Compiling Dialectic Frameworks of Power and Ideology in Organizations and Society

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Abstract—This article outlines a broader research program in the social sciences, specifically critical applied psychology. The objective of this programmatic research is to develop and compile several dialectic theoretical frameworks on power and ideology, integrating interdisciplinary, psychodynamic, and socio-critical perspectives on society, organizations, and individuals. First, drawing on meta-theory of social science paradigms, different approaches to organizational research and associated debates are outlined with special attention to the field of critical management studies. Next, extending labor process theory, a psychodynamic model of power and control in organizations, society, and economy is presented. The subsequent section reviews and structures the literature on ideologies in work organizations, based on previously introduced theoretical building blocks. The following three sections introduce specific dialectic analyses and frameworks problematizing organizational flexibility, economism and humanism, and economy and ecology. In all three models, socially corrosive logics, discourses, and practices of economistic neoliberal ideology are contrasted with ethically responsible and socio-ecologically sustainable humanist alternatives. Finally, a conclusion with regard to the significance and implications of presented analyses is attempted.

Index Terms—Dialectic Analysis, Paradigms, Power, Ideology

I. INTRODUCTION

Energized possibly by the ever more observable and salient disastrous effects of the global ecological and social polycrisis, recent years have witnessed the strengthening, consolidation, and interconnection of epistemologically critical paradigms across several fields of social science [1], [2]. Although interdisciplinary in nature, the theoretical developments in this article emanate from the emerging field of critical applied psychology, more specifically critical work and organizational psychology [3]. Developing the foundation of this nascent field requires not only alternative methodological approaches and empirical results, but theoretical frameworks orienting and contextualizing its research within overarching societal structures and intellectual traditions. The present article seeks to advance this cause. Prior to presenting a compilation of frameworks that could serve this purpose, several defining characteristics of critical applied psychology warrant mentioning. While to date there is no generally accepted or universal definition, it has been proven useful to describe the underlying paradigm along the dimensions of being socio-critical, dialectical, deconstructing, self-reflexive, emancipatory, and humanist [1]–[3]. To further specify these features: a) *socio-critical* implies grounding in critical social theory and critical psychologies, albeit with a pluralistic and undogmatic orientation. This includes sociological (unorthodox) Marxism and Frankfurt School Critical Theory, (psycho-)analytical social psychology, various streams of critical psychology, such as psychology as a subject science, feminist and postcolonial theory, critical race theory as well as critical theories of socio-ecological transformation, such as radical sustainabilities, degrowth economics, and ecosocialism; b) *dialectical* means addressing historically evolved conflicts of interest and power imbalances in labor relations, the economy, and society, as well as examining their effects on social and ecological problems and crises, such as socio-economic inequality, marginalization, polarization, and shifting of social and environmental costs to underprivileged groups; c) *deconstructing* refers to an ideology-critical perspective that transcends superficial and interest-guided explanations, for instance, with regard to social responsibility and sustainability as "business models" or the "unitarist" narrative of convergence of interests in employment relations; d) *self-reflexive* means problematizing, how scientific theories, methods, and results are influenced and biased by epistemological positioning, economic interests, and power structures, for instance, with regard to the dominance of individualistic, managerialist, ethnocentric, and patriarchal perspectives; e) *emancipatory* intention challenges the primacy of economic goals, such as performance, efficiency, or growth, instead prioritizing alternative socio-ecological concerns and objectives, for instance, health and personal development, social justice, democracy, environmental protection, as values in themselves; f) *humanist*, finally, emphasizes a strong focus on human dignity and development, reconfirming the inherent value of human and non-human life, including the natural planetary environment. To some degree, these six criteria can be interpreted as an adaptation and extension of the three defining paradigmatic principles of anti-performativity, denaturalization, and reflexivity, formulated earlier for the field of critical management studies, which will be discussed below.

II. PARADIGMS IN ORGANIZATIONAL RESEARCH

The first section of the paper assimilates concepts from the philosophy of science for a dialectic analysis of academic conflicts that are grounded in ideological and epistemological heterogeneity in management and organizational scholarship [4]. Drawing on the meta-theory of social science paradigms highlights connections and continuities of contemporary and

prior controversies, which are useful to delineate, deconstruct, and reappraise current discourses in the pluralistic field of management and organization studies [1]. The classic taxonomy of meta-theory differentiates: a) theories of society emphasizing harmony and regulation from those emphasizing conflict radical change; and b) scientific assumptions postulating objective versus subjective social realities [5], [6]. Based on these distinctions, *functionalist*, *interpretive, radical structuralist*, and *radical humanist* paradigms have been defined. Subsequent conceptual developments have reinterpreted these distinct ontological, epistemological, and axiological configurations into post-positivist (normative, mainstream), interpretive (constructivist, hermeneutic), postmodern (dialogic, poststructuralist), and critical (dialectic, antagonistic) research approaches [7], [4]. Associated meta-theorizing has been applied to academic disputes involving critical management studies, as an alternative paradigm emphasizing denaturalization, reflexivity, and non-performativity [1], [4]. Distinguishing degree and location yields four contemporary fundamental and foundational inter- and intra-paradigmatic conflicts: 1) the *evidence-debate* between critical scholars and mainstream functionalists; 2) the *performativity-debate* within critical management studies; 3) the *managerialism-debate* between radical structuralists and poststructuralists; and 4) the *ideology-debate* representing influences on adjacent fields, exemplified by an emerging critical paradigm in work and organizational psychology [3], [8]. Interdependent dynamics underlying these conflicts have been framed as fermenting and fragmenting forces, driving paradigm delineation, differentiation, disintegration, and dissemination. This meta-theoretical perspective facilitates more self-reflexive scholarship, sense-making, and knowledge-creation by promoting deeper understanding and more proficient navigation of the organizational literature as an ideologically contested terrain of social science. Theorizing on research paradigms has thus proven helpful to make sense of underlying ontological, epistemological, and axiological fault lines in management and organization studies. Trajectories of future developments can only be speculated about, especially with regard to the dialectics between critical management studies and the emerging paradigm of critical work and organizational psychology [2], [8]. The first section thus sets the stage and provides the meta-theoretical foundations for the frameworks developed in the following sections.

III. POWER IN ORGANIZATIONS AND SOCIETY

Drawing on critical traditions from several social science disciplines, notably, social, political, and systems theory, sociology, psychology, and management studies, the second section seeks to explore, assemble, and integrate some constitutive components of a socio- and psychodynamic perspective on power and control in work organizations [9]. At its core is an archetypal taxonomy of *formal* (economic), *real* (technocratic), *normative* (ideological), and *formative* (biopolitical) modes of power [10], [11]. Associated with these more abstract modes are specific forms of managerial control through various means and combinations of *commodification* (e.g., contracts, compensation, and competition), *coercion* (e.g., commands, constraints, and compliance), *cooptation* (e.g.,

culture, consent, and commitment), and *creation* (e.g., corrosion, conception, and coevolution). Other integral elements of the proposed framework are domains or foci of inquiry, specifically, interests, ideologies, institutions, and identities [1], [4]. These domains are linked to meta-, macro-, meso-, and micro-levels of analysis, resembling the economy, society, organization, and individual. According to the model, processes of behavioral control and psychological governance are reinforced by a pervasive economic system logic, cascading into political, social, and psychodynamic sub-logics [12], [13]. Described taxonomies are integrated with concepts from depth and dynamic psychology and traced across *economic* (meta-system interests), *societal* (macro-political ideologies), *organizational* (meso-social institutions), and *individual* (micro-psychodynamic identities) levels of analysis, thereby revealing fractalized patterns of self-similarity. It is argued that macro-level societal subsumption and subjugation reproduce psychodynamic subjectification (submission and sublimation) at the individual level. Associated psychological processes are mediated by the subordinating and socializing forces embodied in meso-level organizational structures and management control systems [09], [14]. The outlined framework has important implications for the dynamics of power and control in contemporary societies, organizations, and individuals. Specifically, it is useful for analyzing and better understanding the historical and ongoing metamorphoses of power and their psychological manifestations under the increasingly hegemonic governance of economistic neoliberal ideology, which will be taken up and further developed in the following sections.

IV. IDEOLOGIES IN ORGANIZATIONS AND SOCIETY

The next section identifies and reviews conceptual and empirical building blocks of an emerging research agenda on ideology in work organizations [15]. Ideologies are discussed with regard to the domains of *interests*, *institutions*, and *identities*, reflecting societal, organizational, and individual perspectives [4]. *Societal perspectives* are addressed in the growing interdisciplinary literature on the critique of the political-economic practices and ideology of neoliberalism [16], psychological system-justification theory [17], and the sociological analysis of transitions of different ideologies of individualism in response to structural socio-economic strains [18]. On the *organizational level*, ideologies examined in the context of formal technocratic and normative socio-ideological components of management control systems [19] and associated employee responses to different forms of coercive, remunerative and symbolic forms of power [20]. Downsizing research is drawn on as an example of the socially corrosive effects of managerial ideologies of shareholder value, market efficiency, and employee self-reliance [21]. *Individual-level* psychological mechanisms and consequences of ideological preformation and control are addressed in theorizing on social character [22], subjectification and governmentality [23] as well as the "entreployee" concept [24]. *Denaturalization*, *anti-performativity*, and *reflexivity* can be adapted as principles for future research on ideologies, emphasizing hidden meanings, interests, and alternatives [15]. Further research needs include theoretical elaboration, empirical investigations, and practice-oriented applications of knowledge on power and ideologies.

Operationalizing anti-performativity, a suggested counter-model of humanist ideals positions individuation, solidarity, and emancipation against neoliberal ideologies of individualism, competition, and instrumentality. This dialectic taxonomy will be elaborated into a more comprehensive theoretical framework the sections below.

V. DIALECTICS OF ORGANIZATIONAL FLEXIBILITY

The following section focuses on the application of power to processes involving the *individualization* and *flexibilization* of organizations [25]. These constitute a management strategy in responding to labor market dynamics and competitive economic pressures, prompting increased workforce segmentation, differentiation, and rationalization [26]–[28]. Reviewed and evaluated in this context are potentials, pitfalls, and prospects of employee-oriented concepts of organizational flexibility. This includes both broad-based programs or interventions as well individualized approaches. The focus here is on the latter, specifically, the influential proactive constructs of *idiosyncratic deals* and *job crafting* [29]. Idiosyncratic deals are defined as personalized agreements negotiated between individual workers and employer agents, such as direct supervisors or human resource managers, authorizing non-standard employment terms, such as customized work schedules, job tasks, learning opportunities or career support [30]. Related yet distinct, job crafting captures unauthorized modifications employees enact autonomously to improve their job designs and work experiences. In theory, both approaches are assumed to hold the potential for "win-win" situations by increasing the flexibility of organizations to adapt to change as well as their ability to attract, retain, and motivate high performing workforces by aligning jobs with personal needs, preferences and goals. Critical reviews of the literature, however, suggest that insufficient attention has been devoted to prerequisites, boundary conditions, and limitations of mutually beneficial workplace flexibility, especially in the context of the current neoliberal reconfiguration of work organizations [26], [27]. Drawing on a recent debate in organizational scholarship, neoliberal governance can be conceptualized as a matrix of political, social, and "fantasmatic" (sub- or unconscious) logics, infusing individualism, competition, and instrumentality into workplace practices, their academic representation, and their societal evaluation [31]. Reframing, alternative explanations, assessment of side-effects, construction of antagonistic ideal types, and dialectic synthesis provide the analytical tools to differentiate genuine employee-oriented flexibility from ideological counterapplications. The later serve and advance a primarily economic rationalization agenda. Rooted in humanistic management, employee-oriented flexibility reflects principles of individuation, solidarity, and emancipation, counterbalancing neoliberal dogmas and utilization strategies [32]. Associated promises of self-actualization, common welfare, and social transformation are antipodes to neoliberal logics of employee self-reliance, tournaments situations, and economic rationality. Between these poles, new forms of psychological control emerge as *subjectification*, that is, internalization and self-imposition of performance demands and flexibility requirements by employees [11], [22]. These call for new strategies to contain and compensate detrimental

tendencies to health, wellbeing, and psychological growth. Results of the analysis can be summarized in a taxonomy of flexibility configurations, applicable to increasingly stratified human resource architectures. Suggestions to reorient research on organizational individualization include focusing on learning and development, work design, solidarity and social justice. The presented approach contributes to disentangling and deconstructing different forms of individualization, the confounding of which underlies ideologically distorted theorizing and dysfunctional management practices [26], [31]. New ways of critically thinking about organizational flexibility and individualization in the neoliberal era need to be further explored from a dialectic perspective.

VI. DIALECTICS OF ECONOMISM AND HUMANISM

Extending the above theorizing on current challenges facing critical applied psychology of work and organizations, the following conceptual contribution draws on the critique of neoliberal ideology in conjunction with radical humanism and psychoanalytic social psychology [32]–[35]. The objective is to (de-)construct antithetical normative foundations of contemporary societies, organizations, and individuals. Developed is a dialectic and dynamic multi-level framework of the ideological undercurrents shaping political-economic, organizational-institutional, and individual-psychodynamic structures and processes [36]. Integrating dialectic antipodes of genuine ideas versus interest-guided ideology with basic tenets of social character theory, neoliberal economistic doctrines and counter-directed humanist philosophical concepts are contrasted as antagonistic political, social, and psychological or "fantasmatic" logics [12], [31]. With regard to abstract political logics pervading legal and socio-cultural institutions at the societal (macro-) level, this refers to the antipodes of *individualism* versus *individuation*, *competition* versus *solidarity*, and *instrumentality* versus *emancipation*. On the applied (meso-) level of social logics that are shaping organizational and employment practices in the neoliberal workplace versus humanistic management, discussed antipodes resemble *self-reliance* versus *self-actualization*, *contests* versus *community*, and *rationalization* versus *transformation* [25]. On the individual (micro-) level of fantasmatic logics, based on psychoanalytic theory, corresponding exemplary neoliberal fantasies are derived and positioned against antithetical aspects of humanist consciousness; specifically, *success* versus *evolution*, *superiority* versus *equality*, and *submission* versus *empowerment*. The resulting matrix of the normative fabric of advanced capitalist societies is interpreted with reference to social character theory [22], [37]. Specifically, foci of social relatedness (person-self-identity, people-others-interactions, and power-authorities-institutions) are suggested as criteria for structuring content dimensions and as conceptual bridges to core components of relevant social character tendencies (ego-oriented, marketing, and authoritarian). Additional parallels and communalities between analytical social psychology and psychological theorizing on ideologies can be developed, resulting in an interactive dialectic and dynamic framework for organizing contemporary research and applications on neoliberal ideology and its countertendencies [38], [39]. Among others, stressing the fundamental unity of insights

regarding external and internal realities, that is, complementarity of denaturalization and critique of societal ideologies with critical psychological self-reflection and personal development is emphasized [40]. Applications of the presented dialectical matrix as a framework for the social transformation from neoliberal economistic ideologies towards ideals of radical humanism on different levels are called for.

VII. DIALECTICS OF ECONOMY AND ECOLOGY

The last section addresses the dialectic contradiction between economy and ecology and its false reconciliation through constructs of green capitalism and corporate social responsibility [41]. The backdrop of this critique is the current geological period of the *Anthropocene*, defined by qualitatively new manifestations of negative planetary human impact and environmental crisis [42], [43]. Finally, at least in parts of academia and society, there seems to be an increasing realization that to preserve conditions for life on earth, is essential to contain the self-destructive tendencies of capitalism [44]. Yet, there appears to be little agreement as to how the necessary transition towards sustainability can be accomplished. The narrative review presented in this section, explores the respective social science literature. Reflecting the meta-theoretical distinction between sociology of regulation and radical change [5], dialectic analysis contrasts *mainstream (functionalist, normative) neoliberal* and *critical (structuralist, antagonistic) ecosocialist* perspectives on aspects of ecological sustainability. The later deconstruct conventional approaches, such as the United Nations Agenda 2030 as ideological projects of capitalist expansion and legitimization [45], [46]. Rejected are claims of green growth, environmental decoupling, and market-based solutions of corporate social responsibility [47], [48]. Instead, paradigms of critical sustainability advocate for radical approaches of economic degrowth, redistribution, de-carbonization, decommodification, and democratization, thus challenging the exploitative and inherently unsustainable growth logic of capitalism itself [49], [50]. On the organizational level, structural pathologies of corporate social responsibility have been deconstructed [51] and contrasted with propositions of democratic socialization [52]. Further, in the critical literature, increasing self-reflexive attention is devoted to sustainability discourses in organizational scholarship. For instance, a seminal contribution [53] has outlined necessary *paradigm shifts* from *managerialist to critical ontologies*, from *realist to relational epistemologies*, from *discipline-focused to interdisciplinary approaches*, and from *value-neutrality to radical scholarly engagement and activism*. It is concluded that, analyzing the sustainability discourse from a critical theoretical perspective presents opportunities to re-appropriate ecological ideas against their assimilation and degeneration into economistic ideology, counterproductive to the objective of saving the planet from profitable destruction. With seriousness and urgency of the situation providing momentum for social transformation, sustainable development goals and related mainstream concepts need to be reconceived in the context of a more radical social and ecological critique, transcending system-justifying variations of neoliberal ideology.

VIII. CONCLUSION

The objective of this contribution was to compile theoretical models and conceptual frameworks for the dialectic analysis of the manifestations of power and ideology in different areas of society, organizations, and individuals. This includes the very form of science itself, the economy, political and social institutions as well as conscious and unconscious psychological processes and character structures [22], [31]. The presented models share a socio-critical, dialectical, deconstructionist, self-reflexive, emancipatory, and humanist approach. Core theories they build on are meta-theory of scientific paradigms, labor process analysis, ideology critique, theories of power, and radical humanist ethics. Taken together, the compiled frameworks can serve as a theoretical basis for contextualizing empirical research in the emerging field of critical applied psychology of work, economy, and society [1], [5], [8]. Their common denominator is that they deconstruct, problematize, and reject the current neoliberal economistic approach of coercive and manipulative power in socially unjust, oppressive, discriminatory, and polarizing systems. Presented models call for and propose humanistic alternatives of balancing societal interests, organizing economic institutions, psychologically constructing identities, and shaping sustainable interactions with nature. As laid out above, the presented frameworks complement and build on each other, both in terms of content and method. This is attributable to their interdependent socio-historical development within a broader theoretical research program [4], [9], [15], [25], [36], [41]. Although a seamless integration may not be possible, the goal of this contribution was to provide an overview of their breadth, scope, basic assumptions, and inner logic, foreshadowing potentials for empirical research informed and oriented by these frameworks. As such, the presented research is part of an ongoing process of theoretical integration, elaboration, and deliberation in the context of scholarly collaboration and engagement. The uptake, application, and further development of these frameworks, or elements thereof, in different contexts and disciplines is envisioned and explicitly encouraged. Ideally, this could serve the purpose of advancing and substantiating the interconnectedness, communication, and resonance among critical forms of knowledge and scholarly communities. Such an association represents a precondition for urgently needed resistance against hegemonic ideologies and towards socio-ecological transformation of science and society.

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