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IL TRUMPISMO COME NUOVO MODELLO DI GOVERNO

Tra neoliberalismo e neofascismo

A cura di
Davide Borrelli, Christian Laval e Nilton Ken Ota

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Matilde Ciolli

THE POLITICS OF HIERARCHY
Project 2025, trumpism and neoliberalism's afterlife

Abstract:

This article examines the ideological continuities and discontinuities between Trumpism and neoliberalism through an analysis of *Project 2025*, the Heritage Foundation's blueprint to institutionalize Trumpism. Focusing on the chapters devoted to family, sexuality, reproductive health, immigration, welfare education, and presidential power, it analyzes how these same issues were addressed by U.S. neoliberal theorists like Milton Friedman, Gary S. Becker and George Gilder during the hegemonic phase of U.S. neoliberalism. The article argues that a hierarchical political core structured neoliberal thought, reinforcing sexual, racial, and class inequalities through market mechanisms. This legacy, it contends, paved the way for MAGA ideology, which radicalizes it within a different religious, nationalist and authoritarian framework.

Keywords:

Trumpism; *Project 2025*; MAGA ideology; Neoliberalism.

1. *Introduction*

Throughout 2025, Donald Trump's second administration has led several scholars to proclaim the end of the neoliberal era and the emergence of a new political-economic order. The historian of capitalism Sven Beckert has interpreted the present moment as the culmination of a regime shift set in motion after the 2008 Great Recession, marked by the politicization of markets, the revival of tariffs and direct state intervention in corporate decision-making, replacing free trade, central bank independence and globalized production chains (Beckert 2025, pp. 963-1046). According to the economist Branko Milanović, trade wars, sanctions regimes, tariffs justified on geopolitical and military security grounds and the restrictions

on immigration have been marking the transition toward a form of "national market liberalism" that preserves certain features of neoliberalism (low taxation of high incomes and inheritances, deregulation and limited public spending) while rejecting its globalism, cosmopolitanism and civil egalitarianism (Milanović 2025). Similarly, the philosopher Slavoj Žižek has argued that Trump has "brutally erased global neoliberalism", triggering the "disintegration of the ethical-political order" and bypassing both national and international law through more or less direct involvement in war crimes (Žižek 2025). For Žižek, the ideology that best captures this new logic is "liberal fascism", whose "dream is also to allow the market to function freely in its most destructive form, from the most brutal pursuit of profit to the discrediting of any ethical restraint". Finally, already in 2022, the historian Gary Gerstle interpreted the first Trump administration – given its skepticism toward free trade, its ethnonationalism and its hostility toward a cosmopolitan elite allegedly intent on selling off American wealth – as an "incipient challenge to the American neoliberal order" (Gerstle 2022, pp. 243-251).

Distancing themselves from these interpretations, other scholars have tempered the hypothesis of an economic regime-change by highlighting elements of continuity with the neoliberal order. Christian Laval has acknowledged the emergence of a new phase aimed at defining a "new world order", which, however, is marked neither by a supposed return of the state – which under neoliberalism never went away – nor by "deglobalization", a claim challenged by the contradictory tendencies driven by the interests and strategies of major oligopolistic groups and by military-economic imperatives (Laval 2023). To Laval, then, what we are witnessing is not the "end of neoliberalism", but a multidimensional hybridization between the neoliberal state and forms of tariff protectionism and national reindustrialization, supported by increasingly authoritarian governments. Quinn Slobodian has likewise cautioned against treating neoliberalism as a historical period defined solely by global liberalization. In his view, Trump's trade policy should instead be understood within the longer history of the "neoliberal era", which, since the Reagan administration, has been marked by frequent departures from the rules of multilateral free trade, as protectionist agreements have repeatedly leveraged state power to advance private profit and support strategic sectors (Slobodian 2021). Finally, other scholars, while acknowledging the distinctive disorder produced by trade wars and Trump's repeated circumvention of laws and covenants, have emphasized the neoliberal character of his domestic policies. Through instruments such as the Department of Government Efficiency and the Big Beautiful Bill Act, the Trump administra-

tion has cut the federal workforce, promoted sweeping tax cuts, and further curtailed welfare programs, while increasing funding for the military and for Immigration and Customs Enforcement, the agency tasked with arresting and deporting migrants deemed irregular (Moyn 2025; Cox and O'Connor 2025; Chernomas et al. 2023, pp. 196-218.).

Building on this second interpretive strand, this article examines the ideological continuities and discontinuities between Trumpism and neoliberalism. While acknowledging the multiplicity of ideological influences on Trump (Mulieri 2025; Field 2025; Miranda 2026; Slobodian, Tarnoff 2026), the article focus on *Project 2025*, a comprehensive policy blueprint coordinated by the Heritage Foundation and presented by its authors as an effort to institutionalize Trumpism. Analyzing in particular the chapters of the project devoted to family, sexuality, reproductive health, immigration policy, welfare, education and presidential power, the article examines how these same issues were addressed by Milton Friedman, Gary S. Becker and George Gilder in the 1980s, that is by some of the most prominent U.S. neoliberal theorists in the period in which neoliberalism became hegemonic in the U.S. under the presidency of Ronald Reagan. These intellectuals represented different strands of neoliberal thought, but they all played key roles during neoliberalism's rise and institutionalization. Both Friedman and Becker were leading figures of the Chicago School of Economics, presidents of the *Mont Pèlerin Society* – the most important network of the neoliberal intellectual movement – from 1970 to 1972 and from 1990 to 1992, respectively, recipients of the Nobel Memorial Prize in Economics and regular economic columnists for *Newsweek* and *Business Week*. Gilder, by contrast, was a social conservative who only later came to defend entrepreneurial capitalism, most notably in *Wealth and Poverty*, a book promoted by Reagan's entourage. He became one of the leading voices of American Enterprise Institute, a conservative think tank that contributed to shaping Regan's economic agenda, and in 1986 he received the *White House Award for Entrepreneurial Excellence* from President Reagan.

The article identifies, at the heart of the political and economic thought of these neoliberal thinkers, a hierarchical political core that led them, although with different analytical approaches, to strengthen sexual, racial and class hierarchies through market mechanisms, to attack redistributive welfare policies and to constrain egalitarian demands expressed by social movements. This hierarchical thought, the article argues, paved the way for the heterogeneous MAGA ideology, which has radicalized this legacy, albeit operating within a different religious, nationalist and authoritarian framework and often pursuing objectives that conflict with neoliberal principles.

2. *Project 2025*

In April 2023, the Heritage Foundation – a conservative think tank founded in 1973 to support conservative economic policies – published *Mandate for Leadership: The Conservative Promise* (Dans, Groves 2023), which the following year became the basis of *Project 2025*. A document bearing the same title was already published in 1980 and, according to the Heritage Foundation's own estimates, sixty percent of its recommendations were implemented within the first year of the Reagan administration. The drafting of the 2025 version involved a broad range of contributors that gave expression to the different strands of the Make America Great Again movement, with the aim of outlining an agenda that would be "ready on Day One of the next Administration to save our country from the brink of disaster" (Dans, Groves 2023, p. 3). A significant number of participants in the project were later incorporated into the second Trump administration, facilitating the implementation of many of the report's recommendations.

For the president of the Heritage Foundation, Kevin D. Roberts, Trumpism must represent a new form of conservatism that reckons with the limits of the Republican Party and respond to a severe crisis produced by "the long march of cultural Marxism" through the institutions and by the federal government's attack on individual freedom, reversing this tide and restoring the "Republic to its original moorings" (Dans, Groves 2023, p. XIV). From the beginning, the document blames the ruling and cultural elite for the rising inflation ravaging family budgets, the escalating drug overdose deaths, the "toxic normalization of transgenderism", the low-income communities' dependence on government and "the totalitarian cult known today as "The Great Awokening"" (p.1).

To address the collapse of the social pillars of conservatism – among which Roberts lists marriage, family, work, church, school and volunteering – policymakers should assume as a priority the restoration of the patriarchal family as the foundation of a "well-ordered nation and a healthy society" (p. 451), as well as a condition for family financial stability and social mobility. To reaffirm it, it is necessary for the government to support organizations that adhere to the "biblical" definition of marriage and the family and that do not call into question heteronormativity, the sexual division of labor and the biological link between femininity and motherhood. Accordingly, on the one hand, *Project 2025* entrusts religious associations with the task of restoring "broken homes" and providing marriage and parenting guidance for low-income fathers, grounded in a biological and traditional conception of fatherhood; on the other hand, it seeks to make

abortion virtually impossible by advocating for a ban on the current primary means of terminating a pregnancy. Moreover, in order to reestablish the gender hierarchies that feminism has called into question both within and outside institutions, *Project 2025* recommends dismantling diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programs, forcing the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission to rescind rules prohibiting discrimination based on sex, gender and race. According to the project, the teaching of "gender ideology" and race theory should be defunded, and the right of parents to choose their children's education must be guaranteed.

Within *Project 2025*, the attack on women and LGBTQ people goes hand in hand with the attack on racial minorities, both U.S. citizens and regular and irregular migrants. "Open borders policies" are attributed to globalist elites that supports international treaties – "from pharmaceutical patents to climate change to "the rights of the child"" (p. 10) – and to woke American corporations more interested in foreign investors than in national interests. According to Ken Cucinelli, the author of the chapter on the Department of Homeland Security and a former Trump administration official, in order to defend American wages and welfare, it is necessary to further restrict the requirements for access to asylum, suspend the issuance of visas for seasonal workers and international students coming from "enemy countries", as well as for nationals of countries that don't accept deportees, while maintaining expedited regularization procedures for those able to pay higher fees. The *Project* also calls for a sharp increase in the deportation of undocumented migrants, the construction of new detention centers for those awaiting removal and an expansion of the powers of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), insulating it from political interference and allowing it to intervene in workplaces, schools, hospitals and places of worship.

Cucinelli's proposal to close unnecessary offices within the Department of Homeland Security and to allow its Secretary to have "his or her own dedicated team of political appointees selected and vetted by the Office of Presidential Personnel" in order to "help ensure the completion of the next President's agenda" (p. 136) reflects *Project 2025*'s broader plan to dismantle specific parts of the federal government and massively expand presidential power. Its architects want Trump to be able to stock the executive branch with political appointees, fire civil servants at will and discard the impartiality and autonomy of the Justice Department (Graham 2025).

From this perspective, public welfare – blamed for encouraging permanent dependency – should be defunded and tied to stricter work requirements. The Department of Health and Human Services is targeted and accused of promoting abortion as a form of health care programs such as Medicare and

Medicaid, considered responsible for the American "deficit problem". Accordingly, the *Project* recommends promoting educational opportunities outside the public school system dominated by "anti-American, ahistorical propaganda", by distributing public funds through vouchers that can also be used at religious or private schools, with the ultimate goal of closing the Department of Education and restoring educational control to states, localities and parents. Fair housing policies should be defunded because they have been distorted by the adoption of race-based logics and have discouraged the formation of two-parent families, the work ethic and upward social mobility. Ultimately, despite its constant claims to defend American workers, the *Project* calls into question the constitutionality of public-sector unions, favors the use of union-busting consultants by large corporations to discipline employees, supports the loosening of overtime pay rules and advocates the dismissal of the general counsel of the National Labor Relations Board.

The section devoted to the economy is the one that displays the least cohesion among the authors, to the extent that on both trade and the Export–Import Bank two separate essays present conflicting views. In particular, regarding trade, the president of the Competitive Enterprise Institute, Kent Lassman, argues that the best trade policy is a "humble, limited-government approach that would encourage free trade with all nations" (p. 657), promote peace and make goods more affordable for Americans. By contrast, Peter Navarro, a former White House director of trade and manufacturing policy and the current chief architect of Trump's protectionist agenda, supports tariffs primarily as an anti-China measure, aimed at discouraging the purchase of Chinese-made goods. By bringing offshored production back to the United States, blue-collar workers would be enabled to earn higher wages and "climb up the rungs of the ladder to the middle class" (p. 658). Yet, although the economic section opens with the stated goal of "prioritizing the economic prosperity of ordinary Americans" (p. 657), *Project 2025* ultimately advances the deregulation of the financial system and a restructuring of the fiscal system that would result in substantial tax cuts for the wealthiest individuals and high-income corporations, affecting those very same white American workers it claims to defend, leaving them with little more than symbolic compensation.

Overall, *Project 2025* is a plan designed to forcefully reestablish – by authoritarian means – the hierarchies of sex, race, and class that the social and political movements of women, LGBTQ people, Black and Latinos, organized workers and migrants have been calling into question in the past sixty years. Targeting these subjects as political enemies, it prescribes the concentration of power in the hands of the president and the executive, the

replacement of "woke" workers in federal agencies or the media with loyal political appointees and massive funding for ICE and the military, with the aim of restructuring the American social order by eliminating all forms of opposition. While it is ambiguous on trade policy – proposing both protectionist and free-market measures – *Project 2025* remains faithful to a neoliberal logic in dismantling the federal state and the social policies implemented by its agencies.

3. *U.S. Neoliberalism and the family*

By opening their document with a call to overturn the social order built by the "Great Awokening", the authors of *Project 2025* echo an earlier cultural, political and social war that Susan Faludi described as the Reagan-era "backlash" against the liberation movements of the 1960s and the 1970s and the social policies they demanded (Faludi 1991; see also Davis 1990). In that earlier period, neoliberal intellectuals such as Friedman, Becker and Gilder developed theories aimed at restoring the political and social conditions of the market that have been disrupted by these very social movements.

In the 1980s, Milton Friedman was at the height of his career. In that period, PBS stations around the country aired the first episode of *Free to Choose*, a documentary miniseries that served as a major platform for his economic views, closely aligning with the anti-government, tax-cutting sentiments central to Reagan's campaign (Brandes 2020). The companion volume, derived from the series, became the best-selling nonfiction book of the year offering an ideological narrative about what he considered the dangers of excessive government intervention, inefficient bureaucracies burdening the citizens and runaway federal spending.

According to Friedman, the main nefarious effect of the government's "paternalistic programs", started by Roosevelt and significantly increased by Johnson, was the weaking of the family, which had to be considered as "the basic building block of our society" (Friedman, Friedman 1980, p. 33). Social Security undermined, in his opinion, the "individual moral responsibility" that children used to have toward their parents, disrupting the habit of "transfers" made "out of love or duty", which had "strengthened the bonds of the family" (Friedman, Friedman 1980, p.106). The impersonal system of the welfare state was therefore threatening the altruism that encouraged family self-support and that allowed the market to function without state interferences. Friedman also understood the family as one of

the primary incentives to productivity: responsibility toward children and parents, together with the transmission of wealth through inheritance, functioned as a stimulus to work hard and to make sacrifices for one's family (Cooper 2017, p. 59). For this reason, the "natural" incentive of inheritance had to be protected from estate taxation.

The family was therefore envisaged by Friedman as a crucial unity of the market order, both because it enabled the privatization of social reproduction and because it consolidated hierarchies of class and sex. Although Friedman never attributed an inherent inferiority to women, he took for granted their lower market value and regarded the demand for equal pay for equal work as an "anti-feminist" claim, since it deprived women of what he considered their "only weapon" to be hired instead of men, namely, accepting lower wages (Friedman 1978).

Within the Chicago School of economics, however, the role of the family in the market economy was examined, even more than Friedman, by his colleague Gary S. Becker. From the 1970s onward, he began to focus on the very institutions that were central to feminist critique: in 1973 and 1974 he published two essays on marriage (Becker 1973; Becker 1974) and in 1981 a book devoted to the family. The opening of *A Treatise on the Family* acknowledged that "the family in the Western world has been radically altered – some claim almost destroyed – by the events of the past three decades" (Becker 1981, p. 1). These events included "the rapid growth in divorce rates", the consequent rise in "households headed by women" and in "children growing up in households with only one parent". The increased participation of married women, including mothers of young children, in the labor market also reduced the contact with their children and "contributed to conflict between the sexes in employment as well as in marriage" (p.1). Finally, the sharp decline in fertility rates reduced family size and contributed to rising divorce rates and to the labor-force participation of married women.

To address these problems, Becker proposed an economic model grounded in the theory of comparative advantage, according to which "the resources of the members of a family (or of any other organization) should be allocated to various activities according to their comparative or relative efficiencies" (p. 35). While he initially claimed that all individuals within the family were "absolutely identical beings", he soon derived from biological differences between the sexes distinct inclinations toward different roles. Women, being biologically predisposed to childbearing, had "traditionally" devoted most of their time to procreation and other domestic activities, requiring from their husbands "long-term contracts to protect them from abandonment and other adversities" (p. 30). As a result, whereas women primarily invest in human

capital that increases the efficiency of the family, men, who spend most of their working time in the market, primarily invest in capital that increases market efficiency. By deriving different economic performances from biological and sexual differences, Becker both justified and reinforced the sexual division of labor. He did not merely restate the theory of separate spheres, but, by incorporating the domestic sphere into the broader domain of the market, differentiated the value that male and female human capital has on the latter and justified the gender pay gap (Becchio 2024, p. 217). The specialization of tasks and the mutual dependence for men and women made, in his opinion, heterosexual marriage advantageous to both. By contrast, homosexual families, unable to profit from sexual difference in terms of comparative advantage, would be less efficient. Similarly, "deviant" (Becker 1981, p. 40) children – those confused about their gender and thus about their social role – would ultimately turn out to be failed investments.

The application of comparative advantage theory to the family thus allowed him to redefine in economic terms what patriarchal tradition had long established as social norm (Ferber 2003; Carbone 2018). In doing so, he not only naturalized the sexual division of labor, motherhood, the correspondence between sex and gender, heterosexuality, and marriage, but also turned the market, with its rewards and punishments, into a deterrent against any attempt to challenge them (Ciolli 2024, pp. 144-148).

In the same year, a more explicitly moralistic, traditional and patriarchal defense of the family was put forward by George Gilder. Before turning to economics, Gilder had in fact authored two books – *Sexual Suicide* (Gilder 1973) and *Naked Nomads* (Gilder 1974) – in which he argued that the "sexual constitution", that is, the pact binding women to assume responsibility for childcare, had been broken by women's sexual emancipation, which, in Gilder's view, led to family breakdown, youth distress and the rise in crime and violence. These reflections were integrated by Gilder in his book *Wealth and Poverty*, where he considered work, family and faith as the "three pillars of the free economy" that enable individuals to invest and take risks in pursuit of their entrepreneurial ideas (Gilder 1981, p. 94). Social advancement required, in his view, hard work sustained by a form of "faith" – whether in the future or in divine providence – that can uphold "the spirit of enterprise against the setbacks and frustrations it inevitably meets" (p. 93). Such dedication to work, he maintained, could be consolidated only in the presence of a stable family and a monogamous marriage, which motivated men – the only ones he considered truly legitimate workers – to be productive in order to support wives and children. By contrast, when the family was headed by a woman, Gilder argued, it became nearly

impossible to increase the income. Even when women are highly educated, skilled and rely on domestic help, their "family responsibilities and distractions tend to prevent the kind of all-out commitment that is necessary for the full use of earning power" (p. 89). Women who seek to move beyond the domestic sphere are therefore caught, in Gilder's view, in a double trap of inefficiency: on the one hand, they are less productive in the labor market because motherhood leads them to favor part-time work; on the other hand, when they do engage in full-time work, they are blamed for the erosion of the family's well-being. Thus, according to Gilder, the only way to foster upward mobility out of poverty was to confine women's role to providing their husbands with offspring and fidelity.

Overall, in the works of Friedman, Becker and Gilder, the two-parent heterosexual family appeared as a cornerstone of the market society, a source of economic stability and social mobility, and a precondition for dismantling the welfare state, much as it does in *Project 2025*. Yet their different reflections on the family, while reinforcing inequalities of sex and gender and reestablishing the figure of the husband as the family's primary provider, were not aimed chiefly (especially in the case of Friedman and Becker) at restoring a traditional patriarchal order and its values. Rather, they treated sexual hierarchies as crucial for sustaining market competition and productivity. It was precisely the priority accorded to the orderly functioning of the market that led Becker, three decades later, to favor the contractual formalization of same-sex unions (Becker and Posner 2010, p. 22) – though he regarded them as dysfunctional for child development – insofar as this allowed to govern their behavior and manage their assets.

By contrast, in the case of the authors of *Project 2025*, although family, marriage, and the sexual division of labor remain crucial to social and economic stability, they are regarded above all as the heart of a healthy Christian nation. In this respect, both Ken Cuccinelli – who, as Virginia attorney general, defended anti-sodomy laws and bans on same-sex marriage – and Roger Severino, author of the chapter on Health and Human Services, ground their opposition to homosexuality and abortion primarily in their Catholic faith, thereby anchoring the MAGA social project in religious foundations that, within neoliberalism, are at most instrumental to market discipline.

4. *U.S. Neoliberalism and Race*

Another crucial issue, alongside the family, for neoliberal intellectuals in the 1980s was the management of racial minorities and migrants within the

market. The problem of racial discrimination was initially addressed by neoliberals well before the Reagan era. In particular, Becker devoted his doctoral dissertation to the subject and in 1957 turned it into a book titled *The Economics of Discrimination* (Becker [1957] 1971). Appearing a few years after the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling and the beginning of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, his work offered an economic analysis of racial discrimination, interpreting it as a preference or "taste" that must be taken as a given and that simply responds to individuals' efforts to maximize their own utility.

According to Becker, racial discrimination entails a cost both for the target and the perpetrator that, in a competitive market, would ultimately contribute to its gradual erosion. Over time, the greater profits generated by hiring Black workers at lower wages than whites or the competitive advantage gained by firms that employed Blacks and thereby reduced labor costs would, in Becker's view, lead to the dissolution of discrimination. This thesis, however, had significant limitations not only because, as Becker himself acknowledged, certain market conditions made discrimination economically viable, but also because, by assuming the inferior value of Black labor, he implied that the only way to integrate Black workers in the market was through their exploitation.

Echoing Becker, Friedman devoted a chapter to the topic in his hugely influential 1962 book, *Capitalism and Freedom* (Friedman 1962), where he adopted a similar definition of discrimination as a matter of "taste". From this perspective, discrimination by employers, Friedman argued, reflected the preferences of the community and consumers and thus functioned as a profit-maximizing business strategy, one that would be compromised by fair employment regulations coercively dictating hiring decisions. He accordingly likened the measures associated with the Fair Employment Practices Committee to Hitler's Nuremberg Laws and to segregationist statutes in the Southern states, maintaining that all of them destroyed the free market in goods and services (Friedman 1962, p. 113). By the same logic, despite declaring that he "believe[d] strongly that the color of a man's skin or the religion of his parents is, by itself, no reason to treat him differently" (Friedman 1962, p. 111), two years later he denounced the Civil Rights Act as "undemocratic" and contrary to the principle of individual freedom, which he argued was violated by state-imposed prohibitions on discrimination (Burns 2023, p. 270).

The firm conviction that the free market was the only system capable of guaranteeing economic freedom and, consequently, political freedom for all individuals, led Friedman to defend the "colorblindness theorem" (Cornelissen 2025, p. 110) against any form of affirmative action that in-

terfered with the mechanisms of competition in order to protect Black people, workers or women (Wise 2010). Accordingly, when Congress enacted legislation to raise the federal minimum wage in 1966, Friedman wrote that

> the minimum-wage law is the most anti-Negro law on our statute books, in its effect not its intent. It is a tragic but undoubted legacy of the past – and one we must try to correct – that on the average Negroes have lower skills than whites. Similarly, teenagers are less skilled than older workers. Both Negroes and teenagers are only made worse off by discouraging employers from hiring them. On the-job training – the main route whereby the unskilled have become skilled – is thus denied them (Friedman 1966).

Just as with women, Friedman argued that for Black people the only way to avoid employers' refusal to hire them was to accept lower wages. He therefore continued to maintain in 1967 that it was a mistake to look to the federal government for a solution to the country's persistent racial disparities, since "the forces of self-reliance, independence, and private enterprise … alone can produce a permanent solution" (Friedman 1967; Cornelissen 2025, p. 115).

A similar anti-government approach was used by Friedman to address the issue of immigration. In 1978, in his lecture "What is America?", while he declared himself in favor of open borders for migrants seeking to improve their living conditions, he argued that this system had worked only as long as migrants did not have access to state benefits. Paradoxically, he maintained, "Mexican immigration is a good thing for both the immigrant and for the country, but it is so only as long as it remains illegal" (Friedman 1978). Undocumented immigrants, in fact, do not qualify for welfare or Social Security but they can be forced to work for wages that would be unacceptable to citizens. When, however, the welfare state is extended to all migrants, he argued, society collapses under the weight of a coercive, downward-leveling pressure. "Ethnic communities", he concluded, "can only advance through the free market, not solidarity".

Several years later, building on the same concerns about migrants' burden on the welfare state, Becker proposed that the United States should "sell the right to immigrate" (Becker and Posner 2010, p. 38). The entrance fee, he argued, would also serve as a selection mechanism, favoring wealthier and skilled migrants who were more motivated to learn American mores and customs. Almost in the same years, Gilder took a similar stand arguing that the United States should open their borders and expand the number of visas for highly skilled workers in the tech sector and for those who were eager to study on American campuses, rather than "focusing on attracting

more welfare clients". In his view, the selective immigration of competitive and skilled individuals would foster the "entrepreneurial creativity" that American capitalism still required (Hays 2013).

This class-based approach to immigration mirrored the framework Gilder adopted in the 1980s to analyze the causes of discrimination. Poor Black ghettos, he argued, were not the result of racism but rather a matter of class, stemming from what he described as "a natural reluctance of higher classes to expose their children to lower-class values" (Gilder 1981, p. 112). Accordingly, a "meritocratic" capitalist society cannot blur racial and class boundaries without undermining the "reward" due to those who strive to ascend the social ladder. From this perspective, housing subsidies for poor Black families that enabled them to move into middle-class neighborhoods had a negative effect, as they disrupted incentives for social mobility and generated conflict and resentment between classes.

Overall, Becker and Friedman approached the problem of racial discrimination by prioritizing the differentiated inclusion of Blacks, minorities and migrants into the market. Although they opposed all forms of affirmative actions and legislation designed to reduce racial inequality, their aim was not to remove migrants from the American soil but to ensure that their entry could be rendered economically productive and that they would function as subordinate, yet efficient market agents. Gilder, instead, defended the separation of Black and migrant people from the upper classes by portraying class hierarchy as an indispensable organizing principle of capitalism and as a necessary mechanism for allocating "wages of whiteness" (Roediger 1991).

This neoliberal, economic lexicon for discussing race and migration has partially permeated the MAGA ideology. Tellingly, during his tenure as acting director of U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services in the first Trump administration, Ken Cuccinelli promoted a “merit-based” immigration policy that denied green cards and visas to immigrants who used, or were deemed likely to need, food stamps, housing vouchers or Medicaid. In *Project 2025*, Cuccinelli recommends a further tightening of immigration policies without regard for labor market needs, while nonetheless allowing – much as Becker had suggested – expedited regularization for those able to pay more, a principle later operationalized by Trump through a dramatic surge in visa fees. The most evident departure from neoliberal critique of federal government role, however, lies in the virtually absolute powers conferred – in *Project 2025* and later granted by the second Trump administration – to ICE, a federal agency heavily funded through congressional appropriations and ultimately responding to presidential decisions.

The legitimization of persecutory measures against selected segments of the migrant population by an overfunded federal agency, along with the portrayal of migrants as potential "criminals" who do not belong in an America "for Americans and Americans alone", as said Stephen Miller, the key architect of Trump's hardline immigration agenda (Miller 2024; Guerrero 2020), stands in tension with the neoliberal call to defund federal agencies, while also rendering the remaining intimidated migrants more disciplined and compliant within the labor market.

5. *U.S. Neoliberalism and Welfare*

The welfare state – especially in the form assumed under President Johnson – was a common target in the intellectual history of U.S. neoliberalism. In *Free to Choose*, Friedman criticized it in light of the effects of the "War on Poverty" launched in 1964, which he regarded as producing a dual outcome: "widespread dissatisfaction" and "continued pressure for further expansion" (Friedman, Friedman 1980, p. 96). Welfare adversely affected not only the family and individual moral responsibility but, more broadly, the "fabric of our society", reducing "the incentive to work, save and innovate", threatening capital accumulation and limiting freedom. As a result, he argued, "public hunger" grew amid "well-publicized reports of welfare 'queens' driving around in Cadillacs bought with multiple relief checks" (Friedman, Friedman 1980, p. 107). To counter these outcomes, Friedman proposed the negative income tax. The program was intended to dismantle the extensive bureaucracy administering welfare programs and to weaken what the neoconservative Irving Kristol called the "new class" (Kristol 1979; Battistini 2019): government bureaucrats, academics whose research was funded by the government, journalists and others in the communications industry, that is, in Friedman's opinion, "the most ardent preachers of the doctrine of equality" (Friedman, Friedman, p. 142). Deliberately designed to counter this ideology, the negative income tax guaranteed only a minimal income to all individuals, set at a level low enough not to weaken the incentive to work. As Friedman said, "life is not fair. It is tempting to believe that government can rectify what nature has spawned. But it is also important to recognize how much we benefit from the very unfairness we deplore" (p. 137).

One of the public institutions Friedman regarded as most problematic was the school system. He argued that its growing centralization and bureaucratization under federal authority deprived "many parents [of] control over the kind of schooling their children receive", while the forced integration

of white and Black students had generated violence and social conflict. For this reason, he returned to the voucher plan he had first proposed in 1955, although it had been declared unconstitutional in 1964, when six Southern states used it to sustain segregation by allowing private schools to exclude Black students through selective admissions policies (MacLean 2021). Under this scheme, governments would finance education by issuing vouchers to parents for each child, allowing them to choose among approved public, private, or religious schools, which would be expected to respond more efficiently to the demands of student-consumers than centralized public systems. Although Friedman conceded that critics feared vouchers would deepen class and racial divisions, he continued to defend them as instruments that would grant parents of all income levels the freedom to choose their children's schools, while covering, under the rhetoric of "equal opportunity", the material hierarchies that constrained that very freedom.

In the 1980s, Becker also sharply criticized Johnson's "War on Poverty", highlighting what he saw as the link between the expansion of welfare and the rise in illegitimacy, divorce, the erosion of altruism and therefore of family self-sufficiency. Like Friedman, Becker argued that welfare undermined the two engines of market society's reproduction: on the one hand, the incentives to work, produce, and compete; on the other, the family itself, which he believed had been gravely destabilized by the AFDC program, described by Becker as "poor women's alimony" (Becker 1981, p. 357), replacing the wage of the husband as breadwinner.

An even more radical critique of welfare was articulated by Gilder. Although he acknowledged that a healthy capitalist system requires a balance between incentives for entrepreneurial risk-taking and a minimal degree of security, he viewed the welfare state that emerged from the 1960s onward as a rigid structure that predetermines both strategies and outcomes within the market, thereby constraining innovation and economic growth. Above all, however, he attributed to welfare deeply corrosive moral effects: it encouraged the breakdown of the family and of poor Black communities, the withdrawal from the labor market, and, most notably, the erosion of an aggressive and dominant masculinity. As he wrote, "unlike the mother's role, which is largely shaped by biology, the father's breadwinner duties must be defined and affirmed by the culture. The welfare culture tells the man he is not a necessary part of the family" (Gilder 1981, p. 148). Supported by an ideology aimed at combating racial and gender discrimination through affirmative actions, welfare offered women minimal forms of material independence that undermined, in Gilder's view, the "wage of masculinity" which had to incentivize poor men to work. Welfare system, he concluded, should be restricted

as much as possible, making it even "somewhat demeaning", in the awareness that escaping poverty ultimately depends on work.

Overall, the reflections of Friedman, Becker, and Gilder on welfare – by highlighting its alleged loosening effects on social hierarchies, individual productivity and competitiveness – anticipated many of the arguments deployed by *Project 2025* to dismantle it. Indeed, the authors of the Project stressed the need to cut government waste associated with the vast federal bureaucracy administering welfare programs; to curb the spread of egalitarian, gender and anti-racist ideologies allegedly embraced by federal agencies; to remove officials deemed disloyal; to halt what is portrayed as the dissolution of the patriarchal, heterosexual family – particularly within Black communities – as well as dependency on the state; and to expand the use of vouchers in order to reduce centralized federal control over schools and restore parental authority over their children's education. However, whereas the neoliberals' ideological battle against the welfare state was aimed at preventing social leveling and removing obstacles to the functioning of the market, the struggle encouraged by *Project 2025* against the so-called "deep state" combines classical neoliberal cuts to social programs, specific federal agencies and public workforce with an authoritarian strategy to take the reins of government, by creating space for presidential political appointees, funding selected agencies while eliminating those that can constrain the executive's discretionary action and expanding presidential power (Baritono 2025, p. 171).

6. *U.S. Neoliberals and Democracy*

Friedman, Becker, and Gilder did not engage extensively with the theme of democracy. Yet all three emphasized the dangers posed by mass democracy and popular sovereignty, identifying the market as the model toward which democratic governments should aspire. Becker, in particular, wrote a short essay on "Competition and Democracy" as early as 1958, arguing that "an ideal democracy is very similar to an ideal free enterprise system in the marketplace" insofar as those who govern are selected through "perfectly free competition for the votes of a broadly based electorate" (Becker 1958, p. 106). Thus, because competition, in Becker's view, is essential to safeguarding both market efficiency and democratic vitality, its preservation requires shielding economic processes from political interference. He returned to the issue of democracy nearly half a century later, arguing that "economic freedoms, by leading to greater prosperity, over time push societies toward

political freedoms" (Becker and Posner 2010, p. 316). To substantiate this claim, he cited the cases of South Korea, Taiwan and Chile, countries that initiated their economic development under military regimes.

> Korea and Taiwan both began freeing their economies around 1960 after centralized direction of their economies failed to produce economic growth. Chile began opening its economy under General Pinochet in 1981, also after his centralized approach to the Chilean economy failed. Within two decades, all three nations had achieved, or were moving rapidly toward, political democracies, with vibrant competition for elections among competing parties, and a mainly free press (p. 316).

In Becker's view, dictatorships were better suited than democracies to foster development and wealth, since democracies were often paralyzed by internal conflicts among interest groups. Therefore, to the extent that such regimes succeeded in establishing private property and open markets, they could, paradoxically, provide more favorable conditions than democracy for individual freedom to flourish. It was in this perspective that in 1997, Becker wrote that "in retrospect" the willingness of the "Chicago Boys" – a group of Chilean economists trained at the University of Chicago – "to work for a cruel dictator and start a different economic approach was one of the best things that happened to Chile" (Becker 1997).

Friedman shared Becker's economicist approach to democracy and considered economic freedom as "an end in itself" and only in the second place as "an indispensable means toward the achievement of political freedom" (Friedman 1962, p. 8). Competitive capitalism, even more than the rule of law, was in his view the most effective way to separate political from economic power, thereby limiting forms of coercion that arise from the concentration of authority. By making the market the sphere in which individuals decide freely and cooperate voluntarily, Friedman removed from politics the space of collective deliberation and reduced democracy to an institutional framework designed to safeguard free market and individual liberty (Wiedemann 2020). When this task was overcome and democratic mechanisms were politicized, Friedman stated in a 1988 interview, it is "obvious" that "a democratic society" ended up destroying the free economy (Slobodian 2023, p. 15). It is in this light that it is possible to understand the advice he offered to General Augusto Pinochet on March 21, 1975, recommending a "shock therapy" designed to erase every trace of Salvador Allende's democratic socialism through drastic cuts in public spending and monetary contraction (Klein 2007; Edwards 2023, p. 98). In Pinochet's military dictatorship – responsible for torture, summary

executions, forced disappearances, and systematic persecution – Friedman saw a regime capable of opening the economy to international competition, liberalizing interest rates and prices, privatizing state-owned enterprises, reforming labor legislation and eliminating subsidies, that is, of laying the groundwork for greater freedom for citizens as consumers (Fischer 2009, p. 319). In his view, whereas communist regimes had demonstrated the impossibility of democracy emerging from totalitarian systems (a category from which he excluded Nazism and Fascism), the authoritarian regimes of Spain, Portugal, and Greece showed, by contrast, that dictatorships, though undesirable, could, if accompanied by appropriate economic reforms, pave the way for the restoration of democratic government (Friedman 1975).

Gilder did not take a public position on Pinochet's Chile, yet he shared a deep distrust of mass democracy and defended an elitist, economistic conception of it. In his view, political leaders compete by offering platforms of ideas through which they shape and direct public opinion (Gilder 1981, p. 44). Democracy, Gilder argued, should not be understood as a system designed to give voice to the anonymous and conformed masses who are incapable of generating the innovative ideas and entrepreneurial drive necessary for capitalist progress. By contrast, it should be limited to provide a platform for the competitive struggle among elites, stimulating the dynamics of risk-taking and investment on which social prosperity ultimately depends.

Overall, Becker, Friedman, and Gilder interpreted democracy as a form of government that is viable only insofar as it respects the foundations of the market order. Without expressing the same overt disdain for the masses as Gilder did – and indeed presenting the market as the paradigm of an ideal democracy in which all are free to choose – Becker and Friedman nonetheless viewed popular sovereignty as a potential threat to market mechanisms. They thus prioritized the protection of economic freedom over political freedom, going so far as to justify – outside the United States – dictatorship as a temporary institution capable of restoring a market economy and isolate it, through authoritarian tools, from social and political dissent (Bruff 2014; Biebricher 2020; Dardot 2022). The neoliberal distrust of popular sovereignty and the effort to obstruct mechanisms of collective deliberation laid the groundwork for other ideologies' aggressive assault on democracy. However, while for both neoliberal intellectuals and the MAGA movement authoritarianism serves as a powerful tool to dismantle egalitarian social and legal measures and to target political opponents, the former justified it as a means of reestablishing market order, whereas the latter embraces it as a way to render the president's agenda unquestionable.

Project 2025 revives the originalist doctrine reinterpreting the Constitution in light of the presumed intent of the Founders to vest the executive with powers far exceeding those of the Congress and the courts and grounding this expansion in the plebiscitary mandate conferred through election. In this perspective, the aim of *Project 2025* is to grant vast powers to the President, who, through a unitary executive, must be able to exercise control over the bureaucratic apparatus without interference from Congress (Del Pero 2025, p. 121).

7. *Conclusions: continuities and discontinuities between U.S. neoliberalism and Trumpian ideology*

As the previous sections have argued, the challenges posed by feminist and civil rights mobilizations, along with state policies aimed at reducing inequality, prompted U.S. neoliberal thinkers in the 1980s to redefine the political preconditions of the market order. In doing so, they recoded sexual and racial hierarchies in economic terms, reinstating individual responsibility and the work ethic as the sole legitimate route to self-improvement and social mobility. These reflections not only made the hierarchical core of their thought more explicit but also entailed a crucial redefinition of conservatism: by economizing its language and abandoning nostalgia for the past, they recast traditional social hierarchies as necessary custodians of future-oriented social transformation.

It is precisely this idea of conservatism as a "politics for the present" (Ricciardi 2024, p. 347) that MAGA ideology is mobilizing today. As the American conservative activist Charlie Kirk wrote, "the slogan Make America Great Again may use the past as the benchmark for greatness, but we are not advocating a return to mid-century America" (Kirk 2020). For the new national conservative right, indeed, the aim is not to defend a *status quo* they regard as shaped by the Left, but to "have a strategy for creating and retaking space for its constituents, breaking and replacing captured institutions, and liberating them from the moral horizons of the Left" (Milikh 2023), as argued by Arthur Milikh, member of the Claremont Institute, participant in the advisory board of *Project 2025*.

This MAGA battle to reclaim control over society and political institutions relaunch the "civil war" that neoliberal intellectuals once waged against internal "enemies" (Dardot, Guéguen, Laval, Sauvêtre, 2021) – women, lgbtq, Blacks, workers, unions, popular sovereignty – to se-

cure a hierarchical market order and that the contemporary new right has radicalized, aiming to build a Christian, right-wing nation. The analytical comparison between the thought of neoliberal intellectuals who were central during the rise of neoliberalism and *Project 2025*, one of the most significant sources of the heterogeneous Trumpian ideology, allows to assess continuities and ruptures beyond the break represented by tariff policies – which, however, as some scholars underlined, were also deployed by Reagan within a "neoliberal protectionist" framework, to force other states to conform to market-based logic (Wraight 2019) – as well as beyond the persistence of the neoliberal rationality beneath the attack on federal agencies and personnel. In this perspective, the article has shown how the hierarchical core of neoliberal political thought paved the way for ideologies that radicalize its familist, racist and anti-democratic principles, often supporting them for reasons other than the preservation of the market order, while nonetheless preserving their anti-egalitarian character and their reliance on the market as a mechanism for preventing social leveling.

Neoliberal intellectuals portrayed the family as the institution that enables the privatization of welfare through a sexual division of labor that justifies the differentiated value of women's work in the market. The authors of *Project 2025* defend a similar patriarchal vision of the family, but they openly oppose same-sex couples, non-traditional gender identities and abortion not so much because of the economic effects these "deviations" (as Becker termed them) might have on human capital and productivity, as because they are seen as contrary to the dogmas of conservative morality and Christian creed. Neoliberal intellectuals approached racial discrimination by treating race as a vector of underpaid inclusion of minorities into the market. They supported the denial of migrants' access to welfare benefit, as well as their selective admission at the border based on income and skills. The authors of *Project 2025* have revived the neoliberal theorem of colorblindness in order to dismantle affirmative action policies benefiting racial minorities. Yet they often frame diversity as a problem to be eliminated rather than as a source of surplus value. Migrants, in turn, are depicted not only as individuals to be denied benefits and paid less, but also as criminals to be deported with the assistance of ICE agents, who are granted sweeping powers and broad impunity for their actions. With regard to the welfare state, neoliberal intellectuals encouraged cuts on the conservative assumption that public assistance fostered divorce, female-headed households, the dependency of Black women and irresponsible or even

criminal behavior among fathers no longer deemed indispensable. The authors of *Project 2025* deploy similar arguments to justify their assault on the administrative state and its bureaucracies, but with the additional aim of consolidating presidential control over federal agencies and transforming them into instruments of executive power, permeated by an ideology devoted not only to the market, but also to community, nation and God. Finally, neoliberal intellectuals sought to limit the effects of democratic decision-making and, in some cases, justified foreign authoritarian regimes tasked with violently restoring market order. Expanding upon Trump's own 2023 declaration that he would act as a dictator only on the first day of his presidency, the authors of *Project 2025* outlined instead the conditions necessary to render the president's will unchallengeable, shield the executive from congressional constraints and construct an administration composed solely of loyalists, while preparing measures designed to silence and remove political opponents.

Stuart Hall highlighted how the internal contradictions of neoliberalism – torn between change and its governance, individual freedom and moral or religious discipline, formal equality and its exercise within a hierarchical social order, democracy and its authoritarian limitation – have long enabled it to survive crises and emerge from them strengthened (Hall 2011). From this perspective, several scholars have understood contemporary populist and sovereigntist governments, including Trump's first administration, as specific articulations of neoliberal governmentality rather than as opponents of neoliberal globalization (Brown 2019; Serughetti 2021; Slobodian 2025). However, the second Trump administration is confronting us with transformations that can hardly be reduced to one of its "nine lives" (Mirowski et al. 2020). And yet, as has been shown, neoliberalism constitutes the terrain upon which MAGA ideology has been grafted. Although the intensification of an authoritarianism built around the figure of the president and an empowered executive distances Trumpism from neoliberalism – leading some scholars to speak of "late fascism" (Toscano 2023) or "wannabe fascism" (Finchelstein 2024) – crucial neoliberal-conservative logics nonetheless persist within it. These are evident not only in institutions such as the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) or in fiscal policies, but also in *Project 2025* proposals such as the rapid regularization of migrants able to pay higher sums, the use of vouchers to dismantle the public education system and the attack on the alleged egalitarian ideology of agencies responsible for social programs that disrupt the social and family order.

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