

Update on Recent Research into Psychological and Political Significance of Neoliberal Ideology in the Context of Escalating Polycrisis

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ABSTRACT: This article reports background and results of a research program on psychological and political significance of neoliberal ideology in the social-ecological polycrisis. Neoliberalism proliferates and justifies globally dominant political-economic practices enforcing market expansion and deregulation, entrepreneurial freedoms, supremacy of capital interests, and dismantling of welfare states. Simultaneously, it pervades and shapes psychological processes, belief systems, and behaviors. After reviewing theoretical and methodological foundations of system-justifying neoliberal ideologies, exemplary results are reported, pertaining to the ecological climate crisis, the social crisis of eroding civil solidarity, and the political crisis of liberal democracies. Respective surveys studies use the neoliberal ideological beliefs questionnaire with sub-dimensions of individualism, competition, and instrumentality. One study reported relationships with system justification, environmental consciousness, climate-protective behavior, and estimated carbon footprint, confirming a detrimental role of neoliberal ideological beliefs. A second study established connections between neoliberal ideological beliefs, moral disengagement, and absence of civic engagement for people seeking refuge. A third explored correlational patterns in neoliberal beliefs, political attitudes, and party preferences, showing tendencies towards right-wing populism and social dominance orientation. Further, interviews were conducted among socio-economically disadvantaged groups. Contradicting their interests, participants reproduced neoliberal individualism, competition, and instrumentality through meritocratic explanations for poverty and rejection of wealth redistribution. Underlying psychological processes included reduction of cognitive dissonance and appeasement of epistemic and existential motives. Psychodynamics of neoliberal ideology in the polycrisis are highlighted, including self-reinforcing spirals, corrosion of transformative capacities, and a xenophobic authoritarian turn. Implications for social transformation and research are discussed.

KEYWORDS: Capitalocene, Neoliberalism, Political Economy, Ideological Beliefs, System Justification, Socio-Ecological Polycrisis, False Consciousness, Critique

1. Introduction

The rapidly escalating worldwide socio-ecological and political-economic polycrisis raises the urgent question of whether the globally dominating regime of neoliberal capitalism can ever be sufficiently reformed to be part of the solution to meet today's most pressing challenges – or rather needs to be completely dismantled and fundamentally transformed in

order to become ecologically and socially sustainable (Kommandeur et al., 2025; Petrova, 2024; Temper et al., 2018). One does not need to be alarmist or engage in catastrophizing to recognize that the human species, and the world with it, has currently entered a most concerning phase of socio-historical development, which is frequently referred to as the '*Anthropocene*' to signify the negative human impact on the planet (Angus, 2016; Barrios, 2017). Arguably more fitting, however, is the recently suggested label of '*Capitalocene*' (Horvath & Lovász, 2025; Moore, 2016). The latter concept stresses the fact that it is not the human species as such, but rather its extractivist, exploitative, and expansionist economic system, driven by a perpetual blind and crisis-prone process of competitive capital accumulation, that progressively and irreversibly damages the planet and endangers its inhabitants (Trott, 2025). Particularly shocking, from a socio-political perspective, is the apparent disempowerment of democratic governance and collective agency to restrain, regulate or reign in this violently (self-)destructive system (Giannone, 2014). In fact, the latter raises serious questions not only about the economic and political, but also the social and psychological basis of this sheer impotence. These and related considerations formed the backdrop for initiating a research program into the political significance of neoliberal ideology in the socio-ecological crisis from the perspective of applied psychology (Hornung et al., 2025a, 2025b, 2025c). Drawing on rich theoretical traditions of ideology-critique, along with current methods of empirical social science, this research program tries to continue and advance the cause of critical social theory within the epistemological framework of contemporary academic psychology. This undertaking converges with other recent attempts to problematize the unsustainable, unethical, and anti-social core of neoliberal capitalism within critical social, cultural, and ecopolitical psychology (Adams et al., 2029; Trott, 2025). Situated within this broader context, the present article aims to provide an outline and overview of the current state of the focal research endeavor for an interested academic audience. This includes some initial theoretical considerations, methodological developments, presentation and discussion of exemplary empirical results, preliminary conclusions, and implications for the continuation and extension of this stream of research in the near future. All of these aspects will be further elaborated in the following sections.

2. Theoretical Background

Political-economic practices, policies, and discourses of globalized neoliberal financial capitalism have become increasingly hegemonic within the last four to five decades. Among other things, this refers to the perpetual expansion, deregulation, and idolization of markets and financial transactions, prioritization of the interest of capital owners and entrepreneurial freedoms, privatization of public assets and services, and denigration, dismantling, and demolition of institutions of civil society, social systems, and the democratic welfare state (Harvey, 2007; Plehwe et al., 2007; Wacquant, 2009). Today, these measures are so widespread, pervasive, and normalized, that they are typically not critically reflected upon, called into question, or recognized as a specific form of interest-guided social organization. Rather, they (are made to) appear as self-evident or 'natural', as political and economic necessities or 'common sense', despite their undeniably irrational negative effects and blatant internal contradictions (Höge & Hornung, 2024; Skyrman et al., 2023). Among those are the progressing global ecological destruction and catastrophic consequences of anthropogenic climate change, unjustifiable and escalating socio-economic inequality and polarization, pervasive wars and violent conflicts over resources, and widespread political and economic instability and humanitarian disasters (Angus, 2016; Barrios, 2017; Moore, 2016). Going beyond their mere co-occurrence, negative interactions, mutual reinforcement, and compounding of these ecological, economic, social,

and political emergencies towards their exponential destructive potential for humanity and the planet has been increasingly problematized with the concept of polycrisis (Petrova, 2024; Trott, 2025). In a recent comprehensive review of this emerging literature, Rakowski et al. (2025, p. 167) provide an integrated definition of the polycrisis as “*multiple co-occurring, causally entangled crises with synergistic effects on multiple systems that exceed the sum of its parts and degrade humanity’s prospects*” (italics in original). Further, these authors provide a list of (altogether 24) pertinent crises currently discussed in the academic literature, ranging from climate change, pollution, biodiversity loss, and resource depletion (environmental cluster) to conflicts and wars, social inequality, human health, forced migration, and democratic backsliding (sociopolitical cluster) and dysfunctions of the financial system, energy use, technology, and globalized capitalism (economic cluster), as well as overlapping areas among these domains.

One less obvious but nonetheless central aspect of the unfolding polycrisis is the systemic impairment and subtle distortion of human consciousness, resulting in the inability to fully recognize the inherently self-destructive trajectory of the current global political-economic and socio-cultural system as well as the inadequacy of the offered ‘solutions’ to effectively address the underlying causes and contradictions (Gunderson, 2023; Thompson, 2015; Stahl, 2024). Previous research has heavily drawn on psychological system justification theory (Jost, 2019, 2020) to explain this constrained or defective cognition of ‘false consciousness’ through a deeply rooted human need to legitimize and perceive the existing social, political, and economic arrangements as just, rational or at least without viable alternatives, even at the expense of personal and broader collective interests (Jost et al., 2003). In the process of system justification, epistemic, existential, and relational motives for structure and order, safety and certainty, and shared social reality have been shown to play important roles (Hennes et al., 2012). However, in light of the increasingly obvious self-destructive irrationality of the global political-economic system, it seems questionable, whether the processes identified by system justification theory are sufficient to explain humanity’s inability to address the polycrisis (Trott, 2025). Arguably, even more deeply rooted psychodynamics are at work here and need to be explored theoretically and empirically for a better understanding of the resulting perceptual, cognitive, and ethical impairments.

Notably, the delusions of neoliberal capitalist ideology proliferate and reproduce themselves not primarily through force, violence and coercion, but through internalization and subjectification, based on the illusionary promise of freedom of choice and positive reinforcement through incentivization and orchestration of self-interest (Adams et al., 2029; Beattie, 2019; Teo, 2018). Through this gradual process of subtle or ‘soft’ indoctrination and subconscious programming, the introjection of economic rationalities and identity constructions has substantially affected perceptions, attitudes, belief systems, and ways of thinking (Hornung, 2024; Hornung & Höge, 2021). Based on the work of French philosopher Michel Foucault, resulting modes of mind-control that are applied not to individuals, but to entire populations by shaping the context and conditions of their conduct, have been termed ‘advanced neoliberal governmentality’ and ‘biopower’, that is, the subsumption or assimilation of the whole person under the dominant and increasingly totalistic political-economic system (Fleming, 2014; Munro, 2012). For instance, there is an increasing explicit as well as tacit or implied acceptance of the normative model of the ‘rational utility maximizer’ or ‘homo economicus’, driven by self-interest and securing calculated returns from investments in his or her ‘human capital’ (e.g., education, visibility, reputation, experience), taking entrepreneurial initiative and risks in competitive market-based transactions that extend to all areas of life, including social interactions and personal relationships (Adams et al., 2019; Fleming, 2017; Hearn, 2021; Teo, 2018). Conspicuously, only fairly recently, academic psychology has begun to devote closer attention to the

underlying formative processes of the human psyche (Goudarzi & García Ferrés, 2025). For instance, Adams et al. (2019) have described, how features of neoliberalism, such as radical abstraction of personhood from time, place, and social context, the notion of the entrepreneurial self, affect management, and growth imperative, influence the psychological experience, but, at the same time, are reproduced through the theories and constructs of scientific psychology as an academic discipline (e.g., essentialism, responsabilization, striving). Notably, Bettache (2025) just introduced a model of how the capitalist core principles of profit motive, market competition, and private property manifest in cultural syndromes of gain primacy, zero-sum rivalry, and ownership, which, taken together, result in a higher-order individualistic syndrome of egoistic pursuit of self-interest at the expense of others, thus proliferating social inequality.

Indeed, long before psychologists have started to problematize these intellectual deformations, critical social theorists have analyzed observed tendencies and changes in human cognition and affect not as progress in the sense of increasing substantive rationality or reason, but as a manifestation of psychological ‘colonization’ (LaMothe, 2016), whereby social norms and humanistic values are eroded and displaced by distorted economic ways of thinking, which have been addressed in various concepts, such as false consciousness, reification, instrumental rationality, and the social (marketing) character (Eyerman, 1981; Foster, 2017; Gunderson, 2021; Ulrich, 2025). Theoretical elaborations within the context of the focal research program have established connections between these earlier analyses of ideology-critique and the psychological internalization of neoliberal logics of individualism, competition, and instrumentality through cognitive-affective processes of affirmation, naturalization, and negation of alternatives (Bal & Dóci, 2018; Hornung et al., 2025c). Additionally, it has been suggested that a fuller understanding of the introjection and persistence of neoliberal ideology needs to take into account more subtle psychodynamic influences of unconscious or subconscious ‘fantasmatic’ logics of success, superiority, and submission, partly conveyed via social logics of self-reliance, contests, and economic rationalization in contemporary work organizations (Hornung et al., 2025b). From the outlined vantage point, neoliberalism represents a manipulative, psychologically distorting and socially corrosive ideology that serves the vested interests of powerful political-economic elites at the expense of environment and the common good of the majority of people and the planet (Jost et al., 2009). From a critical psychological perspective, it seems particularly pertinent, what exactly makes this ideology so persuasive and successful, how it reproduces and adapts, and what role it plays in shaping beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors that are relevant to the current socio-ecological polycrisis (Adams et al., 2019; Trott, 2025). As should have become clear, satisfactory answers to these questions likely transcend the conventional cognitive and affective paradigm of mainstream psychology and have to venture deeper into the domains of psychodynamic and psychoanalytic explorations. However, they also have to be mindful of the grounding of neoliberalism in the material world, imposing the ‘normative power of the factual’ through existential socio-economic advantages and risks of marginalization.

3. Objectives and Scope of Present Contribution

The goal of the present contribution is to provide a preliminary overview of the focal ongoing research program in applied psychology (Hornung et al., 2021) on the ecological, social, and political significance and implications of internalized neoliberal ideological beliefs in the context of the socio-ecological polycrisis. While the broader research program includes both theoretical (Hornung et al., 2025b) and empirical (Hornung et al., 2025a, 2025c) components, the focus here will be on the latter. Theoretical and methodological contributions on system-justifying neoliberal ideologies and their operationalization are

mentioned with special attention to their implications in current crisis dynamics (Milstein, 2021). The polycrisis is conceptualized as a complex of compounding detrimental ecological, economic, social, and political developments, conflicts and contradictions (Rakowski et al., 2025). These are culminating in environmental and human catastrophes, government failure to adequately address the underlying problems, and widespread threats to liberal democracies in Europe and elsewhere by right-wing populist movements (Ayers, 2024; Ötsch & Pühringer, 2017; Pühringer & Ötsch, 2018). In this context, exemplary results from several empirical studies are reported, linking internalized neoliberal ideological beliefs to psychological dynamics associated with important ecological, social, and political aspects of the escalating polycrisis. Precisely, studies refer to topics at the intersection of the climate crisis, in terms of continued rise in total greenhouse gas emissions, associated global warming, and environmental disasters (Klinenberg et al., 2020), the so-called refugee crisis, referring to increased forced migration, driven by deterioration in living conditions, poverty, resource wars, and human right violations (Esses et al., 2017), and the crisis of liberal democracies, characterized by the rise of far-right populism and democratic backsliding in Europe and on a global scale (Wolf et al., 2024). Representing the polycrisis, these socio-ecological emergencies are not independent issues, but causally entangled, compounding, and aggravating each other (Rakowski et al., 2025). The climate crisis amplifies population displacement and exacerbates the need for changing consumption patterns, while right-wing populist movements stoke, channel, and exploit xenophobic hostilities against people seeking refuge (Hameleers, 2019) as well as denial, ignorance, and resistance towards measures to mitigate climate change by reducing carbon emissions (Bosetti et al., 2025; Jylhä & Hellmer, 2020; Lockwood, 2018). The socio-ecological catastrophes are embedded into a context of perpetual economic crises of the globalized system of neoliberal financial capitalism (Angus, 2016; Moore, 2016). Stated objective of the presented studies was understanding and challenging the socially and intellectually corrosive psychology of hegemonic neoliberal ideology in current crises – as a precondition for the urgently needed socio-ecological transformation of society (Bettache, 2025; Trott, 2025). Eventually, the broader, ongoing research program seeks to answer not only the question why humanity appears to be incapable to adequately respond to the grand challenges of our time, but also what can be done to break out of this state of self-inflicted immaturity to overcome ideological misguidance and paralysis (Bohman, 2005; Gunderson, 2023). Thus, it calls for a renewal of the promises of enlightenment through a reconstitution of radical humanist values and moral reason in a world in perpetual crisis, the outline of which, however, marks the limits of the scope of the present contribution.

4. Methodological Developments

Sporadic but steadily growing scholarly interest in the psychologically and socially dysfunctional effects of neoliberal capitalism has led to the development of several self-report instruments on internalized neoliberal ideology. Notably, the neoliberal beliefs inventory by Bay-Cheng and coauthors (2015) comprises the four dimensions of (a) *system inequality*, (b) *competition*, (c) *personal wherewithal*, and (d) *government interference*. A more recently developed scale is the neoliberal orientation questionnaire by Girerd and colleagues (2023), which consists of the four somewhat similar and partly overlapping dimensions of (a) *competitiveness*, (b) *individual self-regulation*, (c) *relational detachment*, and (d) *public divestment*. The utility and validity of these scales notwithstanding, the presented set of studies is based on an alternative instrument, namely, the neoliberal ideological beliefs questionnaire (Höge et al., 2026), which was developed specifically to operationalize the model of neoliberal ideology by Bal and Dóci (2018). This newly developed scale comprises the three dimensions of (a) *individualism*, emphasizing self-

reliance and self-interest; (b) *competition*, as the need to outperform and dominate others to be successful; and (c) *instrumentality*, portraying humans as resources for economic ends (Hornung et al., 2025b). Aside from the theory-based dimensionality, this instrument differs from other scales in its focus on employment and economy, rather than a combination of personal attitudes and broader societal or policy aspects. As described elsewhere in more detail (Höge et al., 2026), the scale was validated in several German and Austrian samples, including factor structure, internal consistencies, convergent validation with a broad range of constructs (e.g., dark triad of personality, group-based enmity, prosocial and moral behavior), and incremental validity in explaining additional variance in related constructs over and above the neoliberal beliefs inventory by Bay-Cheng et al. (2015). Based on this methodological development, exemplary results of three empirical investigations are reported, all of which are survey studies, based on convenience samples of several hundred employees and students (Hornung et al., 2025a). All study constructs were assessed with multi-item self-report research scales, subjected to psychometric testing for factorial validity and internal consistency as a measure of reliability. In the first two studies, data were analyzed using multiple linear regressions and structural equation modeling. The quantitative part of the third study was based on the preliminary interpretation of raw correlational patterns in a larger subsample.

Lately, an increasing number of studies have employed qualitative methods to explore and elaborate on the psychological processes associated with the internalization of neoliberal ideology and its consequences based on interview data (Girerd et al., 2021; Ioannou, 2024; Seubert et al., 2025). Following this approach of methodological triangulation, an in-depth interview study with a smaller number of persons in precarious economic situations and long-term unemployment was conducted. Qualitative content analysis and hermeneutic interpretation were used to capture the subjectivity of participants in making sense of the status quo in the prevailing social, political, and economic arrangements, as well as in psychologically coping with their own insecure, disadvantaged and subordinated positions in a highly individualistic, stratified, and competitive neoliberal society (Hornung et al., 2025c). Consequently, by merging quantitative (questionnaire-based) and qualitative (interview-based) approaches, the focal research program aims to provide the foundations for a mixed-methods investigation into the social and political psychology of neoliberal ideology, combining epistemological advantages and substantive insights of both methodological paradigms.

5. Exemplary Empirical Results

Empirical findings obtained at this point confirm multiple corrosive and aggravating roles of neoliberal ideology in ecological, social and political crises. In a first study, controlling for gender, age, education, and social status, a chain of serial mediation effects was established. System justification tendencies acted as antecedents to neoliberal ideological beliefs of individualism, competition, and instrumentality, which negatively predicated climate-protective behavior related to housing, energy, mobility, consumption, nutrition, and activism (Feygina et al., 2010; Milfont et al., 2021). Climate-protective behavior, in turn, was instrumental in reducing the personal carbon footprint, estimated based on objective, quantifiable aspects of housing, electricity, mobility, food choices, and consumption, according to a model by the German Federal Environment Agency. Consequently, the positive effects of environmental consciousness, operationalized in terms of attitudes towards environmental protection (e.g., interventionist policies, environmental fragility, eco-centric concern), ecological knowledge, and felt connection with nature, on climate-protective behavior appeared to be counteracted and overcompensated by the

negative influence of neoliberal ideological beliefs (Fremstad & Paul, 2022). Additionally, income level was a substantial predictor of consumption-based carbon emissions.

The second study addressed connections between neoliberal ideological beliefs, moral distancing from the frequently inhumane treatment of migrants and asylum seekers (e.g., moral justification, euphemistic labelling, displacement of responsibility, dehumanization), and lacking civic engagement for people seeking refuge and the human rights of migrants (e.g., circulating petitions, attending protests, donating money, demanding political action). Controlling for demographic variables, moral disengagement from the suffering of people seeking refuge mediated a negative effect of neoliberal ideological beliefs on active solidarity for refugees (Dutt & Kohfeldt, 2019). Additional analyses revealed a compensatory interaction between the two predictors, such that only when moral disengagement was low, active solidarity with people seeking refuge was enacted to a substantial degree, but was eroded by increasing levels of internalized neoliberal ideology.

The third study investigated the political structure of neoliberal ideological beliefs by exploring correlational patterns with political party preferences, generalized political orientation, and endorsement of social inequality in a larger subsample consisting of several hundred data sets. Among others, participants rated the extent to which main political parties in Austria and Germany corresponded to their own political views. In both countries, neoliberal ideological beliefs (Höge et al., 2026) correlated negatively with support for the ecological green party, the social democrats, and left-wing democratic socialists, but positively with endorsement of conservative, economic liberal, and right-wing populist parties, particularly, the far-right extremist 'Alternative for Germany' (Klikauer, 2020) and the 'Freedom Party of Austria' (Rathgeb, 2020). Moreover, ratings on the neoliberal ideological beliefs questionnaire shared about a quarter of variance with political left-right self-placement (Lesschaeve, 2017) and social dominance orientation (Ho et al., 2015), which enshrines the postulate that group-based hierarchies, inequality, and stratification in society are necessary and even desirable.

Further exploring the psychological processes underlying these quantitative findings, a small-scale qualitative interview study with socio-economically disadvantaged persons was conducted (Hornung et al., 2025c). Individuals in precarious life situations and long-term unemployment explicitly or implicitly endorsed neoliberal political-economic practices and discourses of individualism, competition, and instrumentality, reciting meritocratic explanations for poverty and success, rejecting the redistribution of income and wealth, and demanding limits on social welfare, especially for migrants and people seeking refuge (Ayers, 2024; Palley, 2024). While several participants explicitly or implicitly adopted and expressed right-wing, xenophobic, and nationalist views in conjunction with perceived existential threats of economic crisis and social competition, caution is warranted not to resort to a pattern of victim-blaming. It seems important to take into account that offensive and anti-democratic attitudes and beliefs are part of a psycho-social syndrome and dysfunctional coping attempts associated with the socio-economic inequality, precarity, and marginalization participants are subjected to in a society pervaded by neoliberal ideology.

6. Discussion of Empirical Findings

Breadth and heterogeneity of presented exemplary results on the psychological relevance of neoliberal ideology for aspects of the socio-ecological and political-economic polycrisis pose a challenge as well as an advantage (Hornung et al., 2025a). With regard to the ecological dimension, findings support the assumption that market-based consumer societies subject individuals to ambivalent and contradictory messages concerning climate protection. System-justifying neoliberal ideologies and disposable income for consumption

were shown to undermine transformational intentions associated with environmental consciousness, leading to lower climate-protective behavior and higher personal carbon footprint (Fremstad & Paul, 2022; Hamilton & Ramcilovic-Suominen, 2023). In the social dimension, the roots of moral disengagement and lacking civic engagement for human rights of refugees were also found in the decivilizing ideology of neoliberalism (Dutt & Kohfeldt, 2019). Emphasizing complete self-reliance of individuals, competition for resources, and instrumentality of humans for economic ends, neoliberal ideological beliefs appear incompatible with taking social responsibility for others and showing active solidarity (Beattie, 2019; Hearn, 2021). This tendency is confirmed in associated political attitudes, indicating tendencies towards conservative, authoritarian, and elitist views, rejecting the prioritization of social and ecological issues (Azevedo et al., 2019). Results in the political dimension support the convergence of neoliberal capitalism towards right-wing authoritarianism, previously suggested by several authors (Biebricher, 2020; Bruff, 2014; Pühringer & Ötsch, 2018).

The common ground of neoliberalism and authoritarianism is seen in an ideological preference for inequality and logics of superiority and inferiority, based on notions of pursuit of self-interest, competition for resources, and strife for domination (Azevedo et al., 2019; Beattie, 2019; Goudarzi et al., 2022). Demonstrating the validity of the concept of ‘false consciousness’, persons in precarious life situations and long-term unemployment tended to contradict their collective social interest by either explicitly or implicitly endorsing neoliberal ideologies (Jost, 1995; Stahl, 2024). Such self-defeating attitudes manifested in the verbalization of individualistic explanations for poverty and success, rejection of the redistribution of societal wealth, internalized inferiority, and accepting economic utility as a criterion for human worth (Napier et al., 2020). Associated meritocratic ideological beliefs were instrumental for reducing cognitive dissonance, justifying the status quo, and appealing to epistemic needs for simplicity, unambiguity, structure, order, and predictability of the social environment (Jost et al., 2003, 2004). An emerging theme was the connection of neoliberal ideology with group-based enmity and xenophobic stereotypes, connecting to results on moral disengagement from the suffering of refugees and support for far-right political parties (Micocci & Di Mario, 2017; Palley, 2024; Patnaik, 2020). Perceived existential threats were projected onto immigrants, scapegoated for lacking self-reliance, illegitimately appropriating resources, and insufficiently contributing to the host economy. Overall, results demonstrate how neoliberal ideology instrumentalizes epistemic and existential motives to reproduce the justification of societal inequalities and social tensions in the belief systems of those deprived of gainful employment and work-related recognition (Pühringer & Ötsch, 2018). The observed psychological hybridization of free market ideology with crypto- or proto-fascist themes (Palley, 2024) provides a compelling explanation for the widespread rise of right-wing populism in advanced neoliberal societies traumatized by recurring waves of economic crisis and austerity (Baier, 2016; Caiani & Graziano, 2019; Maher et al., 2022). At the same time, presented results open up new venues for combatting democratic backsliding and decivilization by addressing their economic roots through political actions and psychological interventions.

7. Preliminary Conclusions

Disproving relativist positions, neoliberal beliefs do not just reflect a legitimate—albeit possibly reductionist or biased—political-economic worldview, but a dangerous universal system of delusions, threatening the ecological, social, and political basis of democratic societies and, arguably, even human civilization as a whole (Bettache et al., 2020; Fremstad & Paul, 2022; Gunderson, 2023). More specifically, from the presented results, three

broader conclusions can be derived. First, the notion of a self-reinforcing hegemony implies that, irrationally, escalating ecological social, political, and economic crises may not cause larger segments of the general population to challenge and fundamentally rethink the current course of action, but could lead to even more aggressive support for neoliberal ideologies to reduce cognitive dissonance, uncertainty, disorder, and perceived existential threats. This conjecture corresponds with the finding that system justification increases, if the system is perceived to be under threat, as in the rally-round-the flag effect (Lambert et al., 2011). Secondly, what could be called the social corrosiveness of false consciousness, refers to the conundrum that the adoption of neoliberal ideology appears to erode exactly those attitudes and behaviors that are prerequisites for the necessary socio-ecological transformation, such as active pro-environmental, prosocial, and democratic engagement. Thirdly, obtained results also provide illustrative support for a previously diagnosed and highly concerning authoritarian and xenophobic turn in late-neoliberal capitalism (Bruff, 2014; Gallo, 2022). Associations of free-market ideology with social dominance orientation, group-based enmity, and support for far-right populist ideologies reveal an anti-humanist and proto-fascist core of neoliberalism, which can also be observed in frequent references to social-Darwinist themes of competition as ‘survival of the fittest’ (Ayers, 2024; Micocci & Di Mario, 2017; Palley, 2024). Paradoxically, the economy, as the domain where contemporary societies are conditioned to look to for the solution of all their problems, may actually be at the very roots of them. Effectively addressing the polycrisis threatening human civilization requires fundamentally rethinking economic principles and systems toward a conscious use of resources for the common good (Durand et al., 2024), rather than for the sake of a blind and destructive process of capital accumulation, benefitting a small minority in the short term, but damaging the planet and harming everybody in the long run (Stuart et al., 2025). To conclude, the neoliberal system of perpetual extraction, competition, valorization, and growth is not only a destructive political-economic regime, but also a dangerous thought form, a delusional rationalization that needs to be overcome for genuine progress to be possible.

8. Ongoing and Future Research

Presented results are part of a first wave of empirical studies using the newly developed neoliberal ideological beliefs questionnaire and supplementary qualitative research. Follow-up research will expand this foundation in several directions. Research on the role of neoliberal ideological beliefs in the crisis of mental health is currently ongoing (Becker et al., 2021; Card & Hepburn, 2023). For instance, this refers to new forms of psychological stress and strain at work, based on internalized performance pressure and self-endangering coping behavior in response to high-pressure management practices of indirect control through escalating goals, outcome responsibility, internal competition, and employment contingent on performance (Knecht et al., 2027; Telford & Briggs, 2022). The organization of work has important consequences for political attitudes and behaviors that have not yet been sufficiently explored with regard to the neoliberal workplace (Selenko et al., 2025). Another ongoing study focuses on relationships among equity principles, neoliberal ideological beliefs, and support or rejection of redistribution of wealth and income (Bettache et al., 2020; Goudarzi et al., 2022). Future research plans to address dynamics between precarious employment and internalization of neoliberal ideologies. Concerning research design, a mixed-methods approach has proven fruitful. Yet, correspondence between foci and contents of quantitative and qualitative components should be strengthened. Follow-up studies will complement the perspective on *internalized* beliefs with that on *observed* neoliberal manifestations in the organizational and societal environment (Becker et al., 2021). Further, a longer-term aim of future research is to

integrate theoretically derived constructs of counter-hegemonic radical humanist consciousness in quantitative and qualitative investigations (Grzanka et al., 2020; Hornung et al., 2021, 2025b). Logical and necessary next steps involve developing practice-oriented interventions to deliberatively and collectively reflect on, question, challenge, and revise ecologically, socially, and politically harmful economic beliefs, discourses, and practices on different psychological levels. Certainly, utmost modesty is warranted regarding hopes of disturbing the ideological hegemony of neoliberalism.

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