

# Positioning Political, Social, and Fantasmatic Logics of Neoliberal Ideology and Counteracting Humanist Ideals in an Extended Multi-Level Framework

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**Abstract:** Discussed is a multi-level framework of complex and dynamic normative forces shaping contemporary societies. Building blocks include critiques of neoliberalism, (psycho-)analytic social psychology, and radical humanist ethics. Extending an existing model of political, social, and fantasmatic logics of neoliberal ideology, societal, organizational, and psychological structures and processes are subjected to dialectical analysis. The proposed model positions dimensions of neoliberal economic ideology versus humanist ethical ideals as antipodes on three levels (macro, meso, micro) and with respect to three domains of relatedness (identity, interactions, institutions). On the societal macro-level, neoliberal political logics of individualism, competition, and instrumentality oppose humanist ideals of individuation, solidarity, and emancipation. On the organizational meso-level, social logics of neoliberal workplaces prescribe self-reliance, competition, and rationalization, while humanistic management claims self-actualization, community, and transformation. On the individual micro-level, psychoanalytic theory suggests that fantasmatic neoliberal logics of success, superiority, and submission are antithetical to humanist values of evolution, equality, and empowerment. Drawing on social character theory, the framework shows, how neoliberal ideologies influence modes of relatedness towards oneself, others, and authorities, resembling ego-oriented, market-driven, and authoritarian tendencies. Humanist ideals are positioned as countervailing re-civilizing ethical forces. Linking psychoanalytic theories and theorizing on ideologies, the model offers a dynamic framework of the corrosive effects of neoliberal political economy as well as a basis for envisioning and mobilizing potentials for radical humanist transformation.

**Keywords:** Neoliberal Ideology, Humanist Ideals, Analytic Social Psychology, Psychodynamics, Social Character Theory, Societal Transformation

## Introduction

The objective of this contribution is to elaborate and extend a model of neoliberal ideology (Bal & Dóci, 2018), based on notions of radical humanism (Brien, 2011; Durkin, 2014; Saleem et al. 2021) and (psycho-)analytic social psychology (Brunner et al., 2013; Parker & Hook, 2008; Funk, 2024). The underlying purpose is developing a dialectic understanding of counteracting normative undercurrents shaping the 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 (Hornung & Höge, 2019, 2021, 2022, 2024; Hornung et al., 2021). Rooted in classic economic theorizing that constitutes the ideological basis of capitalism, neoliberalism has become the globally dominant (hegemonic) political-economic doctrine (Plehwe et al., 2007). The contradictory and anti-humanist internal logic of this interest-guided system of ideas and practices has been extensively analyzed and criticized (Beattie, 2019; Giroux, 2005; Harvey, 2007; Haskaj, 2018; LaMothe, 2016; Larner, 2000). For instance, neoliberalism has been framed as a set of 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 the particular interests 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 supreme rule of the interests of global economic elites through a totalization of the logic of money and markets, generating luxurious wealth and unrivaled power for a small minority, while “externalizing” harmful effects and social costs, thus imposing increased demands, risks, austerity, and poverty upon the vast majority (Beattie, 2019; Giroux, 2005; LaMothe, 2016; Plehwe et al., 2007). Recapitulating earlier arguments, this contribution is guided by ideas of radical humanism, as represented by social-philosopher and psychoanalyst Erich Fromm (Durkin, 2014; 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 the nested levels of abstract political (societal), applied social (organizational), and embodied psychological “fantasmatic” (individual) logics (Hornung & Höge, 2021, 2022). The resulting multi-level framework represents dominant (hegemonic), and latent (potential) aspects of the normative fabric of advanced capitalist societies, institutions, and subjects. In the following, its theoretical basis will be outlined.

### **Counteracting Logics of Neoliberal Ideology and 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 material conditions determine human consciousness with the dynamic conception of personality in psychoanalytic theory, the collective social character results from an interaction between dominant socio-economic conditions and libidinous dispositions of individuals (Brien, 2011; Brunner et al., 2013). The unique character of any given person is a function of the dynamic interaction between systemic social character tendencies and individual psychological predispositions, partly 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 character was identified as a complementary type in advanced capitalist societies governed by neoliberal hegemony (Funk, 2010, 2024; Foster, 2017). Accordingly, 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 “pathological”, promoting destructive (e.g., egoism, greed, rivalry) and impeding productive character orientations (e.g., altruism, dedication, personal development). Largely compatible with this assessment, the model by Bal and Dóci (2018) postulates individualism, competition, and instrumentality as political logics of neoliberalism. These abstract political logics are assumed to 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, aspirations). Several social (e.g., contractualization, quantitative assessment) and fantasmatic logics (e.g., meritocracy, perpetual gains, progress) 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 individuals, 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 were seen as mirrored 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 elaborates this suggested multi-level model (Hornung & Höge, 2022) through the dialectic extension and elaboration of complementary antipodes to neoliberal economism by 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). 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 as an analytic grid to contrast the humanistic ideal of employee-oriented management practices that contribute to or facilitate 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 economic performativity (Hornung & Höge, 2019). On the individual level, fantasmatic logics of neoliberal ideology were contrasted with humanistic aspirations of evolution, equality, and empowerment, discussed 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 the higher-level political and social logics underlying societal and economic institutions. The resulting dialectic multi-level model is displayed in Table 1. Entries are allocated to three levels, each containing references to relationships to self, others, and authorities. The latter taxonomy is introduced as an additional structuring element, based on radical humanist theorizing on social embeddedness of identity, interactions, and institutions, reflecting the own person, other people, and structures of power as central and interdependent foci 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 presented in a cursory fashion, including preliminary definitions of constructs and associated processes of influence. A more developed account will be provided in the full-length article.

Table 1. Counteracting Logics of Neoliberal Ideology and Humanist Ideals

Counteracting Paradigms	Neoliberal Ideology	Humanist Ideals
Political Logics (Macro-level)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Individualism</li> <li>● Competition</li> <li>● Instrumentality</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Individuation</li> <li>● Solidarity</li> <li>● Emancipation</li> </ul>
Social Logics (Meso-level)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Self-reliance</li> <li>● Contests</li> <li>● Rationalization</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Self-actualization</li> <li>● Community</li> <li>● Transformation</li> </ul>
Fantasmatic Logics (Micro-level)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Success</li> <li>● Superiority</li> <li>● Submission</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Evolution</li> <li>● Equality</li> <li>● Empowerment</li> </ul>

*Source: Based on Hornung and Höge (2022)*

### Political, Social, and Fantasmatic Logics Relating to Self, Others, and Authorities

Political, social, and fantasmatic logics describe complementary normative components of comprehensive belief systems, referring to the 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 workplace practices, the third are implied or embodied, influencing psychodynamic processes, motives, and orientations (Glynos, 2008, 2011; Hornung et al., 2021). As described above, on each level, economic 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). On each level, identity of the focal person, interactions with other people, and authority of institutions of power are differentiated as important domains of social-psychological relatedness. On the societal macro-level, the three core political logics of neoliberal ideology, individualism, competition, and instrumentality, 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 frameworks of neoliberalism and humanism, these six constructs are preliminarily described in Table 2.

Table 2. Counteracting Political Logics at the Societal Macro-Level

Domains of Relatedness	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 particular interests according to 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 with others; sharing resources with those facing adversity; recognizing the universality of human experience	Emancipation: Exposing, resisting, overcoming and transforming unbalanced and limiting power-dependence relationships; liberation from oppression and exploitation

*Source: Based on Hornung and Höge (2022)*

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 manifest 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 ecological orientations (Aktouf, 1992; Alvesson and Willmott, 1992; Koole et al., 2019). The underlying two antipodal tripartite sets of constructs are preliminarily described and compared in Table 3.

Table 3. Counteracting Social Logics at the Organizational Meso-Level

Domains of Relatedness	Self (Identity / Person)	Others (Interactions / People)	Authorities (Institutions / Power)
Social Logics of the Neoliberal Workplace	Self-reliance: Contingent employment arrangements with limited commitments; employees responsible for performance, health, learning, and careers	Contests: Competitive allocation of performance-based rewards to individual employees based on zero-sum, winner-take-all-type tournaments	Rationalization: Focus on increasing economic performance and efficiency; work intensification; employees as human resources
Social Logics of Humanistic Management	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, command, and control; participatory and democratic structures and processes; socio-ecological sustainability

*Source: Based on Hornung and Höge (2022)*

On the individual micro-level, drawing on psychodynamic theorizing, fantasmatic ego-oriented, marketing-oriented, and authoritarian logics of the neoliberal social character (Fromm, 2010; Funk, 2010, 2024; Maccoby, 2002) are contrasted with corresponding facets of radical humanist consciousness. Forms 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. Accordingly, individualistic conceptions of self-reliance, competitive contests, and instrumental rationalization demand individual orientations towards outstanding achievement and outperforming others, while submitting to the "rule of the game", dictated by economic institutions and market forces (Layton, 2014). In contrast, notions of individuation and self-actualization, solidarity and community, and emancipation and transformation, are assumed to promote prosocial orientations towards personal development, egalitarianism, and mobilization of co-active power to challenge and change systems of oppression, exploitation, and inequality (Hornung et al., 2021). Concomitantly, psychological introjection and 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 actively reproduce organizational and societal structures corresponding to their

ideological preformation (Springer, 2012; Vitus, 2017). Preliminary definitions of the respective psychodynamic constructs, resembling fantasmatic logics relating to self, others, and authorities, at the individual level, are provided in Table 4.

Table 4. Counteracting Fantasmatic Logics at the Individual Micro-Level

Domains of Relatedness	Self (Identity / Person)	Others (Interactions / People)	Authorities (Institutions / Power)
Fantasmatic Logics of Neoliberal Social Character	Success: Idealizing excellence, outstanding achievements, and exceptional performance; overcoming odds of the situation	Superiority: Focus on 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
Fantasmatic Logics of Radical Humanist Consciousness	Evolution: Psychological growth and personality development; knowledge, self-insight, higher-level social and ecological consciousness	Equality: Realizing universality of human experience, dignity, and interconnectedness; 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: Based on Hornung and Höge (2022)*

### Preliminary Conclusions

The suggested model offers a dialectic dynamic framework of neoliberal ideology and counteracting humanist ideals on different 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. On the individual, psychological level, these dynamics manifest in self-reinforcing processes of (self-)selection and socialization that have been analyzed in terms of reciprocal determination and elective affinities (Jost et al., 2009), shaping social character structures with regard to affective and behavioral patterns, adopted belief systems, and 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, prescribing individualism, competition, and instrumentality as core principles governing economically advanced Western capitalist societies (Bal & Dóci, 2018). In a dialectic analysis, these economic 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.

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 (fantasmatic logics) on the individual micro-level (Glynos, 2008, 2011; Vitus, 2017). Based on psychoanalytic theory, the latter are exemplified by archetypal fantasies 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. On the other hand, aggregated fantasmatic logics also exert an upward influence in shaping institutions and practices on the organizational meso-level as well as on the political-economic macro-level.

Pathological tendencies of neoliberalism manifest particularly drastic in the sphere of work, notably, in management practices capitalizing on employee self-reliance and self-interest, instead of job security, meaningful activities, and employer responsibility; competition for jobs and pay on internal and external labor markets, instead of focusing on collaboration and the common good; and subjection of workers to a multitude of interventions, from supervision and performance assessment, motivational trainings to 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 those who are mobilized for purposes not aligned with their own best interest (Jost et al. 2003). Increasing hegemonic proliferation of a managerial ideology of “unitarism” notwithstanding (Delbridge & Keenoy, 2010), employment is 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.

While, in theory, humanistic management can buffer these conflicts by introducing additional layers of employee-oriented workplace practices (Aktouf, 1992; Melé, 2016), implementation of flexible work and employment practices within a neoliberal paradigm provides a vehicle for economic rationalization, work intensification and extensification, and divisive anti-union labor-political power tactics (Hornung & Höge, 2019). However, whereas the social logics of neoliberal workplaces and counteracting attempts of humanistic management have previously been the focus of 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 the 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 intends to contribute to both, based on cultivating radical humanist philosophy to counteract socially corrosive tendencies of neoliberal economic rationality (Hornung & Höge, 2022). This explicitly includes challenging the mental (cognitive and affective) representations of the normative structure of neoliberal concepts suggested here. Certainly, actual lived experiences include a fuller range of physical, psychological, and spiritual aspects, which provide guidance on how to adopt, enact, and promote humanist ideals on a personal level. Although primarily abstract and academic in nature, the present preliminary considerations seek to provide a starting point for initiating and supporting such efforts at changing neoliberally contaminated unconscious mindsets (LaMothe, 2016). Yet, it is clear that such an undertaking requires not only theoretical and discursive elaboration, but even more so dialogical and practical deliberation in the context of academic activism and engaged scholarship (Rahbari et al., 2024). What is at stake is nothing less than the normative basis for a civilized society, where social responsibility and ecological sustainability are prioritized over profits and power, serving capital accumulation and rule of political-economic elites.

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