Neoliberalism, Religious Nationalism, Democracy and State

The situation of global politics is marked since the beginning of the year 2025 by the policies of the new US Presidency of Donald Trump, who seems to be promoting a new global order based on the power of the strongest. But the last news put the focus on the internal affairs, putting in risk the liberal democratic principles of the US constitution. The purpose of this blog, though, is not to discuss geopolitical changes but to talk about the concept of democracy that underlies Trump's policies. The aim is to show that the new US governmental programme is not based on neoliberal thoughts, but on the ideology of the Christian nationalism.

Neoliberal thoughts as expressed by Ayn Rand[i] and Ludwig von Mises[ii] are taken as example to understand the position of neoliberalism regarding the democracy and the role of the state and to show the difference to the position expressed by the Heritage Foundation and others in the document Project 2025, which is a blueprint of the actual policy of the presidency of D. Trump.

The Project 2025 is a guideline for a ultraconservative government with a strong Christian nationalist orientation. With the neoliberalism, it shares the idea of a state defending the capitalist order and private property, but, in difference to Rand and Mises, the Project 2025 defends, at the same time, a strong state to 'push back' the influence of 'anti-American' ideologies in the society and to impose a religious nationalism. Rand and Mises defend the right to life the own life in the

capitalist order, while the Christian nationalists linked the capitalist order to religious-inspired values and norms. The maintenance of these norms and values is the overarching goal of the state, which implies the possibility of authoritarian regimes within formal democratic processes.

The Individuum and individual Rights

Mises' view of the individual is characterised by the utilitarian individualism, which sees the self-interest-orientated individual as the basic element of social analysis. Individuals are autonomous in their actions but enter into co-operation with others due to the scarcity of resources. This cooperation based on the division of labour increases the degree of utilisation of resources. As a result, individuals must also make sacrifices for the community out of self-interest, but these sacrifices bring greater benefits in the long term. In other words, individuals do not work together out of charity but out of self-interest.[iii] Although individuals are born into society, society is continuously constituted by the actions of individuals. Mises thus links society with the self-interest of individuals, with the purpose of individual actions. Only cooperation based on the division of labour allows individuals to realise their own interests. Society is not an end but a means for the individual. This cooperation is based on two fundamental rights: private property and freedom. These, however, are again based on two prior rights to life and health. These are the four basic rights mentioned by Mises, which a capitalist social order makes possible and which must be defended by a liberal democracy and its governments. [iv]

Also Rand's thought is radically centred on the individual, self-interest, individual rights and freedom. Only a self-interest individuum can think for himself realising the innate potential for human being as a rational animal. It is not society as such, which according to Rand is only a sum of individuals, that is at the centre of her interest, but the individual and how this can and should be protected against the intrusion of others. The abuse of others on the individual is reflected in the principles of altruism that dominate the present. On the contrary she defends a radical egoism, in the sense that a rational individual should pursue his or her self-interest. The pursuit of self-interest manifested in the use of private property must be protected against encroachment by others. The definition of individual rights therefore plays a key role.

Both, Rand and Mises, set the capitalist order as the only possible rational social order. Mises believes that the possibility of replacing the capitalist social order with other social constructions has been refuted by both economics and sociology.

Understanding of Democracy and the Role of the State

From the perspective of radical individualism, Rand's objectivism sees democracy as a form of totalitarianism. Peikoff (1993: 368), Rand's universal heir and founder of the Ayn Rand Institute, writes: "*Democracy means a system of unlimited majority rule; unlimited means unrestricted by individual rights. Such an approach is not a form of freedom but of collectivism.*" But this rejection refers to a concept of democracy, which is not applied in any liberal democracy. Rand bases her rejection on the concept of democracy as a

social system in which the majority can make decisions in every social sphere. She argues that the democratic process – voting – should be restricted to political and public affairs. In this sense, the function of the state and elected governments should be limited to the persecution of criminals, that is, to the preservation of the public order of the capitalist system. Despite her radical language, she is not opposed to plural liberal democracy but to an understanding of democracy in which the majority of society can regulate all areas of society. Under the concept of a constitutional republic, she advocates a liberal model of democracy in which the role of the state and the government is radically limited to the defence of citizens against the violence of others and to the protection of the individual rights of citizens to shape their lives as they see fit, or in short: the protection of the unlimited use of private property is a prerequisite for this.

Mises derives his understanding of democracy and the state from his approach of a society based on the division of labour but guided by self-interest. In a society, there must be mediation between self-interest and the interests of the society based on the division of labour in order to prevent individuals from being tempted to gain momentary special advantages at the expense of the social order. Mises argues that, as long as anti-social behaviour is not completely excluded, the coercive apparatus of the state is necessary. Mises defends a liberal model of democracy for pragmatical reasons to avoid violent changes of government, for instance, through civil wars. Liberalism considered that the governments cannot act in the long run without the consent of the majority. An unpopular government can be substituted by the force of the majority by

democratic elections, without this possibility, insurrections or civil wars are the means.

According to Cornelissen (2017), this critical defence of democracy is a common thread among the members of the Mont Pèlerin Society. They largely agree that democracy is a necessary condition for individual freedom, although they perceive it, at the same time, as a risk to capitalism since democratic processes tend to disturb the free market. Most neoliberal thinkers advocate the imposition of constitutional restrictions on the power of democratically elected governments. Bierbricher has classified neoliberal solutions in relation to democracy and the market into three variants: The first suggests a restriction of democracy, the second proposes a replacement of its institutions and processes by market mechanisms, while the third variant defends the inclusion of direct democratic measures. The position of Ayn Rand and Von Mises is among those who proposed restriction of the powers of democratically elected governments to the persecution of criminals, the defence of the exercise of the individual rights against others who interfere in the individual rights to life their own lives, as, for instance criminals, and the maintenance of the capitalist order, which in turn must be governed by market mechanisms. The state should be limited to being the guardian of the capitalist social order.

Project 2025, Rand and Mises

These ideas of Rand and Mises echoed in the Project 2025 elaborated by a series of conservative and libertarian organisations under the leadership of the Heritage Foundation[v]. The Project 2025 proposes a radical reduction of

the state bureaucracy. In the line of Ayn Rand, the project 2025 considers the need to go back to the principles of the original American constitution to limit the power of the state, but it considers the individual rights as god-given, referring to the declaration of independence of the USA.

This indicates a main difference between the actual ultraconservative and religious nationalists' position and the earlier neoliberal thought of Rand and Mises: the role of religion and more concrete Christianity in social and political life. The Christian religion plays a fundamental role in most of the association supporting the Project 2025, which has a clear orientation to Christian nationalism and authoritarianism, although the document only mentioned Christianity few times (see https://globalextremism.org)

Rand rejected the fundamental assumption of any religion: the altruism that one should serve the community. According to her, the capitalist order cannot be justified by religion. On the contrary, someone who takes religion as a point of departure should reject capitalism. She argued that religious belief "*is apart from, or contrary to, your reason. … But in principle, faith is incompatible with reason*" (218). Mises defended a similar position, arguing that liberalism is a pure scientific project, and its policy recommendations emanate from scientific reasoning. He rejected value judgement in social science. This does not imply that liberalism is hostile to religions. Liberals "*are radically opposed to all systems of theocracy. But they are entirely neutral with regard to religious beliefs which do not pretend to interfere with the conduct of social, political, and economic affairs*." According to the positions of Rand and Mises,

the individual rights are not natural rights or god-given rights but based on rational reasoning.

The difference becomes evident in the position of the Project 2025 advocating to give the US President broader rights to design policies not only to protect individual rights but also to intervene in a broad range of societal areas, such as in culture, education and sports, with the aim to eliminate all 'anti-American' ideas[vi] in the federal administration. According to Goodwin (2025), the ultimate goal of Project 2025 is "*to reprogram the U.S. administrative state to support and sustain archconservative rule for decades to come. The distinguishing features of this regime would include a far more politicized bureaucracy, immunity against meaningful public or congressional oversight, abusive deployment of agency enforcement capabilities as a tool of political retribution, and aggressive manipulation of federal program implementation in the image of Christian nationalism, white supremacy, and economic inequality*." In other words, it advocates for a flat state in areas in which the promoters of the programme perceive a strong presence of wokeism, and a strong state to reject wokeism and to implement the Christian nationalist agenda[vii]. But it is not the state with its executive, legislative and jurisdiction, to which the Project 2025 refers. It is the figure of the president, which needs to be reinforced so that he or she can control the whole state and defend it against anti-American influence inside of the USA. The decision of the US High Court to concede immunity to the President in exercising his or her function, welcomed by the promoters of the Project 2025, reinforced the position of the US President as he or she can also adapt illegal decisions without fearing legal

persecution. This is not consistent with the thought of Rand and v. Mises to limit the function of the state to protect the exercise of private property and against violence.

In short, at a first look the Project 2025 seems to share position of neoliberalism on society and the role of the liberal democratic state, a deeper analysis shows a considerable difference. A common position is to reduce the functions of the government to protect the capitalist order and not to interfere in the use of individual property. The difference lies in the fact that Project 2025 linked the capitalist order to religious-inspired values and norms. The defence of the capitalist order is the defence of Christianity. The project 2025 conceives their strategy as a strategy of war against internal – the wokeism – and external enemies, particularly China, in defence of their idea of a religious America,

This expressed the difference between the neoliberal thought of Rand and Mises and the agenda of the Project 2025. While Rand and also Mises defends the idea of a liberal democratic state, or, in Rand's word the republican constitutionalism rejecting a wider influence of the state in the exercise of the individual rights, the ultraconservative project only proposed to eliminate those functions of the state which could counter its ultraconservative agenda to reinforce orthodox Christian values and norms and to protect the traditional family. In this sense the ultraconservative project advocates for a strong authoritarian state centralised in the executive figure of the President to defend their idea of America.

Although the actual foreign policy of the US President Trump calls more attention to the international debate, the real

awareness should be focused on the internal policies, which are oriented to change the idiosyncrasy of the US political system towards a religious state imposing Christian values and norms in the society under the leadership of an authoritarian president. Similar movements of religious nationalisms are observable in Europe in form of different extreme right-wing parties.

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[i] Ayn Rand, a female US writer and philosopher of Russian origin, who died in 1982. She exerted notable influence in conservative youth circles in the 1960s and 1970s through organisations such as Young Americans for Freedom and the Society for Individual Liberty in contrast to the left-wing student movement of 1968. Her legacy is defended by the Ayn Rand Institute. It develops activities in Israel, Latin America and Europe. There is an Any Rand Centre Israel, an Any Rand Institute Europe and an Any Rand Institute Latin America.

[ii] L. von Mises is a representative of the Austrian School of Economics. He has been an influential member of the Mont Pelerin Society, which was and is one of the most influential associations converting neoliberal positions in real policies in the capitalist world. There is the Mises foundation promoting thinking in line with the Austrian School of economics in the tradition of Mises, but also of the anarcho-capitalist like Murray N. Rothbard.

[iii] Human Action 168

[iv] "Solely and exclusively in guaranteeing the protection of life, health, liberty, and private property against violent attacks. Everything that goes beyond this is an evil. A government that, instead of fulfilling its task, sought to go so far as actually to infringe on personal security of life and health, freedom, and property would, of course, be altogether bad."

[v] The Hertiage Foundation is an ultraconservative think tank funded in 1972.

[vi] The main ideological enemy is globalism, gender equality, climate policies and the wokeism or woke culture. See Project 2025 Forword.

[vii] However, the majority of the points mentioned in the programme could also be signed by orthodox streams of other monotheistic religions, such as the islam or the judaism.