

Neoliberal Ideology versus Humanist Ideals: Political, Social, and Fantasmatic Logics

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ABSTRACT: Presented is a multi-level framework of normative social forces, integrating critiques of neoliberalism, (psycho-)analytic social psychology, and radical humanist ethics. Extending a model of political, social, and fantasmatic logics of neoliberal ideology, societal, organizational, and psychological dialectics are analyzed. Dimensions of economic ideology are positioned against humanist ethical ideals on three levels (macro, meso, micro) and with respect to three domains of relatedness (identity, interactions, institutions). On the societal macro-level, political logics of individualism, competition, and instrumentality negate humanist ideals of individuation, solidarity, and emancipation. On the organizational meso-level, social logics of neoliberal workplaces prescribe self-reliance, competition, and rationalization, whereas humanistic management advocates self-actualization, community, and transformation. On the individual micro-level, psychoanalytic theorizing positions fantasmatic neoliberal logics of success, superiority, and submission against humanist consciousness of evolution, equality, and empowerment. Drawing on social character theory, neoliberal ideologies influence modes of relatedness towards oneself, others, and authorities, resembling ego-oriented, market-driven, and authoritarian tendencies. Humanist ideals are positioned as re-civilizing ethical forces. Linking different streams of theorizing, the model offers a dynamic framework of the corrosive effects of neoliberal Ideology as well as a basis for mobilizing potentials for radical humanist transformation.

KEYWORDS: neoliberal ideology, humanist ideals, analytic social psychology, social character theory, societal transformation, dialectic analysis

1. Introduction

Well-documented by critical social science, within the last decades, the principles of neoliberal economism have evolved into the hegemonic ideology of global financial capitalism, increasingly taken for granted, unchallenged, unconscious, colonizing all areas of society as well as the human psyche (Adams et al., 2019; Giroux 2005; LaMothe, 2016; Plehwe et al. 2007). As a political-economic theory, neoliberalism was initially developed by the elitist and anti-collectivist Mont Pèlerin Society in postwar Europe, dominated by economists Friedrich August von Hayek and Milton Friedman (Höge & Hornung, 2024). The first neoliberal experiment was conducted in Chile under the brutal rule of the fascist military dictatorship of Pinochet (1973-1990), instigated by the United States and with active ideological and substantive support from the Chicago school of economics, headed by Friedman (Morales & Stecher, 2023). In the 1980s, neoliberalism became the ideological basis for anti-social policies of Thatcherism and Reaganism in the United Kingdom and the United States, respectively, pursuing goals of dismantling social welfare systems, selling off public infrastructure to private investors, and reducing taxes for the rich and wealthy corporations (Harvey, 2007; Wacquant, 2009). World Bank and International Monetary Fund imposed it on countries in the Global South as structural adjustment programs with devastating effects. Today, neoliberalism has advanced to economic "common sense", the largely unquestioned ideology of global financial capitalism, penetrating all areas of life (Plehwe et al., 2007). On the level of political-economic practices, neoliberalism demands perpetual expansion and deregulation of markets, entrepreneurial and corporate "freedoms", unconstrained international finance and trade, low taxes for capital, privatization of state-owned assets, demolition of welfare systems, dismantling labor laws and environmental protection, etc. On the psychological level, it enforces a subjectivity based on the normative model of the self-interested, utility-maximizing homo oeconomicus, "investing" in its "human capital" and constructing its identity like a competitive enterprise, based on a mode of internalized control termed neoliberal governmentality (Foster, 2017; Hornung et al., 2022; Munro, 2012; Teo, 2018). Following Bal and Dóci (2018), neoliberal ideology shapes not only societal institutions, work organizations, and mindsets of individuals via political, social, and fantasmatic logics, thus pervading employment and management practices, but also the construction and representation of these issues in academic research (Merhej & Makarem, 2024). The objective of this contribution is to elaborate and extend the model of neoliberal ideology by Bal and Dóci (2018), based on the ethics of radical humanism (Brien, 2011; Durkin, 2014; Saleem et al., 2021) and concepts of (psycho-)analytic social psychology (Brunner et al., 2013; Parker & Hook, 2008; Funk, 2024). Its goal is improving dialectic understanding of the counteracting normative undercurrents shaping political-economic, social-institutional, and psychodynamic structures of society, work

organizations, and subjects (Glynos, 2008; 2011; Foster, 2017). This undertaking builds on previous analyses, literature reviews, and theoretical developments by the authors (Hornung & Höge, 2019; 2021; 2022; 2024; Hornung et al., 2021). Rooted in classic economic theorizing, constituting the ideological basis of capitalism, neoliberalism has become the globally dominant or hegemonic political-economic doctrine (Plehwe et al., 2007). The contradictory and anti-humanist internal logic of this interest-guided system of beliefs and practices has been extensively analyzed and criticized in various disciplines of social science (Beattie, 2019; Giroux, 2005; Harvey, 2007; Haskaj, 2018; LaMothe, 2016; Larner, 2000). For instance, neoliberalism has been framed as a configuration of oppressive political and economic practices, a paradigm for reorienting public policy and programs, a hegemonic ideological project, a mode of psychological control or “governmentality”, and a specific state form, designed to advance particular interests of a small elite of capital owners, investors, top-level managers, and their political agents (Plehwe et al., 2007; Springer, 2012). Neoliberalism, it has been argued, strives for unlimited scope and power of global financial markets and transnational corporations, worldwide commerce and consumerism, and dismantling of public services and social welfare systems (Harvey, 2007; Wacquant, 2009). It normalizes the rule and interests of global political-economic elites through a totalization of the logic of money and markets, generating unrivaled wealth and power for a minority, while “externalizing” harmful effects and social costs, imposing escalating demands, risks, austerity, poverty, and suffering upon the vast majority (Beattie, 2019; Giroux, 2005; LaMothe, 2016; 2017; Plehwe et al., 2007). Recapitulating earlier arguments, this contribution is guided by radical humanism, represented by social-philosopher and psychoanalyst Erich Fromm (Durkin, 2014; Foster, 2017; Funk, 2024). Integrating the dialectic distinction of genuine ethical ideas versus distorted, interest-guided ideology, with basic tenets of social character theory, neoliberal economic doctrines and counteracting humanist ethical concepts are contrasted across macro-, meso-, and micro-levels of abstract political (societal), applied social (organizational), and embodied psychological “fantasmatic” (individual) logics (Glynos, 2008; 2011; Hornung & Höge, 2021; 2022). The resulting multi-level framework, the theoretical basis of which is outlined in the next section, contrasts dominant (hegemonic), neoliberal and latent (potential) humanistic aspects of the normative fabric of advanced capitalist societies, institutions, and subjects.

2. Neoliberal ideology versus humanist ideals

Social character theory posits that socio-economic structures of society shape psychological orientations and motivational tendencies, such that people eventually “want” to do what they “ought” to do for the system to function effectively (Fromm, 2010; Funk, 2010; Hornung et al., 2021; Maccoby, 2002).

Combining the Marxian dictum that the material circumstances people find themselves in determine their mental states, with the dynamic conception of personality in psychoanalytic theory, the collective social character results from an interaction between dominant socio-economic conditions and the libidinous dispositions of individuals (Brien, 2011; Brunner et al., 2013). The unique character of a person thus emerges from the dynamic interaction between systemic social character tendencies and individual psychological predispositions, depending on socio-economic status or social class as well as person-specific socializing influences (Maccoby, 2002). Fromm has identified ideal types of social character in historical phases of the capitalist political-economic system, such as the hoarding, receptive, authoritarian, and marketing character (Fromm, 2010; Harris, 2019). Later, the ego-oriented social character was identified as a complementary hybrid type in advanced capitalist societies governed by neoliberal hegemony (Funk, 2010; 2023; 2024; Foster, 2017).

According to analytic social psychology, societies can be evaluated with respect to the extent that they permit and promote, or inhibit and undermine the realization of human potentials with regard to physical, social, and psychological well-being and health, including personality development, higher levels of consciousness, and self-actualization. Advanced capitalist societies are described as "insane" or pathological, primarily promoting destructive (e.g., egoism, greed, rivalry) and impeding productive character orientations (e.g., altruism, dedication, personal development). Corresponding with this assessment, the model by Bal and Dóci (2018) postulates individualism, competition, and instrumentality as corrosive political logics of neoliberalism. These abstract political logics operate on the level of public policy and societal institutions (e.g., labor laws, market deregulation), but also translate into the applied social logics of hierarchically nested lower-level institutions, specifically, management and employment practices of work organizations (Catlaw & Marshall, 2018). These, in turn, are suggested to influence the mindsets of individuals through psychodynamic processes termed fantasmatic logics (e.g., idealized narratives, archetypes, aspirations). Several social (e.g., contractualization, quantitative assessment) and fantasmatic logics (e.g., meritocracy, perpetual gains, progress) broadly associated with neoliberalism have been suggested (Bal & Dóci, 2018). However, it is unclear, how these reflect or relate to the three core political doctrines of individualism, competition, and instrumentality. In earlier contributions, the authors have started addressing this issue, using the focal model of ideology to critically analyze and evaluate psychological research on flexible workplace practices (Hornung & Höge, 2019). Individualism, competition, and instrumentality are seen as reflected and reproduced in the applied social logics of management practices emphasizing employee self-reliance (e.g., contingent employment), tournament situations or contests (e.g., internal labor markets), and economic rationalization (e.g., work intensification). Corresponding logics on the individual level were identified in

fantasies of perpetual success (e.g., outstanding performance and achievement, excellence and exceptionality), superiority (e.g., outperforming and dominating others, winner-loser mentality), and submission under the rules of money and markets governing neoliberal capitalism (e.g., fulfilling social roles, seeking acceptance and status, tolerating inequality and injustice). The present contribution further develops the suggested multi-level model (Hornung & Höge, 2022) through dialectic extension and elaboration of the antipodes to neoliberal economism, discussing counteracting sets of oppositional political, social, and fantasmatic logics, based on ideas of radical humanism (Brien, 2011; Durkin, 2014; Saleem et al., 2021; Vitus, 2017). The suggested antagonistic ethical concepts counteracting neoliberal political logics on the societal level, are radical humanist ideas of individuation (Rowan, 2015), solidarity (Wilde, 2004), and emancipation (Alvesson & Willmott, 1992). Accordingly, on the organizational level of workplace practices, these higher-level concepts manifest in applied social logics of self-actualization at work (e.g., personalized developmental tasks), common good or community (e.g., sharing resources), and social transformation (e.g., organizational democracy and participatory change).

Focusing on individualized work and employment conditions, suggested ideological antipodes were used previously as an analytic grid to contrast the humanistic ideal of employee-oriented management practices contributing to psychological wellbeing, health, and personal development (Aktouf, 1992), with the opposing anti-type of a labor political power strategy, reproducing neoliberal agendas of divisiveness, austerity, and work intensification (Hornung & Höge, 2019). On the individual level, fantasmatic logics of neoliberal ideology have been contrasted with humanistic aspirations of evolution, equality, and empowerment, which need to be viewed in the context of fulfillment of psychological needs for competence, relatedness, and autonomy (Koole et al., 2019). Taken together, these fantasmatic representations are part of the psychological deep-structure and foundation of higher-level political and social logics underlying (different types of) societal and economic institutions. Core components of the resulting dialectic multi-level model are displayed in Table 1.

Its entries are allocated to three levels, each containing references to relationships to self, others, and authorities. The latter taxonomy was introduced as an additional structuring element based on radical humanist theorizing on social embeddedness of identity, interactions, and institutions, reflecting the focal person, other people, and structures of power as interdependent domains of socio-psychological relatedness (Brunner et al., 2013; Parker & Hook, 2008; Funk, 2024). In the following, the three levels (macro, meso, micro) of political, social, and fantasmatic logics of neoliberal ideology and humanist ideals are outlined, including definitions of constructs and descriptions of associated processes of influence.

Table 1. Logics of Neoliberal Ideology and Humanist Ideals

	Neoliberal Ideology	Humanist Ideals
Political Logics (Macro-level)	- Individualism - Competition - Instrumentality	- Individuation - Solidarity - Emancipation
Social Logics (Meso-level)	- Self-reliance - Contests - Rationalization	- Self-actualization - Community - Transformation
Fantasmatic Logics (Micro-level)	- Success - Superiority - Submission	- Evolution - Equality - Empowerment

Source: Own elaboration based on Hornung and Höge (2022)

3. Counteracting political, social, and fantasmatic logics

Political, social, and fantasmatic logics constitute complementary normative components of comprehensive belief systems integrating societal macro-level, organizational meso-level, and individual micro-level (Bal & Dóci, 2018; Hornung & Höge, 2022; Vitus, 2017). The first are more abstract, underlying political-economic principles and broader socio-cultural values, the second are applied, manifesting in the design of concrete organizational and workplace practices, the third are implied or embodied, targeting psychodynamic processes, motives, and orientations (Glynos, 2008; 2011; Hornung et al., 2021). On each level, economistic neoliberal ideology, reifying humans for the sake of market forces and capital accumulation (Giroux, 2005; LaMothe, 2016), are contrasted with humanist ideals, emphasizing inherent worth, potential, and centrality of humans as ends in themselves (Brien, 2011; Durkin, 2014; Saleem et al., 2021). Further, on each level, the identity of the focal person, interactions with other people, and the authority of institutions of power are differentiated as important domains of social psychological relatedness.

3.1. The societal macro-Level: Counteracting political logics

On the societal macro-level, the three core political logics of neoliberal ideology, individualism, competition, and instrumentality, as outlined by Bal and Dóci (2018), have been contrasted (Hornung & Höge, 2022; Hornung et al., 2021) with counteracting radical humanist ideas of individuation (Rowan, 2015), solidarity (Wilde, 2004), and emancipation (Alvesson & Willmott, 1992). Reflecting antagonistic modes of relatedness to self, others, and authorities (identity, interactions, and institutions; or person, people, and power) within the normative frameworks of neoliberalism and humanism, these six constructs are briefly defined in Table 2. All are discussed in more detail below.

Table 2. Counteracting Political Logics at Societal Macro-Level

	Self (Identity / Person)	Others (Interactions / People)	Authorities (Institutions / Power)
Political Logics of Neoliberal Ideology	Individualism: Naturalization of individual self-interest and attribution of full responsibility for one's own life situation; shift of societal risk toward individual members	Competition: Markets as best way to ensure progress and optimal allocation of resources in all areas of society; competition and rivalry as inherent to human nature	Instrumentality: Objectification and utilization of humans for economic interests based on cost-benefit calculations for maximizing performance and profits
Political Logics of Radical Humanist Ideas	Individuation: Emphasis on conditions for personality development and self-transcendence; overcoming self-interest in meaningful social contexts and relationships	Solidarity: Empathy, supportive social relationships, and collaboration; sharing resources with others facing adversity; recognizing the universality of the human experience	Emancipation: Exposing, resisting, overcoming and transforming unbalanced and limiting power-dependence relationships; liberation from oppression and exploitation

Source: Own elaboration based on Hornung and Höge (2022)

Individualism. Core to political, socio-economic, and cultural changes of neoliberal hegemony on the societal macro-level is a socially corrosive form of excessive, "rugged" individualism (Mumby, 2019). Emphasizing individual agency and self-interest, maximization of personal utility is declared not only an inherent part of human nature, but a rational, even desirable trait (Bay-Cheng et al., 2015; Teo, 2018). Neoliberalism attributes complete responsibility to individuals for their life situation, education, occupation, wealth, health, and happiness, downplaying or neglecting situational influences and societal conditions, such as social stratification and inequality, privilege and discrimination, structural unemployment, and economic crisis (Azevedo et al., 2019; Cabanas, 2018; Greene, 2008). This serves the normalization and institutionalization of a "fundamental attribution error", justifying systemic shifts in societal risks and responsibilities towards individuals. Advancing neoliberal objectives, this logic of complete self-reliance or "hyper-autonomy" undermines and erodes communal organizing, collective pursuit of

shared interests, and social support systems (e.g., labor unions, welfare systems), as well as social cohesion, interpersonal relationships, and responsibility for others (Becker et al., 2021; Franz, 2021; Lynch & Kalaitzake, 2020). A political logic of neoliberal ideology on the societal level, individualism manifests on the organizational level as a social logic of employee self-reliance in the neoliberal workplace (Edwards et al., 2003), and on the individual level as a narcissistic fantasmatic logic of success, integral to the neoliberal social character (Layton, 2014; McDonald et al., 2007). This cross-level reproduction is discussed in more detail below. The dialectic antipode to neoliberal individualism is the humanist idea of individuation and its derivatives of self-actualization and evolution.

Competition. Representing market fundamentalism, a core feature of neoliberal ideology is a dogmatic political logic of competition as the only legitimate form of societal coordination and regulation (Eagleton-Pierce, 2021; Oreskes & Conway, 2023; Slobodian, 2023). In often biologicistic analogies, explicitly or implicitly drawing on ideas of social Darwinism ("survival of the fittest"), competition is "naturalized" as inherent to the human species, and revered as the "one best way" to ensure efficient allocation of resources, enabling progress in all areas of society and in all domains of life (Fremstad & Paul, 2022).

As the central institutions of neoliberalism, allegedly "free" markets are idealized as "quasi-divine" entities, omnipotent and unfaultable, capable of determining value, ensuring supply, and improving the quality of goods and services to advance human welfare within and across societies (LaMothe, 2017; Reid, 2001). Expansiveness of the market form corresponds with progressive commodification of the world. One of the most universal commodities is the human work capacity (labor power), traded and utilized in the form of "human resources" on societal (external) and organizational (internal) labor markets (Bryan, 2023; Howell & Kalleberg, 2024). According to the logic of competition, more and more areas of society are organized as contests or tournaments, based on rivalry and winner-looser mentality. In interpersonal relationships and interactions, this corrodes cohesion, collaboration, and non-competitive prosocial attitudes and behavior.

Instrumentality. The neoliberal political logic of instrumentality refers to the "objectification" and utilization of human beings for ends that are not in their genuine interest, but serve the goals of those in positions of power (Baldissarri & Andrighetto, 2021; Fowers, 2010). On labor markets, for instance, people are treated as tools or "resources", traded and "utilized" according to cost-benefit, means-end, or input-output calculations with the purpose to maximize economic objectives, specifically, profits, market share, or capital returns (Delbridge & Keenoy, 2010; Klikauer, 2019). Instrumentality is used to justify the reification and commodification of human life and social relationships, criticized in the

humanist tradition as a step towards political-economic fascism, negating or relativizing the absolute and unconditional value of human beings as ends in themselves (LaMothe, 2016; 2017; O’Kane, 2021). As such, instrumentality, the degradation of human life as a means to pursue monetary or material goals and interests, is genuinely at the very core of economistic versus humanist thinking (Kozlarek, 2021; Weber, 2023). Its logic reduces the intrinsic value of human life, productive activity, and social relationships to extrinsic and market-based economic utility.

Individuation. A humanist antipode to the neoliberal political logic of “rugged individualism”, is the antithetical concept of “individuation”, adapted from analytical individual psychology (Filion-Donato, 2021; Reedy et al., 2016; Rowan, 2015). The main focus here is the individual person, their self, or identity, with regard to the humanistic ideal of fully developing one’s potentials and existentially becoming “who one is meant to be” (Koole et al., 2019). Considered existential to the human condition, individuation is inherent in humanistic psychology in notions of personality development, personal growth, and (self-)insight. This is addressed in numerous concepts and ideas, such as following a calling or finding meaning, becoming a fully developed or fully functioning person, socio-moral development, self-realization, and attaining higher levels of consciousness (Nidich et al., 2000), as well as in transformational experiences of paradigm shifts, spiritual awakening, enlightenment, and epiphany (McDonald, 2008).

Contrary to neoliberal individualism, which results in social isolation and alienation (Becker et al., 2021; Franz, 2021), individuation involves self-transcendence, that is, overcoming self-interest and ego by cultivating empathy, altruism, and dedication to the need of others in meaningful social contexts and relationships. As a political logic, individuation mandates an emphasis on societal conditions for optimal personal development, such as support for life-long education and learning, as well as pursuit of diverse and heterogeneous forms and pathways of psychological and spiritual growth, including opportunities for collaboration, collective pursuit of common goals, and mutual support in absence of economic interest and pressure (Brien, 2011; Buch-Hansen & Nesterova, 2024; Filion-Donato, 2021). On the respective subordinated organizational level, the political logic of individuation is expressed in the social logic of humanistic management, inherent in notions of self-actualization at work, as opposed to neoliberal employee self-reliance.

Solidarity. The humanistic antipode to neoliberal logics of market competition are political logics regarding solidarity, which focus on social relationships and interactions, emphasizing structural support, cohesion and collaboration, shared use of resources, and collective organizing for the common good (Baker & Lee, 2020; Frémeaux & Michelson, 2017; Wilde, 2004). Solidarity is typically directed

at those who are in a similar situation as oneself, are facing struggles or adverse conditions, being exploited, marginalized, discriminated against, excluded, or otherwise disadvantaged (e.g., poverty, violence, injustice). Practical solidarity is expressed in the Marxian dictum that an ideal society should treat everybody, not according to contributions or possessions, but according to their individual needs and abilities (Rogers, 2022). Enacted solidarity requires perspective-taking, insight into common plights and shared interests, thus rendering it a core component of “class consciousness” (Eyerman, 1981). Counteracting social stratification and inequality as inherent polarizing forces of capitalist political-economy, solidarity demands redistributing resources from social groups disproportionately appropriating and accumulating them, to those who most need them (e.g., strong welfare systems, high taxes on wealth).

As a social logic, solidarity orients organizations and workplace practices towards egalitarian and democratic structures, mutual support, and communal organizing, e.g., reducing differences in status, pay, and privileges (Bhatt et al., 2024; Murillo et al., 2025). A positive fantasmatic logic behind solidarity is equality, emphasizing universality of the human condition, relatedness, and connection among all people, and inherent value of prosocial and democratic attitudes and actions (Weber, 2019). This humanistic vision contrasts with individual self-interest and personal advantage, expressed in neoliberal market fantasies of superiority, leverage, and competitive advantage, idealizing imageries of dominating and outperforming others.

Emancipation. The political logic of the central humanist ideal of emancipation, probably the most comprehensive concept discussed here, incorporates multiple layers of meaning (Boltanski, 2011; Domingues, 2017). Emancipation generally refers to liberation or attaining freedom by overcoming exploitative or limiting power-structures and dependence relationships. In classic social critique, this refers to abolishing class rule and coercive wage-labor relationships by overturning the one-sided appropriation of the means of production by the ruling elite (Brien, 2011; Eyerman, 1981; Fromm, 1962).

Complementing this original macro-emancipatory meaning, which has often been abandoned as unrealistic or utopian, the organizational literature emphasizes more limited “micro-emancipatory” actions, through which individuals resist domination or increase their freedom and self-determination at work (Huault et al., 2014). For instance, this can refer to finding ways of resisting pressure and counteracting control by management or by crafting meaning and opportunities for fulfillment in one’s work activities. It is controversial, if, or at what point, micro-emancipation actually maintains, stabilizes and contributes to domination and suppression, rather than challenging, overcoming or reducing it (Hornung & Höge, 2024).

Political logics of emancipation emphasize freedom and human rights for all people, not in the sense of economic liberties, but as a relieve from artificial economic scarcity, coercion, and perpetual crisis (e.g., unconditional income, decommodification of work, redistribution of societal wealth). Social logics promoting emancipation in the workplace are oriented towards autonomy and participatory influence, self-organization and self-determination, such as non-hierarchical groups, shared leadership, and organizational democracy (Unterrainer et al., 2022; Weber, 2019). This counter-model of humanistic, as opposed to neoliberal management, was framed as organizing for social transformation versus economic rationalization. The underlying fantasmatic logics contrast humanistic visions of true empowerment to realize freedom from oppression and economic necessity, with the neoliberal introjection of submission under the dehumanizing and reified rule of markets and capitalist institutions.

3.2. The organizational meso-level: Counteracting social logics

On the organizational meso-level, broader and abstract political logics are theorized to manifest in social logics underlying concrete work, employment, and management practices (Bal & Dóci, 2018). As outlined above, this segment of the framework has been previously applied by Hornung and Höge (2019), based on organizational theory, to analyze two antagonistic modes of workplace flexibility as either a manifestation of labor political power-tactics, primarily serving economic employer interests of work intensification and extensification (Catlaw & Marshall, 2018; Telford & Briggs, 2022), versus as an employee-oriented application of principles of humanistic management (Aktouf, 1992; Melé, 2016).

Accordingly, social logics of the neoliberal workplace construe relationships to self, others, and authorities in terms of self-reliance, contest situations, and economic rationalization (Hornung & Höge, 2019). For instance, this manifests in contingent employment and employee responsibility for skills and career development, performance-based rewards, and perpetual work intensification (Delbridge & Keenoy, 2010). In contrast, social logics of humanistic management draw on ideals of self-actualization of the person, sense of community among people, and social transformation of power structures. Exemplary practices are job security and self-determination at work, collective decisions and non-hierarchical collaboration, democratic structures, and socio-ecological sustainability (Aktouf, 1992; Alvesson & Willmott, 1992; Koole et al., 2019). The underlying two tripartite sets of antipodal constructs are summarized and compared in Table 3 and further elaborated below.

Table 3. Counteracting Social Logics at Organizational Meso-Level

	Self (Identity / Person)	Others (Interactions / People)	Authorities (Institutions / Power)
Social Logics of the Neo- liberal Workplace	Self-reliance: Contingent employment with limited commitments; employees responsible for performance, learning, careers, and health	Contests: Competitive allocation of performance-based rewards to individual employees, based on zero-sum, winner-take-all tournaments	Rationalization: Focus on increasing productivity, efficiency, and economic profits; continuous work intensification; employees as human resources
Social Logics of Humanistic Manage- ment	Self-actualization: Secure working conditions to support individual and collective autonomy, self- determination, learning, and socio- moral personality development	Community: Collective decisions and orientation towards consensus and common good; collaboration, diversity, and pluralism; consideration of individual needs	Transformation: Alternative organizing beyond hierarchies and control; participatory and democratic structures and processes; socio- ecological sustainability

Source: Own elaboration based on Hornung and Höge (2022)

Self-Reliance. On the organizational level, the political logic of individualism from the societal level translates into a social (managerial) logic of employee self-reliance in the neoliberal workplace (Edwards et al., 2003; Hornung et al., 2021; Mumby, 2019). According to neoliberal management principles, employment is offered on a time-restricted basis, contingent on demand and with high skills and performance requirements, but with limited employer obligations or commitments, thus ensuring economic organizational flexibility in utilizing human resources (e.g., labor costs). In a reversal of paternalistic employment strategies, employees are held responsible for “self-managing” their performance, health, learning, and careers, negating earlier notions of employer reliance and organizational support (McDonald & Bubna-Litic, 2012; Pérez-Zapata et al., 2016). Exceptions to this social logic of self-reliance are typically restricted to a small group of essential core employees, receiving privileged treatment (e.g., high pay, broad benefits), as long as their performance is essential and indispensable for

achieving organizational objectives (Howell & Kalleberg, 2024). The dialectic antipode to the neoliberal ideology of employee self-reliance is found in the concept of self-actualization at work from humanist psychology (Rowan, 2015). The former signifies a one-sided shift in risks and responsibilities that threatens and deprives the majority of employees of stable and supportive, meaningful, and developmental work experiences. The latter emphasizes the need to provide working conditions that support autonomy, psychological growth, and embeddedness within a humanistic approach to management and alternative organization.

Contests. Transmitting or implementing the more abstract political logic of competition from the societal level into actual practices at the institutional level, is an applied social logic of tournaments or contests (Becker et al., 2021; Connelly et al., 2014). In the neoliberal workplace, zero-sum, winner-take-all-type contests are pervasively organized for the competitive performance-based allocation of incentives and benefits among employees, thus incorporating and capitalizing on perpetual increases of reference standards and outcomes (Burchell et al., 2002). In particular, tournament-type contests are increasingly used to determine variable pay, promotions and development opportunities or continuous employment, as well as authorization of personalized work tasks and individual working conditions (Bal & Hornung, 2019; Mughal et al., 2022; Ng, 2017). From a humanistic management perspective, contests based on rivalry and establishing ranks of superiority and inferiority among employees should be replaced with and counteracted by communal forms of organizing based on solidarity, cultivating values of equality, justice and social cohesion (Baker & Lee, 2020). From this point of view, the (anti-)social logic of contests is bound to reinforce a dehumanizing winner-looser mentality and a superiority-inferiority mindset (LaMothe, 2016; 2017), drawing on latent fascist themes of meritocracy and social Darwinism that are inherent in the economic imperative of perpetual competition-based profit generation and capital accumulation.

Rationalization. The social logic of economic rationalization in contemporary workplaces reflects an organizational-level manifestation of the broader political logic of instrumentality at the societal level (Baldissarri & Andrighetto, 2021; Telford & Briggs, 2022). Both refer to the relationship between individuals and institutions of power and authority as an asymmetric complex of means and ends, subservience and domination, submission and superiority, etc. Rationalization refers to quantitative increases in economic efficiency, typically expressed in some outcome to input ratio (e.g., produced market value and labor costs), as the stated or implied goal of various management instruments, programs, and interventions (Catlaw & Marshall, 2018; Telford & Briggs, 2022). Particularly, the social logic of rationalization is embodied in the concept of high-performance work systems, resulting in continuous increases in productivity and profitability, driven by

competitive work intensification and precarious employment practices (Burchell et al., 2002; Howell & Kalleberg, 2024). While rationalization targets quantitative increases in economic efficiency and performance, hierarchically implemented top-down by management and at the expense of the health and wellbeing of the working individuals, the humanistic antipode of social transformation aims at qualitative changes towards communal ownership, structural organizational democratization, self-determination, and radically altered working conditions and experiences (Battilana et al., 2022). In contrast, rationalization represents the dictum of treating employees as human resources, striving for their optimal utilization to achieve economic gains.

Self-Actualization. On the organizational level of a social logic applied to the workplace, the self-directed political logic of the humanist idea of individuation was identified as corresponding with the humanistic management concept of self-actualization at work (Bridgman et al., 2019; Schoofs et al., 2022). Organizing for self-actualization involves stable and secure working conditions, designed to support individual and collective self-determination, self-efficacy, and socio-moral development, rather than being determined by economic pressure and power struggles (Pircher Verdorfer et al., 2015). In addition to individual autonomy and learning, this includes opportunities to cooperatively pursue personally significant and societally beneficial work tasks within participatory frameworks of workplace democracy and social and ecological sustainability (Battilana et al., 2022). A manifestation of the political logic of individuation, the normative ideal of self-actualization, as a social logic of humanistic management, facilitates progressive moral development and realization of higher-order needs for growth, belonging, prosocial impact, and self-transcendence on the individual level (Koole et al., 2019; Matheson et al., 2021; Melé, 2016). The underlying fantasmatic logic of radical humanist consciousness manifests in a developmental orientation towards individual and collective psychological growth and evolution.

Community. A core social logic of humanistic management, referring to supportive relationships and interactions among employees, is found in the principle of community and collaboration towards the common good (Bhatt et al., 2024; Murillo et al., 2025). This aspect is included here as the practical application of a political logic of solidarity and as a conceptual antipode to the social logic of competitive contests in the neoliberal workplace (Baker & Lee, 2020; Frémeaux & Michelson, 2017; Melé, 2016). With regard to management practices emphasizing employee-oriented flexibility, sense of community shows in support for personalized and dissimilar but considered and fair treatment according to individual needs and situational requirements, emphasizing win-win strategies and generative resources, such as learning, positive work relationships, and a socio-morally supportive organizational climate (Pircher Verdorfer et al., 2015). Communal forms of organizing are characterized by egalitarian and participatory

structures and decision-making processes, allowing for the integrative balancing of pluralist interests and diverging goals of various stakeholders, such as employees, managers, investors, and customers, towards the genuine common good (Argandoña, 1998; McPhail et al., 2024). Such an approach exposes and negates the progressively hegemonial (unchallenged and unquestioned) unitarist and economistic logic of managerialism, counterfactually posing as an embodiment of rationality and an orientation toward the common good, while really advancing particular interests and power structures.

Transformation. The conceptual antipode to the authority-related dimension of economic rationalization at the organizational level, the social logic of transformation is not aimed at achieving efficiency-oriented (quantitative) “improvements” of the organizational status-quo. Instead, it is directed towards emancipatory (qualitative) changes at the institutional level and in the workplace (Battilana et al., 2022; Huault et al., 2014). Relating to the power invested in authorities and institutions, social transformation means transitioning towards alternative forms of organizing, humanist ideas of self-determination, self-actualization, and individuation through autonomy, social influence, participation, and democratization (Unterrainer et al., 2022). This implies transcending conventional approaches to organizational power and control through hierarchies, more or less subtle coercion, manipulation, psychological subjectification, and governmentality (Hornung, 2024; Hornung et al., 2022). In the context of flexible workplace practices, transformative aspects have been explored for creating employee-oriented personalized organizational structures and processes (Hornung & Höge, 2019). As a social logic, transformation recognizes, formulates, and communicates the need for radical social reforms of the institutions of capitalism. These, however, appear theoretically and practically impossible within the economistic structural and ideological framework of neoliberalism.

3.3. The individual micro-level: Counteracting fantasmatic logics

On the individual micro-level, drawing on psychodynamic theory, fantasmatic ego-oriented, marketing-oriented, and authoritarian logics of the neoliberal social character are contrasted with corresponding facets of radical humanist consciousness (Fromm, 2010; Funk, 2010; 2023; 2024; Maccoby, 2002). Aspects of relatedness to one’s own self, other people, and authorities are represented by antipodal constructs of success versus evolution, superiority versus equality, and submission versus empowerment. Individualistic conceptions of self-reliance, competitive contests, and instrumental rationalization demand orientations towards outstanding achievement and outperforming others, while submitting to the rules of “the game”, dictated by economic institutions and market forces (Bryan, 2023; Layton, 2014; LaMothe, 2017). In contrast, individuation and self-actualization, solidarity and community, and emancipation and transformation,

are assumed to promote prosocial values of personal development, egalitarianism, and mobilization of co-active power to challenge and change systems of oppression, exploitation, and inequality (Hornung et al., 2021). Psychological internalization of the respective fantasmatic logics is assumed to provide the basis for actively supporting organizational practices and societal systems reflecting neoliberal versus humanist social and political logics, in a dynamic of reciprocal determination, termed “elective affinities” (Jost et al., 2009). Thus, people consciously and unconsciously reproduce organizational and societal structures corresponding to their ideological preformation (Springer, 2012; Vitus, 2017). Descriptions of the respective psychodynamic constructs, resembling fantasmatic logics relating to self, others, and authorities at the individual level, are summarized in Table 4 and are discussed in more detail in the following sections. Accordingly, the neoliberal social character is conceptualized in terms of compulsions demanding success, superiority, and submission, whereas radical humanist consciousness is portrayed as oriented towards evolution, equality, and empowerment.

Table 4. Counteracting Fantasmatic Logics at Individual Micro-Level

	Self (Identity / Person)	Others (Interactions / People)	Authorities (Institutions / Power)
Fantas- matic Logics of Neoliberal Social Character	Success: Idealizing excellence, outstanding achievements, and exceptional performance; overcoming odds of the situation to be successful	Superiority: Outperforming and dominating others, winner-loser mentality; inequality as result of individual differences and effort	Submission: Responding adaptively to market forces; conforming with social roles, seeking status and recognition; system-justification
Fantas- matic Logics of Radical Humanist Consci- ousness	Evolution: Emphasizing psychological growth and personality development; knowledge, self- insight, higher-level social and ecological consciousness	Equality: Realizing universality of the human experience, dignity, and connection; perspective-taking for social justice and material equality	Empowerment Active role in radical social reform, challenging and overcoming limiting power structures, oppression, exploitation, and inequality

Source: Own elaboration based on Hornung and Höge (2022)

Success. Nested within the loop of the superordinated political logic of individualism, and transported via the associated applied social logic of self-reliance, the self-focused neoliberal fantasmatic logic of success on the psychological level manifests as an individual character orientation towards outstanding achievements and perpetual performance (Bay-Cheng et al., 2015). Excellence and exceptionality are idealized as necessary for overcoming the odds of the situation, such as the forces of social stratification and market dynamics. Similar ideas have been formulated in the analysis of individualistic ideologies of self-willed wealth and self-willed success (Greene, 2008). The broader theme has been described as a fantasmatic logic of growth and progress (Bal & Dóci, 2018). In social character theory, a narcissistic focus on personal success and social admiration is a core feature of the most recently identified ego-oriented personality type of the neoliberal era (Funk, 2010; 2024; Maccoby, 2002; McDonald et al., 2007). The underlying archetype is the flexible individual without any fixed attributes, deriving value only from its immediate actions and their calculable utility to self and instrumental others within economic exchange relationships.

Superiority. Closely related to the fantasmatic logic of success, idolization of superiority, dominance, and supremacy is a direct consequence of the political logic of competition, as implemented in the social logic of perpetual contests and tournament situations (Beattie, 2019; Priels, 2023). Superiority puts the focus on outperforming and dominating others, cultivating a winner-loser or superior-inferior mentality, where inequality and injustice are legitimized as results of individual differences in motivation, abilities, and efforts (Layton, 2014). Neoliberal fantasies of superiority thus proliferate acceptance of status differences and social stratification, hierarchical order, and the (ever widening) gap in wealth and power between political-economic societal elites and underprivileged or marginalized social groups, also referred to as social dominance orientation (Lynch & Kalaitzake, 2020). Associated fantasies of superiority are an important aspect of the competitive, marketing-oriented social character instilled by advanced market-based capitalism, initiating the accelerated transition to the neoliberal era.

Submission. The fantasmatic logic of submission represents the psychological relationship of the individual with institutions of power and authority, as manifesting from an overarching political logic of human instrumentality and implemented through the applied social logic of economic rationalization in contemporary workplaces (Funk, 2023; Baars & Scheepers, 1993). The psychoanalytic term of submission is used with reference to the alleged ideal of responding adaptively to changing situations and market requirements, successfully fulfilling social roles and obtaining wealth, status, and recognition by acknowledging, accepting, and succumbing to the order of political-socio-economic institutions, injunctions, and implications of neoliberal capitalism (LaMarre et al., 2019). Psychodynamically, this type of active system-justification

and stabilization relates to the compliance, conformity, and obedience of the authoritarian social character of earlier stages of the historical emergence of capitalist structures within oppressive traditional feudal systems and modern dictatorships (Laskin, 2019; Tauber & Landis, 1975). In any case, submission refers to the projection of own vital forces and attribution of omnipotence to revered, idolized powerful institutional entities, either autocratic states or oppressive market forces.

Evolution. The self-focused dimension of the fantasmatic logic of radical humanism is conceptualized as an orientation towards personal growth and evolution (Cortina, 2024; Lombardo, 2014). This state of consciousness corresponds with, or is a manifestation of, the social logic of self-actualization, as a cross-level projection of the political logic of individuation (Filion-Donato, 2021; Saleem et al., 2021). Specifically, this reflects an aspect of identity, oriented towards personal evolution, in the sense of organic psychological and spiritual development and growth, deep learning, maturation, and realization of higher-level consciousness (Buch-Hansen & Nesterova, 2024; Neal et al., 1999). For instance, an archetypal fantasmatic logic of humanistic evolution involves narratives of a personal journey, overcoming adversity, growth, self-insight, and homecoming (McDonald, 2008). These developmental or transcendental imageries differ from performative or functionalistic neoliberal fantasies of individualized success and quantitative growth, excellence, and exceptionality, which are mandated by social logics of self-reliance and “responsibilization” against the “odds of the market”, serving functions of normalizing the shifting risks and externalized adverse outcomes projected upon individual members of society (LaMarre et al., 2019; Lazzarato, 2009; Lynch, & Kalaitzake, 2020). In contrast, humanistic fantasies of evolution emphasize the realization of human potentialities for full and comprehensive development in psychological, physiological, social, and spiritual dimensions (Funk, 2024; Steingard, 2005). The normative humanist ideal of individual and collective evolution thus contradicts the fantasmatic neoliberal logic of perpetual growth and “progress” towards economic or other externally specified objectives.

Equality. Focusing on relationships and interactions with other people on the individual level, the humanist fantasmatic logic of equality reflects a manifestation of political and social logics of solidarity and community on the societal and organizational levels of analysis (Rozeboom, 2022; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009). More specifically, affirmative attitudes towards equality constitute the psychological foundation of communal forms of organizing and solidarity towards other individuals and social groups. Importantly, equality is based on realizing the universality of the human experience, dignity, and interconnectedness of all human being, as well as perspective-taking to promote equal rights and social justice for all (Anderson, 2023). Thus, equality is the psychodynamic antithesis to neoliberal fantasies of superiority and dominance, which serve to legitimize and normalize

even the most unreasonable and intolerable degrees and manifestations of political-economic inequality and injustice (Howell & Kalleberg, 2024; Lazzarato, 2009). Insights into the necessity and virtue of equality, thus, can provide an antidote of humanist consciousness to the distorting and disfiguring, dehumanizing psychological effects of economistic thinking.

Empowerment. The control-oriented component of radical humanist consciousness, the fantasmatic logic of empowerment, relates to bottom-up actions directed toward authorities or institutions, aimed at resisting, challenging, and overcoming power structures, oppression, exploitation and inequality (Lincoln et al., 2002; McLaughlin, 2016). As such, empowerment is conceptualized as the individual-level or psychological prerequisite of an applied social logic of institutional transformation, as a manifestation of a broader political logic of emancipation (Domingues, 2017). Depending on the focus on psychological or structural aspects, empowerment can be operationalized in terms of the necessary means, knowledge, motivation, direction, collective self-efficacy, and organized efforts towards enacting social reforms and bringing about change (Temper et al., 2018; van Baarle et al., 2024). Humanistic fantasies of empowerment are not limited to exceptional accounts of revolutionary action, but comprise everyday acts of civil courage and disobedience, spontaneous moral outrage over unfair conditions, and resistance or refusal to participate in an oppressive and exploitative system (Vollhardt et al., 2020). Alongside orientations towards personal evolution and equality, empowerment, as collective power to overcome a repressive, unjust, and limiting status quo, is a cornerstone of radical humanist consciousness, antithetical to deformations of neoliberal social character.

4. Conclusions

The suggested model offers a dialectic dynamic tripartite framework of neoliberal ideology and counteracting humanist ideals on multiple levels and with reference to different domains of socio-psychological relatedness. Transcending simplifying assumptions of one-directional cause-and-effect relationships, the underlying socio-psychodynamic analysis assumes complementary dialectic interdependencies, cascading across systems-levels via bi-directional processes of top-down and bottom-up influence (Fuchs & Hofkirchner, 2005). On the individual, psychological level, these dynamics manifest in self-reinforcing processes of (self-)selection and socialization that have been conceptualized in terms of reciprocal determination or "elective affinities" (Jost et al., 2009), shaping social character structures with regard to affective and behavioral patterns, adopted belief systems, and resulting states of consciousness (Foster, 2017; Hornung & Höge, 2021). Starting point of this analysis on the societal macro-level is a trinity of neoliberal political logics, identifying individualism, competition, and instrumentality as core principles governing economically advanced Western

capitalist societies (Bal & Dóci, 2018). In a dialectic analysis, drawing on analytical social psychology, these economistic and socio-morally corrosive political logics are contrasted on the societal macro-level with radical humanist ideas of individuation, solidarity, and emancipation, representing antipodal “productive” relationships to self, others, and authority (Durkin, 2014; Fromm, 1962; 2010; Funk, 2023; 2024; Rowan, 2015; Wilde, 2004). On the organizational meso-level, neoliberal political logics are inherent in workplace practices embodying social logics of self-reliance, contests, and rationalization, whereas humanistic management practices emphasize oppositional principles of self-actualization, community, and transformation (Hornung & Höge, 2019). These more applied social logics, in turn, mediate or channel the socializing forces of political logics from the societal level towards shaping unconscious (sub- or semi-conscious) psychodynamic imageries and narratives, i.e., fantasmatic logics, on the individual micro-level (Glynos, 2008; 2011; Vitus, 2017). Based on psychoanalytic theory, the latter are exemplified by archetypes of success, superiority, and submission (Layton, 2014), reflecting ego-oriented, marketing-oriented, and authoritarian components of the neoliberal social character (Foster, 2017; Funk, 2010; 2024). These complexes are theoretically opposed to antithetical ideals of humanist consciousness, incorporating productive orientations towards personal evolution, equality, and empowerment. Aggregated fantasmatic logics also exert an upward influence in shaping institutions and practices on the organizational meso-level, as well as on the overarching political-economic macro-level. Pathological tendencies of neoliberalism manifest particularly drastically in the sphere of work (Bromley & Meyer, 2021; Catlaw & Marshall, 2018). Particularly, this refers to contemporary management practices capitalizing on employee self-reliance and self-interest, instead of offering job security, meaningful activities, and employer responsibility. In such workplace regimes, competition for jobs and pay on internal and external labor markets is prioritized over social cohesion, collaboration, and the common good (Crowley & Hodson, 2014; Mughal et al., 2022; Telford & Briggs, 2022). Workers are regularly subjected to a multitude of intrusive interventions, from technological surveillance, continuous performance assessment, and motivational personality trainings, to permanent organizational restructuring and change management (Bal & Dóci, 2018; Hornung et al., 2021). Importantly, these measures are first and foremost instrumentally aimed towards achieving economic objectives (e.g., efficiency and effectiveness) that are not primarily benefitting employees who are mobilized for purposes not aligned with their own best interest (Jost et al., 2003). Increasing hegemonic proliferation of the corrosive managerial ideology of “unitarism” notwithstanding (Delbridge & Keenoy, 2010), however, employment remains characterized by inherent conflicts of interest on the societal (e.g., labor protection), organizational (e.g., participation, benefits), and individual (e.g., time, effort) level. In theory, humanistic management can at least buffer or mediate these conflicts by introducing additional layers or aspects of employee-

oriented workplace practices and processes (Aktouf, 1992; Melé, 2016). Implementation of flexible work and employment practices within a neoliberal paradigm, however, provides a vehicle for economic rationalization, work intensification and extensification, and divisive anti-union labor-political power tactics (Hornung & Höge, 2019). Whereas the social logics of neoliberal workplaces and counteracting attempts of humanistic management have previously been the focus of some attention, future research needs to address more in-depth not only the political-economic macro-level, but particularly the individual micro-level, based on psychodynamic and psychoanalytical theorizing (Foster, 2017; Funk, 2024; Glynos, 2011; Hornung & Höge, 2021). The humanist principle of synergistic unity of insights regarding external and internal social realities emphasizes complementarity of the (externally directed) denaturalization and critique of societal ideologies with (internally directed) critical self-reflection and psychological development (Fromm, 1962). The presented analysis seeks to contribute to both, based on cultivating critical and radical humanist philosophy to counteract socially corrosive tendencies of neoliberal economic rationality (Hornung & Höge, 2022; Weber, 2023). This explicitly includes challenging the mental (cognitive and affective) representations of the normative structure of neoliberal concepts suggested here. Admittedly, lived experiences include a fuller range of physiological, psychological, and spiritual aspects, which can provide guidance on how to adopt, enact, and promote humanist ideals on a personal level. Although primarily abstract and academic in nature, the present considerations seek to provide a starting point for initiating and supporting efforts towards challenging and changing neoliberally contaminated unconscious mindsets (LaMothe, 2016; 2017). Yet, it seems clear that such an undertaking requires not only theoretical and discursive elaboration, but equally, dialogical and practical deliberation, for instance, in the context of academic activism and engaged scholarship (Ergene et al., 2021; Rahbari et al., 2024). What is at stake is nothing less than the normative basis of a civilized society, where social responsibility and ecological sustainability are prioritized over profits and power serving capital accumulation and rule of political-economic elites. Hopefully, the developed framework of multi-level constructs and their dynamics can prove useful to an emerging paradigm of critical applied psychology (Bal & Dóci, 2018; Hornung, 2025; McDonald & Bubna-Litic, 2012), combining elements of social, political, and psychoanalytic theory with accepted methods of rigorous qualitative and quantitative empirical research. The presented matrix of constructs offers abundant pathways for different approaches of empirical research drawing on the broader streams of the critique of neoliberalism and business ethics, which, to this date, appear to be largely unconnected. While empirical psychological research has started to address the socially corrosive side of neoliberal ideology, the antipodes of radical humanist ideals, so far, have received far less attention (Hornung, et al., 2025). Considering the current state of affairs,

this is plausible. However, in the spirit of the dialectics of hope (Pierosara, 2021), the uncompromising analysis and radical critique of the dystopian status quo, urgently needs to be complemented by an unapologetically utopian perspective on the still unrealized potentials of radical humanism and critical-emancipatory theory and praxis.

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