



Markets and Morals: The Reactionary Right's Ideological Core

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13.03.2025

Over the last years a worrying political alliance has gained momentum globally. There are striking similarities between Trump, Bolsonaro and Milei in the Americas and Le Pen, Kickl and Weidel in Europe. Inspired by the work of Wendy Brown, I argue that these national politicians share an ideology strongly grounded in the thought of Friedrich Hayek, the founding father of neoliberalism: They all systematically link “markets” and “morals” - combining markets and traditional morals of property, family, and nation. For them, markets are one of several traditional institutions that have to be defended together.

Historical Links of “Markets” and “Morals”

It is good to remember historical examples of movements that linked market fundamentalism and the adherence to traditional values. In Austria, the austerity policies in the 1920s were implemented by prime minister Ignaz Seipel, a Catholic priest, who headed an antisemitic, anti-feminist and anti-modern party. In Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s, an organization called *Tradition, Family and Property* actively supported military coups against democratic governments. In the USA, Ronald Reagan was elected in 1980 by an alliance of neoliberal Chicago Boys and the Christian Right.

The fusion of markets and conservative morality was also evident in interwar Vienna. In the culture war fought by university- and media-based “Black Vienna” against “Red Vienna”, the municipal social democratic reformism in the 1920s, there was already a strong cultural element in the political struggle. This conflictive political context heavily influenced not only the works of Karl Polanyi but also Ludwig Mises and Friedrich Hayek. In 1927, conservatives like Sigmund Freud and Alma Mahler openly supported social democracy against anti-modern and antisemitic conservatives while Hayek was abhorred by social democrats' impressive social housing programme. These historical patterns help analyse today's alliances. The current convergence of anarcho-capitalists like Peter Thiel and Elon Musk with racists, anti-abortion activists, and climate change deniers is not an anomaly - it follows a well-established trajectory.

Wendy Brown's “In the Ruins of Neoliberalism”

Wendy Brown's “In the Ruins of Neoliberalism. The Rise of Antidemocratic Politics in the West”, published by Columbia University Press in 2019, is a must-read for understanding this alliance. In the book, Brown distinctively analyses how proponents of austerity dismantle public services and concentrate corporate power with nationalists that enforce traditional morality and religion.

The anti-hero in Brown's book is Friedrich Hayek, the "Austrian", born in Vienna and appalled by "Red Vienna". Friedrich Hayek, like Karl Polanyi, was a moral economist. While Polanyi aimed at freedom for all in a complex society, Hayek had a clear anti-socialist and anti-democratic vision to return to a traditional social order based on property, family, religion and markets. For him, freedom is founded in the fusion of "markets" and "morals".

Friedrich Hayek: Spiritus Rector of Current Reactionary Politics?

While Milton Friedman simply reduces democracy to market liberalism, for Hayek, democracy and liberalism differ. While the first is a form of decision making based on the majority rule, liberalism is the philosophy of a free social order. Therefore, democracy has to be conducive to liberalism. In case of conflicts, democracy has to be limited, as in the case of Central Banks, or even abandoned, as in the case of neoliberal dictators like Chile's Pinochet, to avoid potentially totalitarian – freedom-reducing - decisions by majorities.

Hayek's liberal social order of freedom is not, however, limited to markets. His neoliberal zeal of privatization, embraced even by so-called progressive neoliberals, is not limited to privatizing roads and schools but includes privatization by "familiarization and Christianization". In this vein, current reactionary movements declare domestic violence, slave-like labor relations and creationist teaching in schools as 'private affairs' that have to be protected from "totalitarian" state interventions. Laws criminalizing marital rape, regulating labor conditions, or mandating science-based education are seen as threats to individual liberty.

Many argue that Donald Trump and his sympathizers are a threat to our pluralist liberal democracies. If this is correct, then public opinion makers must engage in critical self-reflection: Why are austerity and Musk's entrepreneurialism applauded while the racist, sexist, and sometimes fascist pronouncements of this movement are widely condemned? Is it possible that the link between neoliberalism, austerity and privatization, on one side, and racism, sexism and imperialism on the other side is systematic?

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