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**Sozialwissenschaften**

The Narcissistic Dimensions of Market Economy.

Implications and Effects from a Social Work  
Perspective

**MARIA BURSCHEL**

**IU Internationale Hochschule**

Main Campus: Frankfurt

Juri-Gagarin-Ring 152

99084 Erfurt

Telefon: +49 421.166985.23

Fax: +49 2224.9605.115

Kontakt/Contact: kerstin.janson@iu.org

Autorenkontakt/Contact to the author(s):

z. B. Prof. Dr. Maria Burschel

ORCID-ID: 0000-0001-5000-0007 (Open Researcher und Contributor ID)

IU Internationale Hochschule - Fernstudium

Email: maria.burschel@iu.org

**IU Discussion Papers, Reihe: Sozialwissenschaften, Vol. 5, No. 1 (FEB 2025)**

ISSN-Nummer: 2750-0675

Website: <https://www.iu.de/forschung/publikationen/>

# **The Narcissistic Dimensions of Capitalism**

## **Implications and Effects from a Social Work Perspective**

**Maria Burschel**

### **ABSTRACT:**

Background and Objective: This paper posits that market-oriented economies foster narcissistic behavior due to their focus on profit, private ownership, competition, and free markets. The research presented demonstrates that while overall levels of narcissism remain stable, certain political groups and leaders exhibit higher levels of narcissism compared to the general population. Due to the visibility and attention-seeking nature of narcissistic individuals, values such as self-promotion, prioritizing personal gain, blame-shifting, diminishing others, and populist rhetoric become normalized. These trends contribute to right-wing populism, social injustice, and climate change denial. The paper elaborates on the dynamics of narcissism and the use of gaslighting as a manipulation tactic to scapegoat particularly vulnerable societal groups and the field of Social Work itself. Conclusions will be substantiated with examples from politics and business, highlighting the risks posed by narcissistic leaders. The article aims to offer a framework for understanding the rise of right-wing populism in Europe and the USA, which may hinder progress towards a socially, economically, and ecologically sustainable society.

Method: The article is based on an integrative literature review.

Conclusion: The article suggests considering human personality when selecting leaders and analyzing political movements. It highlights the role of social work in forming social and economic structures that encourage empathic, responsible, and diligent behavior rather than narcissistic behavior. The article notes the need for further research to support social change and innovation. Additionally, it offers recommendations for policymakers, educators, and social workers.

### **KEYWORDS:**

*Narcissism, capitalism, transformation, sustainability*

**JEL classification: JEL: P**

### **MARIA BURSCHEL**



**Dr. Maria Burschel** is a sociologist and professor of Social Work at IU-International University in the distance learning program. She teaches and researches topics such as child and youth welfare, family, separation and divorce, as well as narcissism, gender-specific gaslighting, and sustainability.

## **INTRODUCTION: RIGHT WING POPULISM ON THE RISE**

Currently, there is an observable increase in leaders within Europe and the United States who advocate for right-wing populism that could impede social and ecological progress towards sustainability.

Diehl (2017) points out that populism is not inherently dangerous or anti-democratic. Populism stands for empowering people to stand up for their rights against elites that exploit them. Right-wing populism, however, focuses on a leader who claims to fight for the people by creating an "enemy image" (such as Jews, migrants, LGBTQ+ individuals, unemployed, etc.) that the elites (media, academia, politics) supposedly fail to protect the populace against. In this way, the elites are portrayed as a threat. Right-wing populists divide the populace, incite hatred against the elites, and against both external and internal enemies. They are fundamentally anti-democratic, as they oppose the democratic principle of participation, solidarity and equality (ibid).

Two examples show how modern right-wing populism endangers ecological and social progress towards a sustainable society: a) the rise of climate change deniers and b) the call for mass deportation or so-called remigration.

Ad a) "Limits to Growth," a 1972 report for the Club of Rome, was the first major publication highlighting the negative effects of constant economic growth and profit orientation. Its core message remains relevant: we must live within our planet's limits to avoid destroying it and ourselves (Meadows et al. 1972; World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). Despite this warning, environmental destruction has continued, leading to an impending climate catastrophe. But instead of speeding up all means to fight climate change, climate change deniers are reaching top political positions. Mostly right-wing politicians like Donald Trump deny the impending climate catastrophe and, with the slogan 'Drill, Baby, Drill', calls for continued oil extraction, promising prosperity and wealth to the people. On the other hand, people who fight for climate justice are criminalized and often even imprisoned (Pichl, 2023). One activist of the group "Last Generation", who glued himself onto a street was recently sentenced to two years in prison without parole (zeitonline 2024a).

Ad b) Moreover, social values like solidarity, integration or empowering vulnerable people are being jeopardized by populist policy makers. Migrants, for example, are increasingly stigmatized, so called "remigration" is called for – even though that would weaken economy and social stability (Fratzscher, 2024). There are many more examples for the right-wing fight against social progress like gender equality and reproductive rights for women etc. which cannot be elaborated upon here.

One can say, that even though facts, knowledge and complex models exist on how to fight global warming and enable social sustainability<sup>1</sup>, leaders are democratically voted for, who simply lie, ignore facts and complexity and support neoliberal economics, preferably with as little state intervention as possible. Instead, they blame the victims (climate activists), find scapegoats (migrants), devalue, insult and offend their opponents (e.g. Trump offers many examples for this behaviour) and divide societies.

<sup>1</sup> E.G. Theories and models of Sustainable Development (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987); Circular Economy (Ellen MacArthur Foundation) or models of self-organization, participation in cooperatives, common good economy. Especially feminist economic theories point out that common market-oriented theories are blind to gender differences, invisible care work and environmental damage (Merenheimo 2023). These examples are without claim of completeness.

But why does this dangerous populism, based on lies, defamation, misinformation and inconsistencies work so remarkably well?

There are various explanations for the effectiveness of populism. Some authors, such as Rebechi and Rohde (2022), suggest it is related to economic insecurity, which undermines trust in political systems. Others, like Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017), also attribute it to identity theories. Other explanations focus more on psychological dynamics triggered by fear of losing belonging, safety, and protection from perceived threats, as discussed e. g. by Langenkamp and Bienstmann (2022).<sup>1</sup> All these factors are intertwined and connected and provide meaningful explanatory approaches.

Here, an additional explanatory approach will be presented that is based on narcissism as an analytical framework.

Historical observations have already noted that many leaders exhibit strong narcissistic and even psychopathic traits (Wirth 2002). Additionally, it has already been suggested that narcissism influences politics as well as private and professional life in modern societies (Hirigoyen 2021), and even that narcissistic values form the norm in capitalist societies (e.g. Samol 2019).

This paper argues that constitutional democracies with market-oriented economies are particularly susceptible to narcissistic individuals attaining top positions. Fundamental economic assumptions have evolved into a general value system, acting as gateways for narcissism. This allows individuals with narcissistic traits to ascend to positions of power, making far-reaching decisions that are likely to harm society and the environment.

The paper is structured as follows: First, the difference between narcissistic personality disorder and trait narcissism will be clarified. Trait narcissism will be conceptualized as a specific combination of antagonistic behaviors that are highly likely to be unemphathetic, irresponsible, to confuse, divide and cause serious harm to others.

Various studies are compiled to show that while an increase in narcissism in the general population is not detectable, there is a significant concentration of narcissistic individuals in certain societies, political groups, hierarchical levels, as well as among specific gender and age groups compared to the societal average. Notably, studies show that narcissistic individuals are significantly more likely to occupy leadership and decision-making positions, leading almost inevitably to damage and harm.

With this in mind, the perspective will be broadened to a structural level to explore the parallels between narcissistic and common economic values. Narcissistic personalities appear to thrive in economic structures, that are characterized by free competition, with the aim to gain profit. In this environment, narcissistic people will rise up but will not use their wealth and power to support the social sector, a sustainable economy and the common good, but rather to attain power, adulation, and status for themselves. There is no lack of examples for this phenomenon. Democracies operating within these value frameworks seem to be particularly vulnerable to narcissistic manipulation due to the emphasis on freedom of expression and pluralism. Additionally, the article will examine the phenomenon in which the roles of offender and victim are reversed as a result of "narcissistic gaslighting." This reversal occurs not only at the individual level but also at the societal level, complicating efforts to combat and identify harmful, antagonistic behavior.

<sup>1</sup> These are just a few examples, no claim of completeness.

In conclusion, narcissism—not necessarily market economies—poses a significant threat to democracy and the urgently needed sustainable transformation. Narcissistic behaviour should be recognized as a global challenge, endangering both the planet and democratic institutions. This article aims to contribute to the understanding of narcissism as an analytical tool to comprehend the unsettling developments of recent times and to find ways to counteract them. Understanding narcissism might help to evolve concepts of leadership to prioritize empathy, social responsibility, and ecological stewardship within politics and economy. Social services and workers should therefore advocate for a more prominent role in political decision-making, highlighting their competence in shaping societal change.

## Method

To answer the research question of why narcissistic personalities are often in decision-making positions in modern Western societies and what dangers are associated with this, an integrative literature review was conducted. The aim was not to descriptively capture all studies and articles published in this field and provide a comprehensive overview of the current research literature. Rather, a narrative-creative approach is pursued (Snyder 2029, p. 334) to bring together publications from various disciplines (primarily sociology, psychology, economics, and politics, as well as current journalistic publications, to support the discussion with relevant examples) in order to develop a theoretical framework that enables a narcissism-informed perspective on the topic of economies, populism and sustainable transformation. The method of integrative review is especially useful for “newly emerging topics, the purpose is rather to create initial or preliminary conceptualization and theoretical models, rather than review old models” (Snyder 2019, p. 336). It is not the aim to be mainly descriptive or historical, but to “generate a new conceptual framework or theory” (ibid.).

To this end, the following search terms were used, among others: narcissism, personality disorder, personality trait, gaslighting, capitalism, market economy, forms of economy, populism, Politics, hierarchy, social, economical and ecological sustainability. Additionally, searches were conducted regarding certain details of the above terms, as well as connections or combinations of these terms. The search engines utilized included the IU Library with journal searches, Google Scholar, and SSOARs. Furthermore, specific online sources were targeted for research (Psychnet, PsychCentral, PLOSone, Sociological Review, bpb, Destatis, etc.), and a snowball search system was employed. All sources used were checked for scientific rigor, with attention paid to peer review and the relevance of the publishers and authors, as well as credible reporting in some more essayistic or journalistic sources (e.g., DIW Blog). Research was done in German and English and focusses German, English and US-American publications. ChatGPT was used for initial structuring of some paragraphs and for translation.

## Trait Narcissism and Narcissistic Personality Disorder

It is well known that individuals can have a wide range of different personality traits. Personality can be understood as a set of specific, uniquely arranged aspects of personality, all of which lie on a spectrum. Individuals may exhibit traits such as openness, curiosity and creativity, or they may tend towards conservatism and tradition. Some are highly conscientious, precise and punctual, while others are more spontaneous and capricious. Some enjoy social interaction, others hate it. In addition, some

people are prone to anxiety and emotional instability, while others are stable and resilient. Furthermore, some people can be pleasant, friendly, helpful and empathetic, while others struggle with empathy and show self-centred tendencies. Individual temperament, socialisation and culture also shape our personality (Neyer & Asendorpf 2018, pp. 108-111).

Personality traits are often not at the extreme ends of the spectrum, but somewhere in between. However, genetics or certain adverse experiences - often rooted in childhood trauma - can lead to personality disorders. Metaphorically speaking, the personality can fragment, and certain personality traits become more pronounced. For example, if an individual experiences devaluation, violence of any kind, intense competition, or excessive protection, pampering, and admiration during their formative years, they may develop subclinical narcissistic traits or even Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) (Zimmerman, 2023; Brummelmann & Sedikides 2020).

The term Narcissism refers to a set of specific traits, in particular: "a pervasive pattern of grandiosity, admiration, and a lack of empathy" (Zimmermann, 2023)<sup>1</sup>. Narcissistic people often have fragile self-esteem, which they hide behind a façade of grandiosity, boasting, devaluation of others and arrogance. They derive their self-worth from external recognition and admiration, living in a fantastical self-image that they defend at all costs. Narcissistic individuals typically react to feedback or criticism with anger and volatility. As a result, they often engage in deception, manipulation and exploitation of others, seeing others as potential threats or competitors. Social relationships, even intimate ones are mainly transactional. When these personality traits are combined with sadism and machiavellism, we are looking at malignant narcissism or psychopathy also known as the dark tetrad (narcissism, machiavellism and psychopathy or sadism) (Durvasula 2019, p 100-104).

At the same time - and this is what makes this personality type particularly dangerous to others - narcissistic individuals can be intelligent, humorous, persuasive, attractive, charismatic and can appear exceptionally competent, often achieving financial and professional success. They use this charisma to captivate others, only to exploit them for their own narcissistic gratification. Empathic individuals can form bonds with narcissistic individuals, making themselves particularly vulnerable to what is known as narcissistic abuse (Howard 2019, p. 644), characterized by a cycle of idealization and devaluation, as well as gaslighting (Durvasula 2019, pp. 171-180; Sweet 2019, p. 851). Gaslighting is much more sinister than 'just' lying or threatening. It is a severe and often poorly understood form of mostly emotional abuse of intimate partners in which people are made to feel that they are mentally ill, irrational, overly sensitive, aggressive, lack humor or have poor memories. The feelings, opinions, desires or needs of the victim are ignored, ridiculed and pathologized. That way it is an effective way of

<sup>1</sup> In the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) 9 characteristics are listed. To diagnose an NPD 5 of them need to be fulfilled: 1) An exaggerated, unfounded sense of self-importance and talents (grandiosity). 2) Engagement in fantasies of unlimited success, influence, power, intelligence, beauty, or perfect love. 3) The belief that they are special and unique and should only associate with people of the highest status. 4) The desire to be admired unconditionally 5) A sense of entitlement 6) Exploiting others to achieve their own goals 7) A lack of empathy 8) Envy of others and the belief that others envy them 9) Arrogance and haughtiness (translated with ChatGPT, Zimmermann 2023). It is important to understand these criteria as abstract and develop an understanding for their presentation in real life situations, often coming from highly charismatic and likeable people.

shifting blame. Those subjected to gaslighting may begin to doubt themselves, blame themselves for things they did not do, and develop symptoms such as low self-esteem, passivity, insecurity, disorientation, depression, or suicidal ideation (Sweet 2019, p. 851). It is important to mention that not all gaslighters are narcissistic. However, March (2023) shows that men with dark tetrad personalities are particularly susceptible to using gaslighting tactics, as are men with high levels of vulnerable narcissism.

A core characteristic of narcissistic abuse is that victims do not know what is happening to them, often they identify with the narcissistic person as a result of trauma bonding. Due to their charisma, narcissistic individuals often enjoy a lot of support from those around them, as they are perceived as brilliant, genius, or exceptionally talented (Durvasula 2019, p. 111). A cult-like atmosphere often develops around them<sup>1</sup>, making it even more difficult for victims to recognize the abuse, which is exacerbated by gaslighting. In addition, not all narcissistic people exhibit overt grandiosity; some may exhibit significant shyness, hiding their feelings of grandeur. This form is referred to as covert narcissism; some authors consider it to be a particularly insidious form of narcissism due to its subtlety and seemingly harmless nature (Durvasula 2019, pp. 88-94).

It is important to distinguish between narcissistic personality disorder (NPD) and narcissistic traits (Lebow, 2022; Weiss & Miller 2018, pp. 3-13): Narcissism lies on a spectrum and some narcissistic individuals may appear to lead successful lives for years, decades, a lifetime. It is only when individuals struggle to navigate life effectively, exhibit maladaptive behaviors (Neurologen und Psychiater im Netz 2024), experience significant distress, and seek professional help (Lebow 2022), that NPD can be diagnosed. The prevalence of NPD is stable and low, affecting about 1,6 % of the population (Zimmermann 2023). However, the prevalence of trait narcissism in the population is difficult to determine. These people exhibit narcissistic behaviour on a spectrum from 'just' being an entitled person who is full of themselves and never asks questions, to deliberately reckless behaviour, shortly before psychopathy (Lebow 2022; Durvasula 2019, p. 104). The Narcissistic Personality Inventory (Raskin & Terry 1988) is often used to measure the severity of narcissistic personality traits.

The term 'healthy narcissism' is often used (Lebow 2022), but it will not be applied here because strong, ambitious and confident individuals should not be confused with narcissistic people who appear to be just that but are not. Although narcissism exists on a spectrum, it should not be seen as a trivial matter – or even as something positive.

In this article I will refer to narcissism as a personality trait that lies on a spectrum and is characterized by lack of empathy, arrogance, devaluation of others and a sense of being special and entitled.

<sup>1</sup> There are plenty of examples of narcissistic cult leaders such as “Osho”, an Indian spiritual leader known for his controversial commune in Oregon. His followers revered him as an enlightened master and adhered strictly to his teachings. Osho maintained significant control over his followers, discouraging dissent and fostering a strong sense of unity. This eventually led to various forms of abuse and several illegal activities, showcasing the dangers of a cult-like environment surrounding his leadership (Dell & Oppel 2021). But also, in politics we see a number of leaders who are worshipped like divine individuals. One example is Donald Trump (Lee, 2017) who believes that his survival from an assassination attempt was due to divine intervention, and his supporters regard him as the chosen one (Trump 2024).



## State of Research: Narcissism shapes culture

A closer look at the research literature shows that we cannot speak of an alarming rise in narcissism, but we can say that narcissism thrives in certain subgroups and milieus:

In fact, a recent representative study by the University of Münster with 250,000 participants showed higher narcissism in men, especially in young men (Weidmann et al. 2023). This may be partly due to gendered upbringing, which allows boys more than girls to act out certain values, such as fighting and winning, being powerful and dominant over others, etc.

Narcissistic values such as domineering behaviour, desire to control, need for admiration etc. are not true values but rather symptoms. The link between certain values and narcissism was demonstrated in a quantitative Slovakian study. The researchers used the NPI and a values questionnaire: "The data supported a significant positive relationship between narcissism and individualistic values; a negative relationship between narcissism and collectivistic values, regardless of gender and generation. The preference for individualistic values was predicted by narcissism and generation; within collectivism, only narcissism proved to be a significant predictor". (Urukovicova, 2022, p. 315)

Narcissistic values are also reflected in political preferences. A study conducted in Germany (Kazarovytska & Imhoff, 2022) finds a significant correlation between "collective narcissism" and the urge to stop talking about the Holocaust, to "draw a line under it", to finally turn the page and not look back. Collective narcissism refers to a form of narcissism that goes beyond individual self-centeredness to encompass a group or collective identity. It involves an exaggerated belief in the greatness and superiority of one's culture, nation, or social group, coupled with a sense of entitlement and a corresponding disdain for other groups, as seen in right-wing and populist parties (Cickocka & Cislak 2019). The concept of collective narcissism "extends into the intergroup domain the concept of individual narcissism: an extensive self-love or inflated, grandiose view of oneself that requires continual external validation" (de Zavala et al. 2009, p. 3). De Zavala and colleagues (2009) can show that collective narcissism is "reliably associated with intergroup bias and aggressiveness" (p. 43), it can also predict right wing authoritarianism and "blind patriotism" (p. 2). These findings show that the abusive dynamics of interpersonal relationships can be transferred to groups, nations, religious or ethnic groups. The correlation between individual narcissism and collective narcissism is positive but not high, because a person can have a very low self-esteem (which is a main root for narcissism) and "put their group in the center of their lives" (p. 5). This way they gain all attention, status and power for themselves through their in-group.

A 2018 study conducted at the Department of Medical Psychology and Sociology at the University of Leipzig, which surveyed 2,100 people, found that voters of the far right "Alternative for Germany" (AfD) and the Left Party (Die Linke) showed particularly high levels of narcissism. In particular, narcissism scores were particularly pronounced among AfD voters and were also associated with a 'preference for authority' (Zeit-online, 2018). Further analysis showed that AfD voters showed a strong identification with Germany as an in-group, which was primarily manifested in xenophobia, rather than a sense of being left behind (Yendell, 2020).

Narcissistic behaviors are particularly advantageous in the context of social media. Numerous studies show that individuals who exhibit narcissistic traits are particularly active on platforms such as Twitter

(now X) and other social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram (Barry & McDougall 2018, Höllig 2018, Casale & Banchi 2020). Research shows that narcissistic individuals tend to post more frequently and receive more likes and attention than those with lower levels of narcissism. In this way, narcissistic behaviour becomes normalized, promoted and culture-shaping – even if not all onlookers like what they see, nor are narcissistic themselves.

Other studies suggest that economic and/or political systems encourage or discourage narcissistic values. "Individualistic cultures encourage a stronger focus on the self, whereas collectivistic cultures emphasize the importance of social values" (Vater et al. 2018). A German study comparing narcissistic traits in individuals socialized in East and West Germany before reunification found that "grandiose narcissism was higher and self-esteem lower in individuals who grew up in former West Germany compared to former East Germany" (Vater et al. 2018). The authors therefore refer to this phenomenon as "cultural narcissism". Twenge's data (2013, 2021) show that college students born between 1980 and 2000 exhibit an increased sense of self-importance, entitlement, and a focus on personal happiness and individualism compared to previous generations, whom she refers to as "Generation Me". She and her colleagues also found that narcissistic traits increase during periods of economic growth (Twenge et al. 2021). Similar results were found in a cross-temporal meta-analysis in Canada and Australia (Hamamura et al. 2020). The researchers found no evidence of rising narcissism in these two countries, but did find a decline in narcissism during an economic recession in Canada in 2008. It could be argued that a strong economy strengthens narcissistic aspects of personalities.

Another example is the workplace. Recently it has been increasingly recognized that narcissism is a widespread problem in the corporate world. A representative German study of 10,000 respondents shows that levels of narcissism increase with hierarchical status (Heidbrink et al. 2021). This suggests that the higher up you look in an organization, the more likely you are to encounter a narcissistic personality. Narcissists are more likely to be found in leadership positions than in the general population, and they cause significant damage in these roles (ibid). Numerous studies around the world show that workplace climate, employee motivation and performance suffer under narcissistic leadership (Fehn & Schütz 2020; Wang & Jiao 2022). But the effects go beyond these issues. Narcissistic leaders engage in bullying, create divisions within teams, misappropriate funds, lie and are only interested in their own benefit. Wealth, power and status are their primary motivators - not the success and well-being of all. Therefore, sooner or later, narcissistic leaders will "derail" (Externbrink & Keil 2017, p. 49).

Other studies suggest that narcissists are not only to be found in profit-driven companies, but also in NGOs and the social sector, where admiration and recognition can also be gained (Gebauer & Sedikides 2018). Here they present themselves as "living saints", spiritual or religious leaders (Durvasula, 2019, pp. 92-93).

In summary, we do not observe a significant increase in narcissism overall, but higher narcissistic traits are evident in young men, extreme political groups, and leadership positions. Consequently, individuals with narcissistic traits tend to be very prominent and influence culture by normalizing narcissistic behaviors. It could also be concluded that more people are being shaped toward narcissism, leading to self-centered and exploitative conduct. This may be possible because their behaviour aligns with economic and neoliberal values and remains largely unchallenged in democratic

societies where freedom of expression is highly valued. The following discussion highlights the notable similarities between narcissistic traits and market-oriented economic values.

## Market economies may enable narcissistic values

In the following chapters, the focus will be on analyzing central beliefs that hold validity in capitalist, market-oriented democracies as pathways that enable narcissistic behavior. A comprehensive analysis of various forms of market-oriented economies (e.g., capitalism according to Marx, monetarism according to M. Friedman (2002 [1962]), neoliberal directions following Hayek (2004 [1944]) with a rejection of state intervention, more socially oriented market economies, Keynesianism, etc.) cannot be undertaken here. Certain core values in Western societies, originating from economic principles, may pose challenges to sustainable development. This analysis will outline the potential risks associated with two particular values: profit orientation and competition in a free market, supported by some current examples.

### 1. PROFIT ORIENTATION

Profit orientation, the desire to increase capital, is a basically unchallenged economic motivation in Western societies. As Friedman succinctly put it: "The social responsibility of business is to increase its profits" (Friedman, 1970). To this day, the profit motive is seen as rational and a hallmark of a "free society". Often, a focus on the common good is equated with "socialism" and even perceived as dictatorship (ibid.). Although 'ethical issues' have become increasingly relevant to corporate governance - largely in response to numerous environmental scandals, human rights abuses and fraud - the prevailing view remains that profit orientation is 'rational' (Thommen et al., 2023, p. 672), while social and societal responsibility (often referred to as 'ethical issues') is seen as optional.

Business profits often benefit individuals who then seek power and status instead of promoting social responsibility or worker wellbeing. The motivation to accumulate private wealth and become rich is largely unchallenged and it is even regarded as particularly 'clever' to sidestep social responsibility by evading taxes. This interpretation of business responsibility reflects narcissistic values that are devoid of social responsibility and empathy.

Some individuals maximize profit through tax evasion and use their wealth to exert power and entitled behavior. This often occurs without effective repercussions, as society justifies immense wealth and power as results of talent, genius, and hard work.

- The EU-funded EU Tax Observatory found that "the world's billionaires have effective tax rates of between 0% and 0.5% on their wealth, due to the frequent use of shell companies to avoid income taxation. To date, no serious attempt has been made to address this situation, which risks undermining the social acceptability of existing tax systems" (Alstadsaeter et al., 2024). During his first presidential debate against Hillary Clinton, Donald Trump described not paying income tax as "smart" (CNBC, 2016).
- Elon Musk, the richest man on earth, uses his wealth to influence public opinion and politics through his platform, X. He often frames actions like spreading misinformation as free speech, dismissing critics such as German Federal President Steinmeier as "antidemocratic tyrants" (Zeit 2024 b). This behavior illustrates how individuals can use their power to promote right-

wing populism and create chaos. While Germany's capitalism and democratic institutions differ from the USA, Musk is already supporting right-wing populists in the EU.

- Another vivid example of entitled behavior among the wealthy is provided by Jeff Bezos, who demanded the dismantling of a historic bridge in Rotterdam in 2022 to allow his mega-yacht to pass (Lothar & Schäfer, 2022). This display of personal possession was both ostentatious and shameless, demonstrating personal superiority and a remarkable sense of entitlement.
- Similar behaviour can be observed globally. An Oxfam report highlights how the super-rich contribute to climate change through their use of yachts, private jets, large homes, and high consumption (Oxfam, 2024). However, not all wealthy individuals live such lifestyles. Many advocate for higher taxes (taxmenow.org) and aim to benefit society. This shows that personality influences behaviour and values.

These examples illustrate how individuals—often perceived as clever businessmen who are profit-oriented and successful—capitalize on the prevailing belief that the desire to become wealthy is a universally accepted human motivation. However, this is not true for all individuals, but rather for those with a narcissistic or even malignant narcissistic, psychopathic personality emphasis.

Therefore, it is crucial to understand the narcissistic shift in profit orientation from serving the common good – as Friedman originally intended – to prioritizing personal gain and power. This underscores the necessity for greater attention to the personalities of individuals in leadership positions.

## 2. COMPETITION IN A FREE MARKET

Competition between companies, products and services on a free market is a central element of market-oriented economic systems, designed to promote innovation and efficiency (Friedman, 2002 [1962]). Research indicates that especially grandiose and overt narcissists are highly competitive due to their need for superiority and validation, often lacking empathy for competitors (Lurcher et al. 2011). Narcissistic individuals struggle with cooperation and community values, viewing them as weaknesses.

Moreover, competition in a free market is often not fair and tends to exacerbate social inequalities. This is because competition for jobs and societal positions is characterized by unequal starting conditions. Bourdieu (1987) speaks of social and cultural capital, that shapes the Habitus of a person and places them in a social hierarchy. As a result, existing inequalities are reinforced, as the winners of competition tend to accumulate further advantages while the losers fall further behind. To this day, there is no real equality of opportunity in the German society. A McKinsey study (Stifterverband, 2021) shows that in Germany 79 out of 100 children of academics go on to higher education, while only 27 out of 100 children of non-academics do so (p. 3). Only when truly equal competitive conditions are established can one speak of competition bringing about the best solution for everyone. However, this is not the case.

Systematic disadvantages need to be actively addressed. Privileged members of society may need to take a step back and critically reflect on the legitimacy of their privileges. However, narcissistic individuals are unlikely to engage in this self-reflection; they are more prone to exploit their advantages, promote a facade of equal opportunity and blame the disadvantaged.

In contrast, agreeable and empathetic personalities may find competition unimportant and derive little satisfaction from 'winning'. They might prefer participatory processes of developing ideas and come to

conclusions. In an economy driven by self-centered leadership, free competition is upheld and associated with freedom. Consequently, this dynamic perpetuates social inequality without addressing its reduction.

Deregulation is a core strategy of neoliberal market-oriented economies, to guarantee a free market with as little state intervention as possible. Deregulation can be implemented in different areas to secure competitive advantages. Examples include the deregulation of financial markets, which contributed to the 2007 financial crisis (Herr & Stachuletz 2008), the deregulation of safety standards that for example resulted in the Grenfell Tower fire in London in 2017 (Eisenbrey 2017), an unsafe Boeing aircraft and an exploding chemical plant in Texas (Cohen 2019). Without regulation, quality and safety standards can be lowered to gain competitive market advantage, potentially endangering the lives and health of workers.

This brief discussion cannot provide a comprehensive analysis of all consequences of market deregulation. However, it is important to note that deregulation - the absence of government regulation to protect the interests of citizens - can strengthen narcissistic, reckless behaviour and encourage companies to disregard ethical standards. This can lead to a normalization and an increase in exploitative practices and a lack of social responsibility, further widening the gap between the interests of individuals and the common good.

To support this argument, another US study will be cited. The study has shown that particularly deregulated markets, such as cryptocurrencies, have a significant number of individuals with dark personality traits (dark triade): "crypto ownership was associated with belief in conspiracy theories, 'dark' personality traits (e.g., the 'Dark Tetrad' of narcissism, Machiavellianism, psychopathy, and sadism), and more frequent use of alternative and fringe social media platforms" (Litrell et al., 2024).

To summarize it can be said that neither competition nor a deregulated market are bad in itself – but in the hands of narcissistic individuals it can and will be used to maximize private profit on the costs of others. But why is it so hard to fight back?

## Capitalist gaslighting

As Sweet (2019) indicates, gaslighting occurs not only in private settings but also on a societal level. In particular, the trivialization of violence against women and the assertion that women are to blame for the violence they experience (victim-blaming) can be seen as a manifestation of deeply ingrained societal gaslighting. One could refer to this as "capitalist gaslighting," which ultimately serves to confuse and silence victims and to maintain the market-oriented logic of growth to maximize profit. This form of economic gaslighting will be briefly illustrated by examples, such as unemployed people and individuals living in poverty, young people with mental health issues, and the social sector as a whole.

### **POVERTY AND UNEMPLOYMENT**

In market-oriented societies, there is often an idealized perception of what a good life looks like, frequently defined by material possessions and consumer behavior. People are encouraged to attach

their sense of self-worth to their belongings. As a result, individuals experiencing poverty and/or unemployment—who cannot afford what is considered a normal standard of living—often doubt their own value, feel shame and inferiority. Individuals experience feelings of helplessness and passiveness, rather than addressing injustices and seeking to change their circumstances (Erhart 2024). These are typical symptoms of being gaslighted, as explained above.

Considering the prevalence of narcissism within higher hierarchical levels and the widespread belief that profit and competition are legitimate and equitable due to the notion of equal opportunity and success through hard work, one can argue that we are experiencing a form of capitalist gaslighting. Despite our awareness, as informed by Bourdieu (1987) and many others, of the inherent injustices and complex power structures within society, the prevailing idea of earned and legitimate success is still strong enough to obscure the structural inequalities that benefit the affluent, thereby exacerbating the challenges faced by the disadvantaged. Consequently, reckless, entitled, and ultimately detrimental behavior is not only encouraged but frequently idealized, escaping accountability—the onus falls on those who are less privileged rather than on the powerful. This distortion of reality is complete; the privileged are viewed as successful and elevated to the status of idols, while the losers of the system are falsely regarded as lazy, self-inflicted and live on the brink of poverty, often ashamed and humiliated (Krug, 2020). Using the vocabulary of narcissistic abuse, it can be observed that these individuals usually do not unite and rebel against the structure but instead join and identify with charismatic saviors. This was already demonstrated in the Mariental study from 1933 (Jahoda et al. 1975 [1933]).

Again, these dynamics differ in western societies and further research is needed. It is noteworthy still, that even in a Welfare State like Germany, poverty is on the rise for the most vulnerable like the elderly, single mothers, non-academics and people with migration background, while rich people even become richer (Sozialbericht 2024).

## **SOCIAL MEDIA AND LOW SELF-ESTEEM**

Another example is the pervasive presentation of idealized images on social media that focusses on young people. This is a form of early, particularly effective gaslighting that is automated through addictive algorithms. This ultimately serves to make young users feel inferior, less than which ultimately encourages consumption. In a recent online survey conducted by the German health insurance provider AOK, 40% of young people who spend up to 3 hours on Social Media per day admitted to feeling pressured to appear more attractive, successful, and better in general. The findings of the survey demonstrate that social media is a significant contributing factor to the formation of a distorted self-image among adolescents. In light of these findings, the insurance company is calling for a clear labelling system to be implemented in order to identify and differentiate between real and manipulated images on the internet (AOK 2023). A further recent German study of youth (Schnetzer et al., 2024) has indicated that young people who consume social media on a daily basis are more likely to experience psychological problems, girls being more affected than boys (WDR, 2024). It is widely acknowledged that algorithms are designed to foster addiction. However, social media providers are

hesitant to take responsibility for the harm they cause, as doing so would contradict their profit motives. Instead, they invoke principles such as freedom of speech, free markets, and competition, while appealing to the personal responsibility of users, even when these users are minors. Consumers should become more resilient without being patronized by excessive consumer protection (Heidbrink 2020, pp. 133-134). This gaslighting technique works by making users feel depressed and blame themselves for their unhappiness, shifting responsibility away from providers.

## **DEVALUATION OF THE SOCIAL SECTOR**

Social work faces significant challenges in asserting itself within a profit oriented market, as it does not generate profit. At best, it can have a preventive effect and "save" later costs, for instance, through addiction prevention programs in schools designed to avoid expensive therapies, hospitalizations, and unemployment in the future. This example highlights that the impact of social work is often difficult to measure or to quantify precisely. Typically, positive effects manifest in a delayed manner. The discussion about the dangers of the economization of Social Work is ongoing (Vaudt 2022). Social work does not yield material profits, which leads to the characterization of "social services as theoretically unproductive work, as it can only occur if, from a societal perspective, enough value is generated through wealth and taxes to be allocated according to politically determined criteria for the financing of social services and social work" (Goetze 2024, p. 377, translation from German with ChatGPT).

Consequently, also in a social market economy like Germany, Social Work continually grapples with underfunding and budget cuts. It offers limited earning potential and opportunities for advancement, which exacerbates the shortage of skilled professionals, a situation that has yet not been adequately addressed. Conversely, significant reductions in social spending are anticipated. The German welfare association "Der Paritätischer Wohlfahrtsverband" refers to this as a "cut to the core of civil society" (Der Paritätische 2024, translation from German with ChatGPT).

Moreover, vulnerable groups, including migrants, the LGBTQ community, or unemployed individuals, are often subjected to stigmatization, criminalization, and devaluation – symptomatic narcissistic behaviour. As a result, attempts to support gender equality, diversity and inclusion – core values of Social Work – are called "woke madness" (Hamade 2024). In other words, those who face and point out discrimination and work against it are then met with ridicule and allegations of irrationality. Such gaslighting of vulnerable groups jeopardizes the stability of democratic structures that depend on solidarity, equality and facts. The effects of gaslighting are evident today in both Europe and the USA, particularly under Trump's administration, which aims to abolish crucial social services such as the Department of Education and federal DEI (diversity, equity, inclusion) employees (Francis, 2025).

Victim-blaming of Social Work clients also undermines social workers' self-esteem. They often remain "silent", rarely protest, and make few demands (Goetze 2024, p. 374). The experiences of both professionals and clients in the field of Social Work are often met with little empathy and receive insufficient societal attention. Social Services are frequently perceived as costly and inefficient—a valid perspective in profit-driven markets, but not applicable to the Social Sector where empathy is crucial. The constant problematization of the Social Sector clearly highlights the harmful effects of gaslighting that weakens Social Work and consequently societal stability.

Numerous other examples of gaslighting of vulnerable groups and enabling narcissistic behaviour in societal areas like politics and the corporate world could be envisioned, indicating a substantial field for further research.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper has demonstrated that market and profit oriented societal structures promote narcissistic behaviors, which will sooner or later negatively impact individual and collective well-being, democracies, and even the planet. Understanding narcissism as a potentially dangerous personality trait could be useful in addressing and solving the immense challenges that the world faces.

An economic system that prioritizes a culture of empathy and foresight is not only desirable, but necessary for shaping a sustainable and just future. Achieving this requires paradigm shifts in how we, as a society, define and evaluate economic and social values.

To create such a society, the following recommendations are proposed:

### Education and Information on narcissism:

It seems to be increasingly necessary to understand, that unemphatic and narcissistic behavior exists and is ultimately harmful. Empathy must be understood as mandatory in order to overcome climate change and advance the sustainability transformation. To achieve that, psychoeducation should be promoted and made available. Social Work can play a crucial part in this. Education on how certain personality traits manifest in daily life and what the consequences are is needed in educational curricula for schools and universities. More research is required to better understand the dynamics of narcissistic abuse in various societal contexts.

### New leadership concepts:

Political parties and businesses should critically reassess their idea of what successful leadership means and focus more on listening, understanding, participation, social and ecological responsibility and foresightedness to prevent narcissistic personalities from climbing up the hierarchy ladder.

### Strengthening of Social Politics and Social Work:

It is imperative that Social Services emerge from the shadows and demand to be a political priority and a guiding principle, as they competently serve as the executive arm for establishing social justice and strengthening societal cohesion and democracy. Viewed in this light, Social Work can counteract to a growth and profit fixated economic system that normalizes narcissistic and harmful values. This entails not only the expansion of Social Services but also the improvement of working conditions for professionals in Social Work. Enhanced support and appreciation for the work in this sector are crucial, not only to ensure the well-being of clients and the quality of services provided but also to mitigate the risks posed by narcissistic values in politics and business. In this context, Social Work must regain its self-confidence and articulate well-founded demands. The pursuit of technological progress must be accompanied, if not led, by social progress and innovation.

A robust Social Work practice can help mitigate narcissistic behaviors while fostering compassionate ones. This creates a foundation for collective well-being, ensuring ecological sustainability in a socially responsible manner and addressing the challenges presented by an increasingly complex world.



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