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Strategies of neoliberal knowledge production: how did free-market think tanks react to the COVID-19 pandemic?

Nina Lotze

Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK

ABSTRACT

The actions states took in response to the Covid-19 pandemic posed serious questions about the role of the state in the economy and posed a challenge to neoliberals invested in defending and re-asserting neoliberalism. This paper seizes the pandemic as an opportunity to examine how neoliberals react to modern crises, how they may attempt to re-establish neoliberalism and what role neoliberal ideas play within those processes. It analyses outputs from ten neoliberal think tanks in Germany and the UK and interviews with members of those think tanks to trace neoliberals' narratives of the crisis and the ways in which neoliberal ideas are wielded to construct these. It finds that for neoliberal think tanks ideological adherence is the key strategy, enabling the construction of a cohesive narrative about the pandemic across various schools of neoliberal thought and country contexts, adjustable through the variations within neoliberalism to specific policy environments. Brief major disagreements did not affect this overarching narrative and, interpreted as matters of principle, instead strengthened self-perceptions of a communal 'liberal' identity. Neoliberal ideas form the cornerstone of neoliberal think tanks' work in large part because they are strategically useful for the production, coordination and attempts at dissemination of neoliberal knowledge.

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Introduction

There is a pervasive sense that current policy frameworks are failing to substantially improve modes of living or rescue us from crises, a sense that we may be living in a period of interregnum, questioning the dying old ways before the new have been formed (Sutcliffe-Braithwaite 2019). Even if this is true, the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) of 2008/09, which appears to have prompted this new period, proved that established neoliberal structures and ideas do not die easily, that they can be actively reasserted and reinforced even in the face of a crisis that explicitly challenges them (Mirowski 2013, Cahill 2014). Our current moment is marked not just by new politics that reject

CONTACT Nina Lotze ni.lotze@gmail.com Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Sheffield, S10 2TU Sheffield, UK

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neoliberal logics, but by the continuing power, networks, actors and structures of previously dominant neoliberalism. These cannot be ignored and are worth serious examination to understand whether and what kind of changes in established policymaking logics might be possible, and how they may be influenced by the active assertion of neoliberal ideas through networks of neoliberal knowledge production.

The Covid-19 pandemic offers an opportunity to interrogate the work of these networks during crises that challenge neoliberalism. Like with the GFC, the events of the pandemic posed serious questions about the role of the state in the economy – Nobel-Prize winning economist Joseph Stiglitz described it as a challenge to free market orthodoxy (CBC Radio 2020) and the World Economic Forum took the opportunity to call for a 'great reset' towards a future where governments steer the economy to fairer outcomes (Schwab 2020). Beyond rhetoric, the reactions of states to the pandemic seemed to present opportunities to shift away from neoliberal, free-market policymaking (Tooze 2021, Chohan 2022). Lockdown policies demonstrated empowered states intervening in economic life and restricting civil liberties in favour of public health in a way that is anathema to neoliberal priorities of preserving individual and economic rights and restricting the state from encroaching on them. Economic support measures and the large amounts of deficit spending they necessitated countered long-standing austerity approaches and revived visions of an expansive welfare state. Covid-19 presents a challenge for neoliberals and neoliberal ideas in a similar way to the GFC. This paper asks how neoliberals responded to the crisis of the pandemic and what strategies for reasserting neoliberal ideas they employed, to deepen our understanding of what role neoliberal ideas play in the maintenance of neoliberal structures as they are under threat, and to reveal strategic considerations that shape the ways they are constructed by the actors most heavily invested in them.

This paper studies the reactions to the pandemic of neoliberal think tanks in the UK and Germany, as actors within broader networks of neoliberal knowledge. Research on these networks recognises neoliberal think tanks as connecting various actors, seeking to translate neoliberalism into policy knowledge and to influence policymakers, the media and the public (Plehwe and Walpen 2006, Salles-Djelic 2017). In this dual commitment both to a specific set of ideas and to policy influence, think tanks are best understood as a type of epistemic community with the purpose of creating and disseminating policy knowledge (Stone 1996). The work of neoliberal think tanks during a crisis therefore reveals the interactions between neoliberal ideas and strategies for influence, allowing for an examination of the ways continuing networks of neoliberalism attempt to (re)assert neoliberal knowledge. It is in analysing these well-funded and well-connected organisations that strategies for (re)legitimating neoliberal structures are revealed.

The paper finds that, far from having to strike a difficult balance between presenting ideas and working strategically, for neoliberal think tanks ideological adherence *is* the key strategy. Firstly, think tank reactions were constructed around a core set of ideas about the state that enabled the creation of a quick and cohesive narrative about the pandemic and common policy suggestions across different types of think tanks and two country contexts. Secondly, within this broad narrative, different schools of neoliberal thought enabled the strategic adjustment of that narrative to different policy environments and target audiences. Thirdly, disagreements between neoliberals about the

pandemic, also based on differences between different schools of neoliberal thought, were short-lived, did not affect the cohesiveness of the overarching narrative they constructed, and reinforced self-perceptions of a communal 'liberal' identity. Neoliberal ideas, in particular about the role of the state, form the corner stone of neoliberal knowledge networks' strategic work to remain relevant, present policy solutions as common sense and legitimise neoliberal structures.

Neoliberal ideas and neoliberal resilience

Examinations of neoliberalism in crisis contexts have contended with the ways in which the events of the GFC – the meltdown of a deregulated and profit-maximised financial system, the spread of the crisis due to the financialised and globalised nature of Western economies and the state bailouts of the financial sector – first exposed deeply problematic neoliberal structures and raised challenges to established neoliberal policy assumptions, and then revealed the highly resilient nature of neoliberalism (e.g. Duménil and Lévy 2011, Mirowski 2013, Cahill 2014). Among the explanations for neoliberalism's surprising resilience was the role of neoliberal ideas, stemming from an understanding of neoliberalism not just as a recent project to restructure capitalism in favour of finance capital (e.g. Duménil and Lévy 2011), but originally as a philosophy of political economy and political project (Mirowski 2013). This philosophical-political project has been fractured into several schools of thought since the beginning, but remains a single entity, identifiable by a set of core ideas. These are characterised by an attempt to reconcile the preservation of individual liberty with the necessity of the state in securing it through the apolitical resource distribution powers of the market, to whose effective functioning the tasks of the state must be wholly dedicated and limited (Biebricher 2018, Slobodian 2018).

The relationship between neoliberal ideas and material reconfigurations of capitalism is complex, as policy ideals met policy realities to shape variegated forms of neoliberalism (Peck 2010), but it is well established that neoliberal ideas have historically been wielded to justify neoliberal structures, over time becoming the 'new normal' or 'common sense' in policymaking (Overbeek and van der Pijl 1993, p. 1, Gamble 2013, p. 53). The reassertion of neoliberal policy logics post-GFC can be traced to the limiting frame for policy discourse created by embedded neoliberal ideas (Cahill 2014) and the continued usefulness of those ideas to powerful actors legitimising capitalist structures (Schmidt and Thatcher 2013). This is by no means coincidental – features inherent to neoliberal ideas, its flexibility and idealism for example, help explain their continued usefulness (Gamble 2013, Schmidt and Thatcher 2013, Cahill 2014).

The literature about neoliberalism's apparent continued resilience indicates that understanding it, particularly in the context of new crises, involves taking seriously both the material reality of neoliberalism as a class project *and* its existence as a multifaceted but coherent ideology underpinning that project (Slobodian and Plehwe 2020). This paper situates itself within an academic tradition that explores and traces neoliberal ideas, via thinkers, proponents, networks and ideas, and maps an intellectual-ideological history that ties neoliberalism to its past and from there traces it into its present (Mirowski 2013, Davies 2014, Biebricher 2018, Slobodian 2018). This research identifies neoliberalism's historical and philosophical roots by parsing out the various schools of thought originating

from a core of thinkers like Friedrich Hayek, Ludwig von Mises, and Milton Friedman and tracing their origins and connections to organisations like the Mont Pelèrin Society (MPS) (e.g. Dardot and Laval 2013, Biebricher 2018). In doing so, it understands that neoliberal ideas became the logics underpinning neoliberal capitalism through a concerted political-ideational project whose actors and networks are traceable and, crucially, remain active today. After the GFC, tracing neoliberalism's intellectual networks helped explain the continued embeddedness of neoliberal logics, as these networks maintained influence and could be mobilised in moments of crisis (Plehwe 2017, Plehwe *et al.* 2018). These networks take particular forms: Mirowski imagines spheres of neoliberal ideological influence in the structure of a Russian doll, with inner layers of intellectuals – core members of the MPS and the academic departments they dominate – enveloped by a more public-facing shell of foundations and think tanks that connect with the media, policymakers, and the broader public (2013, Plehwe and Walpen 2006). Within this structure, neoliberal think tanks have historically been particularly relevant to understanding neoliberalism's history, as they are credited with having supported the neoliberal policy shifts of the 1980s, both among elites and in mainstream discourse (Desai 1994, Salles-Djelic 2017).

As organisations, think tanks can generally be understood as a type of epistemic community, with members bound together by common values and engaged in knowledge production (Stone 1996). Simultaneously, they are bound by a variety of imperatives, positioning think tanks as engaged both in the principled, ideational work of knowledge production *and* the strategic, political work of balancing credibility and legitimacy, raising funds, and gaining influence with key audiences across policymaking, the media, and the public (Stone 1996, Abelson 2021). Within neoliberalism's intellectual networks, this outwards-facing shell then presents the point at which neoliberal ideas are packaged, coordinated, and disseminated for the sake of influencing the structure of capitalism. How think tank neoliberals go about this work, which neoliberal ideas they choose to promote and in what way, can reveal the strategies that underpin attempts to re-legitimise neoliberal capitalism in moments of crisis.

In the aftermath of the GFC, the strategy was clearly to blame the crisis on state spending and justifying austerity policies (e.g. Plehwe 2017). While this worked in the short run, as austerity measures took their toll in the decade that followed, they were haunted by lasting critiques, both from the left and the right (Ibsen 2019, Rauh and Zürn 2020), as well as within public discourse (Hunt and Stanley 2019). The pandemic, with its severe shocks to the global economy through lockdown policies and disrupted supply chains, supported by massive amounts of state spending on furlough and loan programmes, presents a parallel crisis to the GFC. Like the GFC, the severe shock and the policy measures used to survive it run counter to usual neoliberal logics – the state, not market actors, appeared to be most capable of managing a crisis whose effects were worsened by a globalised, profit-maximising economic system (Tooze 2021, Mezzadri 2022). Unlike at the time of the GFC, however, the Covid-19 pandemic was pre-empted with a decade of new scepticism and increased challenges towards neoliberal ideas, logics of austerity and even capitalism writ large. The established neoliberal 'common sense' is under threat in a new way, from a new crisis and within a new political environment, offering the opportunity to re-examine strategies of neoliberal knowledge production. While we can expect neoliberalism's intellectual networks to defend neoliberal capitalism, we cannot assume that the ideas used, the strategic decisions made, will mirror those of

the GFC. If we want to understand how neoliberal ideas may mutate, how they may be packaged or re-packaged to legitimise neoliberal structures and policies, we must ask specifically: how did neoliberals react to the Covid-19 pandemic? In answering this question, this paper seeks to understand how an ostensibly highly influential set of ideas, threatened by crisis events, is actively re-interpreted and re-asserted in ongoing processes of knowledge production.

Methodology

The central questions of this paper are interested in neoliberal ideas and their strategic use. This approach considered the fact that neoliberalism as a philosophy of political economy is traditionally varied, even as it contains several core ideas common across its various traditions (Biebricher 2018). The research therefore focused on selecting as cases for analysis neoliberal think tanks that would represent different strands of neoliberal thought. In order to ensure a variety of neoliberal traditions, neoliberal think tanks were chosen from two country cases: the UK and Germany. First and foremost, these two loci historically present different strands of neoliberalism, both in its intellectual-ideological history and, consequently, in its manifestation in policy and 'common sense'. This stems from Germany's perceived unique strand of ordoliberalism, associated with thinkers like Wilhelm Röpke, Alexander Rüstow and Walter Eucken, who assigned a more prominent role to the state with the theory of *Ordnungspolitik* (ordering politics) (Ptak 2009, Dardot and Laval 2013). In contrast, British neoliberalism has been typically associated with the influences of Friedrich von Hayek and Milton Friedman, mixing the more state-limiting and law-centric principles of the Austrian school (Biebricher 2018, Hayek 2019[1982]) with the monetarism and economisation of the Chicago school (Davies 2014). Additionally, neoliberal think tanks in both the UK and Germany have a well-documented history of influencing or attempting to influence policy and public debate (Desai 1994, Pautz 2012), situating them within the public-facing node of larger neoliberal ideational networks. Simultaneously, examining neoliberals in different country contexts allows the analysis to understand the ways that different political environments can play into neoliberals' strategies for knowledge production.

Equally important in this choice was that both the UK and Germany experienced very similar crisis trajectories across the pandemic period, limited for the sake of this paper from March 2020 to December 2021. They followed similar patterns of waves of infections and government measures: a first strict national lockdown starting in March 2020, which was relaxed during the summer of 2020, only to be followed by renewed lockdown measures in the fall of 2020 and into the winter of 2020/21 (Thurau and Bosen 2021, Institute for Government 2022). Both countries instituted similar economic measures of furlough schemes and government-backed business loans (Stewart 2020, Redaktions-Netzwerk Deutschland 2021), while borrowing heavily to finance these (Tooze 2021). This allows for an analysis comparing *different* neoliberals' reactions to very *similar* crisis circumstances.

Ten think tanks in the UK and Germany were selected as cases for this analysis, summarised in Table 1. In the UK, a core of neoliberal think tanks has been influential since the days of Margeret Thatcher and these were chosen for analysis, as their position as key neoliberal (or 'free market') think tanks has remained unchanged (Hernando 2018,

Table 1. Think tank information.

Abbr.	Full name	Neoliberal school(s)	No. of documents
UK			**680**
ASI	Adam Smith Institute	Anglo, Hayekian, Chicago	357 (15 reports)
CPS*	Centre for Policy Studies	Anglo/Thatcherite	95 (10 reports)
IEA	Institute for Economic Affairs	Anglo, Hayekian, classic liberalism	162 (32 reports)
TPA	Taxpayers' Alliance	Anglo/Thatcherite	66 (18 reports)
Germany			**730**
FHG	Friedrich Hayek Society	Hayekian	205
FNS*	Friedrich Naumann Foundation	Anglo, ordoliberal, classic liberalism	168 (5 reports)
INSM	Initiative for the Social Market Economy	ordoliberal, Anglo	38 (17 reports)
LES	Ludwig Erhard Foundation	ordoliberal	79
LMI	Ludwig von Mises Institute, Germany	Hayekian (anarcho – capitalist, libertarian)	140
PMI	Prometheus Institute	Anglo, ordoliberal	100

* explicit ties to a political party: the Conservatives (CPS), the FDP (FNS)

Pautz 2018): the Institute for Economic Affairs (IEA), the Adam Smith Institute (ASI) and the Centre for Policy Studies (CPS). A newer addition, the Taxpayers' Alliance (TPA) was also selected for analysis. The think tank landscape in Germany is far more varied, particularly when it comes to neoliberal think tanks. The analysis aimed to reflect this variation by selecting six think tanks with different neoliberal ideational influences. What they have in common is their broadly neoliberal ideological standpoint and their public and policy-facing work. For think tanks with a generally ordoliberal standpoint, the Initiative for the New Social Market Economy (INSM) and the Ludwig Erhard Foundation (LES) were selected. For think tanks with a Hayekian[1] neoliberal perspective, the Friedrich-Hayek Society (FHG) and the German branch of the (American-founded) Ludwig von Mises Institute (LMI) were selected. For think tanks with a 'liberal', in many ways Anglo-influenced, form of neoliberalism, think tanks with close ties to the party of the Free Democrats (FDP) were selected: the Friedrich Naumann Foundation (FNS) and the Prometheus Institute (PMI), though both of these also exhibit strong influences of ordoliberal thought.[2]

In addition to presenting different traditions of neoliberal thought, the ten different think tanks each have their own unique institutional set-ups with different implications for organisational strategies. Of the ten think tanks, the British TPA and CPS and the German INSM, FNS and LES most clearly and straightforwardly prioritise a policymaking audience, with both the CPS and the FNS exhibiting direct political-party ties to the Conservatives and the FDP respectively. The FNS is additionally unique amongst the ten think tanks for its massive budget, curtesy of Germany's unique policy of providing public funding to official party think tanks in line with the party's performance in general elections. While the ASI, IEA and PMI also direct much of their efforts at policymaking circles, all three heavily emphasise the educational aspect of their work and often direct outputs at media, academic and membership audiences. Finally, both German Hayekian think tanks, the LMI and FHG, while engaging extensively in media publications and exhibiting close ties to academia through their members, function loosely as organisations more focused on creating connections between members rather than influencing policymakers. These different audience priorities were considered throughout the analysis as important strategic considerations for think tank neoliberals.

A document analysis of a total of 1,410 publications, mainly reports, blog posts and media publications, from the ten think tanks during the pandemic period, provides the

Table 2. Distribution of interviews.

UK	7 interviews	ASI, CPS, IEA
Germany	10 interviews	FHG, FNS, INSM, LMI, PMI (+1 from a research institute)

bulk of the data for the neoliberal reaction to the crisis. The full scope of think tank publications was included to analyse attempts to reach all target audiences, whether these be policymakers, specific groups within the public, the media, or like-minded individuals, including those at other think tanks. The distribution of these documents is laid out in Table 1. Semi-structured interviews conducted with 16 members of the think tanks (and 1 worker at a research institute providing reports for one of the think tanks) in 2023 provide clarifications, deeper insights and hindsight evaluations of the crisis period;[3] for the distribution of these interviews, see Table 2.

Documents and interviews were first coded according to dominant trends in the reactions to Covid-19, which yielded three broad topics: construction of the crisis, reactions to lockdown policies and reactions to economic support measures. Particular attention was paid to 'major' publications, like reports, and the tone and publication strategy of documents gave indications as to the target audience (e.g. a blog post on the think tank's own website vs. an editorial in a newspaper). A second round of analysis traced neoliberal ideas within these narratives, identifying how these played into the differences and coherencies of the narratives, both explicitly and implicitly through the arguments and reasoning presented. A final round of analysis focused on the institutional and discursive contexts within which the ideas were used for specific narratives and how these shaped differences and similarities in neoliberals' crisis discourse. Neoliberal ideas were classified to different schools of neoliberal thought based on an understanding gleaned from the writings of neoliberal theorists and the academic literature on neoliberalism's intellectual history.[4]

First strategy: constructing a common narrative

Despite working within different country-contexts and representing diverging schools of neoliberal thought, neoliberals' reactions to the pandemic very quickly became remarkably consistent and coherent, after a brief period of early disagreements about lockdown policies (see below). This section examines how reactions to the crisis, from critiques of lockdowns and economic measures to policy recommendations for recovery from the pandemic, became coherent across the neoliberal think tanks because they relied on the same core neoliberal ideas about the problematic of the state. These draw particularly on Hayek's concepts of the knowledge problem, wherein the state (and any other actor) is incapable of steering the economy, due to the impossibility of knowing enough to do so (Hayek 1960), and of the intervention spiral, wherein the state, once it begins to interfere, will continue to intervene in order to continually correct the mistakes it inevitably makes, until ultimately it takes control of economic (and private) life (Hayek 2019[1982]). In other words, by relying on a core neoliberal concept of the state as *inherently* and *dangerously* incompetent, neoliberals were able to construct coherent narratives about the crisis that worked in their advantage to formulate a consistent 'classically' neoliberal recovery programme. The analysis demonstrates that relying on core neoliberal concepts is

strategically expedient for the work of neoliberal knowledge production, as it enables a quick and coherent interpretation of crisis events and presents a common narrative of them across various organisations and in differing country contexts.

The inherently and dangerously incompetent state

Think tank neoliberals used Hayekian ideas to frame the pandemic as a problem with the inherently and dangerously incompetent state across three main topics: lockdown policies, economic support measures like furlough and loan schemes, and private sector competency. Firstly, lockdown policies were critiqued to highlight the state's inability to formulate and implement policy. The government was unprepared (Schönwitz 2020, Zitelmann 2020b),[5] reacted slowly and inefficiently (Kerber 2020, Worstall 2020a), and communicated poorly (Kerber 2020, Schönwitz 2020) and there was scepticism that lockdowns were even effective at halting the spread of the virus (Gebauer 2020, Neild-Ali 2020). These narratives were particularly prevalent during discussions of later lockdowns, as governments were more experienced and had more information on Covid-19 (e.g. Leutheusser-Schnarrenberger 2020b, Paqué 2020e), eroding many think tank neoliberals' relative leniency towards the first lockdown (see below). The problems with lockdowns were understood as the result of the state's *inherent* inability to manage the crisis: there was a common narrative that the costs of shutting down the economy were not being weighed properly, particularly the effects on individuals and their wellbeing (Bagus 2020b, Bagus 2020a, Härting 2020, Butler and Lesh 2020, Jessop 2020a). This feeds into neoliberals' core construction of the state as tending towards subsuming the individuals' capacity for making decisions and taking risks, usually applied to the theory of the interventionist state intruding upon the entrepreneurial endeavours necessary to the functioning of a free market economy, but here broadened to include health decisions (Pirie 2020, Mueller Interview 2023, Interview 6, 7 2023).

Lockdown policies were also consistently framed as a form of state overreach, despite some early acceptance (see below), as neoliberals across think tanks warned that they may be a way for the state to attain more power (Fink 2020, Leutheusser-Schnarrenberger 2020a, Snowdon 2020). This framing was particularly prevalent at German think tanks operating in a discursive environment that particularly emphasised protection of civil liberties, with outputs reflecting concerns that lockdowns threatened citizen's rights, and urging for scepticism, caution, and strict limits to the policy (Interview 4 2023, Friedrich-Naumann-Stiftung 2020b, Tichy 2020a). Implicitly, Hayek's intervention spiral is invoked, indicating that once the state has found an excuse to gain more control, it is unlikely to relinquish it and more likely to deepen it.

The second focus through which think tank neoliberals framed the crisis as a problem of the state's inherent and dangerous incompetence, was in reactions to economic support measures, particularly furlough schemes, business loans, and their cost. These reactions heavily emphasised that the state's measures should be temporary (Javid and CPS 2020) and targeted (Felbermayr and Kooths 2020, Denham and O'Connell 2020), based on the reasoning that the state was *not capable* of running the economy efficiently (Weede 2020) and the measures were essentially distorting market processes (Lesh Interview 2023, Tichy 2020a). Across various think tanks, neoliberals advised keeping market competitiveness as intact as possible (Paqué 2020b), pushing, for example, against

changing flexible labour laws (INSM 2020c) or in favour of tax cuts for businesses (Butler and Lesh 2020). Much of this was couched in economic language but inspired by Austrian school ideas of the state's inability to direct the economy compared to the efficiency of the market mechanism: the government should be wary of 'picking winners' (Bagus 2020c, Kilcoyne and Lesh 2020) and 'crowding out' private sector solutions (Shackleton 2020). The same logic applied to the warnings of 'zombie businesses', maintaining that the state's support was distorting the economy by keeping businesses artificially afloat, interfering with creative destruction mechanisms of the market, and creating the possibility of economic collapse once the measures ended (Nef 2020a, Schäffler 2020a, Butler and Lesh 2020, Williams Interview 2023). Neoliberals questioned the efficacy of the policies (Kilcoyne and Lesh 2020, Enninga 2021b), described them as poorly constructed (Denham 2021, Kooths 2020), and pointed out the bureaucracy's difficulties with implementation (Worstall 2021d, Mayer 2021), all building upon the idea of the state's interventions as *inherently* incompetent.

Alongside this, economic measures were portrayed as doing more harm than good, representing that the state was not only incompetent, but dangerously so: by mid-2020 outputs from across all of the think tanks called for an end to furlough schemes, as well as other state support, reasoning that continuing them could only harm the economy (Schäffler 2020d, Metzher 2020, Neild-Ali 2020) and its recovery (Schnabl 2020b, Paqué 2020c), and extend the power of the state beyond its remit (Felbermayr 2021, Jessop 2020c). In the words of one FNS article, extending the support measures would amount to an 'ordopolitical sin' ('*ordnungspolitischer Sündungsfall*') (Paqué 2020c). This push to limit the state manifested in a worry over the costs of the support measures and the way they were adding to public debt (Mueller 2020). Neoliberals called for reining in state spending (Worstall 2020f, Shostak 2020) and, in the German case, the return of the debt brake (INSM 2021b, Stoiber *et al.* 2021), arguing that not to do so posed a danger to the economy (Kessler 2020a, TPA 2021b) and, in the more extreme Hayekian narrative, endangered economic freedom by making people overly reliant on the state (Polleit 2021a). The state in neoliberal ideology is not capable of replacing the competitive free market; its attempt to do so should be restrained as much as possible and as the pandemic wore on, economic support measures were interpreted through this conceptualisation.

A final main topic through which this logic was used to interpret the crisis as one of state incompetence, was that of private sector competency. As the examples below show, several think tank neoliberals' narratives about the crisis centred on 'proof' that the free market 'worked' and the state did not. This argument interpreted pandemic events to demonstrate the benefits of free markets, the private sector and businesses, early in the pandemic praising the price mechanism (Hartjen 2020b), the flexibility of companies (Jessop 2020b, Interview 3 2023, Butler and Lesh 2020) and the ability of supply chains to adjust in order to continue to provide goods (Behan 2020, Javid and CPS 2020), and further into the pandemic, holding up the private companies that developed the vaccine (Worstall 2021c, Schäffler 2021b) as proof of the good of free markets. The narrative here tied the benefits reaped from the actions of private companies to their ability to function within a flexible and (relatively) free market, but primarily it emphasised that any good in the pandemic came from *outside* of the state. This contrast was often explicit (Reinhartz and Spohr 2020, Butler 2020): '[i]n reality, of course, the corona crisis exposes the failure not of the market, but of the state' (Zitelmann 2020b, *own translation*).

It is the nature of think tanks as epistemic communities to centre their work on some set of ideas and principles, but, as the pandemic demonstrates, for neoliberal think tanks doing so is also a strategy. Relying on a core set of ideas allows for an interpretation of crisis events that is not only expedient, but also consistent across networks of neoliberal knowledge production. This cohesiveness allows for another strategic advantage: the ability to construct a common narrative around solutions to the crisis.

A common policy programme

The reliance of think tank neoliberals on a core set of ideas to interpret the Covid-19 crisis provided a cohesive narrative of the pandemic as a crisis poorly managed and worsened by an incompetent state. This cohesive narrative naturally allowed for the production of a common narrative about the policies that *should* be implemented to resolve the crisis and the effects of the temporary shutdown of the world economy. As this sections demonstrates, across the various think tanks and both country contexts, think tank neoliberals were able to construct a singular consistent policy programme. Following the logic of their common narrative of the pandemic, Covid-19 demonstrated the need for less politics, less state, more market, in other words, a state focused on its core functions (Schäffler 2021a, Zitelmann 2020a, Worstall 2020b) and withdrawn from economic activity (Bagus 2020c, Stoiber *et al.* 2021, Worstall 2020g). This allowed neoliberals to suggest 'classically' neoliberal, 'growth-oriented' policies: reductions in business and capital taxes (De Soto 2021, Kessler 2020b, TPA 2021a, Record 2020) and VAT (Javid and CPS 2020, Schnabl 2020a), deregulations (Enninga 2020b, 2021b, Bagus 2020c, INSM 2020b, Kilcoyne and Lesh 2020, TPA 2020a), less bureaucracy (INSM 2020a, Paqué 2020b), more free trade (Enninga 2021b, INSM 2020d, 2020e) and less state spending (Friedrich-Naumann-Stiftung 2021, Mueller 2021, Stoiber *et al.* 2021, Worstall 2021a, 2021b, Elliott 2020, Marson 2020, 2021).

This 'classic' neoliberal programme was tied explicitly to the pandemic and the economic measures taken during it; German think tanks INSM and FNS, as well as British think tanks CPS and TPA, using the idea that the measures had led to a reliance upon the state, argued that these needed to be actively reversed (Williams Interview 2023, Eida 2021, Heywood 2021), for example through job training programmes (INSM 2020b, Ehrentraut and Hoch 2020, Friedrich-Naumann-Stiftung 2021) and deregulation of labour markets (INSM 2020b). For the long-term question of recovery policy suggestions, core neoliberal ideas of the inherently dangerously incompetent state enabled a coherent policy critique that coalesced into a coherent recovery programme.

This coherency across the networks of neoliberal knowledge production reveals that adherence to core neoliberal ideas is advantageous strategically to the quick and consistent production of a neoliberal understanding and narrative of a crisis. The nature of neoliberal think tanks as dispersed across various national settings and as varied in their structures, targeting different key audiences, means that this consistent narrative and the policy advice accompanying it appears to emanate from different sources, taking on the appearance of a type of 'common sense'. The reliance on a neoliberal canon for the production of neoliberal knowledge thereby also performs a coordinative role, allowing for the production of this common sense without the need for explicit cooperation.

Second strategy: flexibility

The common framing of the pandemic identified in the previous section, blaming the incompetent state for the crisis it wrought, is fairly broad. Though think tank neoliberals constructed a coherent understanding of the crisis by relying on core neoliberal logics, the resulting narrative of the crisis also allows for a significant degree of flexibility. The UK and Germany provided different policy contexts that influenced the ways think tank neoliberals presented their critiques of the state. As this section will show, these different methods often relied on different traditions of neoliberal thought for their reasoning, strategically wielded to adjust the common narrative of the pandemic to contexts within which different traditions of neoliberal logics are prevalent and different policies form the focus of think tank activity.

In the first example of this, British think tanks far more frequently supported their critiques of the state's policies with rationalistic and economistic reasoning: discussing the necessity of cost–benefit analyses (Teather 31.03.2020 [IEA]), of considering citizen's rational choices (MacDonald 20.03.2020 [ASI]) and of weighing the possibilities of market distortion (Shackleton 08.10.2020 [IEA]; Butler and Lesh 16.04.2020 [ASI]). This suits both the think tanks' and the UK's established mode of Chicago school neoliberalism that embeds economic reasoning into political discourse. In contrast, German think tanks usually presented their critiques with heavy emphasis on the issue of civil rights: worrying about the policies' effects on rights to freedom and self-determination (Straubhaar 03.11.2020 [FNS]; Friedrich-Naumann-Stiftung 26.05.2020) and emphasising the necessity of defending human rights from the state (Leutheusser-Schnarrenberger 31.03.2020 [FNS]; Interview 4 2023). In neoliberal fashion, this concern for civil liberties was still an economic one: 'Economic freedom is an integral part of societal freedom,' as one blog put it (Friedrich-Naumann-Stiftung 23.10.2020). This was supported also by the use of ordoliberal ideas around personal responsibility and individual moral duty to the economy (Gerhardt 2020a, Enninga 2020b). German think tanks appeared to both be engaging with a public discourse frequently focused on issues of civil liberties and a particularly ordoliberal moral commitment to individual (economic) rights. The breadth of neoliberal thinking allowed think tank neoliberals to adjust the way they constructed their common critiques of the state to their policy environments.

In a second example of the strategic use of this flexibility of neoliberal ideas, think tank neoliberals in the UK and Germany framed the same set of policies proposed across the think tanks in different ways. German think tanks framed the policies as the best way to 'return' post-pandemic to the already good system of the social market economy (Nientiedt 2021, Enninga 2021a, INSM 2021c, Tichy 2020c, Koch 2021), reflecting a relatively positive assessment on the side of ordoliberals of the German political economy pre-pandemic. British think tanks particularly emphasised the policies their think tanks had also previously been promoting, like tax cuts, framing these as the conditions needed for the economy to recover on its own (Shackleton 2020, Denham and O'Connell 2020, Clougherty 2021, Lesh Interview 2023). The cohesive narrative was sufficiently broad for think tank neoliberals to strategically incorporate established policy narratives, either of circumstances they already liked, as in the German case, or those they had long been advocating, as in the British one.

The pandemic period not only shows that neoliberal knowledge production relies on a common core of neoliberal ideas for the creation of a cohesive narrative about crisis events, but also that this cohesiveness is itself supported by the flexibility lent to think tank neoliberals by varying schools of neoliberal thought. These are strategically wielded to adjust to different policy environments, supporting the production of a neoliberal common-sense approach across neoliberal knowledge networks in different national contexts.

Disagreements about lockdowns: ideology over strategy?

While think tank neoliberals rapidly converged onto a common narrative of the pandemic as outlined above, the very early months of the crisis evidenced strong disagreements not about the nature, implementation or duration of the very first lockdown policies (and their accompanying economic support measures), but about their legitimacy. This section explains how one set of think tank neoliberals held that the state's measures were legitimate and justifiable, though they then quickly turned to the critical narrative explored above, while the other maintained from the outset that the policies were unjustified state actions and consequently expressed more vehement criticisms. These differences of opinion were not clearly separated by think tank membership and appeared often in publications by the same think tank, though there were clear trends in the published outputs that indicated which side was more prevalent. As the analysis will show, as a rule, think tank neoliberals that were situated at ordoliberal and British think tanks tended to belong to the first group, while members of Hayekian think tanks and those self-identifying as particularly Hayekian and/or libertarian usually belonged to the second. This reveals a complex interplay between ideological adherence and strategic considerations that this section seeks to unpack.

A matter of principle or strategy?

Think tank neoliberals that supported the first lockdown measures often framed this as both practical and noncontradictory to neoliberal ideology: Members at ordoliberal/liberal think tanks the FNS and LES and various British think tanks contributors seemed persuaded by the idea that lockdowns were necessary to prevent overwhelming health care systems (Friedrich Naumann Stiftung 2020a, Röser 2020, Jessop 2020a, Butler and Lesh 2020, Elsom 2020). This is true even in hindsight, with multiple interviewees from British think tanks pointing to the fragility of NHS capacity as a reason they supported the first lockdown (Interview 1 2023, Marlow Interview 2023, Davies Interview 2023). Hindsight on the first lockdown also reveals neoliberals' conception of policymaking in a crisis; interviewees from across all types of German think tanks and all three of the British think tanks available for interview noted that the policy had been acceptable because it was made under the pressure of enormous uncertainty (Schneider Interview 2023, Interview 1; 2; 3; 4 2023, Williams Interview 2023, Marlow Interview 2023, Davies Interview 2023). Lockdowns were, even in this tentative support, not portrayed as a *good* policy, but as one that was an understandable result of the situation, built on the implicit notion that the state *should* act in a crisis and that it did so to the best of its ability under the circumstances. This reflects a flexibility within the neoliberal canon about the crisis role of the

state, which is never desired to be truly disempowered, but instead should hold, so ordoliberals, managerial capacity and the ability to fix, so Hayekians, market failures (Biebricher 2018).

Similarly, in supporting the emergency economic measures, the state's legitimacy in acting to aid individuals and businesses was portrayed first and foremost as a practical matter: Economic measures were a part of the broader effort to overcome the medical crisis (Lenz 2020, Clougherty 2021), and, as the state had implemented lockdowns, it too should be responsible for mitigating the economic effects (Interview 4; 5; 2023, Lesh Interview 2023, Marlow Interview 2023). Implicit in this was an idea that the state was the legitimate saviour of markets and the economic system in a crisis (Straubhaar 2020, Koch and Rugen 2021, Interview 3 2023), with one commentator at the FHG even describing it as the 'hour of Keynesian politics' (Van Suntum 2020). Neoliberal ideas of the state as crisis manager shine through here as well.

Justification of the higher amount of state spending also relied on both practical and ideological arguments: Emergency spending was simply necessary and justifiable due to its temporary nature (Denham and O'Connell 2020, Lesh 2020, INSM 2020f) and tightening fiscal policy too soon into the pandemic-caused recession would be disastrous – notably the two think tanks with the highest levels of intolerance towards deficit spending, the TPA and the INSM, agreed on this point (TPA 2020b, Felbermeyr *et al.* 2020). This was explicitly noncontradictory to neoliberal ideology, as neoliberals made the argument that the state's high amount of borrowing and spending in the crisis was only possible because it had previously adhered to neoliberal principles of fiscal responsibility (Javid and CPS 2020, Issing 2020). Ordoliberal-leaning German think tanks used this to point out that the crisis had proven the benefits of the debt brake as a way of ensuring there would be fiscal room in a crisis (Gründler and Potrafke 2020, Friedrich-Naumann-Stiftung 2020b). In acknowledging the pandemic as a genuine moment of crisis, there was no need to abandon neoliberal principles – they were still used to tentatively (and very temporarily) support ostensibly non-neoliberal policies.

This use of neoliberal ideas becomes even more apparent when considering think tank neoliberals who explicitly and vehemently rejected the legitimacy of the state's emergency pandemic measures. In this narrative, mainly neoliberals at the Hayekian FHG and LMI, but also several at British think tanks, particularly the ASI, argued that the first lockdown (and later ones too) was a foolhardy undertaking by a state that could not possibly have enough information to effectively implement such a policy (Bagus 2020b) (Hayek's knowledge problem). It demonstrated the worst of the state's tendency to grab more power in a crisis with the dangerous impossibility of retracting that power in the future (Interview 6 2023, Tögel 2020, Broder 2020a) (Hayek's intervention spiral). Added to this were practical arguments: unlike in the UK or US, there was never any danger of Germany's hospital capacity being overwhelmed (Gebauer Interview 2023). Consistent with this approach to lockdowns, the rejection of economic measures built on Hayek's idea of the intervention spiral (Taghizadegan 2020) and the fear that this form of state take-over of the economy would become entrenched (Weede 2020, Interview 6; 7 2023), ruin the social market economy (Bagus 2020c), and lead to socialism (Habermann 2020). Interviewees from the FHG and ASI concluded that since lockdowns were not justifiable measures of state intervention, neither were any of the resulting economic interventions (Gebauer Interview 2023, Worstall Interview 2023, Marlow Interview

2023). The language around this was suitably alarmist, with one FHG blog describing the measures as 'Corona-socialism' (Broder 2020b). Relying more on the libertarian strands within Hayek's work, this set of neoliberals also used neoliberal ideology to make the opposite argument that lockdown policies and the subsequent economic measures were *never* legitimate.

However, though think tank neoliberals continued to rely on neoliberal ideas to make these arguments, this does not mean that the arguments being made were not *also* strategically beneficial to the think tanks' attempts at influence. It is noticeable, that ordoliberal-leaning think tanks that nurture closer ties with political parties and government, like the PMI, INSM and FNS, were more lenient in their assessment of the government's policy decisions, even in hindsight (Interview 3; 4; 8 2023, Schneider Interview 2023). As one member of the PMI put it: 'Well, I think, on the whole we got through it somewhat okay.' (Schneider Interview 2023, *own translation*). And despite several more libertarian voices, the British think tanks, who generally favour close work with policymakers, also extensively published supportive voices and upheld the view that at the very least the first lockdowns had been justifiable (Williams Interview 2023, Marlow Interview 2023, Davies Interview 2023). By contrast, it was the loosely connected and far less policymaker-focused think tanks, the LMI and FHG that overwhelmingly platformed dissenting opinions and heavily emphasised that the state, due to its very nature, expanded its power during the crisis and implied this to be *inherently* dangerous for civil liberties (Interview 2; 6; 7 2023, Gebauer Interview 2023, Mueller Interview 2023). The way neoliberal approaches were used to interpret the legitimacy of the measures was generally in line with the strategic considerations of the think tanks' target audiences. As the issue of the *legitimacy* of the state's policies, which it was implementing regardless of think tank neoliberals' opinions on it, was a short-lived one and the narrative quickly turned, across the think tanks, to critiquing the state, this divergence of opinion also did not affect the cohesiveness of the neoliberal knowledge produced in the long durée of the pandemic. In fact, given think tank neoliberals' self-perceptions and the ways that think tanks as organisations must continuously self-mythologise their influence (Abelson 2021), this brief moment of disagreement served the larger purpose of coordinating neoliberal knowledge networks.

Disunity as a strength

Think tank neoliberals were well aware of the different opinions about the legitimacy of lockdown policies, particularly as they diverged not only between, but also within think tanks (Interview 8 2023, Denby Interview 2023). Rather than any strategic motives or organisational differences, interviewees tended to attribute these disagreements to philosophical differences between different schools under the 'liberal' umbrella (Interview 8; 4 2023, Marlow Interview 2023, Lesh Interview 2023). Importantly, these disagreements were a source of pride: 'Well, there is a lot of discussion internally here. That is also the nice thing, that everybody – so from ordoliberal to really classical liberal, libertarian, actually everything is represented' (Interview 8 2023). That there was room for disagreement and debate was portrayed as proof of the liberal nature of the institutions, particularly those that emphasised the fact that they do not have a 'party line,' like the IEA and ASI (Lesh Interview 2023, Worstall Interview 2023). Disagreements on pandemic policies

strengthened neoliberals' self-perceptions as engaged in providing an 'ideology-free' space for debate (Interview 8 2023), 'enriching the ideational landscape' (Interview 7 2023) and promoting a broadly liberal 'marketplace for ideas' (Denby Interview 2023).

At neoliberal think tanks and, more broadly, within neoliberal knowledge networks, neoliberal ideas are genuinely held beliefs, and their use is not seen or portrayed as strategic. The complex interaction between adherence to neoliberal ideas and strategic considerations indicates that think tank neoliberals, invested in their own self-image as above party politics or outside influence, choose ideology over influence, or at the very least believe themselves to do so. Considerations of influence and effective dissemination of ideas are obscured behind a self-mythology of being controversial radicals (e.g. Marlow Interview 2023) and principled truth-tellers, supported by knowledge production work that relies heavily on neoliberal ideas. Differences of opinion serve to reinforce this image, ironically bringing neoliberals closer together. In more ways than one, ideological adherence then *is* a strategy, creating cohesive crisis narratives that allow flexibility, but also creating the conditions for tight-knit epistemic communities, for the very functioning of neoliberal knowledge networks.

Conclusion

What happens to neoliberalism as it is increasingly questioned and challenged, how do the established networks of neoliberal knowledge react? The narratives about the Covid-19 pandemic constructed by think tank neoliberals demonstrate that the main strategy is a reliance on neoliberal ideology for the political project of legitimating and defending neoliberalism. Core neoliberal ideas about the state were wielded strategically to formulate a common crisis interpretation and policy programme across various organisations and country contexts. Variations in schools of neoliberal thought were used to support differences within that narrative to adjust to different policy environments and target audiences. Even disagreements between neoliberals about the legitimacy of lockdown policies, though based on genuine principled differences between different types of neoliberals, played into think tanks' strategic interests in reaching different target audiences, and served to reaffirm a sense of 'liberal' identity.

The use of neoliberal ideas is strategic not only to produce cohesive neoliberal knowledge, but also to strategically disseminate it and even to coordinate neoliberal knowledge networks and epistemic communities. The presence of the same narrative across different think tanks, disseminating it to various media outlets and policymakers, enables the positioning of the common neoliberal crisis interpretation of the pandemic as the fault of the state as 'common sense'. This positioning is paradoxically strengthened by the disagreements between neoliberals; if think tanks and members or associates that appear to hold different positions – say the IEA and the CPS, or the FHG and the FNS – agree on what the state has done wrong and how it should be remedied, then it can be painted as fundamentally true and even non-ideological. The differences in neoliberal schools of thought serve more than just the function of allowing neoliberals flexibility in adjusting their discourse to the circumstances around them, they serve also to obscure just how unified neoliberalism is at its core. The centring of the core narrative on the dangers of the incompetent state is not incidental and reveals that neoliberals and, by extension, the knowledge they produce, remain deeply invested in a critique of the state. Here as

well, an inherent strategic strength to neoliberal ideas becomes apparent, because forming crisis interpretations around a fundamental scepticism of the state allows neoliberal think tanks to present themselves as outside of the halls of power and outside of mainstream of policy discourse. They can remain, in the words of Tim Worstall at the ASI, 'radicals' (Worstall Interview 2023). This has the advantage of positioning their ideas as innovative at a time when policymakers and the public are scrambling for solutions to an unexpected problem, as well as reinforcing their own mythology as neutral, uninfluential policy advisors.

The question remains to what extent neoliberals' ideas and interpretations of the crisis were picked up by policymakers and even the general public. Neoliberal think tanks remain very well connected to various political actors and the media, but influence is notoriously difficult to determine (Kelstrup 2021) and recent developments, like the disastrous premiership of Liz Truss, actively supported by think tank neoliberals, and the German reform of the debt break indicate that these networks are no longer able to strongly assert neoliberal policy preferences, calling their purpose and effectiveness into question.

Notes

1. To avoid confusion, the 'Austrian' school of neoliberalism will be referred to in the remainder of this paper as 'Hayekian'. For further details, see Appendix 1.
2. For further details on how the think tanks and their ideological leanings were classified, see Appendix 1.
3. Ethics and consent procedures of the Department of Politics and IR, University of Sheffield were followed. Ethics approval number: 049560
4. For further details on these classifications and the process of the analysis, see Appendix 1.
5. References for the documents and interviews of the analysis can be found in Appendix 2.

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Notes on contributor

Nina Lotze has recently completed her doctoral research at the Department of Politics and International Relations at the University of Sheffield.

ORCID

Nina Lotze http://orcid.org/0009-0007-3539-1645

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