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“Dear Professor”: Exploring Lay Comments to Milton Friedman

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(Received 22 April 2022; accepted 27 April 2022)

While previous research on the rise of neoliberalism has focused on elite networks of economists, politicians, journalists, and business leaders, this article investigates the attractiveness of Milton Friedman’s ideas at the time of the neoliberal breakthrough from a bottom-up perspective. A close reading of mostly favorable letters by two hundred viewers in response to the 1980 television documentary series Free to Choose indicates that neoliberalism’s popular legitimacy was based on a broad yet fragile coalition. Four different and in many ways contradictory viewer narratives can be distilled from the letters: (i) a conservative narrative, (ii) a reactionary narrative, (iii) a left libertarian narrative, and (iv) a populist narrative. Although in 1980 Friedman was, and today still is, perceived as a conservative economist, the letters show that under the surface of public debate his reach as a public intellectual far exceeded the realms of postwar conservatism as Friedman was supported by people who were situated further to the right and the left. Perhaps more than the elite sources of the neoliberal project, Friedman’s lay reception thus highlights neoliberalism’s complex and contradictory history in a plastic manner.

Introduction

Starting in the second week of January 1980, Milton Friedman’s television documentary series *Free to Choose* aired on public television stations across the United States and Great Britain.¹ In ten episodes, the economist argued that all existing social, economic, and political ills were rooted in too much government intervention in economic and social life. The solution, Friedman insisted time and again throughout the series, was simple but difficult to achieve politically. By allowing markets to operate freely and limiting government to its basic tasks, which included jurisdiction, national defense, controlling the money supply, and raising

¹According to Rose and Milton Friedman’s memoirs, the series was shown by 196 Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) stations in the United States, which corresponded with 72 percent of all PBS stations, and was watched by three million viewers, a number that ranked it among the most popular PBS programs. Except for the last episode which was followed by an interview with *Meet the Press* host Lawrence E. Spivak, each episode consisted of a half-hour documentary and was followed by a half-hour discussion between Friedman and invited guest debaters who were either in favor of or opposed to Friedman’s views. Milton Friedman and Rose Friedman, *Two Lucky People: Memoirs* (Chicago and London, 1998), 471–515, on the US broadcast especially 498–9. The series is freely accessible online at www.freetochoose-network.org/programs/free_to_choose/index_80.php.

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(a minimum) of taxes, things would get better. While the necessary transformation period might be challenging, Friedman promised that under the new system people would be both freer and more prosperous in the long run.

Not unusually for a popular-media production, the series triggered an influx of letters by the audience. By Friedman's own count, he and his wife Rose received almost two thousand comments on the *Free to Choose* project, which, next to the series, also included a book with the same title.² Occasionally, viewer reactions contained strong criticism. One correspondent thought that Friedman's "viewpoints are reminiscent of Queen Antoinette" and "animalistically inhumane."³ But most viewers who decided to write to Friedman after watching one or multiple episodes did so to express their interest and often great enthusiasm. They thought the series "FANTASTIC," "wonderful," "marvelous," "IMPRESSIVE," or "a startling 'eye-opener'."⁴

In recent years, historians have discovered Milton Friedman as a key figure of contemporary history. Along with fellow economists from the so-called Chicago school of economics and the Mont Pèlerin Society (MPS), he is seen as a major proponent of what some call market fundamentalism or conservative economics, while others—including myself—prefer the concept of neoliberalism. The existing historiography mostly focuses on the ideas of academics, journalists, politicians, and their donor networks. These top-down accounts give us rich insights into the activities of think tanks, most prominently the MPS, and the nexus between business leaders, conservative politicians, and free-market economics departments and law schools in various countries.⁵ Yet, as Sören Brandes has noted, the question of the "popular legitimacy" of neoliberal ideas and concepts promoted by these networks has thus far been understudied.⁶ *Free to Choose* was an attempt to popularize

²Milton Friedman and Rose D. Friedman, *Free to Choose: A Personal Statement* (New York, 1980). Many more letters were sent to the WQLN, the PBS station responsible for the production of *Free to Choose*. Friedman and Friedman, *Two Lucky People*, 499. The responses to the television series fill four archival boxes. Milton Friedman Papers, Boxes 223–6, Hoover Institution Archives (hereafter MFP). An additional two boxes contain reactions to the book *Free to Choose* (MFP 221–2).

³N.D. to Milton Friedman (hereafter M.F.), [undated, 1980], MFP 223, Folder 7.

⁴A.B. to M.F., [undated, 1980], MFP 223.3; W.M.B. to M.F., 18 Feb. 1980, MFP 223.4; G.K.B. to M.F., 25 Feb. 1980, MFP 223.4; E.C.B. to M.F., 26 March 1980, MFP 223.4.

⁵Dieter Plehwe, Quinn Slobodian, and Philip Mirowski, eds., *Nine Lives of Neoliberalism* (London and New York, 2020); Quinn Slobodian, *Globalists: The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism* (Cambridge, MA and London, 2018); Philip Mirowski, *Never Let a Serious Crisis Go to Waste: How Neoliberalism Survived the Financial Meltdown* (London, 2013); Tiago Mata and Steven G. Medema eds., *The Economist as Public Intellectual* (Durham, NC, 2013); Daniel S. Jones, *Masters of the Universe: The Origins of Neoliberal Politics* (Princeton, 2012); Jamie Peck, *Constructions of Neoliberal Reason* (Oxford, 2010); Philip Mirowski and Dieter Plehwe eds., *The Road from Mont Pèlerin: The Making of the Neoliberal Thought Collective* (Cambridge, MA, 2009); Yves Steiner, "Les riches amis suisses du néolibéralisme," *Traverse* 14/1 (2007), 114–26; David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford and New York, 2005); Bernhard Walpen, *Die offenen Feinde und ihre Gesellschaft: Eine hegemonietheoretische Studie zur Mont Pèlerin Society* (Hamburg, 2004). Historians of American conservatism have also contributed significantly to the history of free-market economics: Binyamin Appelbaum, *The Economists' Hour: False Prophets, Free Markets, and the Fracture of Society* (New York, 2019); Angus Burgin, *The Great Persuasion: Reinventing Free Markets since the Depression* (Cambridge, MA, 2012).

⁶Sören Brandes, "The Market's People: Milton Friedman and the Making of Neoliberal Populism," in William Callison and Zachary Manfredi, eds., *Mutant Neoliberalism: Market Rule and Political Rupture* (New York, 2020), 61–88, at 63.

Friedman's core message. As shown by Caroline Jack, the production team aimed to design the series in a way that would appeal to "a housewife in Iowa" with no prior knowledge or interest in economics and political theory.⁷ According to Angus Burgin, the strength of series was that it told a catchy story around "the force of the market metaphor."⁸

While the Iowan housewife, imagined as the prototypical viewer by the producers, is missing in the sample, Friedman did receive mail from viewers in Iowa and housewives from other parts of the country. Why were such people, who were not professionally engaged with economics, politics, or the media, drawn to his philosophy? What made them believe that neoliberalism could work? In a highly plastic and varied manner, their letters show the attractiveness and persuasiveness of Friedman's ideas with the public at large. As a source they provide a unique opportunity to investigate the popular legitimacy of his views at the time of the elections of Margaret Thatcher in Great Britain in 1979 and Ronald Reagan in the United States in 1980—a period that is routinely seen as the breakthrough period of neoliberalism.

Analysis of the letters shows that the reception of the television series *Free to Choose* was more multilayered than its simple message. This is only seemingly a paradox. Rather than streamlining his lay supporters' thoughts, Friedman's "certainty" opened up room for the imaginary to travel in multiple directions.⁹ A close reading of the letters enables us to separate the lay narratives into four categories: a conservative narrative, a reactionary narrative, a left libertarian narrative, and a populist narrative.

As the answer letters show, Friedman, for the most part, fervently defended his core message but otherwise did not seem to mind that viewers attached new meanings to his thoughts. On the contrary, he interpreted the positive but heterogeneous feedback as a single "grass-root sentiment" for change.¹⁰ The bottom-up perspective thus suggests that the neoliberal project gained popular legitimacy because its simple core message of free markets and limited government was highly adaptable, both intellectually and emotionally, to multiple and often contradictory hopes and fears.¹¹

⁷L. Rout, "The Perils of Milton: A Nobel Economist Tries to be a TV Star," *Wall Street Journal*, 10 Oct. 1979, 1A, 32A, cited in Caroline Jack, "Producing Milton Friedman's *Free to Choose*: How Libertarian Ideology Became Broadcasting Balance," *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* 62/3 (2018), 514–30, at 520.

⁸Angus Burgin, "Age of Certainty: Galbraith, Friedman, and the Public Life of Economic Ideas," *History of Political Economy* 45/Supplement 1 (2014), 191–219, at 216. The analysis of Brandes, "The Market's People," points in a similar direction. *Free to Choose*, he argues, created a populist image of a "market's people" standing united against big government.

⁹Burgin, "Age of Certainty."

¹⁰See, for instance, M.F. to D.K.A., 11 March 1980, MFP 223.2.

¹¹According to Daniel T. Rodgers, the "intellectual project," driven by Friedman and his fellow Chicago and MPS economists, can be adequately described as "market fundamentalism," merely representing "what is still called, in most quarters, 'conservative' economic thought." While confirming that Friedman strongly appealed to conservatives, the sample shows that lay correspondents carried Friedman's ideas in multiple directions. From a bottom-up perspective, the term "conservative" does not capture the whole spectrum of correspondents. The same is true for "market fundamentalism," since, as will be shown, the market metaphor did not play a prominent role in all four narratives. The concept of neoliberalism has been scorned for

Methodologically, the endeavor to examine Friedman's lay correspondence builds on and expands the work of historians who have studied lay reactions to eminent public intellectuals. Jennifer Burns's biography of Russian American philosopher and author Ayn Rand cites fan mail to show the profound impact that Rand's novels could have on her readers. Similarly, Robert Shepherd shows how British right-wing politician Enoch Powell received thousands of enthusiastic responses to his "rivers of blood" speech in 1968.¹² Friedman's ideas and persona, too, inspired and even emotionally moved a considerable number of his viewers. A businessman from New York, for instance, confided that "during the dogged days of winter, when it was a little hard for me to keep my courage in the face of all the pessimism in the air, I re-read your passages of wisdom and foresight. I have them pasted in a special notebook in my office. And they give me the stimulus to go on."¹³ Such venerating statements give an indication of Friedman's almost cult-like status among some of his followers.

Yet rather than just taking the positive feedback as proof of the importance and influence of Friedman as historical figure, this article goes a step further by systematically investigating how the lay correspondents received and processed Friedman's ideas in their own words. This approach follows past and ongoing research by intellectual historians, historians of knowledge, and micro-historians who are interested in how ideas, concepts, and narratives evolve and develop as they circulate in society at large and therefore study sources that document the intellectual life of "ordinary" people.¹⁴ Although lay correspondents did, of course, elaborate on what they saw and heard in the series, their letters offer more than just facsimiles of the original script.¹⁵ In a quite literal sense they can be analyzed as subtexts of Friedman's neoliberal discourse. Not written for publication, these subtexts did not necessarily

being too broad and ambiguous on many occasions. Yet the letters to Friedman show that, already in 1980, his grassroots followers attached very different and often contradictory meanings to his simple message of free markets and limited government. From a bottom-up perspective, neoliberalism therefore seems to be the more suitable concept than conservative economics or market fundamentalism, precisely because it offers room for ambiguities and contradictions. Daniel T. Rodgers, "The Uses and Abuses of 'Neoliberalism,'" *Dissent*, Winter 2018, at www.dissentmagazine.org/article/uses-and-abuses-neoliberalism-debate. For rebuttals to Rodgers see Julia Ott, "Words Can't Do the Work for Us," *Dissent*, 22 Jan. 2018, at www.dissentmagazine.org/blog/neoliberalism-forum-julia-ott; Quinn Slobodian, "Against the Neoliberalism Taboo," *FocaalBlog*, 12 Jan. 2018, at www.focaalblog.com/2018/01/12/quinn-slobodian-against-the-neoliberalism-taboo.

¹²Jennifer Burns, *Goddess of the Market: Ayn Rand and the American Right* (Oxford and New York, 2009), 90–96; 168–72; 191–2; Robert Shepherd, *Enoch Powell* (London, 1996), 352–54.

¹³T.W.G. to M.F., 3/22, 1982, MFP 221.7.

¹⁴For instance, Jonathan Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* (New Haven, 2001); Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller* (Baltimore, 2013); Daniel T. Rodgers, "Paths of the Social History of Ideas," in Joel Isaac, James T. Kloppenberg, Michael O'Brien, and Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen, eds., *The Worlds of American Intellectual History* (New York, 2017), 307–23; Sarah E. Igo, "Toward a Free-Range Intellectual History," in *ibid.*, 324–42; Philipp Sarasin, "More Than Just Another Specialty: On the Prospects for the History of Knowledge," *Journal for the History of Knowledge* 1/1 (2020), 1–5.

¹⁵As reader-response theory insists, reading is an active rather than passive process in which the meaning of the original script is simultaneously shortened and enriched. The same is true for watching television. For a conceptual introduction to reader-response criticism see Jane P. Tompkins, *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-structuralism* (Baltimore, 1980).

respect the rules, boundaries, and jargons of public debate, which was dominated by the scientists, journalists, and politicians thus far in the focus of the historiography of the neoliberal intellectual project.

The reactions to the *Free to Choose* television documentary series are the largest among multiple collections of viewer and reader comments in Friedman's personal papers.¹⁶ The following quantitative and qualitative analysis is based on letters by two hundred correspondents who overwhelmingly commented favorably on one or multiple episodes of the ten-part series.¹⁷ The sample includes many short notes of appreciation, gratitude or praise.¹⁸ But most letters contain shorter or longer statements which provide rich material for a qualitative analysis. In addition to comments on the *Free to Choose* television series, I also use especially meaningful letters from other collections.

The next section gives a short overview of the information available on the senders' social profiles. Thereafter, I display the four types of lay narratives in separate sections. While the main focus of this article is on the reception of Friedman's persona and ideas, an additional section is dedicated to Friedman's answers. After recapitulating the main findings, the concluding remarks offer a brief discussion of how the bottom-up perspective helps to contribute to a better understanding of neoliberalism's popular reception and legitimacy.

Friedman's lay correspondents

Of the two hundred correspondents, 88 percent (176) lived in the United States, another ten percent (19) in Great Britain.¹⁹ Hence the contexts of the following analysis are the American and to a lesser extent the British historical landscape. Overall, the American correspondents came from thirty-seven states and were fairly evenly distributed throughout the country. The percentage of correspondents living in large cities, metro, and rural eras roughly corresponded with the national average of the 1980 Census.²⁰ Fan mail reached Friedman from rural farming communities

¹⁶MFP 223.2–9. The other collections contain reactions to *Capitalism and Freedom* (MFP 220.8, 227.4–7); *Newsweek* magazine columns from 1966 to 1984 (MFP 228.2–231.18); and appearances on CBS in 1975 and 1976, *Meet the Press* from 1970 to 1984, and the *Phil Donahue Show* in 1979 and 1980 (MFP 220.8, 227.4–7, 8.1–5).

¹⁷Since some of the two hundred viewers sent multiple letters, the number of letters in the sample is 212. Some 73 percent (146) of senders unequivocally supported Friedman's ideas. Some 14 percent (28) agreed with his philosophy in general but questioned certain positions. Some 5.5 percent (11 correspondents) expressed neither support nor criticism. Only 7.5 percent (15) of the viewers voiced thorough criticism. A note on sampling: Friedman's office filed the incoming letters alphabetically along with carbon copies of Friedman's mostly formalized answer letters. The sample contains the letters by the first two hundred correspondents of the collection. I excluded from the sample numerous letters by friends and colleagues, as well as correspondence relating to the production of the series.

¹⁸For instance, a letter sent after the first episode simply stated, "I have just finished watching 'Free to Choose' Bravo!" M.L.D. to M.F., 13 Jan. 1980, MFP 223.7.

¹⁹In addition, four correspondents lived in Canada and one in Belize.

²⁰The Census divisions New England (10.3 percent of the correspondents), Middle Atlantic (19.4 percent), the Pacific (16.6 percent), and the West South Central (13.1 percent) (including the three most populated states in 1980, California, New York, and Texas), however, are slightly overrepresented in the sample. In 1980, 76 percent of Friedman's correspondents and 74.8 percent of the US population lived in metropolitan areas ("standard metropolitan statistical areas"), which included an urban center of at least 50,000

like Graettinger, Iowa, with less than a thousand inhabitants;²¹ from the Appalachian resort city of Pigeon Forge, Tennessee; from the Californian suburb of Santa Ana in notoriously conservative Orange county; and from Chelsea in downtown Manhattan.

The information on the social profiles of the correspondents, available in the letters, in the letterheads, and in obituaries, indicates that most letter writers were relatively affluent men over the age of thirty. But the share of female correspondents, many also affluent, was significant at 19.5 percent (39).²² Occupational status is available for roughly half of the correspondents.²³ Business owners and executives were the largest group (38), followed by medical doctors (11), engineers (8), and academics (7).²⁴ However, the socioeconomic background of the correspondents was not uniform. The sample contains several students. A “music arranger” from Nashville assured Friedman that despite his profession he was not “a wild kneejerker liberal.”²⁵ Workers and small businesspeople who often experienced economic difficulties wrote letters too. A woman from Lancaster, Ohio, for instance, wrote to Friedman, “listening to you gives me encouragement and the strength to live on \$7,500 a year.”²⁶

Since, as will be shown, race played a complex role in the lay narratives, it is worth mentioning that most of Friedman’s lay correspondents were likely white people. Yet at least three support letters suggest that Friedman also received mail from members of minority communities. A “disillusioned teacher” from east Morgan Park, a traditionally black neighborhood on the South Side of Chicago, supported Friedman’s proposal to privatize education through a school voucher system.²⁷ The editor of “Everybody Magazine,” “a small black monthly

inhabitants and surrounding communities. Some 29.7 percent of Friedman’s correspondents and 31.6 percent of the population lived in one of the sixteen “standard consolidated metropolitan areas” with several interrelated metropolitan areas. Some 13.7 percent of Friedman’s correspondents and 12.3 percent of the population lived in cities with more than 500,000 inhabitants. My calculations, based on the 1980 census data. US Bureau of the Census, retrieved from www2.census.gov/prod2/decennial/documents/1980/1980censusofpopu8011uns_bw.pdf.

²¹Total population for Iowa’s incorporated places: 1850–2000, www.iowadatacenter.org/datatables/PlacesAll/plpopulation18502000.pdf.

²²These numbers do not include four letters signed by couples. The gender of sixteen correspondents is undeterminable. Yet women’s lay interest in Friedman should not be underestimated since the gender ratio seems to vary with the format and air time. The share of women among the commentators on Friedman’s 1979 appearance on the *Phil Donahue Show*, which aired in the morning, was 37.9 percent, as fifty of 132 letter writers were women. See MFP 8.1–2.

²³We mostly know about a correspondent’s profession because she or he mentioned it or used business stationery with a letterhead. Of course, this was not a wholly coincidental act. Commentators choose to reveal to Friedman what they were doing for a living if they deemed this to be appropriate or prestigious.

²⁴Medical doctors, while generally supportive of Friedman’s views, often wrote to express discontent with the proposal to liberalize the medical professions and dismantle the American Medical Association, which Friedman saw as an unjust monopoly limiting the choices of patients and medical practitioners. See the section titled “Friedman’s responses.”

²⁵B.D. to M.F., [undated, 1980], MFP 223.7.

²⁶N.Y. to M.F., undated [1980], MFP 8.5. \$7,500 in 1980 are equal to approximately \$23,500 in 2020.

²⁷E. Ch. to M.F., 13 Aug. 1980, MFP 223.5. Ellen Skerrett, “Morgan Park,” in Chicago Historical Society, ed., *The Electronic Encyclopedia of Chicago* (2005), at www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/842.html.

publication,” showed interest in Friedman’s ideas after watching him on the *Phil Donahue Show* in 1979.²⁸ A doctoral student at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) asked Friedman if he could participate in *Free to Choose* as a panelist, since “it is clear that your program is one of few forums in America where a Black, non-elite perspective might be allowed expression.”²⁹

Overall, the social profiles of the lay correspondents thus indicate that Friedman was heard by people with different political worldviews and socioeconomic backgrounds. The following analysis of their narratives shows how the viewers received and processed *Free to Choose*.

Conservative views

After watching and also reading *Free to Choose*, one correspondent felt a sense of betrayal. The price of the “best Chevy, 4 doors,” he scribbled on paper, had more than quadrupled from \$1,600 in 1950 to \$2,500 in 1960, to \$5,000 in 1970, reaching an incredible \$7,500 in 1980. He added to the list the prices of “A good livable house,” “A Hershey Bar,” “A Ticket to a Movie” and the “average wage earners pay check,” which all had simultaneously skyrocketed in the same time span. It was not so much that this correspondent was existentially threatened by inflation since he assured Friedman that he was “going to be OK.” Still, he had the “terrible feeling that the Federal Reserve and/or the US Gov[ernmen]t has stolen money from me for the last 30 years in the form of printing paper money to erode the value of my savings, my life Ins[urance] and by pushing me into higher tax brackets.”³⁰ “So all this,” he realized, “happened to us the governed by elected representatives in this democratic society with our eyes supposedly wide open in the last 30 years. Robin Hood was a ‘piker’ compared with this.” He expressed his gratitude to Friedman for “effectively pointing out this appropriation of our funds [at first he had written “my funds”] to stupid people like myself.”³¹ The Robin Hood analogy was meaningful. If the US government was stealing money from the rich to give to the poor, it was clear on whose side this letter writer was on. His narrative also signals that viewers emphasizing property rights were sensitive to what they perceived as excesses of democracy.

The author of this letter belongs to a group of fifty-seven correspondents who raved for Friedman because of his constitutionalism, uncompromising position on property rights, and stern opposition to redistributive policies. Since these were issues that were at the heart of the new conservative movement that emerged from the 1960s onward, this group might be labeled “conservative.”³² The group was quite diverse, from an occupational standpoint. Next to businesspeople and well-educated professionals, it included multiple students, a reverend, an artist, a teacher, a shop steward at a machinist union, and a barber.

²⁸J.E.R. to M.F., 9/ 27, 1979, MFP 8.2.

²⁹M.A. to M.F., 5 Feb. 1980, MFP 223.2.

³⁰W.S.B. to M.F., 8 May 1980, MFP 223.3.

³¹W.S.B. to M.F., 8 May 1980, MFP 223.3.

³²Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton, 2015); Matthew D. Lassiter, *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South* (Princeton, 2006); Michelle M. Nickerson, *Mothers of Conservatism: Women and the Postwar Right* (Princeton, 2012).

The presence of conservative voices in the sample is hardly surprising. Starting with the Barry Goldwater campaign in 1964, Friedman served as a prominent adviser to several Republican presidential campaigns and was a major advocate of the tax revolt movement which, to a large extent, defined the new conservative movement from the 1960s onward. Although describing himself as an agnostic and “liberal in the 19th century British way,” Friedman’s public image as a conservative was already well in place during the time under investigation.³³ In his influential book *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America, since 1945*, published in 1976, George H. Nash identified Friedman as an important pillar of the postwar conservative intellectual movement, which fused notions of free-market capitalism with Judeo-Christian morality.³⁴ And in the contemporary media coverage of *Free to Choose* Friedman was portrayed without hesitation as a “conservative economist.”³⁵

Of the four types, the conservative correspondents followed Friedman’s script most closely. But the reading was selective. Viewers had no difficulties distilling the elements that were most important to them. They were rather uninterested in the potentials of individual freedom and free markets which in Friedman’s narrative provided opportunities to the benefit of all. In fact, his concepts of “freedom” and “market,” which are omnipresent in the series, were hardly ever mentioned in the letters of this group. To call this group “market fundamentalists,” a concept that some suggest, would therefore be misleading.³⁶ Rather, the narrative was about the protection of individual wealth from an allegedly corrupt and dysfunctional government.³⁷ Unlike Friedman, who believed in integration and equality in and through the marketplace, some of his conservative followers justified inequality in religious terms. In the context of the post-civil rights multiracial democracy, even the principle of one person, one vote could be seen as a threat.

Conservative correspondents gravitated most toward the elements in *Free to Choose* that were inspired by the work of Friedman’s former disciple and colleague James M. Buchanan. Buchanan’s public-choice theory, for which he won the Nobel Prize in economics in 1986, stated that politicians, just like everybody else, would constantly act in their own self-interest, which in their case was to satisfy their constituencies and political allies in order to get reelected.³⁸ Buchanan’s theory, presented by Friedman in the final episode, resonated with an owner of a real-estate business, who “felt such a sense of outrage and frustration at what big government is doing to this country—my country.” Rhetorically, she asked, “Isn’t it appalling

³³Milton Friedman to John Kenneth Galbraith, 1 Oct. 1978, John Kenneth Galbraith Personal Papers, Box 200, Folder 4, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum (hereafter JKGP)

³⁴George H. Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America, since 1945* (New York, 1976).

³⁵“Economics 101: With Milton Friedman,” *New York Times*, 6 Jan. 1980, B15; Peter W. Bernstein, “The Man Who Brought You Friedman,” *Fortune*, 25 Feb. 1980, 108–11.

³⁶See note 11 above.

³⁷The narrative bears similarities to what Thomas Piketty calls “neo-proprietarianism,” which the French economist considers the main ideological driving force for the increase in inequality in the West and beyond since the late decades of twentieth century. Thomas Piketty, *Capital and Ideology* (Cambridge, MA and London, 2020), 679.

³⁸On Buchanan see Nancy MacLean, *Democracy in Chains: The Deep History of the Radical Right’s Stealth Plan for America* (New York, 2017).

that our elected officials (some) are cognizant of your facts but can't (or won't) do anything about them because their re-election would be in jeopardy?"³⁹

Closely following Friedman's critique of government, advocates of private property used the language of the law to justify protection of wealth from redistribution. Taxation and inflation were conceived as deprivation and thus violated the "the Bill of Rights," the "right to privacy,"⁴⁰ or even "human rights."⁴¹ Taxation allegedly contradicted the Constitution and was therefore "un-American."⁴² The perceived solution was a return to "the basic principles that our great country was founded upon."⁴³ Like the Tea Party movement three decades later, private-property advocates imagined the American revolutionary period as an ideal. The current government had joined "the ranks of other tyrannical governments," thus resembling British rule over Americans in the late eighteenth century.⁴⁴

For some viewers, Friedman's wealth-protecting constitutionalism was in accordance with Christianity and Judaism. "[T]he freedom philosophy and God's holy Scriptures is all of one piece," as a former personal assistant to the founder of an organization called Americans for Constitutional Action believed. Citing several biblical passages, she explained why it was generally wrong to try to actively improve society: "The Jewish and Christian Scriptures teach salvation by faith, not righteousness through good works."⁴⁵ If individual wealth was a possible sign of grace, active redistribution by government was not only unconstitutional, it was interfering with God's plan.⁴⁶

Defenders of property rights were the most active and enthusiastic supporters of Friedman. They invited neighbors to watch the show, wrote positive reviews in local newspapers, penned letters to their representatives in Congress, spread the message in their barber shops, or sent checks to support the "fighting organization."⁴⁷ Several correspondents perceived Friedman as a companion in a struggle against a seemingly mighty opponent. Until hearing Friedman speak, an electronics engineer "had the feeling of a lone chicken in an atmosphere of coyotes."⁴⁸ Watching

³⁹E.C.B. to M.F., 26 March 1980, MFP 223.4. In the mind of another viewer, democratically elected members of Congress were only "representing themselves, exchanging favor for favor." E.B. to M.F., 10 March 1980, MFP 223.4.

⁴⁰T.C. to M.F., 23 May 1980, 28 July 1980, MFP 223.6.

⁴¹M.B. to M.F., 19 Feb. 1980, MFP 223.4.

⁴²T.C. to M.F., 23 May 1980, 28 July 1980, MFP 223.6.

⁴³C.Q.A. to M.F. 27 April 1980, MFP 223.2.

⁴⁴T.C. to M.F., 23 May 1980, 28 July 1980, MFP 223.6.

⁴⁵G.B. to M.F., 9 Feb. 1980, MFP 223.3.

⁴⁶Such thoughts are reminiscent of the ethic of puritan sects in the sixteenth century as described by Max Weber. While no one could be certain of God's grace, personal economic success or failure and individual wealth or poverty could be seen as a possible sign of salvation and damnation, respectively. The doctrine of double predestination, according to Weber, made Protestants invest in their professional lives and strive for economic success—a mentality that allegedly provided the basis for capitalism in the centuries to come. Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (London, 1976). For a recent analysis of the protestant underpinnings of Ronald Reagan's justification for free-market economic policies see Meg Kunde, "Making the Free Market Moral: Ronald Reagan's Covenantal Economy," *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 22/2 (2019), 217–52, at 217.

⁴⁷T.H.A. to M.F., 8 May 1980, MFP 223.2. Friedman transferred incoming checks to the "National Tax Limitation Committee," where he was a member. See, for instance, M.F. to T.F.C. III, 15 April 1980, MFP 223.5.

⁴⁸J.H. to M.F., 28 Sept. 1979, MFP 8.1; E.B. to M.F., 10 March 1980, MFP 223.4.

Friedman debating the other pundits in the second half of each episode reminded a couple of the biblical figure of “Daniel in the lions’ den.”⁴⁹

Some letters indicate that issues of poverty, democracy, and (relating thereto) race played an essential, yet complex, role in the hostility toward big government. For example, several of the correspondents cheered for conservative black economist Thomas Sowell, who starred as a guest debater in Episode 4 (on welfare), and Episode 5 (on equality), blaming liberal welfare programs for the deterioration of black communities. No other pundit, except Friedman himself, was praised in similar fashion. A conservative literary critic wrote to Friedman, “Thomas Sowell is rare—a Black supporter of the free economy—and I’ve written to tell him so. Except for the growing attraction of Neo-Conservatism to more Jewish intellectuals not too many Blacks and Chicanos support the conservative view.”⁵⁰ Although the language was benevolent and inclusive, the problem, to this viewer, was clear: the political attitudes of people of color were seen as an obstacle to the United States’ moving in the right direction.

Taking a similar perspective, another viewer was unsure whether Friedman’s plan could work in the United States. Referring to Friedman’s statements on how Germany and Japan had solved inflation by reducing the money supply and living through a subsequent recession, he observed that the situation in these countries could not be compared to the US since they “did not have to face up to a dual society problem.” Although agreeing “wholeheartedly” with Friedman’s proposal in principle, he asked, “What happens to say, Detroit, Chicago, Newark, Los Angeles, Oakland and East Palo Alto etc. when the [money] presses and programs stop!”⁵¹

There were also defendants of the Constitution, for which racial integration was rather the cause of than the solution to the current economic and social ills. “We,” a correspondent wrote in a three-page letter, “are no longer an isolated community of one or two million with relatively homogenous values, we are a great cosmopolitan empire.” Therefore it was uncertain “whether a free-trade market can exist for any length of time.” The Constitution, which was an expression of what he perceived as “homogenous values,” was defined by “Judeo-Christian morality.” But since the days of the American Revolution, “large masses of people have joined us who are not necessarily so sympathetic to these values.” As examples, the author of the letter did not mention immigrants from Europe or Asia, who came to the United States after the ratification of the Constitution in 1787, but the “Indian population and many Blacks who feel there is a connection between Christianity and their degradation. They vote and attain offices in Government and yet they may feel no special ties to any portion of our heritage.” While it is not clear whether “Indian population” referred to Native Americans or immigrants from India, the reference to blacks shows that “joined us” didn’t mean arriving physically in the United States in the nineteenth and twentieth century but rather obtaining political and civil rights and being able to participate in society as citizens. According to this correspondent, the United States in 1980 was in a “cosmopolitan situation” in

⁴⁹P.S. and J.M.D. to M.F., 19 April 1980, MFP 223.7.

⁵⁰S.B. to M.F., 8 Feb. 1980, MFP 223.3 Another viewer thought Sowell “was terrific!” S.A. to M.F., [undated/1980], MFP 223.2; “P.S. Tom Sowell for President,” F.B. to M.F., 14 Aug. 1980, MFP 223.3.

⁵¹B.G.A. to M.F., 7 Sept. 1980, MFP 223.2.

which the values of the founding fathers, based on Christian faith, were rapidly eroding. Universal suffrage—which became closer to a reality in the United States with the Voting Rights Act of 1965—was considered a problem. “If we let all the minorities act freely, their conflicting desires would not afford enough common ground for a compromise.” Moreover, his theory assumed that the political emancipation of minorities would foster bureaucratic solutions and, subsequently, lead to “tyranny.”⁵²

Similar fears might have prompted other defenders of private property rights to directly question democracy. A married couple, for instance, who “thoroughly enjoyed” watching Friedman on the *Phil Donahue Show* in 1979, criticized him for calling “America a Democracy—God help us if it ever becomes a Democracy—it’s a Republic! Democracy is when everyone is the same. No one has more than anyone else—except the leaders, of course.”⁵³ Another viewer hoped that the United States “could duplicate the Chilean experience.”⁵⁴ To these viewers the principle of one person, one vote—mass democracy—smelled dangerously of Soviet communism or Allende socialism. Sympathizing with a military dictatorship in South America, on the other hand, was not a taboo.

Yet most letter writers discussed in this section did not explicitly mention the threat that the newly gained political power of minorities allegedly poses to private wealth and, by extension, to existing socio-racial hierarchies in the United States. Instead, they relied on the color- and class-blind language of universal and inalienable individual property rights and, in at least one case, on divine predestination.

In the sample, there are also letters that argued against redistribution but deviated significantly from Friedman’s script. They are the subject of the next section. The tone in these letters is more combative and enemies are denounced directly. These correspondents did not speak the language of the law and religion, but thought in terms of the economic strength and weakness of nations and individuals. These concepts are ultimately borrowed from the natural sciences, especially from social Darwinism.

Reactionary views

A retiree living in Florida after spending a life in business in Chicago was worried about the state of the US economy. “Whereas, not too long ago our merchant fleets dominated world traffic, now they are practically non-existent. The automobile, steel, ship-building, television, computer, shoe and garment industries that were preponderantly ours have been seriously hurt or have substantially left our shores.”⁵⁵

This correspondent is part of a group of thirty-two correspondents who might be called “reactionary.” It was the most affluent group among Friedman’s correspondents, including several medical doctors, bankers, consultants, engineers, the vice president of marketing of an electronic supply company, an MIT graduate, a lawyer at a firm specializing in mergers and acquisitions, and the former owner of a sanitation corporation and retired air force colonel.

⁵²R.T. to M.F., 12 Aug. 1980, MFP 8.5.

⁵³Mr and Mrs R.G. to M.F., 20 Sept. 1979, MFP 8.4.

⁵⁴V.A. to M.F., 8 Feb. 1980, MFP 223.2.

⁵⁵H.L.A. to M.F., 11 Feb. 1980, MFP 223.2.

Unlike the conservatives of the first group, reactionaries did not solely take inspiration from traditions when conceptualizing the future, but hoped to reverse recent changes and reforms and return to an allegedly better past. Contemporary American civilization was perceived to be in a state of decline.⁵⁶ For reactionaries, Friedman was a bearer of a social order that was vanishing under the influence of organized labor and the civil rights, feminist, queer, and counterculture movements. Although reactionaries were generally supportive of the series, their view contained important elements that contradicted Friedman's script, especially regarding free trade, which they did not unequivocally support, and government protection for domestic industries, which they, unlike Friedman, did not necessarily condemn.

Reactionaries shared Friedman's criticism of "Big Unions" as the interest group of the working class.⁵⁷ With never-ending demands for higher wages, unions were able to "blackmail the country,"⁵⁸ or were "choking the economic life in western world" at the expense of "business men"⁵⁹ and "big and little companies."⁶⁰ But for reactionaries the problem at hand was larger than just the unionization of the economy. The United States (and Britain) were experiencing not only an economic downfall but, at the same time, a moral crisis. In their eyes, military doves, feminists, gay activists, liberals, intellectuals, minorities, welfare recipients, and criminals were all to blame. "We need ... a return to God, Country, morale, return all females to their homes to be housekeeper, wife and mother, teacher of good, morale, respect ... responsibility, and obedience," one viewer summed up his solution for the current ills.⁶¹

A consulting engineer living in a suburban-style housing development in San Diego asked whether Friedman remembered "the pansies who rioted in San Francisco when a jury verdict didn't turn out to their satisfaction."⁶² This was a reference to the White Night protests in May 1979 that followed the trial of Dan White, who had assassinated San Francisco mayor George Mascone and openly gay politician Harvey Milk. Watching *Free to Choose* apparently reinvigorated this supporter's homophobic views, although Friedman never expressed anti-gay sentiments in the series or elsewhere and eight months had gone by since the events in San Francisco.

This correspondent also commented on the topic of race and education. He asked whether "BUSSING and the other concomitants of integration (since the Brown case—was it in 1954?) done, say, black children any good?" (Friedman

⁵⁶Economic nationalists were bothered by the growing trade deficit with Japan, worried by decreasing "productivity" and rising inflation, and observed a lack of economic "vitality." B.A. to M.F., [undated, 1980], MFP 223.2; T.C.M.D. to M.F., 14 April 1980, MFP 223.7; G.N. to M.F., 10 March 1980, MFP 225.1; C.A.B. Associates to M.F., 22 March 1980, MFP 223.3.

⁵⁷B.A. to M.F., [undated, 1980], MFP 223.2.

⁵⁸R.C. to M.F., [undated, 1980], MFP 223.5.

⁵⁹W.B.E. to M.F., 6 March 1980, MFP 223.8.

⁶⁰B.A. to M.F., [undated, 1980], MFP 223.2. For another viewer, unions were striving for "total monopoly"; stripping them "of their power will be a herculean political task, but it must be faced." T.C.M. to M.F., 14 April 1980, MFP 223.7.

⁶¹R.J.B. to M.F., 21 Jan. 1980, MFP 223.3.

⁶²H.A.B. to M.F., 15 Feb. 1980, MFP 223.4.

scribbled “No” on the side, seemingly not understanding the rhetorical nature of the question.) For Friedman, who opposed both mandated desegregation and busing, the main problem with public schools was that they were public. He proposed a voucher system in which government would finance the education of every child in a private school of their parents’ choice. But the correspondent ignored this solution and instead pointed out the “lack of family discipline.” Rebutting a statement by Gregory Anring, the commissioner of the Massachusetts Department of Education and one of two pro-public-education guest debaters in Episode 6, he insisted that it was not poverty at the root of meager academic performances but “insubordination.” Recounting his own grammar school days, he explained that the “bad boys,” including himself, were regularly castigated not only by their teachers but, more importantly, by their fathers. Thus his narrative contradicted not only Anring’s views but also Friedman’s. While Friedman thought that public schools or, broadly speaking, public institutions, were the problem, the correspondent emphasized that black pupils’ behavior caused the educational crisis.

The emphasis on family values presented in this letter bears similarities to the neoconservative narrative that emerged in the 1970s and stated that the moral crisis and social ills of America were rooted in the disintegration of the family. According to neoconservatives, most prominently Daniel Patrick Moynihan, it was nowhere as pronounced as in black communities. As political scientist Melinda Cooper shows, the strengthening of the family as a social, economic, and legal institution was a bipartisan initiative in the last quarter of the twentieth century.⁶³ Like Moynihan and many other leaders of neoconservatism, the correspondent was, he told Friedman, “an erstwhile ‘liberal.’” Yet while neoliberals and neoconservatives shied away from blunt racism and tried to introduce new policies such as school vouchers or welfare reforms, he wondered, at the end of his letter, whether there was “any way this school situation can be solved by letting natural laws work?” Tacitly he translated Friedman’s free-market concept from a universal facilitator for equality of opportunity into a system that promised to (re)establish a social hierarchy based on race. Yet despite his social-Darwinist reinterpretation of the market society, this correspondent nevertheless felt that he agreed “with everything” Friedman had to say.

Racism and social Darwinism were not an exception in the letters. A viewer explained, “It is against the laws of nature for everyone to be happy and rich, and even for everyone to survive.” Watching *Free to Choose* gave her relief from feeling “guilty” and “unhumanitarian” because Friedman, in her eyes, proved that “poverty was a fact of life,” and “that it is not up to the government to see that no one suffers from it in this country.”⁶⁴ A seventy-five-year old physician from Maine came straight to the point: “Darwin’s ‘survival of the fittest’ ... expresses the law of inequality among individuals, species, genera, races, etc.”⁶⁵

⁶³Melinda Cooper, *Family Values: Between Neoliberalism and the New Social Conservatism* (New York, 2017).

⁶⁴L.A. to M.F., 10 Feb. 1980, MFP 8.3.

⁶⁵Dr. E.C. to M.F., 9 Feb. 1980, MFP 223.5.

Like conservatives, reactionaries looked in their letters to the past in order to project the future. The New York businessman who kept a notebook with Friedman's wisdom, mentioned in the introduction, wanted his "sons to believe again in the American Dream, where a young couple can fall in love, buy a home, and be symbols of all that is fine and upstanding."⁶⁶ In the economic nationalist narrative the guiding star was not so much the American Revolution as the image of a twentieth-century society marked by continuous economic growth, a victorious war, patriarchy, racial segregation, and inequality. In the eyes of these correspondents, the ideal had been derailed by the Great Society initiatives, the civil rights movement, and the emancipation of women and queer communities.

In these letters, present-day American civilization was perceived as being in a state of decline. One correspondent, recalling having read Oswald Spengler's *Decline of the West* as a student, was of the view that "the genius of capital formation had become stagnant and generally lost to the bureaucracy inefficiency in combination with entrenched monied interests."⁶⁷ Another correspondent remarked that "blacks and the misguided leadership that they have had has accelerated the decline." Originally, he had typed "our decline."⁶⁸ And a university professor sent Friedman a clipping of a newspaper article in which he discussed the "genetic factors in mental abilities, both with regard to individuals and ethnic groups." He concluded, "Scholastic achievements in American public schools continue to decline, perhaps because of politically inspired egalitarianism which is so fashionable and which is based to a considerable extent on a deliberate disregard for genetically determined factors in mental abilities."⁶⁹

Unlike the advocates of individual rights and Christian morality, economic nationalists tended to be more skeptical about the possibilities for change. Using a medical metaphor, one correspondent, a physician, wrote that Friedman's "ideas" "were too healthy to be accepted by the society pervaded with bureaucrats and parasites."⁷⁰ A retiree from Hawaii shared the doctor's despair. He, too, relied on an imaginary of decay based on pseudo-natural science: "we, as a society, are done for. Our people are no good, and we are only breeding more of the same." But not all economic nationalists thought that Western civilization was "doomed."⁷¹ A forty-four-year old vice president of marketing of an electronic supply company in Toledo was confident "that the 'hunters' and the 'hunted' will become evident" again once "the next severe economic disruption" had cleared the air.⁷²

⁶⁶T.W.G. to M.F., 23 Sept. 1981, MFP 221.7.

⁶⁷T.F.C. to M.F. 15 March 1980, MFP 223.5.

⁶⁸T.S.B. to M.F., 30 April 1980, MFP 223.3.

⁶⁹[C.E.W.], "Bullhorn: The Nature-Nurture Controversy," *Tulsa Collegian*, 18 Nov. 1976, 3. The article shows that racist and social-Darwinist voices in the Friedman letters were not necessarily a relic from the Gilded Age and Progressive Era since it cites more recent studies on the relation between race and intelligence. One is a famous article by evolutionary psychologist Arthur R. Jensen, whose work influenced Richard J. Herrnstein, co-author of *The Bell Curve*. Arthur R. Jensen, "How Much Can We Boost IQ and Scholastic Achievement?," *Harvard Educational Review* 39/1 (1969), 1-123; Richard J. Herrnstein, "I.Q.," *Atlantic Monthly*, Sept. 1971, 43-64; Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles A. Murray, *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life* (New York, 1994).

⁷⁰Dr. E.C. to M.F., 9 Feb. 1980, MFP 223.5.

⁷¹E.C.W. to M.F., [undated, 1980], MFP 226.1.

⁷²R.J.D. to M.F., 4 March 1980, MFP 223.7. A lawyer from Texas, although "sometimes in despair at whether or not we have the ability or even the will to avoid disaster," was "glad to see" Chile's

While advocates of property rights and Christian morality looked to the Constitution and, sometimes, God as their protectors, economic nationalists tended to wish for strong and charismatic leadership. Here, too, democracy could be perceived as a problem. One correspondent thought that it would “take a dictator to force the American People to the reality of our economic plight.”⁷³ Commenting on Friedman’s invocation that only the ballot box could bring change, a consultant from the St Louis metro area wrote, “Of course you are right but the sad fact is that the men who have the guts to do it will not be running for office. They are men like yourself, myself, my boss and maybe another dozen in business whom I know.”⁷⁴ For some, Friedman himself was seen as a possible leader and president.⁷⁵

The previous two sections have shown that his conservative and reactionary correspondents firmly supported Friedman, although for different and often idiosyncratic reasons. The next two sections discuss how far the economist’s appeal transcended the political divide between right and left.

Left libertarian views

On 9 January 1980, two days before the initial episode of *Free to Choose* aired in the St Louis metro area, two owners of a consulting firm circulated an interoffice memo to raise their employees’ awareness of the upcoming series. Friedman demonstrates, the memo announced, that “[c]apitalism is the most efficient system in producing wealth and well-being.” It said, “Competitive capitalist societies are the most equal societies,” and, “Few steps would contribute more to prosperity and world peace than a complete move to free world trade.”⁷⁶

These statements form part of a third group of thirty-two correspondents who might be called left libertarian. With regard to the professions of the correspondents, this group had a similarly heterogeneous composition as the conservative property rights advocates of group one. It included medical doctors, university professors, engineers, businesspeople, a consultant, a self-employed typist, and a music arranger. For liberal and progressive politicians navigating in the limelight of public debate, the risk of publicly associating with Milton Friedman, the darling of conservatism, was probably too high. Yet the lay comments suggest that, beneath surface of public debate, Friedman did have a direct and early influence on the economic imaginary of the center left.⁷⁷ For this group of correspondents, Friedman was a prophet for the liberation of society and the self. The enthusiasm

“post-Allende recovery,” for which he credited Friedman’s teachings. R.B.D. to M.F., 11 March 1980, MFP 223.7.

⁷³J.S.B. to M.F., 30 April 1980, MFP 223.3.

⁷⁴P. and B.B. to M.F., 8 March 1980, MFP 223.3.

⁷⁵A.B. to M.F., [undated, 1980], MFP 223.3.

⁷⁶M. Inc. interoffice correspondence, 9 Jan. 1980, MFP 223.3. The memo was sent to Friedman by an employee of the firm.

⁷⁷Stephanie Mudge observes that the “neoliberal project,” by which she means MPS and Chicago neoliberals, including Friedman, only played an indirect role in the “neoliberalization” of center left parties in the United States and Europe in the mid-to late 1990s and early 2000s. Stephanie L. Mudge, *Leftism Reinvented: Western Parties from Socialism to Neoliberalism* (Cambridge, MA, 2018), 330, 369.

in their letters shows that towards the end of what Tom Wolfe famously branded the “Me’ Decade,”⁷⁸ free-market capitalism was seen as not only a cosmopolitan catalyst for greater creativity and self-empowerment but also a more integrated and humane society and a better-connected world.

Similar to the neo-proprietarians of group one, the third group adapted rhetorical elements of the civil rights movement and the counterculture. However, instead of individual rights and protection from government intrusion into privacy, it spoke the language of inclusion and integration on the social level and of creativity and autonomy on the individual level. Like with the reactionary correspondents, these letters were preoccupied with the functioning of the economy. But rather than viewing economic life as an allocative struggle between nations and individuals, the global economy was imagined as an “exchange system”⁷⁹ with the potential to foster “[c]ommunication between people of the world.”⁸⁰

An executive vice president of a company selling paint and lacquer thinner attached to his letter a self-written pamphlet in which he, similar to defenders of property rights, argued for lowering the current tax burden by implementing a flat tax. But unlike them, his narrative was not about the protection of his own assets but about world peace and integration. He explained that defunding government “would get us out of the cold war situation we are in now that could develop into a war that ends everything. It would bring all people together again—the Catholic, the Jewish, the Indians, the very poor and the very rich—so that people would really stop and help one another.”⁸¹

While the conservative views mostly ignored the topic of free markets and the reactionary views even often opposed free trade, this group of viewers saw free markets and private initiatives as means for social and environmental progress. One correspondent, who, judging by his name, was probably of South Asian descent, had “fervent hope that [*Free to Choose*] will help us ushering in an era of international prosperity to all.”⁸² A member of “the Hunger Project whose intention it is to end world hunger by the end of 1997” was sure that “hunger and malnutrition in the world” can be taken “as an example of how freedom leads to greater equality.”⁸³ Another correspondent asked whether Friedman could “suggest any way in which the needed environmental protection can be accomplished, including necessary consideration of aesthetics, without Government excessively telling all of us what to do?”⁸⁴

⁷⁸Tom Wolfe, “The ‘Me’ Decade and the Third Great Awakening,” *New York Magazine*, 23 Aug. 1976, at <https://nymag.com/news/features/45938>. On the importance of the concept of “creativity” in late twentieth-century society see Andreas Reckwitz, *The Invention of Creativity: Modern Society and the Culture of the New* (Cambridge and Malden, MA, 2017); Andreas Reckwitz, *Society of Singularities* (Cambridge and Malden, MA, 2020). The narrative detected in the letters of this group also contains elements of what Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello have called the new spirit of capitalism, which appeared in the late twentieth century and was rooted in the individualism and antiauthoritarianism of the 1960s counterculture. Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (London, 2007).

⁷⁹O.M.A. to M.F., 3 Sept. 1980, MFP 223.2.

⁸⁰R.E.C. to M.F., 16 Nov. 1981, MFP 223.6.

⁸¹S.C. “WE WANT TO BE FREE—NOW!”, MFP 223.6.

⁸²J.C.B. to M.F., 21 Jan. 1980, MFP 223.3.

⁸³J.A.B. to M.F., [undated, 1980], MFP 223.4.

⁸⁴J.J.C. to M.F., 19 Dec. 1979, MFP 223.6.

On the individual level, the narrative of creative capitalism incorporated the counterculture's critique that bureaucratic discipline suppressed self-growth. A self-employed typist from New York, for instance, "knew there was something wrong with welfare because of the inhumanity it forced upon people," some of whom she knew personally. Therefore she was in favor of Friedman's negative income tax system, which would leave the people "to act in their own self-interest."⁸⁵ Similarly, a correspondent who asked Friedman about his opinion on reparations for descendants of slaves thought that welfare does not "allow for creative individual investment and choice."⁸⁶ This reflected Friedman's narrative. In Episode 4, entitled "From Cradle to Grave," he insisted that the welfare system would first and foremost hurt welfare recipients since it would decrease incentives to find work and, subsequently, inhibit a sense of fulfilment and self-worth. In the narrative of creative and integrative capitalism, welfare and, as an extension, socialism were viewed neither as a form of theft and blasphemy (as in conservative views) nor as a disregard of natural laws (as in reactionary views), but as a violation of the welfare recipient's freedom and dignity.

Friedman's correspondents carried the argument of self-worth and self-consciousness further. "Self-respect," one correspondent explained, "can cause the creation of wealth."⁸⁷ Another told Friedman that if more people realized that "[e]ach of us in our uniqueness have something to offer one another ... a dynamic growth explosion comparable to an atomic chain reaction" would occur.⁸⁸ Here, "growth" was not understood in the form of an ever-larger GDP but on a spiritual and personal level. Self-expression, in turn, would benefit the total.

In a similar vein, a reader of *Free to Choose* who had just recently heard of Friedman sent a book on Buddhist meditation which he thought was "in a way the key to opening up the American consciousness to accept the free market economic principles so eloquently enunciated in *Free to Choose*." Meditation, in his mind, would help to overcome "the socialist-welfare-mentality" that "springs from a fear of the future and a longing for security at all costs."⁸⁹ In a letter to the editor of a Buddhist newspaper that he forwarded to Friedman, he explained that capitalism and Buddhism were highly compatible because, just like mediation, the "free market unleashes vast amounts of creativity and riches in all directions because it is based on voluntary cooperation."⁹⁰

Like supporters of individual property rights and Christian morality, advocates of creative capitalism were eager to connect and be actively involved. This indicates a high level of interest and conviction. As shown, one company raised awareness among their employees. For the aforementioned Buddhist correspondent, the praise for free markets was not a fluke. He bought copies of *Free to Choose* to disseminate among his friends and relatives, informed Friedman about the work of a group of Mexican journalists who were spreading the gospel of free markets south of the border, and wrote newspaper articles about the compatibility of capitalism and

⁸⁵N.F. to M.F., 3 Feb. 1980, MFP 223.9.

⁸⁶F.D. to M.F., 27 July 1982, MFP 223.7.

⁸⁷D.K.C. to M.F., 3 Sept. 1980, MFP 223.6.

⁸⁸J.B. to M.F., 17 May 1980, MFP 223.4.

⁸⁹D.P. to M.F., 7 Aug. 1982, MFP 222.4, for a similar case see R.K.A. to M.F., 8 March 1980, MFP 223.2.

⁹⁰Vajradhatu Sun, Feb.–March 1982, MFP 222.4.

Buddhism. He even sent a copy of Friedman's book to the Dalai Lama "along with letter trying to explain why Buddhism is actually more in tune with capitalism" than with socialism.⁹¹

Populist views

A factory worker from a small manufacturing town in west New York did not hold back her anger. "I hate to discourage you but you are dealing with a bunch of assholes, important government and big business and union assholes (Please forgive my language, but I could've strangled a few of those 'do-gooders' who are trying to protect me!)" Judging by the dispatch date, the letter was penned in reaction to the second episode of *Free to Choose*, entitled "The Tyranny of Control," in which Friedman highlighted the advantages of free world trade. The reason for the anger of this working-class correspondent was the current price of automobiles. As a consumer, she would rather pay less for a fuel-efficient—and supposedly foreign—automobile than for a more expensive and less efficient—and supposedly domestically produced—car. The nexus of pressure groups, however, would prevent this from happening. Although not optimistic about the future, she was sure that she could "easily get every worker to agree with you." For her, Friedman was clearly on the side of the working people and consumers in the fight against vested interests.⁹²

This correspondent belongs to the fourth and smallest group of nineteen persons who were interested in Friedman's theory because, in their understanding, it promised to fight and replace a corrupt economic system. In some aspects their narrative is reminiscent of the anti-big-business and trust-busting movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which was formed in reaction to the monopolistic powers of a small number of great corporations and contributed to laying the groundwork for antitrust laws and Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal.⁹³ Yet unlike populists and New Dealers beforehand, these correspondents developed a narrative in which active government and unionization were not part of the solution but part of the problem. The hope was that deregulation and free markets would level the economic playing field. In this sense one correspondent commented, "It's hard for some of us to give up a 'Rooseveltian' trust in government." Yet after watching *Free to Choose* he wondered "how much of this trust is romantic and nostalgic." He asked Friedman whether "a return to a free market economy" would solve what he conceived to be the major economic problem,

⁹¹D.P. to M.F., 7 Aug. 1982, MFP 222.4. Readers of *Capitalism and Freedom*, Milton Friedman's first book for a broad readership, made suggestions for a revision to make it more popular. With this aim, a community college professor sent Friedman a copy of a book by French postmodernist and anarchist Jacques Ellul to help Friedman stress the dangers of modern mass society for human self-awareness and self-consciousness. And, observing that "sex always attracts," another correspondent suggested changing the book's title, in order to augment sales, to "Sex, Capitalism and Freedom" or "Freedom and Sex." J.S. to M.F., 29 March 1976, MFP 220.5; G.M. to M.F., 18 Oct. 1978, MFP 220.5.

⁹²S.D.C. to M.F., 19 Jan. 1980, MFP 223.5. Similarly, a worker and member of the "Culinary Union" in Las Vegas wrote that "the union, politicians, and the Nevada Resort Association all 'sleep in one bed.'" H.C. to M.F., 29 July 1981, MFP 223.6.

⁹³Charles Postel, *The Populist Vision* (Oxford and New York, 2007); Alan Brinkley, *The End of Reform: New Deal Liberalism in Recession and War* (New York, 1995); and Matt Stoller, *Goliath* (New York, 2019), Chs. 3, 4.

namely “reverse the trend toward an ever larger concentration of industrial wealth and power[.]”⁹⁴

A correspondent from a small town in rural Indiana, to mention another example, asked Friedman how she and her husband should best sustain the pressures of their much bigger supplier. The couple had “started out as a service station selling a major brand gasoline.” With the “husband’s hard work, long hours and skills we grew to a major repair shop, and a dealer in Lawn and Garden Co.” Now “Lawn and Garden Co.” pressuring them “to expand and carry a larger and larger supply of products.” Hesitant about expanding the business at an older age, the couple feared that Lawn and Garden Co. would stop supplying them with goods.⁹⁵ After decades of firsthand experience with corporate power, these small businesspeople anticipated that radical free-market deregulation would benefit them.

Although this group included an engineer, a contractor, and a consultant, most letter writers were small businesspeople and workers. Unlike the other, mostly affluent, Friedman correspondents, some of this group experienced firsthand the economic hardship of the inflationary and recessive 1970s. Fears of downward social mobility were an integral part of their narrative. But the members of the fourth group were not only likely to be economically vulnerable. With almost half of the letters written by women, the share of female correspondents was significantly higher as well.

Friedman must have felt a sense of satisfaction when receiving support letters by struggling working-class people and small business owners. While he saw himself as a man of the people, his critics did often not.⁹⁶ The lay correspondence leaves little doubt that Friedman’s views were mainly embraced by affluent and middle-class people. Yet so too did a score of correspondents who, according to their letters, lived in precarious economic conditions and felt excluded from the rest of society. Similar to the factory worker from west New York, a correspondent who had been a union member in his younger years separated Americans into members “of powerful pressure groups” on the one hand and a “no ‘clout’ portion of society” on the other. Belonging to the latter, he asked Friedman for “advice and council” on how to survive “the demon ‘inflation’ without protection of a ‘pressure group’.”⁹⁷ Frightened by rising prices and downward social mobility, he asked, “What should this great group of people do? Give up self-respect and independence and join those who only receive?” In Alamogordo, New Mexico an owner of a “small discount grocery store” was also unsettled by mounting wholesale prices and rising taxes. “They seem to make it impossible for the small guy to make it.” Large wholesalers, while rejecting doing business with small retailers like him, would sell to government-owned stores on the nearby air force base which could sell at a loss because they were subsidized by tax money.⁹⁸

⁹⁴B.D. to M.F., 18 April 1980, MFP 223.7.

⁹⁵Mrs C.A. to M.F., 17 March 1980, MFP 223.2.

⁹⁶For instance, in private correspondence, Galbraith accused Friedman of “leading a revolt by the rich against the poor.” Friedman replied by stating, “I regard myself if anything as leading a revolt of the poor against the rich.” John Kenneth Galbraith to M.F., 11 June 1980; M.F. to John Kenneth Galbraith, 2 April 1980, JKGP 200.4.

⁹⁷R.C. to M.F., 1 March 1980, MFP 223.6.

⁹⁸J.C.F. to M.F., [undated, 1980], MFP 223.9.

There are also letters in which correspondents brushed off Friedman's opposition to big business as hypocritical or self-deluding. "You are the corporations' front man if they ever had one," one correspondent wrote in reaction to Friedman's appearance on the *Phil Donahue Show* in 1980. Explaining that buying "Swiss Francs, Gold and Silver" would make her savings inflation-prone, she further challenged Friedman's statement that people could do nothing to stop inflation instead of voting for politicians who pledged to stop the money presses and decrease government spending.⁹⁹ The fact that she was investing in international financial markets indicates that she—contrary to the less fortunate critics of big business just cited—was rather well off. The same is true for a university professor who accused Friedman of acting—consciously or not—in the interest of oil companies.¹⁰⁰ While the better-off critics of big business were concerned with energy, clear air, and road safety, they did not fear that rising prices would eventually push them down the social ladder.

Regarding welfare, the correspondents of the fourth group shared Friedman's and the third group's view that accepting aid was humiliating. For them, however, whether or not to enroll in government-sponsored programs was not a philosophical but a real-life question. Despite being in despair, the store owner from Alamogordo, who described himself as a "libertarian," tried "not to use any of the aid that the gov[ernment] has like food programs." He also declined a loan backed by the United States Small Business Administration, a government agency providing counselling and capital for small businesses.¹⁰¹ Unlike in the narrative of creative capitalism in which the negative income tax system was favored as a substitute for the current welfare regime, the issue was ignored in the populist narrative. Instead, there was a vague hope for a leveling of the economic playing field, a vision of a less bureaucratic and more just form of main-street capitalism which would enable people to live independently from government, unions, and large corporations.

Friedman's responses

Friedman treated his reader and viewer correspondence with great care. In the early months of 1980, however, his office was overwhelmed by the mail pouring in. Still, it managed to send a standardized letter to almost all of his lay correspondents. As well as thanking them for their support, Friedman told his correspondents that the many positive responses gave him "hope that there is really an underlying grass-roots sentiment in this country that is capable of turning the country around."¹⁰² Reflecting on the series in his and Rose's memoirs, he wrote, "Letters from viewers were one of the most rewarding products of the series."¹⁰³ The positive feedback from the audience was reward for past efforts and encouragement for further engagement in the public sphere.

⁹⁹A.B. to M.F., [undated, 1979], MFP 8.1.

¹⁰⁰J.R.C. to M.F., 8 March 1980, MFP 223.6.

¹⁰¹The SBA was founded in 1953. See the Small Business Administration website at sba.gov.

¹⁰²See, for instance, M.F. to D.K.A., 11 March 1980, MFP 223.2.

¹⁰³The memoir even contains excerpts from a few letters. Friedman and Friedman, *Two Lucky People*, 498.

Yet, alongside standardized responses, Friedman did answer some letters personally. This indicates that he read all his mail carefully before deciding whether a brief thank-you note or a more elaborate answer, sometimes of several pages, was appropriate. In less busy times, he responded to all incoming mail with an individual letter.

The responses do not reveal a somewhat secret side of Friedman since they were congruent with his public statements. It is also not apparent that the viewer correspondence influenced the substance of Friedman's argument or beliefs. Yet his answers show that he was interested and willing to engage in certain issues and criticism, while ignoring and refraining from others. This gives us a better understanding of how Friedman interpreted his public role and how this might have contributed to the popular success of the neoliberal intellectual project.

Friedman was eager to answer questions and challenges regarding his statements by referring to his more scholarly works and/or elaborating on the topic at hand. One such example is a letter by a medical doctor who brushed aside Friedman's claim that the American Medical Association (AMA) would exercise a monopoly in health care and thus make medical treatment significantly more expensive. Although "wholeheartedly" applauding the "championship of 'Freedom of Choice' and the marketplace," this correspondent accused Friedman of inaccuracy and even "conscious distortion" of facts regarding the AMA. Friedman reacted by citing an early study he had undertaken with Simon Kuznets.¹⁰⁴ In addition, he scribbled, "I would not want to attribute to you self-interested motives in your defense of the AMA. Do you want to attribute these motives to me?"¹⁰⁵ Even in his lay correspondence, Friedman promptly reacted to challenges to his core message, which was built around his scholarly brilliance, integrity, and independence.

Friedman was less determined when the correspondents' questions were outside his realm of expertise. On *Meet the Press* in 1970, Friedman was asked by the interviewer where government should decrease spending. Before suggesting cuts for urban renewal programs and farm subsidies, Friedman stated that the war in Vietnam, in terms of costs for the government, was less expensive now than in the last year under Johnson. This impelled a college student, who had started to follow Friedman because of her interest in his negative income tax proposals, to write a letter inquiring about Friedman's "view on the Vietnam War and its effect on the American economy."¹⁰⁶ In his answer letter, Friedman stressed that it was "urgent to separate the political and social considerations of the war from the economic considerations." He then continued by explaining that "ending the war would reduce the military expenditures but only by a modest amount."¹⁰⁷ While, for example, John Kenneth Galbraith used his popularity to comment extensively on the war and to demand a withdrawal of American troops, Friedman preferred not to discuss the most controversial topic of recent American history from a

¹⁰⁴Milton Friedman and Simon S. Kuznets, *Income from Independent Professional Practice* (New York, 1945).

¹⁰⁵Dr. J.W.A. to M.F., 12 March 1980, MFP 223.2.

¹⁰⁶A.L.B. to M.F., 5 July 1970, MFP 227.4.

¹⁰⁷M.F. to A.L.B., 1 Aug. 1970, MFP 227.4.

moral or military point of view.¹⁰⁸ He gave a similarly evasive answer to the couple who challenged him on his characterization of the United States as a democracy as opposed to a republic.¹⁰⁹ While acknowledging that he made a mistake, he also added that the difference was not “the key issue.” Important was that government spending on all levels was cut “down to size.”¹¹⁰

Friedman’s concentration on his core message is especially evident in an exchange of multiple letters with one of his most ardent followers—the New York businessman with the notebook—who contacted Friedman in January of 1983 because he had “been a little concerned with Ronald Reagan as of late.” The president, he thought, was losing support within his own ranks despite his achievements, which included a hawkish attitude towards the Soviet Union, decreasing government spending, and the tax cuts “needed by every family.” He was sure that if Reagan had the unconditional support of the right, a “vigorous economic recovery” would be possible. Yet this was not all this correspondent wanted to tell Friedman on that day. With a nod to the so-called crack epidemic ravaging black inner-city communities, he, imagining himself as the president of the United States, proposed letting the “National Guard” enter “crime-stricken cities” and giving the inhabitants “exactly five hours to evacuate before the area will be leveled by gunfire.” Friedman chose to ignore these calls for the mass deportation and execution of citizens disobeying military rule. In his answer letter Friedman first thanked his correspondent for the “nice letter” before stating that he too was worried that Reagan “appears to be hedged in.”¹¹¹ Yet he reminded him that Reagan had been “able to do a great deal initially from deregulation ... to setting in motion substantial tax and spending cuts.”¹¹² Such were the issues that were important to

¹⁰⁸John K. Galbraith, “Resolving Our Vietnam Predicament,” *Playboy*, Dec. 1967; Galbraith, “The Galbraith Plan to End the War,” *New York Times Magazine*, 12 Nov. 1967, 29–30, 124–32. Friedman’s biggest contribution to the discussion on the Vietnam war was his proposal to abolish the draft, which he thought was an intrusion on individual freedom and economically ineffective. However, the proposal did not include an opinion on whether the war should be fought or not. Milton Friedman, “The Case for Abolishing the Draft— and Substituting It for an All-Volunteer Army,” *New York Times Magazine* (1967), 114–19.

¹⁰⁹See the section titled “Conservative views.”

¹¹⁰M.F. to Mr and Mrs R.G., 10 Jan. 1980, MFP 8.4. In a similar vein, Friedman answered the letter by the professor who claimed that the “disregard of genetically determined factors in mental abilities,” which allegedly differed between “ethnic groups,” was responsible for the current educational crisis. See the section titled “Reactionary views.” Friedman commented that “these are complicated issues on which I am not competent, but they are clearly important.” Yet while Friedman appeared to think that genetics played a role in the social world, it seemed that he pushed back on genetic determinism. “I agree with you that genetic factors are important, but I find it hard to believe that they could operate over so short time span as that which is relevant to change in academic achievements.” Probably referring to his correspondents claim that public education “is, to a considerable extent, wasting the talents of our most gifted young people” by disregarding alleged genetic differences, Friedman wrote, “The problem is that while you have high birthrates among welfare populations, you also have many non-formed families, a great deal of wastage as it were from the genetic pool.” M.F. to C.E.W., 11 March 1980, and C.E.W. to M.F., 20 Feb. 1980, MFP 226.1.

¹¹¹M.F. to T.W.G., 14 Feb. 1983, MFP 221.7. Friedman’s enthusiastic hopes for what he saw as fundamental change, partly triggered by the popular success of *Free to Choose*, had cooled by the mid-1980s. The disillusionment was expressed in Milton Friedman and Rose Friedman, *Tyranny of the Status Quo* (San Diego, 1984).

¹¹²M.F. to T.W.G., 14 Feb. 1983, MFP 221.7.

Friedman. The second Cold War and real and imagined wars on drugs of the early 1980s were left uncommented.

While Friedman had a firm and even radical belief in free-market reforms, he refrained from taking a decisive position on other potentially divisive issues. This tactic helped Friedman to create a diverse following that included people who, despite their fascination with Friedman's philosophy, had very little else in common.

Conclusions

The analysis of the comments by two hundred viewers in reaction to Milton Friedman's 1980 television documentary series *Free to Choose* shows that Friedman's ideas convinced a broad range of people from different walks of life and with different hopes and fears. Although the four narratives are not identical with distinct political camps, their features make it possible to categorize the correspondents' views along political lines. The neo-proprietarian narrative carried features of postwar conservatism, while the reactionary narrative was reminiscent of older leanings on the right. A similar temporal distinction makes sense for the two narratives further to the left. In many respects the left libertarian narrative of creative capitalism, with its emphasis on integration and self-fulfillment, corresponded with the ethics of the New Left, while the antiestablishment narrative contained elements of the leftist anti-big-business movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Neoliberalism was, of course, never the quasi-unstoppable historical force it is sometimes described as, nor was it unanimously celebrated, as critical voices in the sample show. But the letters strongly indicate that Friedman, at the time of the neoliberal breakthrough, had supporters along the entire political spectrum.

Yet Friedman's broad coalition was also fragile and full of contradictions. While the first two narratives can be seen as two sides of the Friedman coin—individual property rights and constitutionalism (sometimes supplemented by religious and antidemocratic sentiments) on the one hand, liberating markets and self-empowerment on the other—the reactionary and populist readings of *Free to Choose* lay open to multiple tensions and disagreements within the camp of Friedman enthusiasts. Moreover, these two narratives contain discursive elements that, in current discussions, are often used to criticize the neoliberal order.

From today's vantage point the reactionary narrative, with its economic nationalist and social-Darwinist underpinnings, might appear as both the distant past before the neoliberal turn and the present. In 1980, the heyday of protectionism and scientific social Darwinism had passed. The postwar conservatism had adapted, to a large extent, the color- and class-blind rhetoric of individual rights. Today, however, economic nationalism, racism, misogyny, and antidemocratic sentiments are again part of the discourse on the right. In the year before the election of Donald Trump, an article on the *Breitbart News Network* stressed the need for the right to cut its ties to neoliberalism, which is an allegedly "nihilist, deracinated force that is already inflicting more damage on Western civilization than

communism ever achieved.”¹¹³ Yet, as the lay correspondence from around 1980 displays, Friedman at the time was supported by reactionary voices from the right, despite already existing ideological deviations. Yet, for the most part, neither Friedman nor his reactionary correspondents acknowledged these tensions in their letters.

The populist antiestablishment narrative raises similar historiographical questions. The hope of these correspondents was to rein in the power of large corporations, government agencies, and unions. While the issue of economic power was mostly ignored in the cosmopolitan and neo-proprietarian narratives (groups three and one) and economic nationalists (group two) were decisively pro-big business, the hope of the antiestablishment correspondents of group four was that Friedman’s philosophy would provide a pathway for curtailing the might of large corporations. These voices are reminiscent of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century left-wing American populist movement. They indicate that Friedman, by arguing that government regulation and unionization were the cause of, rather than the solution to, economic concentration, succeeded in occupying, a least partly, a discursive space which was traditionally dominated by the left. Today, the image of a “rigged economy” has been brought back to the center of the political debate to criticize the contemporary economic order, most prominently by Bernie Sanders. Yet Friedman’s lay correspondence show that a similar sentiment of powerlessness already fueled the hopes and the popular legitimacy of neoliberal project.¹¹⁴

Acknowledgments. I would like to thank Arno Haldeman, Eric A. Häusler and the two anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments and criticism.

¹¹³Gerald Warner, “Conservatism Can No Longer Cohabit with Nihilistic Neoliberalism,” *Breitbart News Network*, 23 Sept. 2015, at www.breitbart.com/europe/2015/09/23/neo-liberalism-v-conservatism-a-messy-divorce.

¹¹⁴Recent work by Quinn Slobodian, a historian of neoliberalism, shows how the imaginary of the contemporary European and American far right is partly influenced by European neoliberal economists, most prominently Friedrich von Hayek, who shared most of Friedman’s view. Quinn Slobodian, “Hayek’s Bastards: The Populist Right’s Neoliberal Roots,” *Tribune* (2021); Slobodian, “Anti-’68ers and the Racist-Libertarian Alliance,” *Cultural Politics* 15/3 (2019), 372–86.

Cite this article: Cottier M (2023). “Dear Professor”: Exploring Lay Comments to Milton Friedman. *Modern Intellectual History* 20, 512–535. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244322000245>