JOURNAL OF CONTROVERSIAL IDEAS

Article

Neoliberalism and the COVID-19 Pandemic: The Enigma of Lockdown

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Submitted: 25 January 2025, accepted: 27 February 2026, published: 10 May 2026

Abstract: When most states in Europe and elsewhere responded to the COVID-19 pandemic with the "lockdown" of much of economic and social life, this was heralded by many, particularly the political left, as the end of neoliberalism, an era in which market and efficiency imperatives predominated. This article argues that, on the contrary, lockdown itself shows the imprint of certain, less commonly apprehended yet equally "neoliberal" precepts, including authoritarianism, technocracy, a modicum of global governance, and an exalted sense of security. However, this is not to deny the importance of other factors in the making of this historically novel pandemic response measure, in particular, the "precautionary principle" in a context of great uncertainty.

Keywords: neoliberalism; COVID-19 pandemic; lockdown; authoritarianism; security; political left; intellectuals

How to cite: Joppke, C. Neoliberalism and the COVID-19 Pandemic: The Enigma of Lockdown *Journal of Controversial Ideas* **2026**, *6*(1), 3; doi:10.63466/jci06010003.

It is almost forgotten that when the COVID-19 pandemic arrived, despite all the doom and threat to human life that was associated with it, it also flagged to many, on a positive note, the end of "neoliberalism".[1] As the eminent political theorist Shlomo Avineri put it succinctly, the "coronavirus has killed neoliberalism" because now "everyone looks to the state".[2] Financial Times senior editorialist Martin Wolf even pronounced the "return to the

[1] The concept of neoliberalism is controversial because of its many different and often polemical meanings. One may distinguish between a narrow political economy understanding and a broader understanding as a political rationale across policy areas. This article leans toward a broader understanding of neoliberalism, as "subordinat(ing) the state and all social domains to the market…thereby undermining democracy" (Laruffa, 2023: 1). That neoliberalism does not mean the absence but the recasting of the state, with an authoritarian tilt, has been stressed by Biebricher (2019). The Covid experience confirms this.

[2] Shlomo Avineri, "Coronavirus Has Killed Neoliberalism", *Haaretz*, 30 March 2020.

idea of citizenship", because "the first concern of democratic states is the welfare of all their citizens".[3]

I argue in this article that, rather than signalling the end of neoliberalism, the political management of the Covid pandemic was shaped by certain neoliberal precepts, such as authoritarianism, technocracy, a modicum of global governance, and an exalted sense of security. Indeed, what stands out in European and other Western states' pandemic management is their convergence on a double strategy of lockdown and quasi-obligatory mass vaccination. Both implied immense freedom restrictions, which neoliberal ideology in its beginnings, ironically, had rebelled against (most vehemently Hayek, 1944). Still, at least the vaccine part of the double strategy has "neoliberalism" (on earth) written all over it, because it involved "public-private partnerships" in which risks are "socialized" while rewards are "privatized", as Mariana Mazzucato (2013) nailed the essence of it to the wall. By contrast, lockdown's neoliberal pedigree is much less obvious. It is even counterintuitive, considering that "lockdown groupthink" consisted of prioritizing "saving lives" over the "economy" (Joffe, 2021: 17). Hence, to gauge the neoliberal element in lockdown, without denying the importance of other (more immediate) factors, is the main purpose of this article.

In a first step, I map the similarity of state responses to the pandemic, the "Covid Consensus" (1). Secondly, I list some key factors, not all of neoliberal pedigree, that help explain lockdown, which is a historically novel pandemic response measure (2). Thirdly, I highlight the moment of "exalted security" which has been a feature of neoliberal governing since the early millennium, and which reached an apex in the Covid crisis (3). Fourthly, I show how criticism of lockdown was strongly suppressed, which is analogous to a neoliberal logic of "there is no alternative" (TINA), mixing authoritarian and technocratic elements (4). As the suppression of critique was fully endorsed, if not spearheaded by the political left, I inquire in the fifth part why the left, in particular, supported lockdown and its freedom restrictions (5). Consequently, as I argue towards the end, opposition to lockdown tended to be branded as "extreme right", which only partially corresponds to the facts (6). The central paradox of lockdown is that the left's support of it helped in prolonging, rather than shortening, neoliberalism's lifeline (7).

1. Covid Consensus

Mainstream social science accounts of state responses to the Covid pandemic tend to stress their variations and then seek to explain them. At one level, this is unsurprising. Social science by definition is a variation-finding and -explaining endeavour, dealing with a reality that is historical—that is, neither random nor necessary—and thus of necessity contingent and variegated. Social historian Peter Baldwin (2021: abstract) made a start, arguing that "countries have responded very differently" to the "same threat". As there was little in the world not Covid-related at the time, there was an immediate rush of political science studies on the topic, almost all of them about explaining "variation in policy responses" (Toshkov et al., 2022: 1009). Dimeter Toshkov et al. (ibid.), for instance, are interested in the "speed" of school closures and of imposing national lockdowns. This presupposes that schools *were* closed and that lockdowns *were* imposed, which are

[3] Martin Wolf, "Democracy Will Fail If We Don't Think as Citizens", *Financial Times*, 6 July 2020.

the *really* interesting because unprecedented facts. Similar variation-finding exercises have been done, for instance, about the relationship between scientific expertise and political decision-making (e.g., Hodges et al., 2022), "trade-offs" between "public health" and "democratic principles" (Engler et al., 2021), and other matters pertinent to pandemic management.

In their preoccupation with variation-finding, these studies are silent on the *really* interesting aspect of liberal state responses to the Covid pandemic, which is their surprising similarity. In a provocative work, French sociologist Laurent Mucchielli (2022) identified a "*doxa du Covid*" (Covid doxa), which consists of five elements.

Firstly, the pandemic has been taken, from its beginning to the end, as a panhuman threat, even though its lethality, also from the start, was strongly correlated with old age and comorbidity.[4] Secondly, a medical solution to the virus was from the beginning precluded by the diction that "no therapy is possible". Thirdly, as long as no vaccine was available, a political solution, lockdown, was favoured over the medical and more proportionate and targeted solutions that had been employed in previous pandemic responses. Fourthly, lockdown was instantly coupled with the notion that the only viable way out of it was rapid vaccine development followed by mass inoculation, the latter bordering on the involuntary. Finally, the double lockdown-cum-vaccination strategy was turned into a "doxa" by the systematic suppression of dissent, which became denounced as anti-science, conspiratorial, and extreme-right.

Toby Green and Thomas Fazi (2023: 98) call this package "Covid Consensus", with lockdown as the perhaps most eyebrow-raising—because harshly freedom-restricting—part. More than that, lockdown, they argue, was "an article of faith, supported by the overwhelming majority of self-defined progressive opinion" (ibid.). This calls for a closer look at it.

2. Explaining Lockdown

The original meaning of lockdown is the "confining of prisoners to their cells, as following a riot or other disturbance".[5] In retrospect, one must wonder how easily a word that originated in prison language could become a term for how all of society was treated by the state. In a liberal society, whose first principle is freedom, to rob all of their members (not only the infected) of their freedom for extended periods, and repeatedly over several years, is an unheard-of event, at least in peacetime. It is thus no accident that the world's major public health organization, the WHO, and the eminent Johns Hopkins University Center of Health Security (JHCHS), both of which would take leading roles during the pandemic, had not even imagined, let alone prescribed, such a drastic measure in their previous pandemic response scenarios and manuals. The very word "lockdown" didn't exist, at least not outside the prison sector. In two reports issued shortly before the pandemic, both organizations also took distance from other, more moderate "non-pharmaceutical interventions" (NPIs), such as travel restrictions or border closures, as both ineffective and intrusive (WHO, 2019; JHCHS, 2019). Overall, previous pandemic responses consisted of targeted measures only. This previous response type, which was

[4] See Scott Atlas, "The Data Is In", *The Hill*, 22 April 2020.
[5] link to the article.

replaced by lockdown, may be called "focused protection"—using the language of the October 2020 Great Barrington Declaration by a group of eminent virologists, which came to be promptly dismissed as "not grounded in science and…dangerous".[6]

How lockdown came to be the nearly universally consented pandemic response measure, despite its absolute novelty, and this in very short time, is a puzzle that no one has convincingly explained so far. In an explorative and inductive spirit, I suggest that the following factors need to be part of a plausible explanation.[7]

Firstly, the immediate notion of a "deadly virus", which was fed by dramatic but incomplete information trickling in from China, including disturbing pictures of people randomly collapsing in the street, kicked off a worst-case orientation, or what in public health circles is called the "precautionary principle", which applies to "(a)cting under conditions of scientific uncertainty" (Gostin, 2008: 72). It "stipulates an obligation to protect populations against reasonably foreseeable threats, even under conditions of uncertainty" (ibid. 73). The rub is that, so far, the precautionary principle (except in academic circles; see Munthe, 2011) had rarely been applied outside environmental policy, where it was widely in use to "forestall disasters and guide decision making in the context of insufficient data" (Gostin, 2008: 73). Lawrence Gostin, a leading American public health academic, tellingly notes that the precautionary principle "has not been explicitly invoked in the context of epidemic threats", because it "may burden individuals and impose limits on their freedom" (ibid. 74). So, while a template for drastic state action existed, its epidemiological application was still a novelty.

Secondly, by March 2020, when the virus arrived in Europe and North America, China seemed to have successfully suppressed its Covid outbreak by what happened to be the world's first lockdown, though only at a regional level, in the province of Hubei. Indeed, the Chinese early success in bringing the virus down, even though by illiberal means, was widely admired in the West. For the philanthropist tech billionaire and global vaccine promoter Bill Gates, China "did a lot of things right at the beginning", especially having "shut down completely", to which there was just "no alternative" (Green & Fazi, 2023: 162). Economic historian Adam Tooze is full of admiration for China, which showed to him that "(b)eing willing to sacrifice normality was actually the best way to preserve normality" (2021: ch. 3). By February 2020, when the West was indecisive and "wasting time" (ibid.), he argues, China, "(a)fter achieving effective suppression (of the virus)", was "back to normality" (ibid. ch. 4). Or so it seemed. Sociologist Armin Nassehi, who advised German Chancellor Angela Merkel during the pandemic, similarly acknowledged that "the Chinese autocratic solution is undoubtedly efficient", and he derived from it the "sociological hope for governing with a firm hand (*Durchregieren*)".[8] Of course, there were critical voices, like Thierry Breton, a high-ranking European Commissioner, who considered China's authoritarian crisis response as "not in our culture" (Tréguer, 2021: 4). Accordingly, further hurdles had to be cleared for lockdown to be adopted in the West.

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[6] Open Letter of the American Public Health Association (link to the article).

[7] The first four of the factors mentioned in the following fare prominently in Macedo and Lee's (2025) excellent study of the United States.

[8] Jörg Phil Friedrich, "Corona-Aufarbeitung", *Die Welt*, 22 March 2024.

Thirdly, one further hurdle cleared was that the WHO, after initial hesitation (motivated by the wish not to embarrass China)[9], came around firmly in favour of lockdown (again in support of China), in a strongly worded statement that called the rigorous Chinese restrictions "*the only measures* that are currently proven to interrupt or minimize transmission chains" (quoted by Green & Fazi, 2023: 69). As a leading British public health expert assesses the impact of the WHO endorsement, "lockdown quickly became the international norm" (Woolhouse, 2022: 252). But qua international norm, lockdown was the result of global governance, not in a legal but discursive sense, as a best practice or "script" to follow (Meyer et al., 1997), which for the time being is its main way of operating. This defies the dominant Covid image of the return of borders and of the sovereign state, particularly shocking in an allegedly internally borderless Europe, which of course *also* happened, and not just for a moment but protractedly, between 2020 and 2022.

Since Friedrich Hayek's early sketch of an "interstate federation" (Hayek, 1939), considered by many a blueprint for the European Union, and propagated by the Geneva School of "globalist" neoliberalism (see Slobodian, 2018: ch. 3), "global governance" had been a central plank in the "neoliberal project" of neutralizing the democratic nation-state (Streeck, 2021: preface), which includes the notion that politics is not about "power and distribution" but "rational problem-solving" (ibid.). Such world governance involves corporate actors as "equal participants" in the business of rule, to constitute "multi-stakeholder groups" and "public-private partnerships", which is the typical slang (Häring, 2021: part 1). The WHO, while nominally under the ambit of the United Nations Organization and thus financed by its member states, is a case in point: its biggest funder today is the private Gates Foundation. When Covid arrived, Gates Foundation support had already reoriented the WHO's global health policy from holistic "primary health schemes", especially in developing countries, toward "managing specific diseases", within a "public-private partnership" frame of profitable vaccine development (Lakoff, 2017: 74). This foreshadowed the immediately advertised way out of the pandemic. By that time, it was forgotten that in the management of the 2009 Hong Kong swine flu, the WHO had been credibly accused of interest collusion with the pharmaceutical industry (see the Council of Europe report, Flynn, 2010).

A *fourth* element to bring about lockdown is scientific expertise, and thus technocracy and its view of policy and politics as about the correct solution. In March 2020, mathematical biologist Neil Ferguson, a professor at Imperial College London, published a truly catastrophist Corona-death projection, if no immediate action was taken (Ferguson et al., 2020). The innocently titled "Report 9" (that had not yet gone through peer review but immediately circulated in high government circles) negatively contrasts "mitigation", which is the established approach of "protecting those most at risk" (ibid. 1), a.k.a. "focused protection", with a more radical—and entirely novel and untested—strategy of virus "suppression" (via lockdown, the word appearing in the paper only once, and rather obliquely). Not to allow any doubt, the paper depicts virus suppression as "the only viable strategy at the current time" to prevent the collapse of health systems, particularly their

[9] Never mincing his words, Niall Ferguson (2021: ch.9) called the tardive and China-friendly posture of the WHO "supine, if not sycophantic", referring it to the fact that WHO chief Ghebreyesus's candidacy for the job had been "strongly backed" by China.

intensive care facilities (ibid. 16). Incredibly, for suppression to be effective, it would have to be upheld "until a vaccine becomes available (*potentially 18 months or more*)" (ibid. 2; emphasis supplied). The Ferguson paper thus *also* established the inherent link between lockdown and vaccine development, the core of the Covid Consensus.

In retrospect, "Report 9" must be considered one of the most influential scientific interventions of all time. A few days later, after Italy had taken the first step, the British and American governments, which were targeted by the Imperial College model (also because of Ferguson's strong connections with top levels of both administrations), declared lockdown, and so did the French government (one of its scientific advisors had previously worked in the Ferguson lab) (Sebhatu et al., 2020: 21202). Only Swedish health experts were not convinced: "(T)here is so much uncertainty in (the Imperial model) that made us think it was not a realistic scenario", said one of them (Borraz & Jacobsson, 2023: 86). Much as the WHO's dubious role in the 2009 swine flu "pandemic" (that had been precipitately declared on the basis of a lightened definition of pandemic; see Doshi, 2011) was forgotten, so was the fact that the same Imperial College professor had overestimated the expected death rate of the 2009 Hong Kong swine flu by a factor of 80 (with respect to the U.K.). Moreover, when mad cow disease raged in 1980s and 1990s Britain, Ferguson's "metrics of fear" had predicted 136.000 deaths from this disease, while in reality only 178 people died of it, and over a twenty-year period (Dodsworth, 2021: ch. 10). Green and Fazi (2023: 392) are on the mark when attributing the fabulous "success" of Ferguson's mathematical and entirely empirics-free Corona death projections to a "fetishization of science" and the discarding of the "experience of medical history". Geoff Shullenberger (2024: 44) even calls it an instance of "hyperreality" as theorized by French philosopher Jean Baudrillard, which is "the generation by models of a real without origin or reality". Indeed, because of its immediate political adoption, the Ferguson "simulations…reset the course of reality and thereby became inextricable from it" (ibid.), eliminating the possibility to judge them right or wrong. Exactly as theorized by Baudrillard, "simulation preceded and thereby devoured the real at every point" (ibid. 46).

A *fifth* factor in making lockdown the (near-)universal initial state response to Covid is that in a situation of great uncertainty there is a propensity of states, much like any other organization, to engage in "isomorphism" (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), that is, to simply copy what other states (or organizations) are doing, and to do so more intensely the closer in space and type they are. "Mimicry is a common response among decision makers when the effect of a decision is uncertain", as Abiel Sebhatu et al. (2020: 21201) summarize the pertinent wisdom of organizational sociology. These authors plausibly use the isomorphism template to explain the fact that "(a)lmost 80 percent of the OECD countries adopted the same COVID-19 non-pharmaceutical interventions (NPIs) within a span of two weeks" (ibid. 21207). In a later reflection, Neil Ferguson memorably captures the copycat element: "It's a communist one-party state, we said. We couldn't get away with it, we thought…And then Italy did it. And we realized we could" (quoted in Green & Fazi, 2023: 82). Ferguson's main reference is to the world's first nationwide lockdown, declared by Italy on 9 March 2020, shortly followed by similar lockdowns in most other European countries (and the United States). But his statement equally expresses the scientific roots of lockdown that Ferguson and his Imperial College laboratory themselves ("we") had prepared; and, of course, it underscores the pioneering of lockdown by the "communist one-party state", China.

However, while isomorphism, particularly in combination with the precautionary principle, may explain the *initial* resort to this drastic measure, it does not explain why states *repeatedly* would resort to it, as often as four times over a two-year-plus period, and increasingly against the evidence (i.e., the lesser lethality of later virus variants and the collateral damage from lockdown becoming apparent). Governments' standard explanation has been to "follow the science", as if science had ever been in the mode of "one", and more fundamentally still, as if science could ever be prescriptive (at most it might be predictive).

The "follow the science" mantra will no longer do, at least if Germany is the measure, the country that was initially praised as one of the most effective virus responders. Some 4000 pages of secret protocols of the Robert Koch Institute (RKI), the epidemiological expert institute advising the German government, which a whistle blower leaked to the public in summer 2024, show scientific expertise systematically subordinated to other-determined political preferences and choices. More specifically, repeated expert suggestions to soften the restrictions were ignored in favour of politicians' persistent preference for a hard line. As two critics try to make sense of this preference, the logic of lockdown was "deliberately circular", in that tough measures were deemed necessary to make people understand the seriousness of the situation (Lange & Shullenberger, 2024: 3). The German economics minister, Peter Altmaier, concisely expresses this mindset: lockdown was "signal of the dramatic nature of the situation and that we *mean* business" (ibid.).

The leaked Robert Koch protocols provide evidence that the German government followed a strategy of instilling fear and that it remained committed to a worst-case orientation throughout the pandemic. For instance, while the RKI experts repeatedly questioned the effectiveness of the (rather uncomfortable and intrusive) FFP2 masks, and even pointed out certain health risks if they were not properly used, these masks remained obligatory for a full three years (Rostalski, 2024a). Furthermore, despite the RKI's repeated negative advice on the effectiveness of school closures, German schools remained closed for a total of 38 weeks, close to a school year. And when—in the late second year of a pandemic that wouldn't subside despite a swift mass vaccination campaign that reached no less than two-thirds of the population—political leaders, including the federal health minister himself, Jens Spahn, gave out the sinister notion that this was a "pandemic of the nonvaccinated" who had to be brought to their knees by plain coercion, RKI experts quietly remarked that this notion was "scientifically not correct". This obviously did not impress the minister (ibid.).

Hence, the picture arises of the German government, while pretending to "follow the science", actually subordinating expert advice to pre-set political choices, especially in the later phases of the pandemic. But, if not driven by expertise, what was driving these political choices, which in this case amounted to sticking to a hard and uncompromising line?

3. Exalted Security

The German case is not singular. In the U.K., for instance, after initial hesitation, the government "weaponized fear", convinced that "the perceived level of personal threat needs to be increased among those who are complacent, using hard-hitting emotional messaging" (Dodsworth, 2021: intro). Most European governments, as well

as the American, instantly and persistently used the language of war in their pandemic responses. They again followed China in this, which even called its anti-Covid campaign a "people's war". "*Nous sommes en guerre*" was the heading of French President Emmanuel Macron's announcement of the French lockdown on 16 March 2020,[10] and in France as elsewhere, military expertise and military organizational platforms were prominently involved and used in pandemic response measures.

Putting pandemic lockdown into a larger picture, one may consider it the culmination of a trend of the neoliberal state to refocus from socio-economic security, which it can no longer provide, to plain physical security, resulting in the "protection of lives" that was the main state slogan during the pandemic. For a pre-pandemic context, sociologist Loïc Wacquant (2009: 243) speaks of "the staging of security", in the elementary sense of "*sécurité, Sicherheit, seguridad*, etc.". To Wacquant, the staging of security "has the primary function of enabling leaders in office…to reaffirm on the cheap the capacity of the state to act at the very moment when, embracing the dogmas of neoliberalism, they unanimously preach its impotence in economic and social matters" (ibid.). In the pandemic context, Didier Fassin (2021: 156) argues in a similar key that French President Macron's promise to "save lives whatever it takes" is an expression of a post-welfarist "biolegitimacy", with the "recognition of life as the highest good". At the same time, Fassin argues, the "sparing of physical lives…laid bare…the indifference toward the injustices in the treatment of social life" (ibid. 171). This is because lockdown, in his view, robbed people of "another right to life", which is the "right to make decisions on what is good for oneself" (ibid. 164). In addition, Macron's promise to "save lives" was entirely mute on the non-digitally-privileged who had no chance but to serve as "essential workers" on the virus front.

The opposite of physical security is fear, and a post-welfarist state that returns to this Hobbesian Ur-idiom of the political must cast the individual less as an agent of choice than as someone who is inherently *vulnerable* and in need of protection. Frank Furedi (2007: 165) speaks of a "politics of fear" that implies a shift from a "humanist" to a "vulnerability paradigm" of personhood. The watershed event for states to go this way were the Islamist terror attacks on America, on 11 September 2001. The War on Terror launched in response was in many respects precursor to the "war against the virus", in both campaigns the war rhetoric being conspicuously present. At the time, British Home Secretary, David Blunkett, immediately understood the greater meaning, as well as strategic possibilities, of 9/11: "The 11 September atrocity has come to crystallize the fear and insecurity many people feel in this new globalised age…(and) it appeared almost to symbolize our vulnerability itself" (in Ramsey, 2022). Blunkett thus draws a link between 9/11 and the generalized vulnerability in a global market society, implicitly flagging the possibility to deflect this vulnerability from its recognized socioeconomic sources to ersatz sites.

What Blunkett did not mention is that "the ideology of vulnerability", as LSE law professor Peter Ramsey (2022) calls it, "supports a protection-racket politics in which rulers are complicit in manufacturing threats that they then insist we are vulnerable to and in need of protection from". Wacquant (2009: 243) also hinted at this possibility in his notion of "staging security", which suggests a deliberately inflated threat level. This

[10] link to the article.

may sound conspiratorial, but the state as protection racket, if not as "organized crime", is an established theme in the historical sociology of the state, championed by Charles Tilly (1985). And if there is an element of truth in the sizeable literature on "securitization", it is that threats, even if grounded in natural events, are at the same time constructed, that is, turned into a security issue by political choice (for an application of the notion of securitization to the Covid pandemic, see Regilme, 2023: 559).

"It's for the sake of health that the faint-hearted social atoms are mobilized, now that the effectiveness of antiterrorism has ended up being blunted", argues a self-declared "Conspiratorial Manifesto" (Anonymous, 2023: ch. 3), suggesting a thematic link between the antiterror and anti-virus "wars". Public health has been a prime site of neoliberal governing already preceding the pandemic, and often in protection-racket mode. In a celebrated case study of Britain, medical doctor Michael Fitzpatrick (2000: 1) depicts governments from Thatcher on as engineering "an endless series of health scares", which went along with a "dramatic increase in state intervention in the personal life of the individual". As Fitzpatrick specifies the context, this happened "ironically in a period when the state has been inclined to withdraw from economic and social commitments" (ibid. 65). It started with the famous mid-1980s HIV/AIDS campaign, in which with "no good evidence" a gay-lifestyle-specific health risk was generalized into a safe sex exhortation for everyone, visually dramatized by crushing tombstones and icebergs in government television advertisements and "Don't Die of Ignorance" leaflets distributed to all households. It continued with cot (sudden infant) death and mad cow disease in the 1990s. "(H)ealth scares have acquired a virtually continuous presence", Fitzpatrick (ibid. 24) concluded, paradoxically just when there was "better health than at any time in human history" (ibid. 2).

Fitzpatrick (2000: 7) attributes the "tyranny of health" to a "society which has abandoned any grand project", coinciding with the arrival of political neoliberalism. Indeed, a distinctly neoliberal tone in these campaigns, which even intensified under New Labour in the late 1990s, is to call upon the individual to "behave virtuously" (ibid. 2), thus "direct(ing) attention from the social causation of disease" (ibid. 75) toward holding the individual responsible for it; and, of course, the intention throughout is to reduce health care costs under the motto "prevention is better than cure" (ibid.).

The role of the political left in the exaltation of security and its flipside, the depiction of the individual as vulnerable, merits further attention. To stay with the British case, Ramsey (2022) reports that the "promotion of vulnerability…really got going under Blair's New Labour government". The Third Way left's chief theorist, Anthony Giddens (1991: ch. 7), laid the intellectual foundation in arguing that there has been a shift in "high modernity" from a collectivist "politics of emancipation", which to him has been largely successful, to an individualist "life politics", centred on "self-actualization". But this in turn, Giddens continues, requires "ontological security" to beat an ever-present "existential anxiety". While angst may be part of the human condition, it is exacerbated by the fact that high modern "self-identity", with people cut loose from the collective moorings of class and estate, is "inherently fragile" (ibid. 185).

That this combination of hyper-individualism and vulnerability could yield fiendishly authoritarian results is demonstrated in an empirically unimportant yet conceptually interesting New Labour policy, the "Anti-Social Behavior Orders" (ASBO) that were in force between 1998 and 2014 (see Ramsey, 2012). They stipulated a "right to security" on the part of "vulnerable" citizens. But, in effect, they moralized citizenship in terms of a

legal obligation to "reassure others about their future security" (ibid. 16). Concretely, to violate an ASBO entailed penal prosecution for small deviance (or pastimes) like spitting, smoking in public places, or night-time noise. Ramsey (2022) calls "authoritarian liberalism" the propensity of such measures to posit "individuals as universally vulnerable to each other", to "cast suspicion on individual liberty", and to "(set) citizens against each other in every possible way".

Of course, pandemic management is a world away from the trivia of ASBO. But it shows on a bigger scale some of the same elements of authoritarian (neo)liberalism, from the state-encouraged spying among neighbours for lockdown violations[11], to whipping-up the vaccinated against the non-vaccinated, the latter accused of behaving in non-public-good-conformant ways, which became a dominant theme in the late phase of the pandemic.

4. Suppression of Critique

When Margaret Thatcher famously declared that "there is no alternative" (TINA), her reference was a free-market policy modelled on Hayek's prescriptions.[12] But the TINA principle stands more generally for a technocratic penchant for the "correct solution" that has *also* become prevalent in a neoliberal order. TINA's authoritarian downside was felt by those who dared criticize lockdown and other pandemic measures. Take the example of the earliest critic of lockdown, Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben. His case is well known but worth retelling for the level of vilification that he (and other critics of the Covid Consensus) was (or were) subjected to. Agamben did little more than question the exalted security and racket mentality that underlies lockdown. Previously a cult author of the left, Agamben only had to use the tools of his own philosophy, which had reflected on "bare life" and the "state of exception", often in arcane prose. The philosopher's Covid interventions at least were exceedingly clear.

In a first blog published in late February 2020,[13] Agamben simply reiterated the Italian National Research Council (NRC) statement that there was "no SARS-CoV-2 epidemic in Italy" *at the time*, and that in 80 to 90 percent of cases the symptoms were "moderate", "a kind of flu". Once it was over, pandemic hardliners from German virologist Christian Drosten to Bill Gates would draw the exact same parallel between Covid and flu.[14] But when the pandemic was on, to compare Covid with the flu was breaking the ultimate taboo. On the basis of the official NRC definition of the situation, Agamben addressed, first, the "disproportionate" and "grave" government restrictions of elementary individual freedoms, which to him "manifest again the growing tendency of the state of exception to become a normal governing paradigm" (though he erred in the fact that, unlike the lawless state of exception that he had depicted in his philosophical writings, pandemic emergency rules were replete with legal and normative production).

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11 "Corona-Snitches Thrive in Lockdown Europe", *Politico*, 3 April 2020.

12 The Iron Lady, at a Conservative Party meeting, reportedly pulled out a copy of Hayek's *Constitution of Liberty* from her handbag, and banged it on the table with the words, "This is what we believe" (link to the article).

13 Giorgio Agamben, "L' invenzione di un epidemia", *Quodlibet*, 26 February 2020.

14 For Drosten, see Rostalski (2024b: 101); for Gates, see Green and Fazi (2023: 162f).

In the same blog, Agamben also criticized the instilling of a "state of fear" and "collective panic" by the state. This becomes popularly accepted, he argued, in a "perverse vicious circle" of fulfilling the "desire for security" that was created by the state's very fear campaign. This was not far from the truth. Apart from the German RKI protocols mentioned above, the German interior ministry, in March 2020, commissioned a strategy paper whose explicit purpose was "shock therapy" modelled on China, as one of its authors, a sociologist, later frankly admitted (Bude, 2022: 247–49).[15]

In a second blog,[16] Agamben attacked the bleak picture of society and public policy that transpired in the pandemic response measures, as "no longer believ(ing) in anything but bare life". Moreover, the protection of bare life, or to "flatten the curve" (to quote the monochrome and ubiquitous formula whose precise origin happens to be Ferguson's "Report 9"), argues Agamben, is not "something that unites people", which was the official diction; instead, it "blinds and separates them"[17]. This is because "other human beings…are now seen solely as possible spreaders of the plague whom one must avoid at all costs and from whom one needs to keep oneself at a distance of at least a meter"[18].

Agamben thus exposed the Orwellian "doublethink", which according to Elena Lange (2024) has had a return in pandemic management. Orwell had defined doublethink as "the power of holding two contradictory beliefs in one's mind simultaneously, and accepting both of them" (ibid. 50). An example is in the mentioned German interior ministry paper, which sports the perplexing slogan "social distancing brings people closer together"[19]. Division, not unity, must also be the unintended result of the favoured war metaphor, at least if applied to a virus. As Agamben plausibly argues, "a war with an invisible enemy that can lurk in every other person is the most absurd of wars. It is, in reality, a civil war. The enemy is not outside, it is within us".[20] In the same blog, Agamben condemns the inhumane practice, common during the pandemic, of the Covid dead to be denied the "right to a funeral". As every schoolchild knows, this was the topic of Sophocles' Antigone tragedy, in which the protagonist's conscience (and ties to her brother) memorably trump(s) her obligations to the political ruler: "(It) is curious that the churches remain silent on the subject", Agamben lashes out against the clerics,[21] because silent, indeed, they were and remained so. Finally, Agamben utters a truism about the state of exception, which was the state of normality between 2020 and 2022: "A society that lives in a perennial state of emergency cannot be a free society".[22]

In a third blog[23], Agamben dared to compare a hypertrophied notion of public health with the *salut public* whose protection had been the pretext for *la terreur* in

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15 *Wie wir COVID-19 unter Kontrolle bekommen* (Federal Ministry of the Interior and Community, Berlin, 22 March 2020; typescript, in author's possession). Again, Germany was no outlier. The Belgian health minister, for instance, opined that people are conducive to "psychological shock tactics" (Graso, 2022: 25).

16 *Quodlibet*, 17 March 2020.

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid.

19 *Wie wir COVID-19 unter Kontrolle bekommen*, op. cit.

20 *Quodlibet*, op. cit. The War on Terror had already met similar objections (see Lakoff, 2006).

21 *Quodlibet*, op. cit.

22 Ibid.

23 A German translation appeared as Giorgio Agamben, "Gastkommentar", *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 5 May 2020.

the French revolution. And he raised "legitimate doubt…that panic is spread…also to deflect attention from past omissions of several governments". His empirical point of reference is neoliberal hospital reforms, which in Italy, in particular, were pushed by explicitly "technical" governments that had been in place there in several editions over the past few decades. As a result, Italian hospital capacity was reduced by 50 percent between 1997 and 2015, and the number of hospital employees by 46.000 between 2009 and 2017 (Šumonja, 2020: 218). As in other European countries,[24] these "reforms" continued unabated during the pandemic. Adam Tooze (2021: ch. 1), this time on target, speaks of "organized irresponsibility" in Western countries' health sectors since the 1980s: "(S)urplus capacity was viewed not as a responsible precaution", as it should be from the vantage point of public health, "but a regrettable drag on efficiency", in a typically neoliberal application of business logic to a non-economic sector (see footnote 1). To the degree that it wasn't exaggerated,[25] the publicly staged need to "flatten the curve" was not natural fate but the auto-generated result of decades of neoliberal health policy.

In this third pandemic blog, Agamben makes another important point: considering the "new function" that doctors and virologists have acquired in "governing the pandemic", he finds it dangerous to "let them decide on matters that are lastly of an ethical and political nature"[26]. To "follow the science" also ignores that there is not, and can never be, "agreement among scientists". As this fundamental fact was ignored, "science has become the religion of our time", and Agamben wants this to be understood "literally".[27] If one considers the policy-making power of Neil Ferguson's phantasmic computer simulations, this conclusion does not seem exaggerated—although the German RKI files, discussed above, suggest a more complex picture of the expert-politician relationship, in which politicians have not necessarily been the pawns of experts.

In retrospect, the three main points of Agamben's critical Covid blogs have a lot of plausibility: lockdown's freedom restrictions were disproportionate; social distancing betrayed an impoverished view of society as reduced to physical life; and science as one voice to legitimize policy implied a disfigured understanding of science. Of course, one might reasonably disagree with this, because freedom and security are notoriously difficult to balance. But the astonishing matter is the virulence, if not violence, with which Agamben's considered views were dismissed, root and branch. Indeed, Agamben received the modern-day equivalent of being tarred and feathered and thrown out of town, especially by the left who had previously adored him for the same critical philosophy that he simply brought to bear on the pandemic. "Each short essay was more absurd…than the last", all just "right-wing…conspiracy theories", posted the American philosopher Benjamin Bratton in the leftist Verso blog.[28] "Monitor and punish? Yes, please", responded Slavoj Žižek, which was less of a witticism than his previous provocations.

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[24] In France, between 1990 and 2017, 160.000 hospital beds were removed, one-third of the national total, and the cuts continued during the pandemic (Laurent Mucchielli, 2022: ch. 8).

[25] In France, for instance, in 2020, Covid patients represented only two percent of all hospital patients, and five percent of intensive-care patients (Deruelle, 2022: 10); in Germany, the hospital association IQM (*Initiative Qualitätsmedizin*) reported that "in 2020 our clinics were never at a capacity limit" (Lütge & Esfeld, 2021: 24).

[26] "Gastkommentar", op. cit.

[27] Ibid.

[28] Benjamin Bratton, "Agamben WTF, or How Philosophy Failed the Pandemic", *Verso Blog*, 28 July 2021.

At least, to Žižek, Agamben was not a right-wing turncoat, but guilty of a "widespread leftist stance", which is to suspect the "power exercise of social control" behind every government policy; but this "does not make the reality of the threat disappear".[29] TINA: the Slovenian star professor did not use the acronym, but he meant it. Tim Christiaens, a young Belgian philosopher and self-described expert on "neoliberal governmentality"[30], whose doctoral work had "primarily built" on Agamben, ridiculed his former hero's critical (and in fact rather unsurprising) views as "the ramblings of a 77-year-old man". He even demanded that "society (must) be defended from Agamben", whom he also finds indistinguishable from "corona denialists such as Bolsonaro or Trump".[31]

5. Why the Left Supported Lockdown[32]

Indeed, the fact that right-wing populists like Bolsonaro and Trump opposed lockdown and related measures (like mandatory mask-wearing), helps explain why the left would ardently support that. At one level, this is simple political mechanics, which requires that left and right (or government and opposition) take opposite positions on issues. As Peter Baldwin (2021: 164) quipped about its workings in the United States, a mask on the face "became the semiotic opposite of a MAGA hat".

However, something deeper was involved in leftist support for lockdown. As Lee Jones (2024: 25) keenly observed, and confirming our previous reflection on "exalted security", the Third Way left's turn from "anti-poor policies" to an "emphasis on vulnerability and protection" would suggest exactly this. Jones even surmises that the professional managerial class (PMC) "welcomed lockdown as a 'new lifestyle' featuring no commuting, working from home, more time spent with family, and increased savings" (ibid. 27). Less ad hominem, and more substantively, one could argue that lockdown recovered for the left a positive concept of freedom, and the return of a public-good minded state, after forty years of neoliberal market idolization.

But this was at the price of a contorted version of freedom, if the concept was not thrown out altogether. Consider German sociologist Frank Nullmeier (2020: 4), who advocated what he calls "social liberty". In his view, the "pandemic qua socio-natural condition is per se unfreedom". Conversely, "a shutdown is the attempt to remove the pandemic-conditioned unfreedom through the state-ordered restriction of freedom rights". Furthermore, "the unfreedom to be at risk to be infected at any moment is significantly reduced through freedom restrictions (*Zugangsbeschränkungen*)" (ibid. 12). In short, "the loss of freedom is answered with the loss of freedom, in order to restore the conditions for a free life in common" (ibid. 12–13). To be deprived of freedom for the sake of freedom—this is the gist of the argument.

The same point was made, with the considerable technical prowess of the trained philosopher, by Kieran Oberman (2022: 817): "While lockdowns restrict freedom, so too do viruses. Since viruses restrict freedom and lockdowns protect us from viruses,

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[29] Slavoj Žižek, "Monitor and Punish? Yes, Please", *The Philosophical Salon*, 16 March 2020.

[30] link to the article.

[31] Tim Christiaens, "Must Society Be Defended from Agamben?" *Critical Legal Thinking*, 26 March 2020 (link to the article).

[32] Commensurate with the limited scope of this article, the political left outside the North Atlantic world, which was often critical of lockdown and related pandemic measures, is not considered here.

lockdowns can protect us from the harmful effects that viruses have on freedom". But this ignores, as fellow philosopher Alberto Giubilini (2023: 886) objected, and which must be brought against Nullmeier (2020) as well, that "different types of freedom" are impaired by lockdown and by viruses, which just happen to be different things. The direct and inescapable behaviour restriction by lockdown is a rather more serious freedom impairment than the probability of having one's future behaviour restricted by catching a virus through risky behaviour at an earlier point, which moreover should be for the individual and not for the state to decide.

But the dominant reasoning at the time, also shared by politicians, was that "having rigid rules today represents real freedom", as the Italian health minister defended lockdown (quoted by Giubilini, 2023: 887). This denied the possibility of questioning the proportionality of lockdown. The dilemma shines in German philosopher Jürgen Habermas's (2021) ardent defence of the "strict preventive measures", which he contrasts positively against the "libertarian course of opening" that he detests. Notably, Habermas's lockdown defence was not in March 2020, when panic might have excused him, but in September 2021, after not just one but three consecutive lockdowns in Germany, with the fourth lurking just around the corner.

Habermas intervened in the lively debate among German constitutionalists whether the "protection of life" trumped all other constitutional rights, particularly freedom rights. Most stridently, University of Münster constitutionalist Oliver Lepsius attacked a "state of exception in jurisprudence", in which an absolutized protection of life stamped out the need to carefully justify and balance the restriction of basic rights.[33] The very first clause of the Basic Law, which stipulates that "human dignity is inviolable", does not allow this, argues Lepsius. As he put it: "China as model. In the 'Hour of the Executive', human beings are reduced to their naked physical existence. But exactly this the Basic Law does not permit: it would be…a violation of human dignity" that is protected in the mentioned dignity clause, and it would be a violation of other basic rights as well. To which Habermas (2021: 24) plainly responded: "One cannot want to protect the dignity of a person and let her body rot"; accordingly, the "protection of life by the state is the implication of…the protection of human dignity".

This is common sense but it is also unlawyerly. As University of Freiburg constitutionalist Dietrich Murswiek (2021a) objects, the right to life guaranteed by Article 2(2) of the Basic Law is wrongly interpreted in such reasoning. While the right to life does have superordinate status to other freedom rights, as Murswiek thinks (for a different opinion, see Heinig et al., 2020: 864), it only "obliges the state to protect the individual against *acts by third parties*, but not against general risks of life or natural catastrophes" (emphasis supplied), such as pandemics. In legal language, the right to life protects against "*Störer*" or "*Gefährder*", that is, against hostile or dangerous third parties, either the state (qua *Abwehrrecht*) or private actors (qua *Schutzrecht*). In a pandemic, this may justify isolating infected and sick persons. But it does not justify isolating the healthy, which is the thrust of lockdown. "Healthy people are no *Gefährder*", as Murswiek (2023: 484) asserts. Unless, of course, and that was the mostly unspoken gist of the lockdown advocates, one considered *all people*, the healthy included, as *Gefährder*, that

[33] Oliver Lepsius, "Vom Niedergang grundrechtlicher Denkkategorien in der Corona-Pandemie", *Verfassungsblog*, 6 April 2020 (link to the article).

is, "potential spreader of the virus".[34] This, however, would not meet the constitutional proportionality test, at least in Murswiek's (2021b: 11) view.

The legal validity of these arguments cannot be adjudicated here. But it is striking how much Habermas, the Federal Republic's foremost critical conscience since its founding in 1949, simply replicated the government-imposed Covid Consensus. And he was representative of the left at large. This is a "war of species against species", as Habermas even made the official war metaphor his own (2021: 2). Furthermore, Habermas deemed the "relatively strict…course" of the German government backed by the "consensual council of scientific experts", thus implicitly endorsing the questionable notion of science speaking with one voice (ibid. 5). In the same breath, Habermas expresses contempt for the "noisy polemic" of the "liberalization lobby" (ibid. 7), which to him implied the "politically aggressive and conspiracy-theoretical denial of the pandemic infection and mortality risks". For Habermas, as for most leftists, there was a "radical right core" to the "fake-liberal protests of the Corona deniers".

Habermas (2021) is nevertheless correct when arguing, at the level of constitutional theory, that the Covid crisis throws into sharp relief an inherent tension between the two components of "liberal democracy": its liberal component pushing for "the guarantee of subjective freedoms", and the democratic element pointing at the "self-empowerment of citizens in the political pursuit of collective goals". More concretely, lockdown meant to him the "asymmetric insistence on the solidarity of citizens at the cost of equally guaranteed subjective freedoms" (ibid. 3). However, what sounds fine at the level of theoretical abstraction looks a lot less innocent in the real world. The constitutional argument obscures that, during lockdown, the requested "citizen solidarity" was rather easier to afford for the professional ("laptop") class doing home office in their countryside retreats than for lower-class people crammed into small urban apartments without greenery and fresh air for extended periods and several times over. And the heft of the "cost" in terms of freedom restrictions was not shouldered equally, as the "solidarity" injunction suggests, but selectively, by the young (deprived of school and potentially subject to domestic violence by caged-in parents), by women and mothers (doing home schooling with their children, in addition to their habitual double shift), and by the poor (either deprived of work and income or dispatched as "essential workers" to the virus front) (for a comprehensive review of lockdown losers, see Green & Fazi, 2023: chs. 6–8).

The Habermasian construct of democracy and citizen solidarity shining in lockdown buys into the notion that there was no alternative, while putting a halo on the brute force with which it was implemented by the state. Claus Offe, eminent political sociologist and incidentally Habermas's scientific assistant at the University of Frankfurt half a century earlier, was among the few public intellectuals who dared question the Covid Consensus.[35] In ethical respect, he finds it "doubtful" to put the right to life above all other basic rights—this might lead to the "irreversible establishment of authoritarian regimes", and he cites the example of Hungary where Victor Orbán was busily doing that. With respect to the "Corona problem", Offe continues, in medical terms this was mostly a

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[34] This is the view of the former constitutional justice Paul Kirchhof, who justified lockdown by calling all people qua human being "*Gefährder*"; to him, the non-vaccinated were even "*Intensivgefährder*" (extra-dangerous) (quoted in Murswiek, 2023: 488).

[35] Claus Offe, "Pandemie-Politik", *Corona Blog*, Vienna Institut für die Wissenschaften vom Menschen, 20 April 2020 (link to the article).

"geriatric" one, and the "generalized interventions" (his word for lockdown) effectively aimed at "prolonging the lifetime of multi-morbid seniors" (even though Offe was no youngster himself, and already suffering from the severe disease that would slay him in 2025) at the cost of the "younger and middle generations", who faced unemployment and financial hardship. Instead of lockdown, he favoured a "group-specific differentiation of regulation"—the medical pre-Corona standard, and the gist of the Great Barrington Declaration that would be issued a few months later. But, as we saw, this was the alternative that was effectively and deliberately suppressed during the pandemic. While Offe was spared Agamben-style vilification, his position came down to the exact same. It questioned the deadly nature of the virus to which only one answer was possible, and thus the premise on which the Covid Consensus rested.

In one more respect, however, Habermas (2021: 6) was exactly right: lockdown was "supported by the large majority of the population", not only in Germany. Toby Green, in the first, single-authored version of *Covid Consensus* (Green, 2021: ch. 4), is "baffled…as to why citizens of liberal democracies were so willing to give up their freedoms to fight a disease which, it quickly became clear, the vast majority of them were not in danger from". In fact, if most people gave in to the drastic freedom restrictions, Green and Fazi (2023: 396) suspect that two decades of continuous crisis drumming, accompanied by states' promotion of security from secondary to primary value, were conducive to this.

Britain is a case in point. Initially, the British government had hesitated to impose lockdown, out of fear that the "British public would not accept (it)". But this turned out to be "completely wrong", as the Prime Minister's chief advisor, Dominic Cummings, put it later (House of Commons, 2021: 44). Indeed, when lockdown was lifted in July 2021, two-thirds of the British public were found in favour of continuing with "masks, social distancing, and travel restrictions", and still a majority supported these measures until COVID-19 is "controlled worldwide". In addition, astoundingly, "a sizeable minority would like personal freedoms to be restricted permanently", and almost twenty percent of surveyed Britons supported a permanent ban on leaving home after 10 p.m. "without good reason". The pandemic "revealed John Bull's authoritarian streak", *The Economist* concluded.[36] However, such attitudes were prevalent elsewhere. Two German critics called Western states' political Covid management a "real Milgram experiment" (Lütge & Esfeld, 2021: 91), in which unrelenting fear-mongering bore the intended fruits.

6. Lockdown Opposition: Extreme Right?

Of course, not everyone agreed with lockdown. In Germany, lockdown oppositionists became known as *Querdenker* (lateral thinkers). They drew support from the independent *Mittelstand*, small business owners and entrepreneurs disproportionally affected by the closure of stores and in-person services. But the "lateral thinker" logo also points at the involvement of artists, who similarly suffered from the closing of theatres, galleries, and concert halls. In a vituperative account of lockdown critics, William Callison and Quinn Slobodian (2021) see them united by "the conviction that all power is conspiracy", and they depict them beholden to an understanding of freedom as "defined in the negative, reduced to individual license and shorn of any sense of mutual responsibility or solidarity".

[36] "Some Britons Crave Permanent Pandemic Lockdown", *The Economist*, 10 July 2021.

Even more negatively, Carolin Amlinger and Oliver Nachtwey (2022) call the *Querdenker* attitude "libertarian authoritarianism", although the authoritarian element in this disposition remains in the dark. "Their only authority are they themselves [*sie selbst*]", the authors argue at one point (ibid. 292). This suggests that libertarian *is* authoritarian, which would make their pairing a tautology, and one with the ring of the implausible.

Offering a "critical theory" framework for deciphering the *Querdenker*, Amlinger and Nachtwey (2022: 13) depict their attitude as a pathological "side effect (*Nebenfolge*) of late modern society", whose "promise of individual self-realization bears a potential for injury that may turn into frustration and resentment". But what the authors declare to be critical theory is really uncritical affirmation of the German government's lockdown policy. The *Querdenker* are described as showing an "overbearing intellectual critique of the state measures", and as "contest(ing) the danger of the virus and the proportionality of the measures" (ibid. 22). This phrasing implies that the "state measures" *were* "proportionate" and adequate to the "danger" that they responded to. The state is rational, only its critics are not—this is their "critical theory" message.

Lockdown critics were generally depicted as "arching toward far-right beliefs" (Callison & Slobodian, 2021). In this respect, the empirical part of Amlinger and Nachtwey (2022), which is based on an online survey of 1150 Lateral Thinkers, contains one surprising finding. But it is one that does not allow dismissing them as far right: 41 percent of *Querdenker* had recently voted for the Greens and for the radical Left Party, while the preference for the radical right party, *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD), was only at third place, with 15 percent. The authors immediately qualify this inconvenient finding, arguing that while "arriving mainly from the left", the *Querdenker* "are now moving toward the right" (ibid. 23). And they read a deep authoritarian disposition into this move, "a radically individual understanding of the right to freedom that tips over to the authoritarian" (ibid. 24). Again, the meaning of authoritarian in this statement stays in the dark, and the question arises why these left-to-right switchers had been with (presumably non-authoritarian) progressive and leftist parties before.

There is a simpler explanation for lockdown critics' rightward move, which is rooted in a political demand-supply logic. Amlinger and Nachtwey (2022: 245) themselves hint at it: "Progressives are asking for regulation (*Normierung*), while conservatives are emphasizing the right to free self-determination". This indeed has been the main pandemic cleavage. Only, the mainstream conservative parties' partaking in the Covid Consensus entailed that the far right could extol themselves as the new freedom fighters. By the same token, this constellation implied that progressive parties, both centre and radical, were hegemonic on pandemic matters. This is not to deny that most radical right parties, including the German AfD, had initially supported border closures, something that silenced them for a moment because borders were closed anyway, and subito. Over time, however, radical right parties positioned themselves as freedom defenders and critics of government "authoritarianism" (see Kaltwasser & Taggert, 2022).[37] "*Liberté, liberté*" was the chant at spring and summer 2021 rallies held by French *Front National* dissident Florian Philippot, and he presented himself at the French 2022 presidential election

[37] Rogers Brubaker (2020) called it one of the "paradoxes" of populism in the pandemic: in deviation from its previously protectionist leanings, right-wing populism turned "anti-protectionist" because of its "relational and oppositional" nature, "defined by what it opposes".

contest as opponent to the Macron government's "*dictature sanitaire*".[38] No wonder that ordinary lockdown opponents were receptive to such political offers.

If this was the pull factor on the political supply side, German political scientist Philip Manow plausibly describes the reverse push dynamics on the demand side: "If one denounces people long enough as right fringe, they will eventually move into this direction".[39] An AfD leader confirms the underlying supply-demand side dynamic: "(Our) strategic decision in 2021 (to oppose lockdown) has given us long-term access to voters of the bourgeois centre (*bürgerliche Mitte*), which we previously could never reach. And these voters have stayed with us".[40]

7. Conclusion: The Lockdown Paradox

As I argued in this article, several factors need to be combined when seeking to explain lockdown. First and foremost, there was the perceived need to avert a fundamental threat to human life and society in a context of unprecedented uncertainty, calling for drastic action that disaster researchers have described as based on the "precautionary principle" (or "logic of preparedness", Lakoff, 2017). Tilting in this direction, and addressing the considerable freedom restrictions entailed by it, Sheila Jasanoff (2020: par. 4) argues that pandemic management is an instance of "public health sovereignty", in which people, in principle, are demoted from acting "social and political subjects" to "biomedical subjects, more acted upon than acting". Similarly, Peter Baldwin (2021: 10) sees pandemics as "first-order political events", in which there is an "immediate faceoff between the community's obligation to safeguard itself and individual citizens' claims not to be sacrificed in the process". In a "primordially political situation", Baldwin argues, there was simply no choice but to trample on individual freedoms. In addition, he cites an etiological factor that is specific to the Corona virus, and that provides perhaps the strongest argument of lockdown supporters: the virus's "highly contagious" nature, with a high degree of transmission by "asymptomatic" carriers, precluded a milder or "voluntarist" approach, and instead required "the authorities to lock up everyone" (ibid. 173). Complementing these views, a "political sociology perspective", by Klaus Kraemer (2022: 28, 5), argues that the "overextension of pandemic management" in a context of "existential uncertainty" became generalized and sustained by inter-state "isomorphism" and intra-state "path dependency", respectively, among other mechanisms. Social theorist Richard Münch (2022) adds to this the toolbox of Georg Simmel's classic sociology of conflict. According to it, an external threat conditions an internal closing of ranks and suppression of criticism, which in turn leads to further conflict escalation, polarization, and enforced conformity—the pandemic "erosion of democracy" and scapegoating of the unvaccinated for a pandemic that would not end are explicable in these terms.

Despite their obvious plausibility, the drawback of such generic explanations, drawn from a variety of social science disciplines and perspectives, is to redescribe what

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[38] "Présidentielle 2022: Florian Philippot candidat pour rétablir la 'liberté'", *Libération*, 15 July 2021.

[39] Interview with Philip Manow, "Der Notfallmodus wurde nie verlassen", *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 31 December 2021.

[40] Timo Chrupalla, quoted in "Die Querdenker sind noch nicht fertig", *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 21 October 2024.

happened as "without alternative", thus unwittingly affirming the dominant state rhetoric. Their nucleus is the presumption of a "deadly epidemic" (Baldwin, 2021: 172). Shared by most social science accounts of Covid management to this day,[41] this naturalizes the state's response as the only possible—at least the only humanely acceptable and reasonable—response.

This is where the neoliberalism factor enters. There is an elective affinity between certain political forms of neoliberalism and defining features of lockdown: *authoritarianism*, incidentally the historically first political form of neoliberalism that squarely expresses its chronic tension with, if not hostility to, democracy;[42] *technocracy*, as the uniform "voice of science";[43] the little bit of *global governance* exercised by the WHO;[44] and the denigration of social in favour of physical life and *exalted security*.[45]

The central paradox of lockdown is that, exactly contrary to these neoliberal continuities, leftists have read into it a correction to the perceived deficits of a neoliberal order, above all its disdain for the public good, or rather its equation of the public good with whatever is profitable and efficient. Their list is long. Judith Butler (2022) dismissed "personal liberty" as "death drive", and lockdown expressed to her an "ethics of care" and an understanding of humans as "interdependent creatures". For Bruno Latour (2021), the pandemic lockdown is anticipation of the "general lockdown" that he deems necessary to save the planet from ecological catastrophe. And for Slavoj Žižek (2020: 86), lockdown and related measures showed that "our first principle should be never to economize but to assist, unconditionally, irrespective of costs, those who need help, to enable their survival". In short, in its support for lockdown (and the Covid Consensus at large), the left, represented here by some of its intellectual leaders, had to endorse or even double-down on lockdown's neoliberal affinities, making it a matter of "no alternative", much like Margaret Thatcher had famously decreed that "there is no alternative" to her neoliberal economic program.

However, the case of Sweden shows that an alternative was possible. Sweden was the only country in Europe to eschew lockdown, including its particularly problematic aspect of prolonged school closures—this would only produce a "lost generation of children who haven't been able to go through school like you'd normally do", as a Swedish health official dreaded the prospect (Olofsson et al., 2022: 4). Entrusted by the government to the autonomous Public Health Authority (PHA), the Swedish pandemic response discarded the "precautionary principle" and instead "favour(ed) established epidemiological knowledge over uncertain and evolving evidence" (ibid. 5), thus following the previous "focused protection" approach supported as late as 2019 by the WHO and (unsuccessfully) resuscitated by the Great Barrington Declaration. Instead of locking

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41 For the few noteworthy exceptions, see the next footnote; see also Münch (2022) and Macedo and Lee (2025).

42 In addition to some of the sources mentioned in this article (Laurent Mucchielli, 2022; Green & Fazi, 2023), "authoritarian" Covid management is critically addressed by Kitchen (2020), Thomson and Ip (2020) and Simandan et al. (2024). Two major works highlighting the authoritarian dimension of political liberalism are Biebricher (2019) and Wilkinson (2021).

43 Central works showing the technocratic aspects of political neoliberalism are Esmark (2020) and Bickerton and Accetti (2021).

44 The best work on neoliberal "globalism", from a history of ideas perspective, is Slobodian (2018).

45 For the biopolitics of political neoliberalism, see Fassin (2012); for its constitutive security-drumming, see Wacquant (2009).

people up, the behavioural pillar of the Swedish Corona response was to bet on "voluntarism" and "individual responsibility", which Swedish political scientist Jon Pierre (2020: 485) finds less of a (neo)liberal trope (that it certainly is!) than something that is deeply engrained in "Swedish culture and social behaviour". Writing in the first half of 2020, Pierre nevertheless castigated this approach as "dangerously liberal" (ibid. 479), considering that at that time Sweden suffered the highest Covid death rate in the world. But over the long run, the Swedish alternative paid-off handsomely, considering that its excess mortality in 2020–21 was much below the European average, including that of Spain, Italy, Belgium, and Germany, all of which (in descending order of severity) were lockdown hardliners (Borraz & Jacobsson, 2023: 103). The Swedish Corona Commission (2022) confirmed that expecting people "to follow voluntarily was fundamentally correct. It meant that citizens retained more of their personal freedom than in many other countries" (ibid. 3). This did not prevent the commission from criticizing the PHA for its "limited, late, and not very vigorous measures" (ibid. 18) in the pandemic's earliest and most lethal moment, arguing that at that point "a precautionary principle or principle of action" would have been preferable (ibid. 24).

Today, a deafening silence surrounds the pandemic, as if it had never happened, like in a trauma. This interestingly mirrors the non-memory of the early 20th century Spanish flu. Despite having been the "greatest massacre of the 20th century" that "engulfed the entire globe in the blink of an eye", with incomparably more lethal consequences than its early 21st century successor, the Spanish flu is depicted by one of its major chroniclers, Laura Spinney (2017), as the "forgotten pandemic", at best "remembered personally, not collectively".

"Denial was everywhere", says Eric Klinenberg (2024: 370) about the contemporary U.S. Democrats' post-pandemic refusal to be associated with the tough restrictions that they had happily favoured against their Republican opponents. On the other side of the Atlantic, in Germany, the SPD and Green Party, governing until late 2024, blocked an investigative parliamentary commission to examine the government's pandemic management.[46] This would only become a "playground for the enemies of democracy", finds SPD member of parliament Dagmar Schmidt, adding that "such a show nobody needs", with an eye on the right-populist AfD that had criticized the government's lockdown and mass vaccination policies all along. The Green Party Vice President of the Bundestag Katrin Göring-Eckardt blew into the same horn when opening that an investigative commission would be "abused" to "defame" the responsible politicians, doctors, and scientists. Today, she argues, "the pandemic is utilized to fuel hostility against our parliamentary democracy". This was again with an eye on the AfD, from whom "our democracy" stands to be protected. The Green politician thus exhibits a remarkably possessive and exclusive understanding of democracy, which suggests that the German post-war syndrome of "militant democracy" (*wehrhafte Demokratie*) has moved from the conservative to the progressive spectrum. Armin Laschet, a leading CDU politician who had always favoured a more liberal Covid management, to no avail, is among the few in

[46] After the fall of the progressive "Traffic Light" coalition government (consisting of SPD, Greens, and the liberal FDP) in November 2024, the new coalition government of CDU and SPD led by Chancellor Friedrich Merz (CDU), in summer 2025, has finally established a parliamentary "*Corona-Enquete-Kommission*". Its final report is slated for June 2027.

the political elite to register a "great bitterness in our society". And he attributes it above all to the "rigorous suppression of dissent".[47]

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Acknowledgments: I am grateful to two anonymous reviewers for this journal.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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[47] All quotes in this section are from Jochen Buchsteiner, "Das Land hat einen Corona-Kater", *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 29 April 2024.

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