

## Werner Bonefeld\* 's Critique of Ordoliberalism and Authoritarian Liberalism\*\*

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## Abstract

This paper examines Werner Bonefeld's critique of Ordoliberalism, focusing on the tensions between its advocacy for economic freedom and its dependence on authoritarian state mechanisms. Bonefeld argues that Ordoliberalism, a form of neoliberal governance originating in Germany, promotes a governance model that prioritizes market stability over democratic agency. By examining Ordoliberalism through the lens of "authoritarian liberalism," this paper analyses how the Ordoliberal state justifies repressive measures to enforce economic order. This critique gains relevance in contemporary contexts, such as European austerity policies, where Ordoliberal principles often lead to restrictions on political freedoms. Through a discussion of Bonefeld's arguments and the broader implications of authoritarian liberalism in neoliberal governance, the paper illuminates fundamental contradictions within Ordoliberalism and explores their impact on political economy today.

**Keywords:** Ordoliberalism, Authoritarian Liberalism,  
Neoliberal Governance, Werner Bonefeld, Political Economy

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formally unveiled in 2025, representing a noteworthy advancement in the effort to render Bonefeld's critical perspectives comprehensible to a wider audience within Thailand. Contact: watcharabonb@nu.ac.th

## I. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to examine Werner Bonefeld's critique of Ordoliberalism<sup>1</sup>, specifically his argument that the economic

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<sup>1</sup> Ordoliberalism's significance lies in its intricate balance between market freedom and state intervention, making it a critical lens for analyzing contemporary political economy. Originating from the Freiburg School in Germany, Ordoliberalism advocates for a "strong state" to construct and maintain a competitive market framework, ensuring economic order while mitigating monopolistic practices. This approach offers valuable insights into global economic governance, particularly in contexts where state mechanisms are deployed to stabilize markets amidst crises, such as the European debt crisis and its associated austerity policies. The dual focus on market efficiency and authoritarian state practices, as highlighted in Werner Bonefeld's critique, resonates with ongoing tensions between neoliberal economic frameworks and democratic governance.

In the Thai context, the relevance of Ordoliberalism is underscored by the nation's struggle to balance economic modernization with social equity. Thailand's political economy, characterized by centralized state control and developmentalism, can benefit from the Ordoliberal critique of how states enforce economic stability at the expense of political agency. For instance, Thailand's response to economic crises often involves state-led stabilization measures that echo Ordoliberal principles, such as regulatory frameworks to safeguard market competition while sidelining democratic deliberation. Despite its

philosophy's reliance on authoritarian measures is an inherent contradiction within its liberal ideals. Bonefeld argues that Ordoliberalism, a German-originated neoliberal governance model, promotes a restrictive state apparatus enforcing market principles, often at the cost of democratic freedoms. (Bonefeld, 2017). This analysis will highlight how Bonefeld interprets Ordoliberalism as a case of "authoritarian liberalism," where the state's role in preserving market stability overrides its commitment to democratic principles and individual freedoms.

Ordoliberalism was developed as a response to the socio-economic crises of the early 20th century and the perceived failures of laissez-faire capitalism. Key theorists, including Walter Eucken and Franz Böhm, advocated for a "strong state" to safeguard economic competition and prevent monopolistic practices, which they saw as threats to individual freedom (Bonefeld, 2012). Unlike classical liberalism, which emphasizes minimal state intervention, Ordoliberalism holds that

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limited scholarly engagement in Thailand, Ordoliberalism offers a theoretical foundation for examining the country's economic governance, particularly in areas such as competition policy, fiscal discipline, and the interplay between market forces and authoritarian tendencies. Engaging with Ordoliberalism could enrich Thai political economy studies, fostering a deeper understanding of how global neoliberal paradigms interact with local governance structures.

the state must actively maintain an orderly market structure. This model underpinned Germany's post-World War II social market economy, designed to balance economic freedom with social stability (Foucault, 2008).

However, Bonefeld argues that Ordoliberalism's reliance on state intervention to enforce market conditions reveals a fundamental paradox. According to him, the Ordoliberal state not only regulates the economy but also imposes constraints on social and political life, leading to authoritarian policies under the guise of maintaining order (Bonefeld, 2019). He suggests that Ordoliberalism's commitment to economic freedom ultimately necessitates repressive state practices, as the state acts to mitigate the social disruptions caused by market forces. In this sense, Bonefeld sees Ordoliberalism as a model of "authoritarian liberalism," wherein the priority given to economic stability comes at the expense of democratic agency (Bonefeld, 2017; Bonefeld, 2019).

This paper will explore Bonefeld's critique in light of contemporary governance issues, particularly the increasing prevalence of austerity policies within the European Union, which are often justified as necessary to sustain economic order (Müller, 2014). By assessing the authoritarian tendencies within Ordoliberalism, as interpreted by Bonefeld, this paper aims to shed light on broader questions about the compatibility of neoliberal economic governance with democratic values

(Dardot & Laval, 2014). The relevance of Bonefeld's critique is underscored by ongoing debates on the role of the state in regulating market economies, especially amid recent global shifts toward more authoritarian governance models.

## **II. Literature Review**

### **Overview of Ordoliberalism**

Ordoliberalism emerged as a distinct economic and political philosophy in Germany during the interwar period, primarily through the work of economists and legal scholars associated with the Freiburg School, including Walter Eucken and Franz Böhm. Eucken argued that an economic system based purely on laissez-faire principles leads to monopolistic behaviors, which ultimately undermines both market and individual freedoms. Instead, Ordoliberal thinkers proposed that the state should actively create and uphold a regulatory framework to preserve competition and ensure market order. This concept of a “strong state” aligned with their view that a purely self-regulating market is neither feasible nor conducive to societal stability (Bonefeld, 2012; Ptak, 2009).

The Ordoliberal approach strongly influenced Germany's post-World War II social market economy, which sought to combine economic freedom with social welfare. This model, grounded in Ordoliberal principles, aimed to foster a competitive economy while maintaining a

strong regulatory role for the state, ensuring that social welfare provisions and protections against economic monopolies remained intact (Foucault, 2008). Foucault (2008) notes that Ordoliberalism's emphasis on creating a framework within which competition could thrive reflects a fundamental shift in the liberal paradigm, prioritizing regulation as a necessary support for free market mechanisms. This regulatory approach differentiated Ordoliberalism from other forms of neoliberalism, such as those prevalent in the Anglo-American context, which placed a stronger emphasis on market deregulation and minimal state intervention (Görge, 2020).

### **Authoritarian Liberalism**

The concept of authoritarian liberalism, first coined by political theorist Carl Schmitt, addresses the paradoxical combination of authoritarian governance and liberal economic principles. Schmitt argued that the liberal state, in its efforts to preserve market freedom, often resorts to coercive measures that undermine democratic freedoms and reinforce authoritarian governance (Schmitt, 1932/1996). This form of governance relies on the state's authority to impose economic discipline, which, in Schmitt's view, is necessary to manage the social instability that unregulated markets can produce. Schmitt's work has since informed critiques of neoliberal governance, especially where liberal

economic policies are enforced through undemocratic means (Biebricher, 2019).

In modern political economy, authoritarian liberalism is increasingly linked to the austerity policies enforced by the European Union, especially as a reaction to economic crises. Müller (2014) argues that the EU's austerity policies reflect authoritarian tendencies within liberal frameworks, where economic imperatives override democratic choice. These measures are often justified as necessary to protect market stability, even as they impose significant social costs and erode democratic agency. Scholars such as Dardot and Laval (2014) have expanded on this theme, arguing that neoliberalism's emphasis on market freedom inherently fosters authoritarian practices by limiting the space for political contestation and restricting social autonomy.

### **Werner Bonefeld's Position**

Werner Bonefeld's critique of Ordoliberalism builds on Schmitt's concept of authoritarian liberalism but extends it by exploring the contradictions within neoliberal thought itself. Bonefeld (2017) argues that Ordoliberalism's commitment to market freedom paradoxically requires authoritarian control to manage the disruptive social effects of capitalism. According to Bonefeld, Ordoliberalism is not merely a form of economic governance but a political project aimed at enforcing a specific



socio-economic order. This order, he contends, requires the state to regulate both economic and social life, creating a governance model where the preservation of market structures necessitates coercive state practices (Bonefeld, 2019).

Bonefeld's analysis highlights the tension within Ordoliberalism between its liberal ideals and its authoritarian tendencies. He argues that Ordoliberalism's focus on maintaining market stability ultimately prioritizes economic imperatives over democratic values, thereby institutionalizing a form of governance that limits political freedoms in favour of economic order. This, according to Bonefeld (2019), reveals a fundamental contradiction within Ordoliberalism: its commitment to market freedom demands that the state assume an authoritarian role, creating a model of governance that is inherently repressive. Bonefeld's critique thus situates Ordoliberalism within the broader framework of neoliberalism, where the state's regulatory power is directed not toward expanding democratic choice but rather toward sustaining the market as a socio-political ideal (Bonefeld, 2017).

In summary, Bonefeld's critique of Ordoliberalism draws attention to the authoritarian dimensions embedded within its liberal economic framework. By examining the underlying tensions between economic freedom and authoritarian governance in Ordoliberal thought,

this paper aims to illuminate the broader implications of Bonefeld's analysis for contemporary political economy.

### III. Theoretical Framework

#### Ordoliberalism as a Governance Model

The Freiburg School's Ordoliberalism presents a distinct approach to the state-market relationship. Central to this theory is the belief that a competitive market economy does not emerge naturally but must be constructed and maintained through deliberate state intervention (Vanberg, 2005). Eucken's *Principles of Economic Policy* highlights that while markets should operate freely, the state must establish the legal and regulatory framework that ensures competition. Ordoliberals argue that without a "strong state" actively preventing monopolistic practices and economic concentration, individual freedom within the market is compromised (Ptak, 2009).

Unlike other neoliberal ideologies that champion minimal state intervention, Ordoliberalism advocates for a robust state that actively shapes and regulates the market environment. This framework has been widely influential, particularly in the German social market economy, where the state's regulatory role is seen as necessary to protect both economic stability and social welfare (Foucault, 2008). Foucault (2008) describes Ordoliberalism as a form of "regulated liberalism," in which

freedom in the economic domain is enabled and safeguarded by the authority of the state. However, as Bonefeld (2017) critiques, this model inherently prioritizes economic order over political agency, setting the stage for authoritarian interventions in the name of market stability.

### **Authoritarian Liberalism**

The concept of authoritarian liberalism, originating with Carl Schmitt, offers a useful theoretical lens for analysing Ordoliberalism's authoritarian tendencies. Schmitt (1932/1996) argued that liberal democratic systems, in seeking to preserve market order, often resort to coercive state measures that curtail democratic freedoms. Authoritarian liberalism thus encapsulates the idea that a state can simultaneously endorse liberal economic policies and adopt repressive political practices. For Schmitt, this dynamic is not merely an inconsistency within liberal ideology but an inherent contradiction: the liberal state's commitment to economic freedom necessitates authoritarian practices to suppress the social disruptions that capitalist markets may produce (Schmitt, 1996).

Authoritarian liberalism provides a theoretical foundation for examining neoliberal policies that prioritize economic imperatives over democratic processes, such as the austerity measures imposed in response to the European debt crisis (Müller, 2014). Scholars like Müller

argue that these policies reflect an authoritarian turn within liberal governance, wherein the state limits democratic engagement to maintain market discipline (Dardot & Laval, 2014). Within this framework, liberal economic governance is revealed to be a project that, when threatened, will curtail democratic rights in favour of market stability.

### **Bonefeld's Critique of Ordoliberalism**

Werner Bonefeld's critique builds upon and extends the concept of authoritarian liberalism, applying it to Ordoliberalism specifically. Bonefeld argues that the commitment to economic freedom within Ordoliberalism paradoxically requires state-imposed constraints on social and political life, thus instituting a form of governance that is both liberal in its economic outlook and authoritarian in its methods (Bonefeld, 2017). According to Bonefeld, the Ordoliberal "strong state" is not merely a regulator but a coercive force that enforces market stability by intervening in social dynamics whenever they threaten economic order.

Bonefeld (2019) further suggests that Ordoliberalism's authoritarian elements are not deviations from its liberal ideals but are embedded within its commitment to a stable market order. He argues that Ordoliberalism reveals an inherent tension within neoliberalism: the liberal state's role in upholding economic freedom necessitates

controlling social forces that could disrupt the market. This control extends beyond economic regulation, encompassing restrictions on democratic processes and political freedoms to prioritize economic stability. In this view, Bonefeld positions Ordoliberalism as a political project aimed at maintaining a socio-economic order favourable to capital, even at the cost of individual liberties and democratic practices.

This theoretical framework provides the foundation for analysing Bonefeld's critique within the context of authoritarian liberalism. By examining the intersections between economic freedom and authoritarian governance, this paper explores how Bonefeld's insights reveal fundamental contradictions within Ordoliberalism and, more broadly, within neoliberal governance itself. The analysis that follows will focus on specific aspects of Bonefeld's critique, particularly how Ordoliberal policies manifest as authoritarian practices under the guise of economic stability.

#### **IV. Analysis**

##### **Contradictions in Ordoliberal Thought**

Werner Bonefeld's critique centres on the internal contradictions within Ordoliberalism, particularly its simultaneous commitment to economic freedom and authoritarian state control. According to Bonefeld (2017), Ordoliberalism promotes a "strong state" that prioritizes

economic order over political autonomy. While Ordoliberalism purports to uphold individual freedom within the market, Bonefeld argues that its regulatory framework leads to a paradox: maintaining market order often requires suppressing the very freedoms that liberal ideology claims to protect. For instance, state interventions, such as enforcing austerity measures or limiting labour rights, are justified within Ordoliberal thought as necessary for economic stability but come at the cost of democratic choice (Bonefeld, 2019).

This contradiction, according to Bonefeld, is embedded within the Ordoliberal assumption that economic freedom is the highest priority, superseding democratic engagement. In Bonefeld's view, the Ordoliberal state does not merely protect the market from monopolistic practices; it also actively disciplines social forces that could challenge market stability. This perspective aligns with Schmitt's concept of authoritarian liberalism, suggesting that liberal governance frequently depends on authoritarian measures to uphold economic freedom (Schmitt, 1996). Bonefeld extends this idea by arguing that Ordoliberalism, in its commitment to market discipline, institutionalizes authoritarian practices, thereby revealing the inherent tensions between economic freedom and democratic governance (Bonefeld, 2017).

## **Ordoliberalism in Contemporary Policy**

Bonefeld's critique gains further relevance when considering the application of Ordoliberal principles in contemporary economic policies, particularly within the European Union. Scholars like Müller (2014) argue that the EU's response to the European debt crisis exemplifies authoritarian liberalism, where economic imperatives are prioritized over democratic decision-making. The imposition of austerity measures, championed by Ordoliberal-inspired policymakers, illustrates how maintaining economic order often leads to restrictions on political autonomy. Bonefeld (2019) contends that such measures reflect the Ordoliberal state's tendency to override democratic processes to preserve market stability, thus embodying the authoritarian aspects of liberal governance.

One illustrative example of this dynamic is the European Central Bank's (ECB) role in enforcing fiscal discipline within member states. The ECB's interventions, which limit national sovereignty in favour of economic uniformity, reflect Ordoliberal principles of market discipline and economic order. Bonefeld argues that this enforcement of fiscal policies across the EU exemplifies how Ordoliberalism can manifest as a form of "economic authoritarianism," where democratic institutions are constrained by economic imperatives (Bonefeld, 2019; Dardot & Laval, 2014). The prioritization of fiscal austerity and market-oriented policies over social welfare considerations reveals the inherent tension between

economic freedom and democratic choice within Ordoliberal governance.

### **The Role of Authoritarianism in Liberalism**

Bonefeld's analysis highlights how Ordoliberalism's authoritarian tendencies are not merely an aberration but a structural component of its governance model. According to Bonefeld (2017), the Ordoliberal state's emphasis on economic freedom necessitates authoritarian controls to manage the social disruptions that unregulated markets can produce. He suggests that Ordoliberalism's vision of a "free economy" is contingent upon a state apparatus capable of enforcing compliance with market principles, even at the cost of restricting political freedoms.

This reliance on authoritarian measures is, in Bonefeld's view, indicative of a broader tendency within neoliberalism to prioritize economic stability over democratic engagement. By treating economic freedom as the ultimate end, Ordoliberalism undermines the political autonomy that liberal democracy traditionally upholds. Bonefeld (2019) argues that the Ordoliberal state, in its pursuit of market stability, institutionalizes forms of social control that are necessary to suppress opposition to market-oriented policies. This perspective underscores a key insight within Bonefeld's critique: that Ordoliberalism's commitment to economic order inherently conflicts with its liberal ideals, resulting in



a governance model where the state's authority supersedes democratic processes.

In summary, Bonefeld's critique of Ordoliberalism reveals the authoritarian dimensions of its governance model, highlighting how the pursuit of economic freedom paradoxically entails restrictions on political liberties. Through his analysis, Bonefeld challenges the assumption that economic and political freedoms are compatible within neoliberal governance, suggesting instead that liberal economic principles often necessitate authoritarian practices to maintain stability. This contradiction, according to Bonefeld, reflects a fundamental tension within Ordoliberalism that is emblematic of broader issues in neoliberal governance.

## **V. Discussion**

### **Implications for Political Economy**

Werner Bonefeld's critique of Ordoliberalism as a form of authoritarian liberalism offers significant insights into contemporary political economy, particularly regarding the tension between economic freedom and democratic governance. Bonefeld (2017) argues that Ordoliberalism's emphasis on maintaining economic order through state intervention reveals a fundamental contradiction within neoliberal thought. This analysis underscores how the neoliberal commitment to

market stability often requires authoritarian state practices, which challenges traditional liberal assumptions about the compatibility of economic and political freedoms.

Bonefeld's critique has implications for understanding current trends in governance, especially the increasing prevalence of austerity policies and fiscal constraints imposed on democratic states by transnational organizations like the European Union and the International Monetary Fund. His insights suggest that these economic policies, often justified in terms of maintaining market discipline, reflect a broader tendency within neoliberal governance to prioritize economic imperatives over political autonomy (Müller, 2014). By framing economic freedom as the highest priority, neoliberal states limit democratic choice, thereby institutionalizing authoritarian elements within liberal frameworks. This raises critical questions about the sustainability of democratic governance within neoliberal political economy, particularly as economic imperatives continue to override social welfare and public accountability (Dardot & Laval, 2014).

### **Limitations of Bonefeld's Critique**

While Bonefeld's analysis provides a powerful critique of Ordoliberalism's authoritarian tendencies, it has certain limitations. One limitation is the broad application of his critique across various contexts

without addressing the nuances of Ordoliberalism's implementation in different political and economic environments. While Ordoliberal principles have been influential within the European Union, each member state adapts these principles to its own institutional frameworks and political traditions. For instance, Germany's social market economy, rooted in Ordoliberal thought, balances market freedoms with significant social protections, which contrasts with more stringent austerity measures seen in Southern European countries (Müller, 2014). This variability suggests that Ordoliberalism may produce different outcomes depending on national contexts, which Bonefeld's critique may not fully address.

Additionally, Bonefeld's focus on the authoritarian implications of Ordoliberalism might overlook other dimensions of neoliberal governance that do not necessarily entail coercion or suppression. For example, Dardot and Laval (2014) argue that neoliberalism also fosters forms of self-regulation and individual responsibility that align with its market-oriented logic. This aspect of neoliberal governance, which operates through subtle ideological influence rather than direct state intervention, could present an alternative form of neoliberal discipline that Bonefeld's critique does not entirely capture. As such, while Bonefeld's analysis is compelling in its exploration of authoritarian

liberalism, a more comprehensive critique might also consider neoliberalism's non-coercive strategies for maintaining economic order.

### **Future Directions**

Bonefeld's critique of Ordoliberalism opens several avenues for future research, particularly in exploring the intersections between neoliberal governance, authoritarianism, and democratic resilience. One potential direction for research could be a comparative analysis of Ordoliberal policies across different countries, examining how diverse political systems mediate the balance between economic freedom and democratic governance. This research could offer insights into whether specific institutional arrangements are more successful in safeguarding democratic freedoms while enforcing market-focused policies.

Another area for exploration is the impact of Ordoliberal and neoliberal principles on social movements and resistance. Bonefeld's critique suggests that authoritarian liberalism suppresses political agency, but further research could examine how various social groups and movements challenge or adapt to these economic constraints. For instance, studies on the response of labour unions, environmental groups, and other social organizations to neoliberal austerity policies could shed light on how civil society negotiates its role within an authoritarian liberal framework.

Finally, future research could delve into the ideological dimensions of neoliberal governance, exploring how neoliberal values shape individual and collective identities. While Bonefeld focuses on state intervention as a tool of control, scholars like Dardot and Laval (2014) highlight the role of neoliberal ideology in fostering self-regulation. Investigating how individuals internalize or resist neoliberal values could provide a deeper understanding of the social dynamics underpinning neoliberal governance and its authoritarian implications.

## VI. Conclusion

Werner Bonefeld's critique of Ordoliberalism represents a substantial contribution to the field of political economy, illuminating the inherent tensions within neoliberal governance concerning the dichotomy between economic freedom and democratic autonomy. His comprehensive analysis elucidates how Ordoliberalism, by prioritizing market stability, effectively institutionalizes authoritarian practices that curtail political liberties. This scholarly paper has meticulously examined Bonefeld's arguments within the framework of European austerity policies, thereby underscoring the broader ramifications of authoritarian liberalism in the context of neoliberal governance.

Nonetheless, Bonefeld's critique concurrently provokes inquiries regarding the variability inherent in Ordoliberal practices and the non-

coercive mechanisms through which neoliberalism perpetuates itself. Future scholarly endeavours may seek to address these limitations by investigating how neoliberal governance is recalibrated across diverse political landscapes and by scrutinizing the ideological underpinnings of neoliberal discipline. Through the exploration of these issues, researchers can attain a more profound comprehension of the intricate relationship between economic freedom and political autonomy within the contemporary neoliberal paradigms.

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