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The neoliberal roots of authoritarian protectionism

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Abstract

Luke Cooper's *Authoritarian Contagion* draws attention to the politics of protection proffered by contemporary ethno-nationalist authoritarian rulers. This article argues that the origins of this protectionist politics lies in neoliberal projects, which promoted conservative social hierarchies, such as those associated with gender, race and class, to further capital accumulation. These neoliberal projects led to anti-democratic governance and the concentration of wealth and power, trends that contemporary authoritarian leaders claim to challenge but, in fact, consolidate and intensify in the name of protecting an ethnically-defined people.

Keywords Authoritarian protectionism · Authoritarian populism · Neoliberalism · Conservativism · Democracy · Moral economy

In *Authoritarian Contagion*, Luke Cooper foregrounds the role of 'authoritarian protectionism' in the authoritarian politics that has spread across the world in the last decade. Cooper argues that leaders from the USA to Hungary, China, and India have taken advantage of crises to mobilise support on the basis of a three-step 'ideological logic' involving first, ethnically homogenising the nation; second, constructing enemies for this ethnically defined nation; and third, presenting this nation as under threat (Cooper 2021, 15). In response to their constructed threats, leaders have offered various, essentially authoritarian, solutions that promise to protect the collective such as illiberal democracy, in the case of Poland and Hungary, or anti-democratic republicanism in the USA (Cooper 2021, 35–38). Cooper (2021, 56) highlights the inequalities generated by neoliberalism as key in generating support for authoritarian protectionist leaders and argues that the uncanny combination of crony capitalism and state intervention that have been the hallmarks of contemporary authoritarian regimes challenges technocratic, globalist neoliberalism. In this article, I argue that authoritarian protectionism is not just a reaction to the outcomes of neoliberal economics but the product of moral–political–economic

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projects of neoliberalism. Neoliberal political projects, even in their ‘progressive’ and ‘inclusive’ guises, have valorised and promoted conservative social hierarchies related to marriage, the family, and notions of civilisation. They have also facilitated anti-democratic governance and concentrated wealth and power with a small elite. The solutions that contemporary authoritarian protectionists propose do little to disrupt these trends but, rather, consolidate and intensify them in a supposed effort to resolve neoliberal crises. In arguing this, the article challenges Cooper’s dichotomy between the authoritarian individualism of earlier right-wing neoliberal regimes and the authoritarian collectivism of contemporary authoritarian regimes by highlighting some fundamental continuities deriving from the structural role of traditional social hierarchies in neoliberalism.

Neoliberalism as a conservative moral–political–economic project

Contrary to the depiction of neoliberalism as concerned with *laissez faire* and the creation of *homo economicus*, theories and practices of neoliberalism have constituted a moral–political–economic project aimed at disciplining individuals into the logic of specific forms of market competition and protecting the market from mass revolt through the remaking of states and households (Bruff 2019; Whyte 2019; Brown 2019; Kundnani 2021). At the heart of neoliberal thought was the moral claim that markets, unlike mass politics, could pacify conflict and create social cooperation. Also central was an explicit or implicit (depending on the thinker) acknowledgement that non-market forces, such as family care, were necessary for stable market activity. Neoliberal thinkers thus sought to curtail democratic politics and establish a conservative moral framework that valorised traditional social hierarchies. These measures were to ensure the marketised reform of the state and the household, sanction the inequalities produced by markets and ensure privatised social reproduction. Prominent neoliberal thinkers from all traditions upheld forms of anti-democratic and authoritarian politics, patriarchal family values and the ‘standard of civilisation’—a social evolutionary racial understanding of history in which the Christian West was the pinnacle.

German ordoliberals, like Wilhelm Röpke, were the most explicit in their infusion of markets with traditional morals and in their rejection of democracy. Ordoliberals feared moral degeneration would be the result of mass politics and a sole focus on market efficiency. Their solutions included the establishment of a strong technocratic state insulated from democracy and the economy and the cultivation of an extra-economic framework based on the family, religion and rural land (Brown 2019, 77–78, Slobodian 2018, 85, Saull 2018, 732). Röpke,

for instance, characterised the proletarian masses as primitive and barbarous because they lacked values such as self-discipline and honesty that were necessary for market competition. He also defended apartheid South Africa on the grounds that it was essential to maintaining global economic order (Slobodian 2018, 150).

The presence of traditional morals and the rejection of popular sovereignty is less overt in Friedrich Hayek’s thought but still clearly evident. The defence of the ‘central values of civilisation’ against the rise of mass politics was the central goal of the

Mont Pelerin Society. Hayek identified the morals of the Christian West—honesty, belief in property and the family—as the source of the West's dominance. He also came to regard religion as necessary for invoking the emotions necessary to submit to the market (Whyte 2019, 64). Both markets and morals, he argued, were 'spontaneously' derived and necessary for social order. Hence, only limited government, an expanded 'personal protected sphere' and the containment of popular sovereignty and demands for redistribution were conducive to freedom (Brown 2019, 104). Despite his desire to limit the state's legislative power, Hayek called for immigration controls because of the threat migrants may pose to western culture and its liberal principles, the condition of market competition (Kundnani 2021, 11). Hayek and Milton Friedman both infamously collaborated with Pinochet's authoritarian regime on the grounds that a liberal dictatorship was necessary to bring political freedom in a country long under the yoke of a welfare state. Though notions of natural liberty rather than civilisation underpinned Friedman's neoliberalism, like Röpke, he supported white rule in southern Africa to defend against the threat of electoral democracy, which threatened to empower the economically weak and limit the spread of economic freedom. As Melinda Cooper (2017, 67–71) has noted, there is a frequent slippage in Friedman's work between advocacy of individual responsibility and family responsibility. This slippage implicitly recognised the role of the family in socialising individuals and providing the means for social reproduction for dependents in the absence of state welfare. Due to his focus on agglomerative market outcomes, this slippage also reflected his lack of interest in the impact of this burden on actual households (Bruff 2019, 371).

Neoliberal practice has followed the theory; if not in the latter's intended outcomes, then in enacting the means necessary to promote market societies. Neoliberal practices spread globally, and in variegated forms, in various ways. The neoliberal Chicago school economists had direct influence over the design of the Pinochet-era constitution in Chile; foundations, business lobbies and thinktanks facilitated neoliberal reforms in the USA and the United Kingdom; and international financial institutions aided their spread in the global South. Neoliberal social orders, far from giving life to a spontaneously evolved market, with individuals self-regulating with spontaneously evolved morals, have created particular types of private markets dominated by large capitalist interests and concentrated wealth and power with a small minority. Nonetheless, the prescribed means by which neoliberal social orders were to be brought about—regulatory reform, anti-democratic governance, and the promotion of traditional morals—have been prominent in the practice of neoliberalism globally. In both the theory and the practice of neoliberalism, conservative morals did not just serve the purpose of ideologically building a majority, as Cooper (2021, 25) highlights, but rather, reflected the structural dependence in capitalist social orders on extra-economic frameworks. Accumulation depends on unpaid or low-paid social reproductive labour and expropriated labour to lower the cost of production and these processes are mediated by a range of social hierarchies including race, gender, and age (Fraser 2018). This is particularly the case in neoliberal capitalist social orders with their intense focus on market competition which has led to increasingly privatised social reproduction, and the super-exploitation and expropriation of labour, as reflected in the growth of the informal sector in the global

South and precarious labour in both the South and the North. These outcomes have relied on the heightened assertion of traditional social hierarchies and anti-democratic practices, such as legislation that strengthened the power of corporations and weakened labour, and institutional and constitutional changes that shielded policies from dissent.

The slippage between the individual and the family and the defence of civilisation was evident in Margaret Thatcher's neoliberal project, as highlighted by Cooper (2021, 26) who notes that she: 'taunted her opponents by quoting the Labour manifestos of the 1970s, arguing her policy agenda would realise an "irreversible shift … of power … in favour of working people and their families" (Thatcher, 1987, np)'. Likewise, Thatcher reproduced racial-civilisational tropes linked to traditional morals: '"Civilised society doesn't just happen", Thatcher argued, "[i] t has to be sustained by standards widely accepted and upheld. And we must draw on the moral energy of society … [and] the values of family life"' (Cooper 2021, 26). Thatcher placed rhetorical emphasis on the opportunity for assimilation provided by adherence to a market order by racial minorities, but the effects of her policies reproduced racial hierarchies while creating new forms of class divisions within racial groups (Shilliam 2018, 115–116). Policies emphasising private responsibility for public goods were directed towards middle class white families, while deindustrialisation created a white underclass. Influenced by American conservative discourses, Black single mothers were particularly targeted as burdens on the public purse, reproducing distinctions between a deserving and undeserving poor that legitimised cuts to public spending (McNeil 1991, 228–236). The Thatcher regime also relied on the heightened use of state violence and legal changes to curb resistance to the neoliberal reforms (Gamble 1994; Hall 1988).

An alliance between neoliberalism and conservative Catholicism also underpinned the world's first neoliberal regime in Chile under the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet, which introduced a fully privatised welfare system. Chile's 1980 constitution combined a Catholic focus on dignity, freedom, and the family with the espousal of private enterprise, competition, 'choice' and legalistic and depoliticised human rights (Whyte 2019, 194). The Chicago School economist, Arnold Harberger, based his support for the Pinochet dictatorship on Latin Americans' supposed inclination towards romanticism, self-pity, and demagoguery—qualities that left them ill-suited to economic freedom (Whyte 2019, 161–162).

Likewise, California governor, Ronald Reagan's welfare reforms tied together themes of family self-sufficiency and moral reform in policies such as welfare cuts, marriage promotion and workfare that were common to both his neoliberal and neoconservative constituencies and advisors. Reagan sought to enact this Californian blueprint across the country as president. The black 'welfare queen' was prominent in Reagan's election campaigning. He also introduced a suite of welfare cuts early in his presidency, including particularly radical cuts to the Aid to Families and Dependent Children (AFDC) programme, which both neoliberals and neoconservatives blamed for generating a moral crisis of the family (Cooper 2017, 64). This and the cuts to immigrant and Native American welfare programmes created a gendered, racialised workfare regime with work requirements and incentives pushing recipients into low-wage and insecure jobs (Perry 2020, 56).

Reagan's agenda was only partly fulfilled, but it was taken up and pushed further by the 'progressive neoliberal' Bill Clinton administration which introduced a more comprehensive workfare regime centred around conservative family values. This regime revived a family responsibility welfare tradition dating to the Elizabethan poor laws, which thrived in the post-Civil War period when it was first applied to former slaves who were compelled into legal marriages, spousal support, or child maintenance with the threat of being forced into convict labour or domestic servitude for non-compliance. The Clinton administration's Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act bore striking similarities to its reconstruction predecessor and included marriage promotion programmes, incentives for states to reduce birth rates without increasing abortion rates, and a system of coercive privatised family responsibility. The latter involved reviving or creating family relationships through the surveillance and enforcement of paternity obligations, with penalties imposed on mothers to ensure cooperation and economic dependence on former partners rather than the state (Cooper 2017, 67–81). The Clinton administration also ended the federal entitlement to welfare, introduced time caps on welfare access and enforced compulsory work in the low-wage services sector—effectively a state subsidy that further depressed wages in a sector dominated by African American, Latina, and migrant women. Clinton's crime law reforms entailed the 'penalisation' of welfare and poverty, which contributed to the largest increase in incarceration in American history, despite falling crime rates since the mid-1970s (Wacquant 2001). Incarceration helped to manage the imposition of neoliberal policies and attendant social insecurities while providing an alternative avenue for generating middle class legitimacy for political leaders in a context in which the economic and social missions of the state were increasingly redundant (Wacquant 2001, 402). Responsible fatherhood programmes, premised under the assumption that absent fathers produce fragile families and poor socio-economic outcomes, flourished under the Administration of another progressive neoliberal, Barack Obama. These targeted low-income minority men and were integrated into the legal system as an alternative for incarceration (Cooper 2017, 101–113). Neoliberal governance in the USA has also entailed various forms of depoliticisation that hollowed out democracy such as the use of the law, technocracy, and management to move contentious issues, such as how to deal with economic crises and the power of corporations, out of the realm of public contestation and challenge (Brown 2015).

Though the Tony Blair government in the United Kingdom initially tried to reduce social inequalities through access to education and training and anti-discrimination legislation, it was also heavily influenced by Clinton's welfare reforms. New Labour introduced a workfare regime involving conditionalities, sanctions, and surveillance aimed at modifying the behaviour of welfare recipients, with a particular focus on single-parent and low-income families, and a white male underclass which was portrayed as a symbol of national degeneracy (Shilliam 2018, 120–127). The Blair government, like the Clinton administration, introduced new anti-crime legislation alongside neoliberalising reforms. This contributed to the largest increase in the prison population in the UK's history with particularly high incarceration rates among black and other non-white minority women (Fisher 2006, 54, Wacquant 2010, 209). The Blair government also adopted a mode of depoliticising technocratic governance which placed ‘at one remove the political character of decision-making’ by emphasising decentralisation; the external validation of policies; the adoption of external rules; and the empowering of ostensibly non-political institutions with policy-making power (Burnham 2001, 136).

This mixture of conservative morals, which reinforced social hierarchies, and anti-democratic governance can also be seen outside out of the vanguard of neoliberalising states. India undertook economic liberalisation in 1991, following a pro-business turn in the 1980s which favoured the middle classes and big business, in particular. In his speech announcing the need for fiscal adjustment, macroeconomic stabilisation, and a regime of austerity, the Finance Minister, Manmohan Singh, repeatedly highlighted the need for the people to make sacrifices and suffer pain to preserve India’s economic independence, invoking fears of neo-colonialism (Singh 1991). In the speech, he recommended the adoption of Gandhi’s philosophy of trusteeship such that those who own and create wealth ‘have to hold it as a trust and use it in the interest of the society, and particularly of those who are under-privileged and without means’ (Singh 1991). For the masses he suggested Gandhi’s practice of austerity which, he argued was a ‘way of holding our society together in pursuit of the noble goal of banishing poverty, hunger and disease’ (Singh 1991, 8). Gandhi’s (1960, 14–15) concept of trusteeship was complex and can be read as paternalistic and a doctrine of class reconciliation, but also as having radical potential, since it required extensive state-mediated redistribution of wealth from the rich and the taking of this wealth by force if the rich did not cooperate. Singh’s austerity and charity for the masses and trusteeship for the wealthy, however, was a firmly paternalistic approach which sought to legitimise the inequalities produced by economic reforms while stemming discontent. The 1990s in India were marked by two trends that had long-term ramifications for democracy. Political participation deepened with the proliferation of caste-based and regional political parties and the demise of the formerly dominant Congress party, resulting in new regional, caste and religious stratifications and hierarchies. Simultaneously, notwithstanding Singh’s efforts at ideologically embedding austerity, India’s economic reforms proceeded with little public debate, as welfare programmes, social provisioning and public sector jobs were slashed and restructured and economic liberalisation undermined local industries, thereby exacerbating socio-political tensions (Jenkins 1999; Pai and Kumar 2018). As this strategy came unstuck in the 2000s, with rising inequality and discontent, a revived Congress party-led coalition government attempted to fashion a progressive neoliberalism that included rights-based social protections to manage the ‘surplus population’ produced by India’s particular mode of neoliberalisation, which had failed to produce mass formal employment (Sanyal 2007). This agenda, however, was negotiated with civil society groups and an activist Supreme Court which were side-stepped in the final policy designs by a government committed only to providing minimal safety nets and technocratic, marketised social provisioning (Chacko 2018).

In the case of China, its turn to authoritarian protectionism in Cooper’s (2021, 105) account is largely attributed to its economic success and subsequent assertiveness. However, as in other countries, China’s ‘neoliberal-looking’ (Duckett 2020) reforms since the 1980s, which promoted markets and the private sector for economic growth, have been accompanied by conservative social values, namely the notion of *suzhi*, which is shaped by Republican-era eugenics, Chinese Marxist and Confucian traditions of self-cultivation, and contemporary authoritarian and neoliberal governance practices and rationalities, which place emphasis on competition, Communist Party authority, and nationalism (Kipnis 2006, 297, Lin 2017). Usually translated as population 'quality', *suzhi* has developed as a distinctive domestic civilising mission which denotes a 'hierarchical and moral distinction between the high and the low' with its improvement upheld as 'a mission of national importance'. *Suzhi* increasingly refers to individual self-improvement and justifies social and political hierarchies including rising inequality and authoritarian leadership (Kipnis 2006, 297). For instance, state discourses of *suzhi* have infused Chinese education systems, which promote individual investment in, and responsibility for, education. This has similarities to theories of human capital developed by Chicago School economists Gary Becker and Theodore Schultz (Goodburn 2020). Neoliberalising reforms in China were possible because of its pre-existing authoritarian and social controls and they have had similar negative consequences as elsewhere, heightening inequalities and population segmentation, benefitting mostly urban formal sector workers and creating a large internal informal and precarious migrant workforce. Health, housing, and education were partly commercialised, and subsequently became more difficult to access. The introduction of means tested cash support programmes for the very poor excluded many and was socially stigmatising. Rural migrants and women were particularly disadvantaged in social provisioning (Duckett 2020, 526–533). The *hukou* (household registration) system tied rural migrants to their villages for access to social welfare systems such as education and healthcare, leaving many marginalised, poor and precarious. A discourse of lacking *suzhi* underpins the treatment of rural migrants who have been managed by local urban governments as 'floating populations' which threaten social stability and security (Zhang 2021; Han 2010). Rural migrants are subjected to racialised social discrimination and violent policing based on their physical attributes of dress, dialect, and marginal status in cities. The *hukou* system and the notion of *suzhi* thus serve the purpose of suppressing wages, stemming dissent, and limiting the costs of state-provided social welfare (Han 2010, 604).

Contemporary authoritarian protectionism and the evolution of neoliberalism

Processes of neoliberalisation have generated distinctive forms of gender and racial oppression, and anti-democratic governance, as well as political and economic crises. Contemporary authoritarian regimes have emerged on this terrain to promote overtly anti-democratic and racialised and gendered forms of popular sovereignty to sustain ever more deeply crisis-ridden neoliberal social orders. Typically, these authoritarian regimes present themselves as welfarist in orientation, thereby ostensibly challenging neoliberalism. A closer examination of these policies, however, reveals ongoing neoliberal trends—including a deepening focus on the reform of the household and the marginalisation of minorities—complemented by deepening authoritarianism to curb dissent. Since 2016 for instance, as a response to growing social discontent, China has initiated reforms to the *hukou* system and its stark rural/urban divide by, for instance, encouraging permanent migrant settlement, and providing healthcare and pensions for migrant workers. Responsibility for migrant settlement, however, rests with local governments, which lack resources and incentives to integrate migrant workers. Migrant children continue to be mostly excluded from high-quality state schools and educated in low-quality private schools or sent back to rural areas, leaving them ill-educated for anything other than low-paid service work (Goodburn 2020). The lack of support for childcare, eldercare and domestic work means that such work has become privatised and marketised. This has had particularly negative effects on women due to the influence of a new discourse on motherhood, tied to notions of *suzhi*, and promoted by local communities and the party-state, which has reversed the one-child policy and adopted a pro-natalist policy in response to an ageing population. Alongside undertaking care work, mothers returning to rural communities are being incorporated into an informal, precarious economy of sub-contracted light manufacturing work (Zhang 2021). Urban low-skilled female workers are also increasingly opting for flexible informal service sector work to cope with increasing care demands (Dong 2020). The social credit system seeks to consolidate the political economy and moral economy of Chinese neoliberalism as a 'techno-moral fix' through ensuring market-based legal and regulatory compliance and a moral discourse of trustworthiness which is connected to the notion of *suzhi* (Zhang 2020; Sum 2019, 396). The discourse of *suzhi* is also central to the treatment of minorities in the province of Xinjiang. Since 2016, the Uyghur and other minorities have been subjected to mass detention in 're-education' camps that aim to raise their moral, mental and physical *suzhi* to, supposedly, that of the Han majority and, as Cooper (2021, 110) points out, to expropriate their labour in supply chains for global brands (Kam and Clarke 2021, 636–637). The absence of *suzhi* has been blamed for Xinjiang's poverty and the inability of minority residents to adapt to the market economy (Zukosky 2012).

In India, the government of Narendra Modi has gone further than any previous Indian regime in embedding neoliberal reforms in a moral framework, namely that of *Hindutva*, an upper-caste, conservative political Hinduism (Chacko 2019). Since 2017, seeking to consolidate a broad base of electoral support, Modi has presented himself as a welfarist Prime Minister launching numerous schemes targeting poor communities including the urban poor, women, youth, Muslim women and even the transgender community, which was officially recognised as a legally protected minority in 2014. A closer examination of these schemes, however, reveals marketised welfare delivery with minimal benefits and an elevation of *Hindutva* social norms and cultural mores which are Brahmanical and patriarchal, positioning left-liberals, Christians and Muslims (particularly men) as enemy others to be excluded, while lower castes are to be hierarchically incorporated into a *Hindutva* social order. For example, micro-credit schemes involving private, and public sector, banks and private sector companies associated with the gig economy, have been targeted towards lower caste, urban poor communities and particularly women, whose labour force participation has fallen precipitously low. The schemes have been promoted as rejecting an overregulated, patronage-driven state created by liberal elites and empowering female family members to contribute to the family income and national growth through self-employment, utilising traditional caste- and gender-based occupational skills (Chacko 2020; Gudavarthy and Vijay 2020). Surveys conducted on the impact of micro-credit schemes on women indicate, however, that they have produced few new businesses and low-quality jobs. Moreover, public health and education systems remain woefully underfunded. The Modi regime has also intensified pre-existing authoritarian tendencies. Farmer resistance to neoliberalising agricultural reforms was met with force and internet shutdowns and was framed as threats to the nation by separatist minorities. Violent campaigns and legislation against Hindu-Muslim romantic relationships have been framed as protecting Hindu women's rights to education and work against oppressive Muslim men (Chacko 2020). The stripping of the Muslim-majority state of Jammu and Kashmir of its semi-autonomous status was consistent with long-held Hindutva complaints about the special treatment given to Muslims in India by liberal elites, but it was also justified as opening the region to investment, women's rights and economic growth. In the name of disciplining and protecting Indian civilisation, moves to privatise public sector companies and marketise agriculture have occurred alongside the introduction of strategic protectionism which aims to encourage foreign investment in some sectors while reducing the role of foreign capital in others; supports selected domestic companies; and rejects or renegotiates free trade agreements, which are now blamed for deindustrialisation (Chacko 2021).

The case of India has some similarities with Hungary where the government of Viktor Orbán combines a moral framework of white Christian, patriarchal nationalism with strategic protectionism to reduce foreign ownership and boost selected domestic capitalists in key sectors while encouraging foreign investment in others and decreasing reliance on international financial institutions. This has been combined with more traditional neoliberal policies such as the constitutionalised enforcement of balanced budgets; inflation targeting and debt reduction; tax cuts; weakening of labour rights; consumer price interventions; anti-poor policies such as the criminalisation of homelessness; and workfare-ist policies. In addition, pronatalist policies aim to consolidate cross-class support by tying social rights to having children; targeting heterosexual working families engaged in formal paid employment with tax benefits; baby and marriage-incentive loans; child-related debt reduction; and mortgage assistance (Geva 2021; Fodor 2022). Such policies often exclude minorities such as Roma, who remain outside of formal employment, and disadvantage lower class women who must continue low-paid work to obtain a modicum of state support. Leaders have justified discrimination in the labour market as well as the lack of state support for care work through an 'anti-gender' discourse opposing gender equality, and through the sentimentalising of feminised care work (Fodor 2022). A limited tax base has contributed to falling expenditure on health and education and the exacerbation of social inequalities (Stubbs and Lendvai-Bainton 2020, 550–551).

Recognising that authoritarian protectionism in India, China, and Hungary and other countries (E.g. see Stubbs and Lendvai-Bainton 2020, Ramos 2021) has done little to resolve the crises of unemployment and social reproduction that have become major sources of discontent is important for finding a way forward for those opposed to this politics. It is these weaknesses that should be the focus for building the progressive hegemonic approach with alternative moral claims that Cooper (2021, 139) advocates. To this end, the 'great resignation' of workers in the low-paid services sector in the USA and the successful farmer protests in India, which forced the government to shelve marketising agricultural reforms, are perhaps hopeful signs for the possibility of building of new social democracies by foregrounding issues of labour expropriation and social reproduction.

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