

Neoliberalism and the racialized critique of democracy

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It is a grave error to believe that it suffices to transfer the democratic institutions that we acquired through centuries-long efforts to the undeveloped countries without a period of transition The path to growth is a tedious path. Democracy, liberty, and prosperity are found at its end. They do not fall effortlessly into one's lap but must be won gradually.

—Louis Rougier (1961, p. 191, author's translation)

1 | INTRODUCTION¹

The neoliberal assault on democracy is without doubt one of the most pressing concerns for critical democratic theory today. Although the economic policies it tends to advocate and the cultural agenda it is wont to generate are objectionable to many, neoliberalism's anti-democratic disposition troubles the progressive mind more fundamentally because it threatens to undermine the very *possibility* of alternative arrangements. This, in any case, is the position taken by Wendy Brown, arguably neoliberalism's most vehement critic. For her, "democracy is neither a panacea nor a complete form of political life. Without it, however, we lose the language and frame by which we are accountable to the present and entitled to make our own future, the language and frame with which we might contest the forces otherwise claiming that future" (Brown, 2015, 210). This explains why so much critical scholarship on neoliberalism is animated by a profound concern for its antipathy toward democratic imaginaries (e.g., Biebricher, 2015; Bonefeld, 2017; Brown, 2006, 2019; Dardot & Laval 2019; Irving, 2018; Kiely, 2017; Lösch, 2008; Olssen, 2018; Slobodian, 2018).

The present essay will contend that this literature has by and large failed to account for the intersection between the neoliberal critique of democracy and racial (or racialized) differentiation. It argues, in other words, that the neoliberal assault on democracy frequently passes through a moment of racial othering. This applies especially, if not exclusively, to global south contexts, where democratization is viewed by many prominent neoliberals as a potential obstacle to economic development and the establishment of a market economy. In such cases, neoliberals

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argue, a choice must be made between economic development and democratic self-governance. The problem, as they imagine it, is that what they call “underdeveloped” populations lack the cultural or civilizational “maturity” to be entrusted with self-rule, as they are unlikely themselves to establish the legal and institutional framework necessary for material growth. In reconstructing the foundations of this argument, I turn to neoliberal discussions of post-colonial self-determination in the post-war period, which provided the template for later neoliberal critiques of democratization in the global south. I show that these discussions were steeped both in racialized tropes and in more explicitly racial theories, which served to enframe post-colonial peoples as “civilizationally immature” and hence unfit for democratic rule. I then turn my attention to later iterations of this same argument, pointing to their continued reliance on a racialized approach to the question of democracy.

The remainder of this essay is divided into four sections. In the first, I reconstruct in broad brushstrokes the commonplace critical account of neoliberalism’s anti-democratic thrust, arguing that this literature has largely overlooked the racialized slant of the neoliberal critique of democracy. The second section opens by historically contextualizing the emergence of the neoliberal thought collective and highlighting the importance to early neoliberalism of decolonization. It then proceeds to consider a range of neoliberal positions on post-colonial governance, arguing that to the neoliberal imaginary, formerly colonized populations cannot be entrusted with democratic self-determination as they lack the cultural, spiritual, or epistemic qualities necessary for enlightened self-rule. The third section unearths the nexus between this view and the neoliberal conception of racial hierarchy. The fourth section briefly discusses two later iterations of this argument, focusing first on the neoliberal justification of the 1973 coup in Chile and second on neoliberals’ attitudes, early in the 21st century, to Middle Eastern populations. The concluding section reflects on the implications of my contention for critical democratic thought.

2 | REVISITING THE NEOLIBERAL CRITIQUE OF DEMOCRACY

Political theorists critical of neoliberalism widely consider it to be inherently anti-democratic. As an intellectual tradition, neoliberalism has been shown to be “skeptical of existing democratic arrangements” (Biebricher, 2019, p. 108); as a mode of reasoning that has come to suffuse ever more spheres of life, it stands accused of “quietly undoing basic elements of democracy” (Brown, 2015, p. 17). Neoliberalism, on this view, mounts a two-pronged assault on the democratic imaginary. First, it discursively reconstructs democracy by assigning it a series of alternative meanings, casting it as a “marketplace of opinions,” for instance (Brown, 2015; Lösch, 2008), or as a purely utilitarian means of electing governmental officials (Dardot & Laval, 2019). This strips the concept of democracy of even its most basic connotation—that is, the “rule” of the “people”—even as it redefines it in strictly transactional terms. Second, it generates a form of political reasoning that, nurtured by neoliberal ideas, empties institutions and states of their democratic content, replacing more or less genuine modes of accountability and participation with managerialism, governance practices, and competitive pressure (Brown, 2015). Neoliberalism, both in its ideational and its practical dimension, hollows out democracy and renders it powerless to mount an alternative hegemonic project.

As critical scholarship has reconstructed it, neoliberal thinking about democracy is, at root, animated by one key concern: if left unchecked, democratic electorates will put pressure on their representatives to redistribute wealth, intervene in markets, or cater to specific interest groups (Biebricher, 2019; Irving, 2018). Not only does this generate policies that, on the neoliberal view, are unjust (such as progressive taxation or wage regulation); much more disconcertingly, it also threatens the very conservation of free markets. Understood by neoliberals as “spontaneous orders” that can emerge only out of the countless uncoordinated actions of individual economic agents, markets are fragile and precarious systems that are thwarted if not demolished if they are interfered with. When the state intervenes in the marketplace, it threatens private property and disrupts the spontaneity required by competitive enterprise. Democracy is, then, a problem for neoliberalism because it cannot exist alongside a market economy without imperiling its most basic preconditions: free exchange, the protection of private property, the iron discipline of competition. Crucially, however, this did not prompt neoliberals to reject democratic decision-making out of hand, as democracy did

have some—if restricted—place in their political philosophy, appearing to them the best available means of selecting governmental officials (see Cornelissen, 2017).

Although the problem of democracy has been approached by neoliberal thinkers in myriad different ways (Biebricher, 2015, 2019; Lösch, 2008), the one solution they most commonly theorized (and that has arguably proved the most influential) is the establishment, through legislation or even constitutional design, of strict limitations to the influence and reach of the citizenry (Cornelissen, 2017). The neoliberal critique of democracy is, as one recent study puts it, “ultimately a matter of assigning non-negotiable limits to representative democracy itself” (Dardot & Laval, 2019, p. 33). The concrete form taken by such limitations differs from author to author. The work of James M. Buchanan, for instance, was largely devoted to designing constitutional restraints to popular intervention in economic policy, which would render it unconstitutional for governments to accrue deficits beyond a certain threshold (Biebricher, 2019; MacLean, 2017; Rosanvallon, 2011), thus leveling considerable restraints upon public spending or economic reform. F. A. Hayek, on the other hand, was not content with such measures, as he believed that democratic rule impinged not just on economic policy but on the integrity of the rule of law as such. He accordingly spent the last decades of his life articulating what he termed a “model constitution” (Hayek, 2013) that, if implemented, would drastically restrict the people’s influence on the legislature, effectively cutting it off from the law and divesting it of its sovereignty (Lösch, 2008).²

My contention is that although the account reconstructed here is by and large correct, and neoliberals did labor tirelessly to imagine and implement restrictions on democratic populations, it has largely failed to pay attention to the racialized nature of this effort. Indeed, although the centrality of racial (or racist) categories to early neoliberal thought has been established (see Plehwe, 2009; Slobodian, 2018; Whyte, 2019), critical scholarship has yet to do the same for the neoliberal critique of democratic self-governance.³ One book that attempts to do just this, Nancy MacLean’s *Democracy in Chains* (2017), has been faulted by neoliberal commentators (Boettke, 2019) and their opponents (Mirowski, 2019) alike for too brazenly ascribing racist views to individual neoliberal authors. What is made clear by the heated debate *Democracy in Chains* sparked is that accusations of racialized reasoning are likely to cause offense among today’s inheritors of the neoliberal tradition. This is why, as Philip Mirowski (2019) argues, it is crucial to approach this topic with care. It is with this in mind that the present essay seeks more systematically to deconstruct the neoliberal critique of democratic self-determination. The point of this exercise, then, is not to accuse this or that author of holding racist views, but to uncover the forms of racialized enframing that tended to undergird this critique.⁴ The first step in such an attempt is to offer an overview of the historical context within which it first emerged.

3 | “A POLITICALLY IMMATURE CONTINENT”

If we are to appreciate the racialized underpinnings of the neoliberal critique of self-determination, one common error must be avoided: the neglect of neoliberalism’s opposition to decolonization. As Quinn Slobodian argues, “[d]ecolonization... was central to the emergence of the neoliberal model of world governance” (2018, p. 5). It is important to note here that although many of its philosophical concerns go back to the interwar period, the neoliberal movement went through its most decisive phase in the immediate post-war period. Of particular significance is that the Mont Pèlerin Society (MPS), widely viewed as the driving force behind the neoliberal thought collective (Mirowski & Plehwe, 2009), was not founded until 1947. As neoliberal doctrine was thus starting to take shape in earnest, its critical gaze was trained on the global spread of communism. This is where decolonization enters the picture: as the geopolitical order, shaken to its core by two world wars, witnessed the end of many an empire, decolonization movements rapidly gained momentum. What alarmed neoliberals about this state of affairs was that, in the context of the Cold War, decolonization often meant the spread of communist influence.⁵ By allying themselves with the communist bloc, decolonial movements stood a chance, as Frantz Fanon put it, at mounting a challenge to “the impregnable citadel of colonialism. If this citadel is invulnerable to knives and naked fists, it is no longer so when we decide to take

into account the context of the cold war" (Fanon, 1965, p. 62). Thus, what B. R. Shenoy at the time referred to as the "communist danger" (1961, p. 155) loomed large over early neoliberal theory.

Faced with the threat of decolonization, neoliberals began studying it from a variety of angles. Some dedicated themselves to a reappraisal of colonial history, arguing that all things considered, Empire had been a force for good and that any argument to the contrary served only to bolster the Soviet cause. Others set out to theorize the causes of underdevelopment, seeking to counter the claim that imperial domination and extraction had left colonial regions impoverished. The problem that grabbed their attention most acutely, however, was the problem of post-colonial governance. How were decolonized regions to be governed? On what constitutions would these "new nations" be grounded? How might the right balance be struck between post-colonial self-determination and supervision by the former colonizer?

What was clear to neoliberals was that the decolonial demand for self-determination could not be granted unconditionally, as that would render newly independent populations completely free to throw their lot in with the Soviet bloc. Here is how Arthur Shenfield, a British economist and barrister, framed the issue in a 1957 paper presented at the MPS meeting in Sankt-Moritz:

By and large the liberal empires originally freed their dependent peoples from economic exploitation. Now anti-colonialism will show them what exploitation really means. Of course these economic influences are the work of the socialist, not the liberal, Western emancipator; and the decay which they will produce in the colonies will be an extension of the decay which the revolt against liberalism produced in the West itself. But the liberal must take their likely persistence into account in assessing the case for self-determination and clearly he must put them in the balance against it. If he believes that the rule of law should be enjoyed by all, he ought clearly to show little enthusiasm for a self-determination which is likely to destroy it. (Shenfield, 1957, p. 4)

Self-determination, in other words, must be weighed against the security of "the West," a confrontation in which the latter necessarily trumps the former.

In this period, the problem for neoliberal thought was thus to articulate a critique of self-determination (see also Getachew, 2019, ch. 5). In erecting this critique, neoliberals commonly resorted to one particular argumentative strategy: by casting the colonial population as "culturally underdeveloped" or "immature," they could assert that it was not yet ready for self-determination, that if left to self-govern it would fall victim to anti-capitalist propaganda, thus destroying its prospects for economic (and therewith civilizational) growth. Shenfield deployed this strategy in the aforementioned paper, arguing that "[o]nly a sophisticated liberalism is fully seized of the dangers of self-determination, but it is not possible to teach liberalism to the ruled and dependent and make sure that it will be sophisticated" (1957, p. 5). Several years prior, S. H. Frankel, one of the founders of neoliberal development economics and an early MPS member, had already made the same argument. As he wrote in a 1953 book:

Africa is not a politically mature but a politically immature continent: by far the greater part of its indigenous population has so far had little opportunity of gaining experience and developing the aptitudes and institutions for handling unaided many of the internal, and most of the inter-continental and foreign issues of government. (Frankel, 1953, p. 167)

Earlier in that same volume he had already unironically cited Rudyard Kipling's infamous poem, arguing the following:

Africa has become a problem for world statesmanship: the 'White Man's Burden' has become the burden of the free world in much more than metaphorical terms. For as long as we can foresee, Africa alone will not be able to provide even a small fraction of the economic and technical framework required to make it a more effective part of the work and life of the outside world. (Frankel, 1953, p. 139)

The neoliberal enframing of post-colonial populations moved on two principal registers. First, it worked to discursively trap the colonized in the past, confining them to a pre-modern regime of temporality. This is most clearly reflected in the ordoliberal position on the complexities of post-colonial government. Writing in the late 1950s, Alexander Rüstow asserted that post-colonial “populations, in some cases, still live in a Stone-Age environment” (Rüstow, 1960, p. 64). This meant, in his eyes, that they could not be entrusted with democratic self-government, at least not in its Anglo-Saxon parliamentary guise, as “this complicated, extremely delicate, and difficult form of government” could not possibly be “the appropriate one for newly liberated colonial peoples” (Rüstow, 1960, p. 64). Writing a couple of years later, Wilhelm Röpke used the same terminology, claiming that post-colonial populations were constituted by “social relations ... that in part still belong in the Stone Age [Steinzeitalter]” (Röpke, 1961, p. 43, author’s translation). As such, these populations lacked the “sociological, spiritual [geistigen] and political preconditions” without which neither “democracy” nor “the rule of law” could function (Röpke, 1961, pp. 24–25, author’s translation).

This view persisted among neoliberals even a decade later. Fritz Machlup, a student of Ludwig von Mises and Hayek and an influential economist in his own right, made the following case in a 1969 essay:

In view of the many nations that have recently become independent after decades of foreign rule, the question of individual political freedom and democratic elections for people with limited political experience and a low rate of literacy is of sometimes tragic complexity. Maybe, democracy works only for informed people who can distinguish between deceptive promises and realistic programs. (Machlup, 1969, p. 141)

He went on to shore up his argument with reference to John Stuart Mill:

Let me recall Mill’s dictum that there can be no liberty for ‘savages’. Replace this harsh word by ‘politically and intellectually immature people’ and reflect on the proposition that full democracy may not be the most suitable system of government for such people; that, for example, the unlimited right to vote and elect the men who will govern the country may lead to the destruction of many other freedoms and also of any real chance for economic development. (Machlup, 1969, p. 142)

On this view, to be suspended in a pre-modern temporal state (to be “underdeveloped,” in their parlance) is also to be ignorant and inexperienced—in a word, immature.⁶ Here, cultural development and epistemic development are tightly linked; and what democracy requires in both areas is lacking, by definition, among the newly liberated peoples.

The second register upon which the neoliberal enframing of post-colonial populations operated flowed from the first: it established a civilizational hierarchy between “developed” and “underdeveloped” cultures. Such a hierarchy is, of course, already implied in that very distinction,⁷ but it floats to the surface of neoliberal reasoning whenever it finds itself having to compare the prospects of post-colonial nations with long-established “Western democracies.” This is visible, for instance, in Hayek’s writings of the 1960s and 1970s, in which he turned his attention to the basic principles of a sound liberal constitution. As he was at pains to make clear, his intention was emphatically not “to suggest that any country with a firmly established constitutional tradition should replace its constitution by a new one drawn up on the lines suggested” (Hayek, 2013, p. 443). Rather, he hoped that his efforts at “constitutional design” might be of particular use to the “new nations,” a term he used as a catch-all phrase for newly independent countries as well as for a range of countries recovering from dictatorships (Hayek, 1960, 2013; see also Slobodian, 2018). What was unique about such “new” nations was that they lacked “the background of traditions and beliefs which in the more fortunate countries have made constitutions work” (Hayek, 2013, pp. 443–444). The crucial point here is that, as noted in the preceding section, the model constitution envisioned by Hayek was exceptionally restrictive, limiting citizens’ influence on the law to the utmost (see Cornelissen, 2017, pp. 520–521). Such comprehensive restrictions were necessary, to his mind, because the “new” nations were ill-equipped for democratic rule. Their populations, having “not yet become used to self-government,” were less likely to uphold democracy than they were to subject themselves to “dictatorial regimes” (Hayek, 1960, p. 821). Here, the charge that post-colonial peoples are insufficiently developed to govern themselves

obtains its weight only in comparison with “the more fortunate countries”—which, for him, was synonymous with “the nations of Europe” (Hayek, 2013, 444; see also Röpke, 1961). On the hierarchical scale of civilizations, democracy is a privilege accorded only to the few.

This hierarchical reasoning was not restricted to the problem of post-colonial constitutions: it could also be mobilized to differentiate between social groups within a single national context, as borne out by the early neoliberal approach to South African apartheid. Indeed, as calls for universal suffrage multiplied in South Africa in the 1950s and 1960s, several prominent neoliberals hastened to point out the dangers in such a proposal (see Slobodian, 2018). Foremost among them was William Hutt, a British economist and long-standing member of the MPS, who authored *The Economics of the Colour Bar* in 1964. His main contention was that apartheid had its origins in state intervention and that capitalism alone could eradicate racial segregation in South Africa (where he resided at the time). Crucially, however, he was firmly opposed to universal suffrage, which he saw as a recipe for disaster: because the majority of the South African population was non-white, any such measure would merely “turn the tables” and prompt racialized oppression of the country’s white communities. As an alternative, Hutt (1966) proposed the establishment of a system of weighted franchise which would ensure, as Slobodian puts it, “a greater value for a white ballot than a nonwhite one” (2018, p. 174).⁸ However, neither Hutt’s objection to universal franchise, nor his defense of a franchise weighted along racial lines, was merely pragmatic in nature. As he wrote in the conclusion to *The Economics of the Colour Bar* after rejecting calls for universal suffrage:

Whilst many laws can be made only by majority decisions, the liberal insists that all the laws so determined must apply to all members of the community in the same sort of way. Under such a precept, as J. S. Mill acknowledged, the state may legitimately treat classes and races differently if, as a result of history, they happen to be primitive and uneducated. (Hutt, 1964, p. 178)

On this view, the great hierarchy of civilizations may well play out on a national scale; and in the crucible of South African apartheid, the developmental gap between the “primitive” races and their “more developed” counterparts demands that democracy itself be fractured, lest the former take control and wreck the ship of state. Here, the aim is not to render democratic rule toothless as such but to allocate its benefits differentially, in accordance with a perceived hierarchy of cultural development.

As these variations on the neoliberal position demonstrate, the neoliberal critique of post-colonial self-determination commonly hinged on a specific conceptual constellation in which democracy and development were played out against each other. A certain level of cultural and civilizational development was viewed as a necessary condition for prudent self-governance even as imprudent self-governance was conceptualized as the royal road to economic disaster. In short, if “underdeveloped” populations—which, by virtue of their very “underdevelopment,” were unfit to self-govern—were to have any hope of economic growth, democratization would have to severely limited if not prevented. As these neoliberals saw it, the end of Empire confronted these populations with a cruel choice: they could choose the path of development or the path of democracy.

4 | DEMOCRACY AND RACIAL HIERARCHY

The neoliberal argument from political “immaturity” is enmeshed in a string of racialized assumptions. Indeed, if the neoliberal case set out above rests on a two-pronged enframing of post-colonial populations, which both consigns them to a state of pre-modernity and locates them in the lower strata of a civilizational hierarchy, then this enframing bears an obvious colonial signature. Traces of this signature abound: they can be found in Machlup’s and Hutt’s references to the younger Mill (who was both a long-standing official for the British East India Company and a notoriously racist philosopher)⁹; in the assumption that the colonized are “primitive” (Hutt) or “dependent” (Shenfield); in the assertion that indigenous peoples have no experience in self-rule; and indeed in the very terminology of “underdevelopment” or “immaturity.” In each of these ways the neoliberals discussed so far betrayed the colonial pedigree

of their line of reasoning, which they seem to have adopted from 19th-century racial liberalism. The racialization that is at work here does not merely reside on an implicit level, however, and it is possible to show that the early neoliberal conception of development, which structured their critique of post-colonial independence, was no stranger to the notion of racial differences.

This is already apparent in Hutt's comments above, which link relative "primitiveness" to racial differences and which show that, some early neoliberal thinkers not only understood race as a biological fact but also attached it to the idea of spiritual and political development. This was a fairly common motif in neoliberal theorization of development and world history. Röpke, writing like Hutt about South African apartheid, argued in the mid-1960s that "the negroes of South Africa are not only people of an utterly different race [*Rasse*] but at the same time belong to a completely different type and level of civilization" (Röpke, 1965, p. 139, author's translation).¹⁰ To his mind, these two factors were intimately connected; that is to say, the comparative "underdevelopment" of South Africa's non-white populations was less a historical accident than a necessary outcome of deep-seated "ethnic differences" between the country's various racial groups (Röpke, 1965, p. 129, author's translation). Indeed, South Africa's comparative wealth and productivity were mostly the result of "the extraordinary qualities of its white population," which included its "pioneering spirit" as well as its "initiative, industriousness and inventiveness" and which were by and large lacking in the country's non-white populations (Röpke, 1965, p. 131, author's translation). It is unsurprising, then, that Röpke saw the solution to South Africa's "racial problem" in "pure ethnic separation," as in such a system both groups would be able to develop at a rate suitable to their race (Röpke, 1965, p. 143, author's translation; see also Slobodian, 2018, ch. 5).

Although other neoliberals rarely expressed such lurid racism, the more fundamental premise that racial differences not only exist but also bear directly on economic, social, and civilizational development was less uncommon in neoliberal writings at the time. For instance, in a 1961 paper, Louis Rougier signaled his agreement with the 19th-century belief that "race and climate" were among the principal causes of "the stagnation of the 'third world,'" before going on to claim that Muslims, Africans, and Indians were prone to fatalism and superstition (Rougier, 1961, p. 187, author's translation). Similarly, the early writings of P. T. Bauer, who is rightly regarded as the single most influential neoliberal development economist (see Whyte, 2019), were structured around the view that "[t]here are manifest and striking differences between racial and ethnic groups in such qualities as industry, thrift, enterprise, and the readiness to perceive and exploit economic opportunity" (Bauer, 1965, p. 74).¹¹ For him as for Rougier, these differences explained the existing developmental inequalities between populations.¹²

Most explicit in linking civilizational history to racial differences was Mises, who reflected on the question of world-historical development at several points in his life (see also Slobodian, 2019). Already in his 1922 *Socialism*, he ventured the claim that "[i]t may be assumed that races do differ in intelligence and will power, and that, this being so, they are very unequal in their ability to form society, and further that the better races distinguish themselves precisely by their special aptitude for strengthening social co-operation" (Mises, 1951, p. 325). In his 1927 *Liberalism*, he likewise opined that "European civilization really is superior to that of the primitive tribes of Africa or to the civilizations of Asia" before going on to characterize "Europeans" as "members of a superior race" (Mises, 1985, pp. 125–126).¹³ He expanded on this view in *Human Action*, his 1949 larger-than-life treatise on the fundamental laws of economic behavior. There, in a discussion of racist doctrine, he conceded that there is some truth to the racist position which "attribute[s] the great achievements of the white race to racial superiority" (Mises, 1998, p. 90). He went on: "It is vain to deny that up to now certain races have contributed nothing or very little to the development of civilization and can, in this sense, be called inferior" (Mises, 1998, p. 90). In his view, this had far-reaching implications for the study of world history, which should be premised on the precept that "the prevailing differences between the various biological strains of men are reflected in the civilizational achievements of the group members" (Mises, 1957, pp. 336–337). The underlying idea here is that capitalism, which for Mises marks the zenith of civilization, is an exclusively white achievement. Other races, restrained by their biological constitution, cannot be expected to give rise to a similar system of their own accord and can obtain Western standards of life only if they adopt the free market system—and the ideology upon which it rests—wholesale. This narrative, then, offers a racialized mythologization of the birth of capitalism even as it pre-emptively defangs any claim to complete post-colonial independence.

Whether it concerns the study of economic development or the historiography of civilization, several foundational neoliberal thinkers considered racial differences a key analytical category. For them, civilizational “primitiveness” or “immaturity” cannot be disarticulated from race, as the one is an index of the other. It is within this broader racialized conceptual matrix that the neoliberal critique of post-colonial self-determination must be situated, as it is from this matrix that the argument that recently independent peoples are too “immature” or “underdeveloped” to be able to govern themselves draws much of its sustenance.

5 | THE AFTERLIVES OF A RACIALIZED ARGUMENT

What stands out about the neoliberal critique of post-colonial independence movements discussed thus far is that it was articulated at a time when, as several scholars have shown (Plehwe, 2009; Slobodian, 2018; Whyte, 2019), a number of prominent neoliberals still relied upon the concept of biological race. As the 20th century wore on, however, neoliberalism was slowly divested of this reliance, a process that reflected a broader trend in the Western social sciences, which over the course of the century’s latter half recoded the concept of race, substituting biological signifiers for cultural and religious ones (see also Goldberg, 1993; Mbembe, 2017; Slobodian, 2018). As the concept of race was thus recast, however, its hold on neoliberal reasoning did not dissipate. Most neoliberals continued to believe in the developmental superiority of Western civilization and, as I will show in the present section, they continued to hold that some peoples lack the capacity for democratic self-determination.

As the long 20th century reached its end, the neoliberal critique of self-determination first directed at independence movements was revived a number of times. One especially pertinent context in which it reappeared was in neoliberal justifications of the Chilean coup of 1973. As many critics have pointed out (see for instance Biebricher, 2015; Bonefeld, 2017; Scheuerman, 1997), in mounting a defense of the Pinochet regime, the neoliberal movement revealed that, in the final analysis, it valued the market over democracy. For these critics, this defense betrays neoliberalism’s Schmittian heritage, which in times of crisis favors authoritarian rule over democracy. In order fully to appreciate the argumentative structure of this defense, however, we must pay attention to its racialized premises. Indeed, as Jessica Whyte (2019, ch. 4) has shown in a brilliant recent study, the neoliberal defense of Pinochet was in part undergirded by a spate of racialized images surrounding Latin American culture. She cites Arnold Harberger, one of the key mentors to the (in)famous “Chicago boys,” who said during a 1986 symposium that “Latin Americans ... were beset by a ‘predilection to romanticism’, a ‘tremendous, incredible vulnerability to demagoguery’ and a collective tendency towards ‘self-pity’” (Whyte, 2019, p. 161). Harberger went on to celebrate the continent’s military governments for counteracting these predispositions, although he added that, by their very nature, such governments posed “a terrible dilemma for us as freedom-loving individuals” (as cited in Whyte, 2019, p. 161).

Similar tropes about Latin Americans were common currency among neoliberals at the time. Speaking at the same symposium as Harberger, Ramón Díaz, who was to preside over the MPS a decade later, drew upon Alexis de Tocqueville to argue that by dint of their cultural heritage, Latin Americans were deeply enamored with the concepts of unlimited democracy, sovereignty, and revolution even as they were inherently averse to “the institution of private property” (Díaz, 1988, p. 253). During an earlier panel, another participant of the symposium had already cited “a kind of immature political culture in Latin American countries” as the key factor in the continent’s ongoing problems (Assar Lindbeck in Walker, 1988, p. 35). Thomas Sowell, for his part, argued across a number of texts that most Latin American peoples, having inherited their culture from Spanish and Portuguese colonizers, were averse to both manual labor and commerce, lacked an intellectual culture, and commonly tended to blame their misfortunes on others (e.g., Sowell, 1983, 1994, 2015).

For these neoliberals, these cultural and temperamental inclinations not only explained Latin America’s lagging economic performance (see Sowell, 2015; Tullock, 2007), but also implied that enlightened democratic self-governance was not likely to strike root there. In his 1986 paper, for instance, Díaz approvingly cited de Tocqueville’s claim that “South America cannot maintain a democracy,” adding that, as the French philosopher had predicted, “[t]he Latin

American Republics may have been called to prosperity and the rule of law, but they missed the appointments” (Díaz, 1988, p. 246). In a book published around the same time, Gordon Tullock offered the view that democratic sentiments were never fully absorbed into Latin American culture, and that this explains why “dictatorship is commoner than democracy” (Tullock, 1987, p. 104). Carlos Cáceres,¹⁴ for his part, wrote in a 1982 piece reflecting on the Chilean coup that under President Allende, extant “political customs” would ineluctably have led “again to demagoguery and moral decay,” necessitating military intervention (Cáceres, 1982, p. 81, author’s translation).

This argument reached its zenith in the hands of Hayek, who utilized it to justify the Chilean coup in a notorious 1981 interview with *El Mercurio* in which he argues that, under certain circumstances, liberal dictatorship is preferable to illiberal democracy. In response to the question “Why is it so difficult to achieve [a system of liberty] in Latin America?,” Hayek replied:

The difference lies in its having another tradition. The United States takes its tradition from England. In the 18th and 19th centuries especially, this was a tradition of liberty. On the other hand the tradition in South America, for example, is rooted basically in the French Revolution. This tradition lies not in the classical line of liberty, but in maximum government power. I believe that South America has been overly influenced by the totalitarian type of ideologies. (Hayek, 1981)

Key to Hayek’s justification of Pinochet’s coup, then, was not an abstract argument about liberty and equality, but the racialized belief, which was shared by many of his neoliberal colleagues,¹⁵ that liberty, the rule of law, and the notion of limits to power were alien to Latin America. If this was a Schmittian claim, it surely was a racially inflected one that in both its argumentative structure and its reliance on racialized tropes echoed the neoliberal critique of post-colonial independence movements.

This critique was likewise revived at the dawn of the 21st century, when especially the 9/11 terror attacks caused a number of neoliberals to focus on the question of Islam. Reflecting on what they perceived to be the continued “underdevelopment” of the Middle East, these authors came to the conclusion that the effort to introduce democracy to the region—as was the stated intention behind the US invasion of Iraq in 2003—was ill-fated. Deepak Lal, who served as President of the MPS between 2008 and 2010, argued shortly after the invasion that “democracy is unlikely to flourish” in “the Islamic world” because Islamic societies have historically strongly favored “despotism” over democratic rule (Lal, 2004, pp. 187, 189). He even went so far as to advocate US-led imperial rule over the region, which he considered to be the only means of “easing the confusion in the Islamic mind which has plagued it for over a century” (Lal, 2004, p. 99). Timur Kuran, a frequent guest at MPS meetings, wrote in 2011 that the Middle East “cannot be lifted from its present state of underdevelopment in a hurry” in part because local “civil societies are too poorly organized, and too beaten down, to provide the political checks and balances essential to sustained democratic rule” (2011, p. 301). In his view, the nature of Islamic law was to blame for this state of affairs, having “bred complacency toward autocracy” among a large number of Muslims (Kuran, 2011, p. 296).

The position that Islam was both predisposed to autocracy and inhospitable to the habits, customs, and practices that, in the West, had made development and democracy possible was not without precedent in neoliberal thought. In his *Socialism*, Mises declared Islam a “dead” religion that encouraged only “rigid fatalism” (1951, pp. 410, 461) and went on to write, in *Human Action*, that “Moslem peoples ... never knew any form of government other than unlimited absolutism” (1998, p. 838). As noted above, Rougier likewise accused Islam (which he conflated with Arabic culture) of being a “fatalistic” civilization that had “killed initiative” and that “did not have a word for ‘enterprise’” (1961, pp. 189–190; see also Rougier, 1971, pp. 176–180). Lal himself had already argued in 1998 that after an initial period of rapid economic and scientific growth, Islamic culture regressed as a result of what he called the “closing of the Muslim mind” between the 9th and 11th centuries (Lal, 1998, p. 63). Charles Murray, author of *The Bell Curve* and MPS member since 2000, was to repeat this view in 2004, claiming that “Islam was (and is) not a religion that encourages autonomy” before going on to opine that the cultural, scientific, and artistic accomplishments of early Islamic civilization were “aberrational, not characteristic, of Islamic culture” (Murray, 2004, p. 401).

Clearly, both the neoliberal justification of the Chilean coup and more recent neoliberal commentary on the prospects for democracy in the Middle East are patterned after the neoliberal critique of post-colonial self-determination. Here again, the neoliberal case against democracy rests on a two-pronged strategy of enframing, which casts Latin Americans or Middle Eastern peoples, on the one hand, as temperamentally or historically hostile to limited democracy and the rule of law and, on the other, as developmentally inferior to Western civilization. Although they rarely reproduce early neoliberalism's reliance on the concept of racial differences, then, these late 20th-century reiterations of the neoliberal critique of self-determination certainly do reproduce its racialized argumentative structure.

6 | CONCLUSION

I have argued that the neoliberal critique of democracy often passes through a moment of racialization. As I have shown, this dimension comes out in particular in debates surrounding the spread of democratic practices to societies in the global south. To many neoliberal authors, these societies are too "immature" or too readily inclined to "fatalism" or "despotism" to be entrusted with self-governance. I have drawn out the nexus that binds this argument to early neoliberal conceptions of race, according to which the biological constitution of many "underdeveloped" populations has rendered them culturally "backward." Although this biological understanding of race largely disappeared as neoliberal thought matured, the racialized forms of enframing to which it gave rise did not. It is this racialized framework, which casts most non-Western cultures as inhospitable to liberty, that is frequently put to work when neoliberals seek to justify the military coup in Chile or advocate imperial rule over the Middle East.

It is not my intention here to pass comment on the broader question as to whether successful democratic self-governance is conditional upon the prevalence of certain cultural habits or institutions. My point, rather, is that the way the neoliberals discussed here inflect this question is deeply troubling. By casting entire populations as culturally, temperamentally, or historically incapable of enlightened self-governance, neoliberal thought not only reproduces a nakedly racist tradition of thought (as reflected in the writings of Mill or de Tocqueville, for instance) but also fundamentally misrepresents the history of democracy. Indeed, by imagining the lack of democratic stability to only ever be the result of a cultural lack on the part of the population, neoliberals blatantly disavow the long and sinister history of political and economic violence (often spearheaded by the USA) that, in many countries in the global south, has sabotaged many a well-functioning democracy; and by arguing that these countries have no experience in self-governance they commit an act of historical erasure, casually effacing a multitude of rich and long-standing traditions of self-rule and autonomy to which people in the global south have given rise since time immemorial.

More needs to be done to trace the racialized dynamics of neoliberal de-democratization and the strategies of enframing that sustain it. In the absence of a critical analysis of these dynamics, our critique of neoliberalism risks remaining "colorblind," as Siddhant Issar (2020) puts it, compromising not only our understanding of neoliberal orders but also our capacity to think and think through alternative futures. As neoliberal rationality continues to cast a long shadow over the present, having fueled anti-democratic sentiments everywhere and mutated into novel formations, the task of critically unpacking its racial dimensions could not be more urgent. The very meaning and life of democracy is at stake.

NOTES

- ¹ I am grateful to the two anonymous reviewers whose generous feedback on this piece helped me improve it significantly. I am likewise indebted to Siddhant Issar for comments on an earlier draft and to Jishnu Guha-Majumdar, Josias Tembo, Anya Topolski, and Jessica Whyte for generative conversations that have steered my thinking about neoliberalism and race. Finally, I thank Vanessa Tautter for helping me with some of the translations.
- ² I should stress here that my point is emphatically not that "the people" was, in days past, in possession of something called "sovereignty" and that neoliberalism's effect was to strip it away. This, it goes without saying, is a naïve as well as dangerous

narrative that romanticizes the past even as it erases the many (gendered, racialized, and classed) exclusions that have always marked democratic life. The point is rather that neoliberal thought explicitly set out to disarticulate the concept of sovereignty from democracy.

- ³ For a critical reading of the “colorblind” nature of several dominant interpretations of neoliberalism, see Issar (2020).
- ⁴ In drawing a distinction between “racist” and “racialized” views or discourses, I rely on David Theo Goldberg’s work, for whom a discourse is “racialized” if it relies silently and implicitly on racial assumptions or concepts. See especially Goldberg (1993, ch. 3).
- ⁵ This was an especially common theme in the papers collected in Hunold (1961), many of which were reprints of papers presented at the 1960 MPS conference in Kassel.
- ⁶ As recent decolonial scholarship by such authors as Walter D. Mignolo (2011) and Anibal Quijano (2007) has demonstrated, European colonial strategy often relied heavily upon the establishment of an imagined epistemic hierarchy. As Linda Martín Alcoff summarizes this point: “Non-Europeans are seen as existing on the *same* historical trajectory, but further behind; their goals are the *same*, but not achieved to the same degree; their knowledge is subject to the *same* justificatory procedures, but it is less well-developed” (2007, p. 87).
- ⁷ As Walter D. Mignolo (2011) has argued, the very conceptual binary of “developed” and “underdeveloped” regions is marked by a colonial understanding of historical time.
- ⁸ Slobodian (2018) also demonstrates that this proposal was favored by several other neoliberals, including Hayek, Shenfield, and Friedman.
- ⁹ For a discussion of the racist dimensions of John Stuart Mill’s writings, see Goldberg (1993) and Mehta (1999).
- ¹⁰ See Slobodian (2018, ch. 5) for a more detailed discussion of Röpke’s position on South Africa.
- ¹¹ For a more detailed analysis of Bauer’s position on racial differences, see Whyte (2019).
- ¹² To highlight these references to biological race is not to make the case that all neoliberal thinkers accepted the category of biological race. Indeed, some neoliberals have articulated fairly comprehensive critiques of racial doctrine, including Alexander Rüstow (1980) and, later, Thomas Sowell (1975, 1983). What is interesting about both Rüstow and Sowell is that although they reject the idea that biological differences are relevant to economic performance, they do tend to reproduce racialized tropes about “underdeveloped” populations.
- ¹³ The context in which Mises makes these claims is interesting given my present purposes. They appear in a discussion of European colonization, to which Mises is in fact largely opposed. He is not in favor of rapid decolonization, however, as that would lead to anarchy since “the natives have learned only evil ways from the Europeans, and not good ones” (Mises, 1985, p. 126). His concrete proposal is thus to hand the League of Nations “supreme authority in the administration of all those overseas territories in which there is no system of parliamentary government” (Mises, 1985, p. 129), at least until the latter have reached a stage of cultural and political development that would render them suitable for democratic self-government. Here Mises thus anticipates the argument that would later become a staple of neoliberal thinking about decolonization.
- ¹⁴ Carlos Cáceres was a prominent “Chicago boy” who joined the MPS in 1980 before going on to become, first, the President of the Chilean Central Bank and then Minister of Finance and Minister of the Interior under Pinochet. See Fischer (2009).
- ¹⁵ An interesting exception to this rule was Milton Friedman, who seems to have held a slightly more nuanced position on the place of liberty in Chilean tradition. See Friedman (2017, ch. 7).

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