

**Book Review of Carolin Amlinger and Oliver Nachtwey, *Offended Freedom: The Rise of Libertarian Authoritarianism*. Translated by Jan-Peter Hermann with David Broder (Cambridge Polity Press, 2025)**

*Offended Freedom* constitutes one of the sharpest yet provocative analyses of contemporary political subjectivity which. By building on traditional Critical Theory, the authors develop a sociological account of a new political formation emerging in late modern societies, where demands for absolute individual freedom are increasingly expressed in authoritarian, regressive, and consequently anti-democratic terms. They define this new disturbing political formation as “libertarian authoritarianism”, while trying to untangle the paradox of how calls for greater autonomy may generate/engender authoritarian tendencies<sup>1</sup>. While the book argues that the root causes are to be found in the historical development of capitalist societies, I maintain that it remains a symptom of an individualist concept of freedom, which defies social interdependence. In general, this is a truly engaging work.

Methodologically, *Offended Freedom* exhibits impressive empirical work. Drawing from many qualitative interviews with the *Querdenker* movement and supporters of AfD, the book presents a new personality structure far away from Adorno et al’s *The Authoritarian Personality* and Fromm’s *Escape from Freedom*.<sup>2</sup> The historically grounded analysis of the book will appeal to any interdisciplinary researcher. The portraits in the book are vivid and their accounts capture individual feelings of frustration, alienation and what the authors call “offended freedom”. They do not attempt at any moment to capture these individuals as monsters or in a pejorative light, but as merely disappointed bourgeoisie, people who in a past life believed in progress but now feel betrayed.<sup>3</sup> The authors link this feeling of deeply personal sense of injury to the structural contradictions of late capitalist societies, where formal liberties coexist with deep inequalities, and success is individualised while failure is privatised.

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<sup>1</sup> Carolin Amlinger and Oliver Nachtwey, *Offended Freedom: The Rise of Libertarian Authoritarianism* (Jan-Peter Hermann tr, with David Broder, Polity Press 2025) 5-8

<sup>2</sup> Theodor W Adorno, Else Frenkel-Brunswik, Daniel J Levinson and R Nevitt Sanford, *The Authoritarian Personality* (Harper & Brothers 1950); Erich Fromm, *Escape from Freedom* (Farrar & Rinehart 1941).

<sup>3</sup> Carolin Amlinger and Oliver Nachtwey, *Offended Freedom: The Rise of Libertarian Authoritarianism* (Jan-Peter Hermann tr, with David Broder, Polity Press 2025) 6-7.

Overall, the book offers a core academic contribution by theorising a new type of political subject, the individuals who prize their own autonomy above all, resist all forms of social regulation, and reject collective obligations while often displaying aggressive, punitive attitudes toward perceived elites, minorities, and “the system”. As the authors write, “Libertarian authoritarians identify not with a leader figure but with themselves and their own autonomy”.<sup>4</sup>

By drawing from Adorno,<sup>5</sup> Horkheimer,<sup>6</sup> Marcuse,<sup>7</sup> and Fromm<sup>8</sup> the authors attempt to demonstrate that the modern promise of freedom always contained its dialectical opposite: the threat of domination. This theoretical framework allows Amlinger and Nachtwey to offer a critical assessment of modern individualism from within. Whereas the mid-twentieth-century authoritarian was defined by submission to authority, today’s libertarian authoritarian is a self-declared rebel stimulated by contempt for norms, institutions, and solidarities that might temper their self-assertion. From this theoretical lineage, I found the author’s engagement with Fromm’s “rebel” type very interesting.

Conceptually, I believe that the authors’ concept of libertarian authoritarianism explains Germany’s populist turns, while also providing a realignment with other political identities across the West, like “freedom convoy” movements in Canada and the Netherlands. What I found particularly refreshing is that the authors avoid moral panic; they do not pathologise their subject but instead locate it within broader socio-structural transformations. They do not critique individuals but the system’s promise of freedom without solidarity, which leaves them to bear the costs of collective breakdown.

Yet, the book comes with an important limitation as its empirical material is almost entirely German, while the theoretical framework is global. Greater comparative analysis with trends in the United States, the United Kingdom, or Central and Eastern Europe would generate more interesting conclusions and allow us to detect, perhaps, global trends. Moreover, the theoretical apparatus is complex; thus, some readers not already conversant with Critical

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<sup>4</sup> Carolin Amlinger and Oliver Nachtwey, *Offended Freedom: The Rise of Libertarian Authoritarianism* (Jan-Peter Hermann tr, with David Broder, Polity Press 2025) 3-7.

<sup>5</sup> Adorno, Frenkel Brunswik, Levinson and Sanford, *The Authoritarian Personality*, (New York: Harper Press); Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments* (CA: Stanford University Press)

<sup>6</sup> Max Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason* (New York: Oxford university Press, 1947)

<sup>7</sup> Herbert Marcuse et al. (2009 [1968]), ‘Aggressiveness in Advanced Industrial Societies’ (and further contributions), in: id., *Negations: Essays in Critical Theory*, London: MayFlyBooks, pp. 187–202.

<sup>8</sup> See Erich Fromm (1941), *Escape from Freedom*, (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston). 45 Erich Fromm (1942), *Fear of Freedom*, (London and New York: Routledge)

Theory might find it hard to follow. Nevertheless, the latter might also be perceived as a feature rather than a limitation, considering the book's ambition to renew the traditional diagnosis amidst new social pathologies.

All in all, I believe that *Offended Freedom*, is a significant contribution to the field of political subjectivity and the crises of late modernity. It presents a rigorous, humane and interesting account of how freedom, when severed from solidarity and institutional trust, can become an authoritarian vehicle. The authors' analysis illustrates the cultural logic of modern populist movements and pushes readers to reconsider freedom. Is freedom simply the absence of constraint? Does it require mutual recognition, social interdependence, and the willingness to live with other in conditions of difference? The forcible framing of these questions in the book challenges readers imagination and hopes for a more democratic cure.

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