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A Conclusion

The American Version of the Liberal Script, or How Exceptionalism Leads to Exceptionalism

Michael Zürn

All countries in the world are different from each other, yet the United States of America is exceptionally different.¹ The land was considered the most beautiful and auspicious promise by the settlers who left Europe because they felt religiously or politically oppressed. From its very beginnings, it was a multicultural country without a history of absolutism. Over time, ever more Europeans migrated to the US because it was rich in opportunities, especially economic ones. In its early stages, it was a country of free markets without feudal legacies and statist inclinations. The emerging “First New Nation” (Lipset 1963), i.e., the first major colony to revolt against a colonial power, proved utterly dynamic. Within a century, the US became independent, rights-based, democratic, and prosperous. Based on breathtaking industrialization, it moved up the international power ladder to the top. It was on the winning liberal side of two world wars and came up as the hegemon of the global system. In crucial moments, this hegemon acted more generously and universalistic than any other powerful state. Moreover, the US shaped the world through its consumerist culture and thriving entertainment industry. This blend of optimism, individualism, freedom, self-determination, prosperity, political moderation in a two-party system, and, above all, success made the US special and a liberal role model. Against this background and due to the constitutive importance of religion, the American self-description received a messianic layer (Tyrell 2021). As part of the American identity, the country was seen as the “city upon a hill.” This messianic streak included the notion of the US as a beacon of hope for the world.

Moral purity is not what societies and states are about. Each of the components of so-called American exceptionalism has a dark side. The country was not empty waiting for European settlers, but the indigenous people were brutally expelled and persecuted. Ethnic stratification and racism were always features of American multiculturalism, with slavery as the darkest moment in that respect. In the economic realm, the success of the US quickly led to big business and powerful

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oligopolies betraying the romantic idea of a free market. In defense of both the free world and economic interests, anti-imperialism was complemented with hard mechanisms of political control, including “imperial leanings,” as Lora Viola (this volume) demonstrates in her chapter about inherent connections between liberalism and illiberalism. In environmental terms, American consumerism is the core of many of our environmental challenges, and its vaunted entertainment industry is often flat and profit-oriented. Last but not least, the religious determination of the settlers led to a society that from the early days on proved open to all kinds of imaginations and fantasies. Kurt Anderson (2017) has written a 500-year history of this fantasy-land, describing a society that always proved exceptionally open to reality-denying imaginations. In this account, prophecies, charlatans, and conspiracy theories always played an important role in US society, with the exception of the period between 1920 and 1960.

Nevertheless, if one state in the global system was or is considered outstanding in soft power, it is the US (Nye 2004). The American script is unique in its attractiveness and, without a doubt, special. In this sense, one may subscribe to the Tocquevillian notion of “exceptionalism.” In my understanding, exceptionalism means that it is only one of many versions of the liberal script, but an especially successful one (Hodgson 2010) with unique features, including the somewhat annoying self-description of being exceptional (see introduction).

Today, the city upon a hill is beleaguered. The US has a deeply polarized society, with a divided elite undermining the foundations of a formerly well-working democracy. Trust in public institutions is at an all-time low, and a significant part of the Republican Party’s narrative includes conspiracies and rejects scientific evidence as a basis for political disputes. Moreover, the American-led liberal international order (LIO) is contested from both the inside and the outside. From the outside, the Russian attack on Ukraine is currently the most visible sign of contestation. The most visible internal symbol of the crisis has been the election of Donald Trump as president of the US and his ongoing struggle to regain power by all means, including the attack on the US Congress on January 6, 2021. This reflects the rise of an authoritarian populist movement that contests some liberal core principles, thereby representing an external contestation of the liberal script inside the US.

The rise of authoritarian populism is not exceptional to the US. Authoritarian populist leaders are in power in various countries, such as Hungary, Turkey, India, Venezuela, and Russia. Moreover, it has gained leverage in all established democracies. In this sense, it is a common phenomenon. However, the US again represents a particular case within the group of consolidated democracies. No other consolidated democracy is as polarized in society and politics. Trust in public institutions is very low compared to other liberal democracies. In no other consolidated democracy do we see such a strong faction within the authoritarian populist movement that contests the liberal script externally (with the possible exception of Italy). Moreover, in no other consolidated democracy do authoritarian populists act so openly independently from the notions of truth and truthfulness. Nowhere else can we observe such a strong “truth decay” and “national reality crisis” (Müller, this volume).

How can we understand the relative strength of the beleaguerment of the liberal city upon a hill? To answer this question, I build on the introduction (Börzel et al., this volume) and many chapters in this volume to develop an endogenous explanation: *American exceptionalism breeds the exceptional strength and form of authoritarian populism in the US today*. To clarify the argument, it is first necessary to deconstruct the language of exceptionalism. When I speak about American exceptionalism, I refer to a specific American version of the liberal script (see Börzel et al., this volume). Each liberal society has to handle a set of tensions built into the liberal script. In this sense, each liberal society is exceptional, meaning none is exceptional. Therefore, I point to the specific features of the American version of the liberal script: (1) it is based on a strong belief in markets and the merit principle; (2) it features a political system full of checks and balances; (3) it has a multicultural or cosmopolitan tendency; and (4) it comes with a strong community orientation on the local level that proves incredibly open to truth decay. I argue that these features have produced the economic, cultural, and political conditions under which authoritarian populism blossoms exceptionally well.

I develop this argument as a conclusion to this volume by referring to the chapters of the volume. Still, the chapter is not *the* conclusion that takes up all the threads laid in the earlier chapters. It is *a* conclusion that develops one argument by taking up a thread that pops up in different ways in all preceding chapters. The chapter proceeds as follows. In the first section, I identify the notion of authoritarian populism with a clear ideological component as the form that best describes most contemporary populist movements contesting the liberal script. In the second section, I distinguish the major versions of the liberal script by pointing to its internal tensions. In the third section, I argue that most features of the American version of the liberal script are conducive to authoritarian populism. These features explain the strength and radicality of authoritarian populism in the US. In this sense, one may state that American exceptionalism breeds the exceptional Trumpist version of authoritarian populism in the US.

Populisms

In his chapter about varieties of populism in the US, Hans-Jürgen Puhle (this volume, 48) “insist(s) on a parsimonious use of the concept.” In doing so, he focuses on “‘populist’ elements, styles, rhetoric, or campaign techniques that characterize a particular mode of an otherwise defined movement and can be combined with any kind of political intentions from the far right to the far left” (Puhle this volume, 48). Against this background, Puhle sees the US as the “homeland of modern populism.” His historically rich account points to eleven stages of populist energies, strategies, and movements. In line with this conception, Omar Ali (this volume) describes a “black populism” that has always struggled against the exclusionary mechanisms of the two-party system, with Black Lives Matter being the current version of this black populism.

Conversely, in Marcia Pally's (this volume) understanding, populism is more an ideology than a style, rhetoric, or campaign strategy. She aims to synthesize ideational approaches with social psychology to distinguish between stronger and softer populism, with many contemporary evangelicals on the stronger side. She builds on Takis Pappas (2016), who sees populism as a way to respond to present or anticipated duress with us–them binaries that draw from historical-cultural notions of society (Pally, this volume). Pally's approach comes close to the dominant one for studying contemporary populism, which is the ideational one (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017). In this view, populism is “defined as a set of ideas that not only depicts society as divided between the ‘pure people’ versus the ‘corrupt elite,’ but also claims that politics is about respecting popular sovereignty at any cost” (Mudde 2004, 542). Accordingly, the emphasis on anti-elitism and popular sovereignty is a thin ideology, i.e., a specific set of ideas distinct from thick ideologies—such as liberalism—because it has limited programmatic scope (Freeden 2003). Consequently, populism needs to pair with a host ideology of the left or the right.

I also follow the ideational approach and consider populism more than just a political strategy of leaders independent of their underlying political vision, as Ali (this volume) does (see also Weyland 2017). In this context, I focus on “authoritarian populism,” which I, however, characterize as a thick ideology. From a cleavage perspective (Lipset and Rokkan 1967; Mair 2005), no ideology speaks to all potential issues but responds to the urgent problems of a given era. In this perspective, ideologies only develop in interaction with competing ones and bind together the topics relevant to a given cleavage. Such an ideology does not depend on sophisticated philosophical texts but on the “capacity to fuse ideas and sentiments” to “create public justifications for the exercise of power” (Müller 2011, 92).

Authoritarian populism, in this view, represents one pole in a new cleavage that juxtaposes the losers and winners of globalization. The underlying social revolution of the new cleavage is globalization. Most analysts consider the social changes triggered by globalization and Europeanization decisive (Rogowski 1989; Kriesi et al. 2012). Authoritarian populism stands for TAN (Traditional/Authoritarian/Nationalist), or the communitarian pole, as opposed to GAL (Green/Alternative/Libertarian), or the cosmopolitan pole (Marks and Wilson 2000; de Wilde et al. 2019). It involves a particular understanding of politics and democracy, characterized by four features (see Schäfer and Zürn 2021, 64–66):

- (1) Political communities end at national borders. For populists, political responsibility and national borders are congruent. They deny that people of foreign origin can even potentially be members of the political community. Political decisions must, therefore, take only the interests of their own population into account. Cross-border responsibility and solidarity are seen as a betrayal of the ordinary people. This set of convictions makes contemporary populism nationalist.
- (2) The nationalism of authoritarian populists is anti-pluralist and assumes a homogenous popular will. Not all people that live in a country are part of

the people. Authoritarian populists draw a sharp dividing line between the true people and those who do not belong to it. In France, *la France profonde* counts more than the multiethnic cities, and in Germany, the slogan *Wir sind das Volk* (We are the people) chanted by Pegida or AfD supporters, excludes people with a migration history but also left-leaning and multicultural districts like Kreuzberg. Authoritarian populism has a homogenous idea of the people.

- (3) The popular will is given and does not develop in the public sphere. Which goals the people want (and how these can be achieved) are not constituted or changed in dialogue and debate with each other. Instead, the outcome is fixed from the outset. Therefore, there is no need for complicated procedures to make the right political decisions. This makes current populism decisionist.
- (4) The will of the majority must be implemented. Representation does not consist of a constant exchange between the representatives and the represented, in which the former can decide autonomously yet are obliged to explain themselves and justify their decisions based on reasons and evidence. Instead, authoritarian populism wants to implement the (given) majority will in an unadulterated way. Individual and minority rights, as well as expertise and science, are considered disruptive. This element of authoritarian populism can be labeled majoritarianism.

In sum, authoritarian populism can be defined as a political ideology that is majoritarian and nationalist (Caramani 2017). It is majoritarian by pitting a majority's homogenous will against liberal rights, tolerance, pluralist will, and truth formation. It is nationalist by pitting the significance of borders and the national will against an open-world society with influential international institutions. These beliefs are bundled in constructing a firm antagonism between corrupt and distant cosmopolitan elites and the decent and local people.

Authoritarian tendencies are inscribed in these four characteristics. If dissenting opinions are inadmissible, the work of the opposition must be made more difficult or suppressed altogether. If courts prevent the people's true will from being implemented, measures are necessary to overcome these blockades and prevent them in the future. The authoritarian populists in power attack the separation of powers, derogate the press, and show open disregard for parliamentary procedures. Where populist parties are in control, they often suppress the opposition, undermine the independence of courts, and try to control the media so that effective opposition, rule of law, and independent scrutiny become impossible. Thus, authoritarian populism is thicker than just the thin ideology of juxtaposing the establishment against the people—it also contains a notion of a political order that replaces representative democracy with a “supposedly direct representation between the people and the leader” (Urbinati 2019, 7).

The conception of authoritarian populism I propose in this chapter does not deny that populist styles, mechanisms, and campaign techniques can be used by parties and movements that do not have an authoritarian ideology. There are indeed good

reasons to believe that populist styles have been more prevalent in the history of the US than in most European countries (Puhle, this volume). The popularity of populist styles in the US may easily be one of the historical reasons that help to explain the success of the Trump movement and, thus, the polarization in American society and politics. However, the Trump movement and its detrimental effects on American democracy cannot be grasped with reference to their populist style only. It is the underlying ideology that matters.

I also do not challenge the idea that there are populist movements for which the concept of thin ideology is appropriate (Pally, this volume). If the defining element of populism is only a juxtaposition of the pure people with corrupt elites, it is indeed possible to think of leftist and potentially democratizing forms of populism. For instance, the 1989 movement in Eastern Germany that led to the breakdown of the Socialist regime used the slogan “*Wir sind das Volk*” and juxtaposed the oppressed people with the degenerated party elite. Likewise, black populism, if considered more than a style, is a movement with progressive inclinations (Omar, this volume). In Southern Europe, Syriza or Podemos are currently considered, together with Bernie Sanders, as the most important representatives of current left populism (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017; Manow 2018). While probably not all these so-called leftist populists even fulfill the criteria of a thin populist ideology, I do not deny that the concept may be useful for some purposes. Nevertheless, I maintain that the authoritarian character of the current wave of populism—which can come in a leftist version, as Chaves and Maduro have shown—needs to be taken into account to understand the rise of populism in our times.

Thus, I stick to the concept of authoritarian populism since this phenomenon erodes the liberal script and the world. It is not populism per se. First, the share of authoritarian populists in the current rise of populist parties over the last three decades is dominant and further growing (Timbro 2019; Norris and Inglehart 2019). Authoritarian populist parties—and in line with the new cleavage, to a lesser extent, green parties—have become significantly stronger in most electoral democracies since the 1980s (Armingeon et al. 2020; Benedetto et al. 2020). Second, declining established parties are increasingly replaced by other new parties, including Emmanuel Macron’s “The Republic on the Move” (*La République En Marche!*) in France and the “Coalition of the Radical Left” (*Syriza*) in Greece. However, these parties challenged and replaced old parties without showing anti-liberalism, anti-pluralism, anti-proceduralism, and anti-internationalism. They may be described as challenger parties that partially use populist techniques (De Vries and Hobolt 2020). In any case, they are not contesting the liberal script externally.

Against this background, I consider the current American malaise as the result of a strong authoritarian populist movement that contests some of the core principles of the liberal script. While the Republican party, under the influence of Trump, joins the long list of successful authoritarian parties, the situation in the US is particularly consequential. The Trump movement has captured the Republican party and has received at least 44.6 percent of the popular vote in each presidential and congressional election since then. This is more than in other established democracies—with

Italy as an exception. Moreover, the Trump movement appears exceptionally radical, as demonstrated by the attack on the Capitol on January 6 and its repetitive reference to conspiracy theories, including a permanent attack on conventional truths (Anderson 2017). Moreover, there seems to be no other consolidated democracy whose affective polarization is as strongly developed as the one in the US (Iyengar et al. 2018). Affective polarization refers to “the extent to which partisans view each other as disliked out-group” (Iyengar et al. 2012, 406). The fast-growing research on polarization still contains conceptual ambiguities but has clearly started in the US and in contexts beyond the US is still in its infancy (Roellicke 2023 for an overview of 70 leading articles in the field). This reflects the relative prevalence of polarization in the US compared to other consolidated democracies (see also Mau et al. 2023). Overall, authoritarian populism is exceptionally strong and effective in the US. In this context, the power of authoritarian populism in the US is more comparable to countries like Turkey and Poland than to Scandinavian or Western European countries. This most recent American exceptionalism can be explained using the exceptionalism of the American version of the liberal script.

The Liberal Script: Tensions and Varieties

In our understanding, the liberal script, like any societal script, consists of statements on how to organize society (see Börzel and Zürn 2020; Börzel et al., this volume) and a grammar that connects these statements (Freeden 2013). To unfold the argument that the specific (exceptional) American take on the liberal script explains the extraordinary strength of authoritarian populism in the contemporary US requires a somewhat more detailed description of the liberal script.

The grammar of the liberal script can be described by distinguishing first-layer and second-layer principles (see Zürn and Gerschewski 2021 for the following). First-layer principles serve as desirable regulative ideas and justificatory reference points for additional aspects of the liberal script. The reference to individual rights in the Declaration of Independence is a prime example: “We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness.” Because “these Truths” are “self-evident,” there seems to be no need for further justification; they are fundamental to the liberal script (Freeden 1996; Wall 2015). Liberty refers not only to private freedom but to authoritative limitations to liberty to protect the liberty of other individuals who are of equal moral worth (Williams 2005, 83). This authoritative source, in turn, needs to be legitimized by the consent of the individuals.

Second-layer components are strongly associated with the liberal script but often justified with reference to first-order principles. One may order the second-layer principles along political, economic, and societal principles. In political terms, the rule of law and collective self-determination are second-layer features, as illustrated by liberalism’s turn against arbitrary power exercised by monarchs or entities like the

church (Fawcett 2018; Rosenblatt 2018). In economic terms, the second-layer components of the liberal script are principles of property rights, market exchange, and a broad notion of a principle of merit. These components also resonate with the rich tradition of classic economic liberalism.

In the societal sphere, the diversity of lifestyles is a crucial second-layer component. Indeed, during the twentieth century, “alternative categories based on gender, ethnicity, religion, and sexual orientation slowly worked their way into mainstream liberal consciousness” (Freeden 2015, 50). In this context, Omar Ali’s (this volume) history of the black movement struggling against exclusion is a prime example. In the cross-cutting sphere, progress and the growing control of nature through human reasoning coexist with an epistemology that emphasizes the permanent need to question existing insights and ask for rational procedures to produce knowledge (Popper 2013). On the one hand, this epistemology involves an element of humility and thus acknowledges the limits of rationality and planning. On the other hand, the major promise of liberalism is long-term progress based on knowledge advancement.

All of the components of the liberal script are related to one other. Some of them reinforce each other, others stand in tension with each other. Contestations of and struggles about the meaning of existing concepts are integral to the liberal script and an open society. Tensions describe a relationship between two or more items that do not stand in a zero-sum relationship with each other. Tensions need to be balanced—otherwise, the common band tears. Any completely one-sided stance on the liberal tensions moves out of the liberal space. For instance, a society that does not regulate the individual with collective rules at all cannot be liberal since it will suppress the rights of the weak. Likewise, an unlimited and unrestricted collective agent that completely dominates the individual cannot be liberal.

Four tensions within the liberal script are especially important (see Börzel et al., this volume; Zürn and Gerschewski 2021). Each of these can be loosely associated with one of the above-mentioned spheres. We will see that the American version of the liberal script is distinct on each of these counts, making it together somehow exceptional.

(1) *Rights versus Majority*: In current varieties of the liberal script, the notion of collective self-determination is closely associated with the democratic principle. Democratic practices are conceived as participatory and egalitarian. However, giving a voice to all does not ensure that it is a liberal voice. A majority of those with civil and political rights may favor policies that work against these rights of the minority. In democratic theory, checks and balances and the independent role of nonmajoritarian institutions solve this problem. Checks and balances shall prevent one power within a political system from going astray. Nonmajoritarian institutions can be defined as entities that exercise some level of specialized public authority separate from other institutions and are neither directly elected by the people nor directly managed by elected officials (see also Thatcher and Stone Sweet 2002, 2). These principles are expected to protect the democratic process and the civil, political, and social rights of institutions by trumping majority institutions.

Historically, American self-perception centered on the majority. The subject dominated debates between British and American intellectuals during the American Revolution. While the Americans pointed to the will of the people, the British side emphasized the rule of law and individual rights. These majoritarian inclinations have been translated into some direct-democratic procedures on the local level and are most visible in the institution of the primaries. In this context, majorities do not only elect candidates but also select them.

In the course of time, the US has, however, vigorously protected individual rights over the democratic process. The Madison and Hamilton element of the American constitution has increasingly beaten the Jeffersonian and Jacksonian traditions (for this terminology, see Anderson and Garrison, this volume). The separation of powers is the prevalent feature of US politics. The president has to work together with Congress, while congressional decisions rarely translate the majority's will into law. Instead, the outcome can be understood only as the result of a complex and unforeseeable negotiation process between all parties, often leading to "gridlock and dysfunctional governance" (Garner, this volume, 78). Moreover, the role of courts, especially the Supreme Court, is significant. Robert Benson has pointed to the importance of active courts in the history of civil rights in the US (Benson, this volume). Overall, democracy at the central level in the US involves different actors with veto opportunities (Tsebelis 1995). This creates difficulties for the majority to see how their preferences translate into policies.

(2) *Markets versus Solidarity*: Property rights and market competition are integral to the liberal script. In some understandings, liberalism cannot even be separated from capitalism (see Kocka 2013 for discussion). In this view, a private economy based on capital entitlements and free exchange is necessary for freedom and the cause of dynamic innovations and wealth in liberal societies (Schumpeter 2005; Weber 1956). At the same time, such an economy produces inequalities that may surpass any reasonable notion of merit. Moreover, high levels of sustained inequality undermine the equality of opportunities in the economic realm. Economic wealth can be translated into undue cultural and political influence (Dahl 1989). In short, a market economy may violate social rights.

There is much variation in how the tension between markets and solidarity is handled. For instance, based on Hall and Soskice's framework (2001), scholars have distinguished different varieties of capitalism, including coordinated, liberal, dependent, and hierarchical forms of market economies. Similarly, Esping-Andersen (1990, 1999) has distinguished different types of welfare regimes. Scandinavian welfare states focus much more on state regulation of the market. High taxes finance a strong welfare state that supports people of temporary or permanent need. Moreover, strong regulation is supposed to control big companies aiming to avoid any radically skewed market outcomes. Many economists criticize strong welfare states for undermining performance, innovation, and growth.

The American creed takes a clear position on this tension. It emphasizes property rights as a fundamental right of individuals, and it is traditionally characterized by a strong belief in markets, high trust in business, and internalization of the merit

principle. The market is the default solution, and state interventions in markets are regarded with skepticism. Compared to most other consolidated democracies, the share of the gross domestic product distributed via the state is small despite the vast military expenditures. Likewise, the social security level is low, especially compared to Scandinavian welfare states. Müller (this volume, 31) shows that even the press and media “privileges the quest for private profit” and created a “highly commercialized ‘free market place in ideas’” with little role for the state or other public institutions. Since none of the other chapters in this volume talks about the political economy of the US, I take this as an indicator of how uncontested the American interpretation of the liberal economic sphere is. The distinct American emphasis on the economic sphere even impacted the perception of the liberal script in general. The “Americanization” (Rosenblatt 2018, 245–264) of the liberal idea in the mid-twentieth century made economic aspects loom large when assessing today’s liberal script. As a result, today’s liberalism is often reduced to economic ideas of neoliberalism.

(3) *Competing Interests versus Common Good*: A somewhat less obvious tension within the liberal script concerns the self-understanding of the society the script addresses. It emerges in the societal realm but also has political consequences. While the liberal script foresees autonomous individuals with the capacity to develop their own will and preferences, it distinguishes between private and collective goods. This tension leads to different understandings of the public realm. In one extreme variety, the public is the arena where competing interests come together to bargain. In this view, politics comes close to a market of predetermined interests. The outcome of this game is a more or less fair aggregation of private interests. Theories of pluralism (including asymmetric pluralism) conceive the political realm in this way (Laski 1930; Schumpeter 2005). In another variety, the public is where the collective strives for the common good. Individuals are embedded in communal norms and participate in arguing and deliberation, in theory, leading to an outcome that transforms prior interests. Different varieties of the liberal script balance this tension in different ways. While republican orientations emphasize the common good and the collective will, pluralist versions emphasize the free interplay of interests.

Again, the American take on this tension of the liberal script is indeed special. While Jefferson strived for a well-informed public early on, the public sphere remained far from the ideal of a deliberative public (Müller, this volume). American politics on the central level is very much seen as interest-based, especially when it comes to the coordination of different local interests in federal decision-making. In this context, political observers in Washington introduced the notion of pork-barrel politics, i.e., the legislator’s practice of slipping funding for a local project into a budget. Conversely, community and solidarity prevail at the local level. Pally (this volume, 117) convincingly describes how evangelicals are embedded in the communitarian traditions on the local level: “White evangelicals, as Americans, are informed not only by evangelical history but by the historico-cultural resources undergirding *American* notions of society and government, importantly, suspicion of ‘outsiders’ and government/elites.” Puhle (this volume) shows how the populist appeal was

always stronger in rural areas due to its communitarian rhetoric. This is true for the progressive grassroots movement in the nineteenth century as well as the Trump movement. The American version of the liberal script deals with this tension by separating the “nasty” and interest-based center from the communal attitudes on the local level. At the same time, individual and local views are sacred.

(4) *Cosmopolitanism versus Bounded Community*: The fourth manifestation of in-built tensions of the liberal script concerns border struggles (de Wilde et al. 2019). A long-standing debate within liberal political philosophy has pitted those emphasizing universal responsibility to humanity (Caney 2005; Pogge 1992; Singer 2002) against those emphasizing that there are “limits to justice” (Sandel 1998) in geographical, institutional, or cultural terms (see also Nagel 2005; Walzer 1994). On the one hand, cosmopolitanism is the necessary implication of liberal and universal thinking in a globalized world (Beitz 1979; Goodin 2010; Pogge 1989). In this view, the growing density of transactions across borders leads to a global community of fate (Held 1995), suggesting similar moral obligations to all people independent of national borders. On the other hand, scholars have pointed to the normative dignity of smaller human communities (Miller 1995) and the decisive institutional context of the state (Nagel 2005). In this view, the proper development of the community may even trump an absolutist version of individual rights. These positions can be subsumed under the notion of communitarianism.

Again, different versions of the liberal script take different positions on this tension. Great Britain had a strong universal rhetoric during its empire’s peak. Similarly, the EU rejects overly nationalist interpretations of the liberal script. Historically, though, liberalism is closely connected with nationalism. Liberals fought for the nation-state, and nationalism, in turn, had a liberal imprint for some time in the first part of the nineteenth century before it became more chauvinist in the second part of the century.

Comparatively speaking, despite a strong liberal nationalism, the American stance leaned toward the cosmopolitan pole for most of the twentieth century. While the struggle for independence aspired towards collective self-determination and the rejection of foreign power, the community that aimed for collective self-determination was already multicultural. Moreover, the settler society was open to welcoming new waves of migrants. This does not deny the prevalent racism and the oppression of the indigenous people. The openness referred mainly to white Europeans but always implied recognition of concern for people living outside of the country. Regarding foreign policy, the US aimed to stay out of European nationalist power struggles. Still, it extended the territory and its influence southwards across the continent, making the national community even more multicultural. Toro and Covarrubias (this volume) argue that the openness for Latin Americans lasted until the 1980s. While isolationism remained strong after World War I, things changed fundamentally with World War II, after which the US emerged as a global hegemon. As Anderson and Garrison (this volume) show, US foreign policy became fully internationalized with strong bipartisan support. Accordingly, “[a] solid majority of Americans have supported an internationalist stance” (Anderson and Garrison,

this volume, 212). As a result, America's global mission became a "creed rooted in common terms of reference, symbols, and ideologies" (Anderson and Garrison, this volume, 216). Thus, the US has been and continues to be the backbone of the LIO—the "indispensable nation," as Madeleine Albright described it in 1988 (Börzel and Risse, this volume). Lora Viola (this volume) demonstrates how often the US violated liberal principles in its foreign policy without questioning its internationalist stance.

In sum, a version of the liberal script prevailed in the US that is highly individualist in the political realm, protecting the rights of its members. Likewise, individualism and liberty shape the economic realm. Compared to all other consolidated democracies, markets and merit play a much more uncontested role in the American creed. These views translate into a view of politics as the place for exchanging threats and promises based on fixed interests. On the local level, this is countered by a strong communitarian inclination. Finally, the US stood for an open and cosmopolitan version of liberalism for a long time. This combination proved to be a success story in the twentieth century. The US was the most powerful, prosperous, dynamic, and attractive country in the world—and in this respect undoubtedly exceptional. Today, things look somewhat differently: A strong and effective authoritarian populist movement, a deep polarization in politics and society, growing isolationism, and some decline in wealth and power are signs of change. In the following pages, I argue that the current problems result from the American interpretation of the liberal script, as outlined in this section.

Why Is the American Liberal Script Conducive to Authoritarian Populism?

The Trump movement and, by now, large parts of the Republican party, display all four features identified in section one as constitutive for authoritarian populism. It is *nationalist* by challenging US-internationalism and putting "America first" (Börzel and Risse, this volume). It is an *anti-pluralist* nationalism that builds on the ideal of a homogenous popular will located in the American homeland. Liberal cities are considered to be under the control of liberal cosmopolitans, and migrants are seen as a threat (see Ali as well as Toro and Covarrubias, this volume). The popular will of the brave American people is given, well known by the genius of Donald Trump, and needs to be implemented without further ado. This *decisionism* is illustrated, e.g., in the chapter by Parolin (this volume) about *Julius Caesar* in Central Park. Finally, minority and individual rights cannot limit the majority's will. This *majoritarianism* is highlighted in the chapter by Benson (this volume). It is, therefore, necessary to control the courts and, not least, to disavow the liberal media (Müller, this volume).

The strength and effectiveness of authoritarian populism are exceptionally high in the US compared to other consolidated liberal democracies. Both the Republican Party dominated by authoritarian populists and the presidential candidate received votes in the previous three congressional elections and the last two presidential

elections that more often than not led to a majority of votes in the Congress or the Electoral College. Within Western Europe, only Italy comes close to such results. Garner (this volume) shows how deeply American society is polarized along partisan lines and how this polarization plays out in the political system. Most scholars see pernicious polarization—an extreme form of affective polarization—mainly taking place in the US (McCoy and Somer 2021). None of the Western European liberal democracies shows similarly strong signs of polarization. Pally (this volume) captures the specific role and meaning of evangelicals in this authoritarian movement. This religious component is missing in most authoritarian populist parties in Western Europe. Müller (this volume) describes the destruction of the public sphere(s) in the US. As a result, the decay of truth orientation in political battles has moved further in the US than in other consolidated democracies. Even Puhle (this volume, 60), who puts forward a broad understanding of populism acknowledges: “All this reached a new quality when, during the attack on the Capitol in January 2021, even violent transgressions were encouraged, justified, and condoned.”

Garner (this volume, 71) shows the enormous level of polarization in the US and puts forward an explanation. In his view, a vicious cycle of societal and political polarization “has warped the US political system away from the Founding Fathers’ original vision.” Building on the work of Sean Theriault (2008), he identifies four factors that help to explain the ideological polarization in the US: (1) societal restructuring, (2) congressional redistricting, (3) primary nominations, and (4) procedural changes. “What has emerged, put simply, is an electoral and political incentive for members to constantly attack the other side and oppose everything the other party promotes, both inside the Congress as well as on the campaign trail” (Garner, this volume, 77). This is a strong and convincing account.

Two qualifications are necessary for my argument in this conclusion. Garner (this volume, 83) writes in the concluding section: “Put simply, at this moment in time, America has a party system where one party mostly operates within the liberal script while the other is increasingly turning to serious and dangerous external contestations of that liberal script.” For this reason, I consider polarization largely a result of the rise of the authoritarian populists that contest the liberal script. The “pernicious polarization” certainly has accentuated this process (vicious cycle) but did not produce the authoritarian populists. I am, therefore, mainly interested in the rise of authoritarian populism in the first place.

How, then, can we explain the rise of authoritarian populism? As Garner (this volume) demonstrates, features of the political system of the US play a role. A political process that includes primaries allows for heavy gerrymandering, and the manipulation of procedures provides good reasons for the success of authoritarian populists when they enter the game. However, most of these supply-side explanations have some problems understanding why authoritarian populists have grown in importance in almost all countries with an electoral system despite all the differences in specific rules (see also de Vries and Hobolt 2020). Therefore, it is necessary to start with societal changes that lead to the demand for authoritarian populists and add supply-side explanations in a second step.

In the remainder, I focus on three demand-side theories for the rise of authoritarian populism and show that they all point to explanatory variables for which the American version of the liberal script has produced comparatively high values. Stated differently, the American version of the liberal script accentuates the determinants of authoritarian populists more than other versions of the liberal script. To put it simply, American exceptionalism (defined as the American take on the four major tensions of the liberal script) explains the exceptional strength of authoritarian populism in the US.

We can distinguish three accounts of authoritarian populism that can complement each other because each points to conditions conducive to the rise of authoritarian populist movements. First, the economic insecurity perspective emphasizes the distributive consequences of economic globalization and postindustrial transformation. Growing inequality, the rise of precarious working situations, and a gap between labor productivity and the real wage index in advanced economies led to the growth of authoritarian populism (Flaherty and Rogowski 2021; Hobolt 2016; Manow 2018; Przeworski 2019). The economic explanation also points to the new grievance between thriving cities and declining regions (Broz et al. 2021). Second, the cultural backlash perspective suggests that authoritarian populism results from a reaction against the postmaterial value change. Authoritarian populism then responds to multicultural practices, the growing importance of antidiscrimination movements, and minority identity politics (Fukuyama 2018; Hochschild 2016). At its core is the struggle of the prosperous white male to keep his privileges (Lipset and Raab 1970).

Third, it is necessary to complement the existing accounts of authoritarian populism with a political explanation that points to the path-dependent effects of certain institutional decisions taken at historical junctures after World War II (Zürn 2022). Accordingly, the cartelization of party politics that started after World War II (Benedetto et al. 2020; Dahl 1965; Kriesi 2014; Mair 2013) has led to a decline of trust in parties and democracies since the 1960s. The subsequent rise of nonmajoritarian institutions at the national and international level from the early 1980s has locked in policies that align with liberal cosmopolitan thinking. Together, these two developments have decreased the responsiveness of political institutions and the perception that they are out of reach for the silent majority (Schäfer and Zürn 2021). This perception is decisive for the rise of authoritarian populism. It is not the unfavorable policies that cause dissatisfaction but the feeling that these policies cannot be changed within the “old system.” In the words of Nadia Urbinati, the confidence that “no majority is the last one” (2019, 91) gets lost.

The American interpretation of the liberal has created a constellation in which all these determinants for the rise of authoritarian populism are especially accentuated. The emphasis on rights has, in line with the political explanation of authoritarian populism, led to a political system with vigorous checks and balances, many strong nonmajoritarian institutions (regulatory agencies, Supreme Court, Central Bank), and a political pork barrel in Washington that Robert Dahl described—already in the 1960s—as

politics of compromise, adjustment, negotiation, bargaining; a politics carried on among professional and quasi-professional leaders who constitute only a small part of the total citizen body; a politics that reflects a commitment to the virtues of pragmatism, moderation, and incremental change; a politics that is un-ideological and even anti-ideological . . . [Many citizens see this form of politics] as too remote and bureaucratized, too addicted to bargaining and compromise, [and] too much an instrument of political elites and technicians. (Dahl 1965, 21–22)

This kind of political system is conducive to the rise of authoritarian populists, as argued in the political explanation. It fosters a form of politics perceived as distant, autopoeitic, and nonresponsive to the people's demands in the homeland. Today, many populist parties pit the imagined will of the (silent) majority against the supposed technocratic rule of liberal experts and employ all the nasty techniques identified in the chapter by Garner (this volume).

The individualist stance and the strong market orientation of the American interpretation of the liberal script also reinforce economic factors conducive to authoritarian populism. The absence of a welfare state is one of the reasons why inequality in the US is higher than in most other consolidated democracies. In 2019, the GINI index value of the US was 0.49—higher than in all consolidated liberal democracies of Western Europe. The absence of an active state has also led to an enormous gap between world-leading growth centers, especially in California and Massachusetts, and regions of industrial decline and rural zones with a growing sense of distance to the centers. While Hillary Clinton received more than 80 percent of the votes in all ten largest US cities, Donald Trump dominated in rural areas (see also Pally, this volume). This development is reflected in a significant transformation of the electorate of the two parties in the US. Until the 1990s, more wealthy people voted for the Republicans. This has changed with the importance of the cleavage between rural communitarians and urban cosmopolitans. The voting counties of Joe Biden equaled 70 percent of America's economy, jumping from 64 percent for Hillary Clinton in 2016 (Muro et al. 2021).

There is one more mechanism of US market creed that fosters the rise of authoritarian populists. The quality media, which is crucial in orchestrating public debates, was challenged by private media companies much earlier in the US than elsewhere. In general, the US media have always been private and largely followed economic incentives. In addition, the unequal economic dynamics of sparsely controlled markets have given the US an enormous advantage in digitalization compared to other consolidated democracies and allowed for the rise of digital giants. As a result of these and related developments, the liberal public sphere has been weakened. While Müller (this volume, 37) maintains that “the emergence of the self-enclosed right-wing eco-sphere *predates* the internet,” the destruction of the public sphere has enhanced the rise of authoritarian populists via vicious circles.

The American version of the liberal script deals with the tension regarding the self-understanding of the society in an extraordinary way, leading us to aspects emphasized by the cultural explanation of authoritarian populism. Whereas politics

on the central level is widely seen as interest-based, community and solidarity prevail on the local level. This level-specific assignment may have worked for a long time, but due to the growing rural–urban divide, it reinforces the perceived division between the homeland-communitarians and urban cosmopolitan forces. Pally (this volume) convincingly describes how evangelicals are embedded in the communitarian traditions on the local level, leading to overwhelming support for Trump among these communities: 86 percent, with a steep growth since 1996. Likewise, Puhle (this volume) demonstrates how the populists, who always had a strong base outside the cities, became more authoritarian and radical in recent years.

Finally, the solid multicultural and internationalist imprint of the American liberal script also works in favor of the anti-pluralism and nationalism of authoritarian populists. According to the cultural explanation, the backlash can be expected to be especially strong in the US. The historical openness of a settler society has led to a multicultural society. Strong antidiscrimination movements like Black Lives Matter (Ali, this volume) and unclosed borders (Toro and Covarrubias, this volume) to the South are necessary components of such a society. However, the moment when the white population with Anglo-Saxon, Scandinavian, and German origins is about to become a minority, authoritarian-populist backlash can be expected (Norris and Inglehart 2019).

Internationalist policies with cosmopolitan rhetoric also strengthen authoritarian populists. These policies feed the narrative that homeland people are exploited by cosmopolitan liberals who instrumentalize international institutions for their purpose, transfer American money to all parts of the world, and undermine American strength. While this narrative does not pass a reality check (Viola, this volume), it is successful in a globalized world where decisions can hardly be traced back to one (institutional) agent. Internationalism has led to a world of complex, multilevel politics. This has strengthened the forces in the US that challenge and contest the internationalist foreign policy of the US (Börzel and Risse, this volume).

Overall, the features of the American version of the liberal script, with its take on the four built-in tensions, have created an economic, cultural, and political environment that is highly conducive to the rise of authoritarianism. For this reason, the relative strength and effectiveness of the Trump movement in the US are not surprising. As this section demonstrated, it can be explained by applying the existing economic, cultural, and political explanations of authoritarian populism.

Conclusion

The liberal script is heavily contested in the US. Forces inside the country have put forward an external contestation of the liberal script. Those who had doubts know better since January 2021. The American malaise stems from the rise of a radical and powerful authoritarian populist movement that contests some of the core principles of liberalism. While successful authoritarian populist parties exist outside of the US as well, the situation in the country is special. The Trump movement has support

from almost half of the electorate, which is exceptional for a consolidated liberal democracy. Likewise, the significant polarization of American society and politics is unique.

How can we understand the strength of the contestation in the US? Based on the chapters in this volume, an endogenous explanation seems plausible: *American exceptionalism breeds the exceptional strength and form of authoritarian populism in the US today*. To make this catchy line convincing, the language of exceptionalism has been grounded. Accordingly, exceptionalism refers to a specific American version of the liberal script based on how it deals with the tensions built into it. The four features of American society that derive from the liberal tensions are decisive: the strong belief in markets and the merit principle; a political system full of checks and balances; a multicultural or cosmopolitan inclination; and a strong community spirit on the local level. I argue that these features have produced the economic, cultural, and political conditions under which authoritarian populism blossoms exceptionally well.

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