs of radical decentralization of state sovereignty. And while there may be good reasons to consider decentralization problematic, it would be a severe stretch to refer to such a decentralized polity as authoritarian, not the least considering that it amounts to the opposite of the ‘strong state’ strategy depicted here. In sum, in the already rather toxic discourse on neoliberalism, it is all the more important for its critics not to overstate their cases in a virtual contest of who can be the most critical and rather limit themselves to defendable and accurate, albeit less spectacular, claims, which is what I hope to have done in this article.

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Thomas Biebricher studied scientific politics, economic policy, and public law at the Albert Ludwigs University in Freiburg and the Queen’s University in Kingston, Canada. After completing his master’s degree in 2000, he completed his doctorate in Freiburg in 2003 with a dissertation titled Self-Criticism of Modernity: Habermas and Foucault in Comparison, published by Campus Verlag in 2005. From 2003 to 2009 he was a DAAD Visiting Assistant Professor at the Department of Political Science at the University of Florida in Gainesville. From 2009 to 2012, he led a group of young researchers at the Cluster of Excellence on the topic of ‘Crisis and Normative Order – Varieties of Neoliberalism and their Transformation’ (members: Frieder Vogelmann, Greta Wagner, Michael Walter). In 2012 and 2013 he represented the professorships for political theory and philosophy as well as international political theory at the Cluster of Excellence. In the 2014 winter term he held a DAAD Visiting Assistant Professorship at the Institute for European Studies at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver. From 2014 to 2017, he was professor for political theory and philosophy at Goethe University. He is currently a postdoc at the Cluster of Excellence. His most recent publications include The Political Theory of Neoliberalism (Stanford University Press, 2019).
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