

Review of: "Neoliberalism, Strong State and Democracy"

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Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.

This paper seeks to clarify what's meant by the term "neoliberalism." It argues that neoliberalism is strongly linked to authoritarianism: "from a neoliberal perspective, state and quasi-state institutions independent of societal interests can best ensure the efficiency and stability of the capitalist system globally, regionally and nationally as 'well-meaning dictators'." I agree that some prominent, neoliberal thinkers support(ed) various forms of "authoritarian liberalism" or "consumer democracy." However, I am not convinced that neoliberalism is inherently authoritarian, and I offer two suggestions for sharpening that argument.

First, the paper could do a better job of explaining to non-experts (like me) what leads neoliberal thinkers towards authoritarianism. The paper echoes other research in arguing that neoliberalism is less focused on "disembedding" the economy from society than "encapsulating" it. However, it is not clear to me why authoritarian regimes are better at encapsulating markets than democratic regimes, which might provide a stronger ideological defense for inegalitarian, capitalist, economies. Perhaps, the reason relates to this paper's compelling argument in Section 2 that neoliberalism emerged as a critique of neoclassical economics. I agree that Coase's theory of the firm provides a justification for relaxing antitrust policies, but I do not see how it provides a justification for authoritarian politics. I think that argument could be clarified in the paper and in the abstract.

Second, the paper could engage with a broader set of neoliberal thinkers. The paper highlights speeches by Alexander Rustow and Carl Schmitt in 1929 and 1932, but it cites little work of self-identified neoliberal thinkers over the last few decades. Indeed, while Schmitt receives the most attention, the paper concedes that he "cannot be safely described as a neoliberal" even if his arguments "are in line with this lecture and influenced the early neoliberals' understanding of the state and democracy." It is not clear that today's self-identified neoliberal thinkers (or think tanks) are similarly influenced by Schmitt's authoritarian impulses, so any evidence that they are would be very interesting. Regardless, I think this paper would be improved by an overview of how contemporary neoliberals discuss the role of the state and the relative advantages of authoritarian and democratic governments.