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Dying myths of neoliberalism: Reflections on socialisation in the age of precarity

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Abstract

This paper critically examines theories of neoliberal socialisation. Taking Byung-chul Han's theory of 'psychopolitics' as an example, I contend that descriptions highlighting the 'seductive' and 'positive' elements of neoliberal culture overlook the persistent disciplinary and precarising forces underpinning the neoliberal socio-economy. Contrary to claims that repressive mechanisms are obsolete, the analysis shows they were initially redirected towards marginalised groups along racialised, psychiatrised, and class demarcations, and their effects are now working their way up the class hierarchy. Proposing an alternative framework, this paper refocuses the analysis of neoliberalism on capitalist class dynamics and centres precarisation as the key socialising force. By detailing the multi-layered effects of this precarisation – such as the rise of cynicism, defensive individualism, and paranoid-populist outcrops – this paper provides a revised understanding of contemporary capitalist subjectivity. Ultimately, this contributes to broader theoretical debates concerning the psychosocial chaos of our late-neoliberal present.

Keywords

Neoliberalism, precarity, capitalism, cynicism, populism, individualism

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It takes courage to promise an overarching psychosocial account of our world, where change is happening at a breathtaking pace. We know that any account of the present must look into material, institutional, and cultural changes associated with the 'neoliberal' revolution that began politically in the late 1970s. We also know that, under Thatcher's project of 'changing the soul', the effects of neoliberal reforms go deep into people's psyches. People are more distressed and more 'sick', our politics more confused. Yet, how we transitioned from Thatcher and Reagan to the psychopolitical chaos of the present day remains unclear. Observations and hypotheses about neoliberal culture and psyches abound, but are confusingly diverse.

The chaos puzzled many, but not philosopher Byung-Chul Han. In his defining aphoristic and prophetic style, reminiscent of 20th-century critical theorists, Han audaciously attempted to weave diverse trends into a unified narrative, uncovering the essence of neoliberal governmentality while offering diagnoses of psychosocial symptoms. From depression and burnouts to mob rage and overconsumption, from the pornographisation of art to the waning of emancipatory forces, all psychosocial phenomena can be traced back to a *unitary 'psychopolitical' logic*: a logic that markets its norms as ideals and entices individuals with the false promise of endless self-optimisation and infinite positivity.

In this paper, I argue that Han's attempt at a unified account of neoliberal subjectivation is overgeneralised. Han is, at best, read as diagnosing the high neoliberal moment of middle-class integration roughly between the 1990s and the 2000s, and he completely misses the plight of many when the effects of precarisation grow in the late neoliberal epoch post-2008. Indeed, by overemphasising the 'soft' and 'positive' side of neoliberal socialisation, Han overlooks how repressive discipline and disidentification have persisted under neoliberalism in the form of ongoing class-based exclusions and extractive dynamics. Such dynamics are common to all capitalist formations, although they have been partly obfuscated by debt-fuelled achievement integration during the high neoliberal era.

In the following sections, I first reconstruct Han's remarks on neoliberal socialisation in his 2010–2020 writings and propose that Han's picture fails to address people's growing dissatisfaction with achievement ideals and the ongoing disciplinarisation of abjected social groups during the high neoliberal decades. In the second half, I rectify Han's errors by discussing neoliberalism's roots in capitalist class dynamics, reframing the issue of neoliberal socialisation as 'precarisation' alongside 'achievement', focusing, in particular, on the recent rise of cynical coping, defensive autonomy, and paranoid survivalism. This new model hopefully enhances our understanding of the complex landscape of late-neoliberal subjectivation, adding to existing accounts of neoliberal socialisation.

Han's Account of Neoliberal Subjectivation

While Han's philosophical system includes various discussions of digital cultures and art and contains an ethical ontology of experience based on a concept of 'negativity', this paper will focus on his characterisation of neoliberal 'psychopolitics'. We can summarise Han's account in three conceptual steps: first, the transition from 'disciplinary society' to

'achievement society'; second, the rise of the 'autoexploiting', self-alienating, entrepreneurial subject; and third, the descent of the auto-exploiting entrepreneur into burnout and depression.

From Discipline to Achievement

Han's view of the cultural and sociological shifts under neoliberalism converges markedly with the argument that runs through the literature on neoliberalism. In such accounts, neoliberalisation of society involves cultural and institutional revolutions that accelerate capital accumulation amidst declining growth by curbing labour resistance, inducing market competition, deploying ideals of entrepreneurial individualism, and stimulating consumption (Gindin & Panitch, 2012; Harvey, 1989, 2005). For instance, capitalist firms, under shareholder pressures, are remade as networked, competitive environments where task teams are encouraged to compete with one another to meet metricised targets set by the central management. Workers are recast as perfectible entrepreneurial workers, responsibilised to innovate and optimise their performance to meet competitive pressures (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2018; Dardot & Laval, 2014, pp. 155–180; Sennett, 2006). Under 'New Public Management' and related public initiatives, the model of entrepreneurial individuation, incentivisation and responsibilisation has also penetrated public institutions, becoming the staple of neoliberal governance and education (Brown, 2015; Dardot & Laval, 2014). On the side of consumerism, the production of individualisable products coupled with new marketing technologies of seduction produces the ideal of the 'responsible consumer', who can achieve self-actualisation and the appreciation of one's market value through 'smart' consumption choices – further extending the reach of ideals of the self-responsible, perfectible individual into private life-choices and aspirations (Bauman, 2007a). This way, workers, students, and consumers alike are expected to respond to their social calling and remake themselves as 'human capital' with a lifelong task of self-perfection, becoming employable, marketable, and investible 'portfolios' (Brown, 2015; Feher, 2009).

For Han, the neoliberal remaking of the citizen and worker into 'projects' (Han, 2015, p. 46; Han, 2017b, p. 1; Han, 2021, p. 103) and 'consumers' (Han, 2015, p. 43; Han, 2017b, p. 9f) marked a paradigm shift in the operation of social power which he terms the shift from (Foucaultian) *biopolitics* to '*psychopolitics*' (Han, 2017b, ch. 4). Han describes in no uncertain terms how societal normative expectations on the subject have shifted from the 'negative', commanding 'You should' into the 'positive', energising 'You can' of neoliberalism. While the former social power enforces compliance with set norms, the latter presents the world as a positively promised world of possibilities under which people are seduced and activated to '*freely*' find their way and realise their inner potentials (Han, 2015, pp. 8–11; Han, 2017a, pp. 9–16).

It is important to note Han's formulations. When describing the neoliberal paradigm shift, Han writes:

> Twenty-first-century society is *no longer* a disciplinary society, but rather an achievement society. Also, its inhabitants are *no longer* 'obedience-subjects' but 'achievement-subjects'. They are entrepreneurs of themselves. (Han, 2015, p. 8, emphasis added)

Relatedly, concerning power mechanisms, he writes:

> The neoliberal regime's technology of power is not prohibitive or repressive but seductive. (Han, 2021, p. 30, see also p. 16)

Han's account describes neoliberal power as a radical rupture from the past, with new, 'smart', 'psychopower' *replacing* 'negative' disciplinary coercion. This is nowhere more apparent in *Psychopolitics,* where he ruthlessly ignores nuances in the Foucaultian analysis of biopower (where (i) the positive and the negative dimensions of power intertwine, and (ii) old paradigms are rarely replaced by the new, but coexist with them[1]) and presents his theory of psychopolitics as *the* replacement for Foucault's on neoliberalism.[2] This account describes how the 'positive', activating forces of psycho-power influence the shaping of psyches in many areas of life beyond just consumption, including the workplace and psychiatry (Han, 2017b, pp. 4–6, 35–36).

Social power, for Han, has decidedly moved away from the 'negativity' of discipline and repression, into 'positivity' of ingratiation, activation and seduction (Han, 2017b, pp. 14–15; Han, 2021, p. 30). Under neoliberal psychopolitics, people are invited to internalise the broad social 'imperative' of productivity as ego-ideals producing an endogenous 'pressure to achieve'. Positive means of socialisation and education now replace traditional 'discipline' in encouraging individuals to remake themselves as self-optimising subjects responsible for producing and reproducing, *at once, ever-appreciating values for themselves and for capitalism alike* (Han, 2015, p. 10). This conversion of 'negative' disciplinary norms into perfectible ideals of achievement, Han believes, objectively raises people's self-expectations and productivity without it appearing to the subject as negative and repressive. The 'soft' and 'smart' operation of such power is essential for understanding how we are remade into self-exploiting subjects.

From Allo-Exploitation to Auto-Exploitation

Although commentators have also discussed how neoliberal power has induced subjects to identify with the self-motivating, self-commodifying, and self-responsible virtues of entrepreneurial subjectivity (e.g. Brown, 2015; Foucault, 2008; Honneth, 2012; Rose, 1999), Han goes the furthest to outline how neoliberal 'social transformation entails psychic restructuring' (Han, 2015, p. 36). He interprets the rise of entrepreneurial subjects using the model of 'auto-exploiting' subjects and asserts that the neoliberal celebration of positivity and limitless opportunities has led most individuals to identify themselves as 'entrepreneurs' and their life as 'projects' (Han, 2017b, p. 5). In his words:

> Today, *everyone is an auto-exploiting labourer in his or her own enterprise*. People are now master and slave in one. Even class struggle has transformed into an inner struggle against oneself. (Han, 2017b, p. 5, emphasis added; See also, Han, 2021, p. 16)

Positive socialisation, as just described, displaces the need for exploitation to be repressive and disciplinary any longer, thus exploitation by *a repressive, disciplinary other* ('allo-exploitation') is not required. When individuals accept self-optimising as

their own calling, social imperatives are effectively internalised as '*auto-exploitation*' *of the subject in all domains and at all times* (Han, 2017a, pp. 9, 20). As such, neoliberal subjects now 'voluntarily' and 'willingly' exploit themselves under the illusion of 'self-realisation and self-optimisation' (Han, 2017b, p. 2; Han, 2018, p. 38).

For Han, this shift in the mode of exploitation has profound implications for the neoliberal subject and the prospects for emancipation from capitalism[3]: First, given how auto-exploiting subjects *willingly* and voluntarily exploit themselves, the call to liberate oneself from social exploitation resonates far less. 'Freedom', for the entrepreneurial subject, is taken more or less exclusively as a means of voluntary betterment of one's market performance (Han, 2017b, pp. 2–3). Second, Han describes how the folding in of the oppressive discipline into the entrepreneurial self relocates resistance and dissatisfaction intrapsychically into the self's inner struggle with its ego-ideals (Han, 2015, p. 46f; Han, 2021, pp. 16–18). Anxieties and frustrations are thus turned inwards into self-responsibilising guilt and shame that drives the self into further self-optimisation rather than social resistance (Han, 2017a, p. 10; Han, 2018, pp. 33, 39). Third, the widespread and willing acceptance of selves as self-responsible entrepreneurs in the realm of immaterial 'self-production' also means, for Han, that class antagonisms are obsolete (Han, 2017b, pp. 5–6). In Han's account, neoliberal subjects are not only incapable of organising collective resistance and calling out on exploitation, but their 'subordinated' subjectivities are also 'not even aware of [their] subordination' (Han, 2017b, p. 14; Han, 2021, p. 17).

Depression – The Auto-Exploiting Subject Breaks Down

For Han, auto-exploitation works through the positive 'ego-ideal' (Han, 2015, p. 46). This leads to a shift in the locus and an intensification of exploitation, for the internalisation prevents the subject from *distancing themselves from social demands*.[4] In Han's terms, auto-exploitation produces fatal 'auto-compulsion':

> Auto-compulsion proves more fatal than allo-compulsion, because there is no way to resist oneself. The neoliberal regime conceals its compulsive structure behind the seeming freedom of the single individual, who no longer understands him- or herself as a subjugated subject ("subject to"), but as a project in the process of realizing itself. (Han, 2017a, p. 10)

Lulled by an internal authority compelling oneself to optimise and perform, the space for resistance is eclipsed socially and intra-psychically. Han describes how neoliberal selves, unable to refuse internalised demands, compel themselves ceaselessly to perform and optimise until they break down completely in shame, fatigue, burnout, and depression, enervated to the point that they are no longer 'able to be able' (Han, 2015, p. 10). This is Han's unified account of the aetiology of depression and many other psychopathologies of the neoliberal age – *not* a result *of negativity and repression*, but 'an excess of positivity'[5] (Han, 2015, p. 1). Neat as this may seem, does Han's account accurately capture neoliberal realities? In the coming section, I juxtapose Han's account with emerging empirical and theoretical work that complicates this picture.

Reconsidering Han

The Persistence of Dissatisfaction and Disidentification

Having reconsidered Han's statements about neoliberal socialisation, we might wonder: Are individuals trapped in narcissistic self-relationships, confused by our culture's optimistic facade, and 'not aware of its own subjugation' as Han argues? Indeed, is our culture so 'positive' that critical views of achievement culture are absent and can only be experienced as depressive feelings of inadequacy? While Han's answer is 'yes' to all the above, there is substantial evidence indicating that his claims may be exaggerated.

In January 2015, posters mysteriously appearing in London Tube trains, featuring quotes from David Graeber's *Bullshit Jobs* sparked a Twitter storm, with users resonating strongly with messages about how work is 'meaningless, dissatisfying, and/or emotionally disengaging' (Davies, 2021, pp. 81–83). In 2019, during widespread protests in Hong Kong, a screenshot of a commuter saying, 'My demand is to go to work, and nothing else' (我的訴求是上班，沒有其他) became a meme. The meme spread to become a symbol of cynical (self-)mockery. The message, it seems, is the contradiction between one's felt meaninglessness of complying with workplace demands and the institutional compulsions to meet them. In October 2021, an ad filling all the screens along one of the busiest walkways in Tokyo, featuring the slogan, 'Are you looking forward to today's work?' (今日の仕事は、楽しみですか), sparked another Twitter storm. The ad's falsely 'positive' message, cast in black font on a white background, was too much. People commented on how this ad was insensitive to Japanese workers' pressure and plight, with popular retweets referring to the ad as the 'final push to someone who pondered suicide', and characterising the backlash against the ad as an emphatic response against the 'neoliberal tendency to make fun of working people'.[6]

Had Han's assertion about auto-compulsion as a natural, all-encompassing result of neoliberalism proven true, we should expect these sentiments to be marginal and predict that people's sense of dissatisfaction with work would *decline* as neoliberal psychopolitics spread. However, research suggests otherwise, showing an overall decline in job satisfaction since the 1970s and a recent rise in concern about job dissatisfaction and worker disengagement (Davies, 2021, pp. 82–85).

Instead of making workers 'unaware' of their subordination (Han, 2017b, p. 14; Han, 2021, p. 17), neoliberal work environments evoke pain only thinly veiled by degrees of cynical denial and business-as-usual compliance – pretences that 'triggers' like random ads can easily undo. The idea of miserable workers has recently even made its way into mainstream news. A 2024 *Financial Times* article reported that the 'workaholic strivers' – the class of auto-exploiting entrepreneurs – are 'exceptions' mostly residing 'at the top of society'. Citing a Gallup report on American corporations, they describe how:

> only about 30 per cent of employees are truly engaged. Another 20 per cent are miserable and spreading their misery in the workplace, and 50 per cent are just showing up – wishing they didn't have to work at all. (Kuper, 2024)

The last description echoes a *SpongeBob SquarePants* meme with a badge that reads 'I really wish I weren't here right now'.[7] A 2025 *FT* article cites studies of a further decline

in worker engagement, describing a sense of absurdity and alienation even amongst elite workers. According to the report, the voicing of the absurdities of work and the 'injection of humour' at work are the way to go for stressed-out 'lost leaders' of the elite class (Berwick, 2025).

The message is clear: while neoliberal 'psychopolitics' may have eroded collective, unionised resistance, this has far from removed workers' awareness of the dissonant realities of their pain and toil. Indeed, the ongoing sense of dissatisfaction raises the question of whether reported depressions mark the inevitable conclusion of self-exploitative manic 'euphoria' (Han, 2018, pp. 38–39) or if they (also) result from psyches that have seen through the seductive promises of neoliberal management, and are exhausted by the heightening demands to adapt and to 'feign authenticity' under institutions that demand people to pretend (Honneth, 2012, p. 166). The latter is likely growing in prominence as the precarising logic of the neoliberal economy unravels – as I trace in later sections.

The Persistence of Discipline

Consider also Han's claim that achievement's 'psycho-power' replaces discipline under neoliberalism. Despite Han's claims that neoliberalism has moved beyond repression, coercive discipline remains defining of neoliberal culture. Han has misread the operations of neoliberal management practices by overemphasising their positive promises and their function of soft seduction and stimulation. Indeed, Han's account risks underplaying the use of disciplinary techniques to 'manage' lower classes in neoliberal psychiatric and carceral practices.

The recipe of seduction and *stimulation for the top* and *discipline for the bottom* has always been the norm rather than the exception under neoliberalism. Anyone who has worked under a neoliberal institution knows how positive talk of achieving 'excellence' and improving 'outcomes' is but a thin disguise for a system of delegated responsibility backed up by tight audits and disciplinary sanctions (Brown, 2015, ch. IV; Clarke et al., 2012). Especially for casualised workers, 'activation' under widespread auditing and best-practices speaks little more than the demand that workers must 'self-responsibly' meet set targets *regardless of their willingness to comply* if they are to remain part of the institution.[8] The same neoliberal institutions that boast achievements and mount praises to hyper-achievers are also the ones that *shame* underperformers, 're-educate' them in the name of activation, and shed them during organisational restructurings (Hoggett, 2017).

Consider also Han's claims about psychiatry. Han overplays his positivity argument and ignores how neoliberal psychiatry can remain disciplinary and repressive towards the 'underclasses'. In *Psychopolitics*, for example, Han charged Naomi Klein's *Shock Doctrine* as blind to the 'actual workings of neoliberal psychopolitics', claimed that '[v]iolent psychiatric interventions of [the disciplinary] kind' such as shock therapy 'are employed in disciplinary society alone: they number among the biopolitical measures of coercion' (Han, 2017b, p. 35). Han's claims about electroconvulsive 'shock therapy' and disciplinary techniques in psychiatry are wrong if taken literally. ECT is still used in psychiatry today (Wipond, 2023). Indeed, rates of involuntary psychiatric

commitments have seen a sizable increase since the 2000s in North America and the UK, with some evidence of an increase in the use of restraints in the USA (Keown et al., 2018; Wipond, 2023). Such disciplinary forces of psychiatry are also disproportionately felt by disadvantaged groups such as homeless individuals and the racialised 'underclasses', as they are particularly vulnerable to coercive treatment in psychiatry and can be compelled to 'accept' that they are 'sick' and receive psychiatric treatment to receive minimal support under punitive neoliberal welfare regimes.[9] (Mills, 2015; Padgett et al., 2016; Wipond, 2023)

Perhaps, the most compelling counterexample to Han's post-disciplinary thesis is that penality and incarceration have not decreased, but instead, have significantly intensified since the 1980s. Backed by dubious scholarly theories (such as the famous 'broken windows hypothesis'), neoliberal governments – most prominently in the USA – have adopted policing and surveillance practices involving hard-handed crackdowns on minor street crimes that especially target urban subproletariats deemed 'dangerous' classes (Gerstle, 2022; Wacquant, 2009).

As Loïc Wacquant powerfully puts it in his seminal study on the neoliberal 'carceral big government', the neoliberal downsising of the social state co-emerged with a significant expansion of police and incarceration systems, funding a 'war on crime' and penalising 'welfare dependency', both of which disproportionately impact racialised groups facing economic precarity. The carceral expansion emerged not to target *real* increases in crime, but to play repressive and performative functions for the neoliberal order – neutralising and invisibilising problem populations, while *redirecting fears of social insecurity of the working and middle classes into moralised disdain of dangerous 'underclasses'* (Wacquant, 2009, 2022). The manufactured impression of 'impunity' and 'moral degeneracy' of the racialised underclasses persists to this date in general attitudes towards the 'deserving' poor and welfare recipients.[10]

That extensive penal expansion took place even in the heyday of neoliberalisation invalidates Han's claim that neoliberal psychopolitics have dispensed with disciplinary 'negativity'. If the *disciplined* lower stretches of the class ladder remain an essential part of the neoliberal order, then Han's contention that the neoliberal order involves a *radical rupture* (from discipline to seduction, and from allo-exploitation to auto-exploitation) from the pre-neoliberal era is questionable. Indeed, one may even argue that Han is able to make such grandiose proclamations by unwittingly making his theory a *symptom* of neoliberal practices that try to invisibilise those who fail and fall behind. As I shall argue in the coming section, no matter how effective its PR missions and self-congratulatory pretences, to the degree that neoliberalism remains capitalist, it is maintained by entrenching centre-periphery divides, 'cannibalising' the masses, and generating 'human waste' within and without (Bauman, 2007b; Fraser, 2022).

The Growing Unattainability of Middle-Class Dreams

What went wrong in Han's argument? On one level, the problem is conceptual. Han could have well avoided the charges of overgeneralisation had he not oversold his case for auto-exploitation and positive achievement culture. In this regard, Foucault and Foucaultians, with more nuanced understandings of neoliberal governmentality, give

more clear-sighted models of neoliberal subjectivation, proposing neoliberalism as a normative 'regime of truth' *imposed* upon states and subjects, while leaving open how subjects may come to identify with these imperatives.[11]

But on a deeper level, Han's overgeneralised account of the autoexploiting subject is symptomatic of the era of middle-class integration into the neoliberal cosmopolitan agenda during the more hopeful, less austere, and less disciplinary era of debt-fuelled high neoliberalism in the 1990s to 2000s. During that era, the colonisation of the symbolic space by consumerist and individualist entrepreneurial ideals may have made class divisions and economic downturns appear obsolete, and the cannibalistic dynamics of capital have been remade as an invisible pretext to a powerfully integrative neoliberal culture for many.

Yet, even in those decades, Bauman (2000, ch. 1) remarked that a 'wide and growing gap' was already appearing between '*de jure*' aspirations, ideals of individual freedom, and people's chances to attain such aspirations '*de facto*'. With greater hindsight, we ought now to realise the preconditions of integration under positive achievement. The aftermath of the Great Recession saw Bauman's *de jure/de facto* gap surface in working-class despair and heightening middle-class fears of falling. What Han generalises as the auto-exploiting achievement subject is better conceptualised as a prerogative reserved for the 'middle-class' whose hegemonic status has made it the poster-child of neoliberal culture (Lamont, 2019, p. 667). Somehow echoing Han's ideal of the auto-exploiting labourer, Wolfgang Streeck describes middle-class integration as involving people:

> willing to seek social integration through the labour market, accepting as a matter of course expectations of employers for full identification with whatever jobs they may be assigned. (Streeck, 2016, p. 45)

For Streeck, this group is also one whose social integration is sustained by 'coping' (adapting to changing markets), 'hoping' (dreaming the dreams of upward mobility and achievement), 'doping' (use of medications for activation and sedation), and 'shopping' (Streeck, 2016, pp. 41–45). But where Streeck differs from Han is his awareness of the fragility of such integration within continuing dynamics of the neoliberal economy.

The anomalous two decades before the crash witnessed the extension of achievement dreams to many through the provision of private credit to the masses (some of which are subprime) (Crouch, 2011; Gerstle, 2022). But as the bubble burst, populations who qualified for middle-class hopes and aspirations of unproblematic integration through work, consumption, and activation shrank (especially among its younger and poorer members). While the long-term erosion of opportunities have long been driving working-class populations to suicidal and nihilistic despair (see Case & Deaton, 2020; Silva, 2023), the middle and 'professional' classes are also falling post-2008 and have since then beginning to experience '[what] has long since happened to the blue-collar working class' in the early neoliberal decades (Ehrenreich & Ehrenreich, 2013, p. 11; see also, Hacker, 2008; Parikh, 2025). As Streeck (2024, p. 119f) observes, intensifying competition and precarisation are now pressuring even those who want to live a life of peaceful subsistence to work harder to stay afloat. Instead of hopefully striving for achievement, many are now driven by a desperate need to not fall behind and survive.[12]

Today, more than ever, any *account of subjectivation must pay attention to the dynamics of the capitalist economy, and its tendency to reduce growing populations to precarity and material destitution*. Understanding the capitalist logic of neoliberalism reveals that the positively seductive grip of achievement culture on 'auto-exploiting' individuals was dependent on class-specific socialisations, and that the economic basis supporting this class is fast eroding. This implies that Han's theory of neoliberal subjects must be significantly revised especially to capture the dynamics of subjectivation in our late neoliberal present.

The Economic Understory of Han's Account

Can the disciplinary and punitive undersides of neoliberal capitalism be accidental? Was the collapse of middle-class integration really unanticipated? There might be different ways of answering these questions,[13] and one is to examine how repression, discipline, and dissatisfaction fit within capitalist dynamics that were a vital motor of neoliberalisation.

When I speak of capitalism, I refer to the existing world system in which the accumulation of capital regularly takes precedence over alternative social aims (Wallerstein, 1983). This is a system where the maintenance of social conditions for capital's profit-making is structurally upheld, including: (i) the defence of private ownership of capitalist classes against theft, expropriation and disaccumulation, and (ii) the maintenance of commodity chains, financial flows and socially reproductive circuits that ensure that investments generally and predictably produces a positive rate of return (Fraser, 2022). Central to the operations of this system is the unequal logic of *extraction* and *discipline,* where a capitalist 'core' extracts value from its 'peripheries' and forces the latter to bear the price of social, economic, and environmental 'externalities'/waste generated by such extractive operations.[14] Those on the periphery can be cajoled into acquiescence, but in times of crisis and conflict, states, as proxies of the capitalist world order, have also proven willing to discipline and violently repress actors that obstruct the logics of extraction and disposal.

Historically, during the post-war decades, state-managed social democracy, characterised by more equitable distribution, and stronger labour protections shielded many in the capitalist core from capital's extraction and disposal operations (Monbiot & Hutchison, 2024, ch. 8). Yet, occasioned by the crises of the 1970s, states have since surreptitiously re-intensified the extraction in previously shielded segments of the protected core by crushing labour power, globalising capital, and pursuing privatisation and deregulation drives that favour continued value extraction and accumulation by the oligarchic classes (Crouch, 2011; Fraser & Jaeggi, 2018, ch. 2; Harvey, 2005; Kotz, 2015; Streeck, 2014). The result of such neoliberal policies is the staggering rise of inequalities, where the ultra-rich accumulate inordinate gains at the cost of precarising ever-greater stretches of the population.[15] As social protections decline across the social spectrum from the underclasses up to the middle class, the masses now find themselves engaged in a zero-sum, survival-based fight for a declining share of the pie, even as the wealth and income of hyper-elites soar to astronomical levels.

It is the genius of neoliberal *culture*, as Han and others showed, that *de jure* ideals of freedom and self-realisation in the turbulent 60s were coopted to obfuscate capital's extractive operations in the name of liberating the 'individual' from social and bureaucratic 'restraints'.[16] But it should also be remembered that behind the so-called 'emancipation' is the collapse of material safeguards for the masses. In the neoliberal economy, *de facto* freedom is cast in a 'free' market characterised by intensifying competition for a declining share of economic growth, where 'losing' actually means 'falling' down the class ladder, exposing one to disciplinary sanctions, and potentially shamed, sedated, punished, and coerced. In the early decades of neoliberalisation, the brutal, precarising nature of neoliberal individualism had perhaps been kept hidden by the easy availability of credit under 'privatised Keynesianism', which concealed the precarious effects of extraction and the erosion of social protections (Crouch, 2011). During this time, neoliberal dreams and ideals were unsustainably financed by state and household borrowing, setting the stage for a subsequent economic meltdown while funnelling inordinate wealth and power to financial elites that they get to keep post-crisis.

As the credit system collapsed in 2008, austerity regimes followed, and ever-larger segments of the population felt the sharp sting of precariousness. Here, the collapse of 'everything is possible' into 'nothing is possible', that Han so emphatically reconstructs as the logic of burnout and depressions (Han, 2015, pp. 10–11), is not (*simply)* a psychic logic, but *a hard, disciplinary logic of capital, debt, finance, and austerity enforced by governments and institutions serving capitalist extraction*. Under this logic, what is owed to private bondholders must be paid in full, while states and the general public bear the financial, social, and psychic costs for the former's financial hubris.

Powerfully shaped by capitalist interests and states thoroughly identified with market logics,[17] the various facets of the neoliberal state's use of disciplinary coercion should well be read as the upshot of capital's socio-economic logic of extraction being re-intensified in the core. Seen this way, *as long as capital remains the chief orchestrator of our socio-economic realities, Han's observations on (middle-class) achievement may be little more than an unsustainable sideshow, as a politics of discipline and survivalist competition is taking its place when the middle classes are now hollowed out.*[18]

Real Dilemmas of Contemporary Neoliberal Socialisation: Subjectivation under Precarity

I introduced capitalist dynamics in the previous section, neither to propose that Han's observations on 'psychopolitics' are irrelevant nor to suggest that we can reduce the cultural aspects of neoliberalism to merely a 'superstructure' of a capitalist 'base'.[19] In a Foucaultian spirit, we can say that institutional and cultural foundations of seduction and discipline evolve in ways that depend on shifts in how issues are problematised, how techniques of control are invented and experimented with, and how they interact with struggles and challenges during their application. Consciousness is shaped by socialisation, but, especially on the individual and local levels, imaginations and fantasies do explode the socialising frames imposed (see Negt & Kluge, 1993). Neither institutions nor consciousness are *determined* by economic logics. Yet, capitalist forces still *play*

important roles in shaping institutions and consciousness, especially at the macro-sociological level. Social practices which find functional niches in the logic of capital accumulation are more likely to be enhanced (financially and otherwise) than those that do not, while forms of consciousness that are too incongruent with prevailing forms of capitalist practices are more likely to wither away due to the lack of space for development and the psychic dissonance that may come from holding them. This is why we can expect the maintenance of the promised possibilities/dreams of the achievement-subject to become more difficult and conflict-ridden when the material supports for achievement dreams are so severely eroded.

To supplement Han's unitary view, I suggest that the neoliberal order subjectivates not only by marketising ideals of *aspirational achievement and positive activation but also constitutively and increasingly by disciplinary socialisation through precarisation*. Following Bauman's *de-jure/de-facto* distinction, the neoliberal 'everything is possible' has never been for everyone a road to endless ego-compulsive auto-exploitation through seduction and stimulation alone, but one backed by 'fears of falling'[20] even for those who were well-socialised into achievement culture. Social psychoanalyst Lynne Layton borrows the formulation from her middle-class patient in describing the psychosocial condition befalling neoliberal subjects as 'Yale, Fail, Jail' (Layton, 2020) – reminding us that the optimistic dreams of meritocratic achievement are backed by deep fears of shameful failure in a highly competitive environment and the risk of sliding down the class hierarchy. This abject underside of neoliberal socialisation could be kept at bay when people are busy enough achieving, but that may not be possible under worsening socio-economic circumstances.

For those without the material, cultural, and symbolic means to strive for 'achievements', the middle-class culture of achievement is more likely to manifest as ego-dystonic impositions – as ideologies that hardly capture the struggles with the worsening disciplinary undersides of neoliberal capitalism. In this sense, the despair and disillusionment that came to public attention in the recent decade afflicting the deindustrialised working class may well hold the key to cracking what (post-)neoliberal socialisation will be like. As fissures are increasingly evident in the post-2008 neoliberal economic and political fabric, we can expect *responsibilisation, backed by disciplinary threats of social shaming and material precarity,* to play a greater conscious role in capitalist subjectivation. Here, I explore three elements of the puzzle that might reveal how subjectivation occurs under intensifying precarisation:

First, the recent rise in *cynicism,* as we have glimpsed in early sections, might be one way tensions in neoliberal socialisation play out. Cynical workers, in contrast with Han's auto-exploiting achiever, relate to neoliberal institutions, expectations, and ideals with a tint of conscious disillusionment and doubt. The ironically critical distance may well function to keep one's conscious dissonance at bay while preserving the enjoyments we reap from participating in the neoliberal game,[21] but it may also be a way of maintaining one's sanity in a suffocating world. By enacting ironic distance from performance demands, one may better cope with heightening disciplinary institutional demands in the absence of subjectively meaningful aspirations. In any case, cynicism stands in an ambivalent relation to resistance and struggles for emancipation, for while the cynic's self-conscious distance from ideals can be tapped for critical radicalisation, the

solidification of the otherwise critical attitude into mundane complaints and rants also diffuses the urgency of change and supports compliance with system demands. The *FT* article surveyed above on 'embracing' and 'injecting humour' into the absurdities of work demands well testifies to the latter (Berwick, 2025). As such, cynicism can be one way to explain the absence of collective struggles without appealing to Han's thesis of full seduction.

Second, the accumulation of tensions in the socialisation of neoliberal subjects does not altogether render obsolete ideals of neoliberal individualism that remake people as decollectivised, self-responsible, and self-providing individuals. Individualist values, ideals, and theories have enduring and organising effects on people's self- and social understanding to this day. However, going beyond Han, individualism figures in neoliberal culture not merely as positive aspirations, but as *modes of coping involving defensive hardening against forces of precarisation and threats of disciplinarisation*.

What Layton calls 'defensive autonomy' and 'amoral familialism' typify how the neoliberal middle class repudiate their dependency needs under demanding socialising environments and project a world of competing agents marked by mutual hostility and class hierarchy (Layton, 2020). But perhaps the most illustrative examples of how threats of precarity connect to defensive individualism are working-class members who have been punished by precarisation throughout the neoliberal decades. Even before the financial fallout, studies describe how American non-college workers uphold ideals of individualism to *harden* themselves against hostile environments. Individualised, working-class subjects seek private solutions to adapt to changing (and worsening) circumstances, prizing responsibility, resilience and self-sufficiency as moral virtues. Despising 'dependency', they also form strong moral(-ised) boundaries that cast their deserving selves against undeserving racialised, underclass abjects (Lamont, 2000; See also, Stephens et al., 2014).

In the post-2008 era, this group becomes more disenchanted with 'meritocratic' social achievement, and threats of falling victim to the state's punitive targeting of the 'underclasses' become more tangible – although a similar individualistic ethics remains, if not hardened, under adversity (Lamont, 2019). The post-2008 studies by Jennifer Silva on working-class young adults in rural America detailed how *dissonant disenchantment from conventional ideals of achievement co-occurs with a strong attachment to ideals of self-responsibility in areas such as intimacy and therapeutic self-help*. Experiencing decades of deprivation, disciplinarisation, and (perceived) betrayal, Silva's working-class interviewees re-anchor their lives in individualist 'narratives of self-transformation' in which troubled pasts are seen as overcome by individual resilience and triumph (Silva, 2013). Such a self-responsibilising ethic is quite remarkably compatible with 'unyielding disengagement' and nihilistic beliefs in doom and apocalypse (Silva, 2023).

Third, and strongly connected to defensive individualism, is the link between neoliberalisation and recent right-wing mobilisations which have gained substantial support among rural working-class voters and young adults (especially those identifying as white) (Chazan, 2024; Hochschild, 2024; McQuarrie, 2017; Silva, 2019). While many factors that precipitated the rise of right-wing populism, increased competition for economic survival and defensively individualist hardening under neoliberalism likely favour support for populist ideologies that are aggressively exclusionary and paranoid

(Yeung, 2025, ch. 6). As an explanation for this, Jessica Benjamin (2017) powerfully argued that inequalities and failures of progressive challenges to the precarizing order predispose people towards symbolic worldviews of 'only-one-can-live', where society is reimagined as a zero-sum game between triumph and triumphed, predator and prey. Such worldviews, continuous with the defensive frames of mind many already cultivated under precarising environments, enable right-wing movements to easily capture people's (rightful) feelings of frustration and despair with capitalism towards incendiary and paranoid directions.

Although paranoid survivalism has moved far beyond the ideologies of the globalist-cosmopolitan era of neoliberalism, it is remarkable how existing populisms are continuous with and retain many elements of earlier neoliberal socialisation. For instance, by placing precarisation in incendiary frames of 'culture wars', such movements mount little effective challenge to economic interests behind neoliberalisation (Indeed, paranoid ideologues are allied with and supported by large capital.) (Cooper, 2021; Monbiot & Hutchison, 2024, ch. 16; Slobodian, 2019). Besides, ideologically, to sustain fantasies of hope and triumph for the in-group, paranoid worldviews only antagonised 'culturally-progressive' neoliberal elites and scapegoated the more vulnerable – the latter of whom have long been victimised and stigmatised as the 'underclasses' Wacquant described (Fraser, 2017; Fraser & Jaeggi, 2018, pp. 193–215; Yeung, 2024). The neoliberal hatred of government, the disdain for 'dependency', and glorification of self-sufficiency and self-responsibility remained alive and well within right-wing mobilisations. Last but not least, there is also evidence that paranoid movements do not undermine, but vindicate neoliberal ideas of '*competition*' and the '*competitive entrepreneur*' by translating them into unabashedly neo-Darwinian, xenophobic, racist, sexist, and neo-fascist terms (Finlayson, 2021; Slobodian, 2025).

Conclusion

Moving forward, a proper resolution of our psychopolitical deadlocks can only be achieved by attending to the continuities and ruptures between our present and the wider ideological and economic trends of neoliberalisation. If the above discussion is accurate, then progressive mobilisations must break the spell of cynical coping and the worrying bind between material precarisation and its psychosocial correlates of defensive autonomy and paranoid survivalism. While part of this involves significant challenges to extractive logics of capitalist accumulation, another part of this project may involve recovering psychosocial imaginaries and institutional arrangements that make social coexistence and recognition possible and desirable for all (Benjamin, 2017, Yeung, 2025).

However we conceive of the way forward, Han's unifying diagnosis of neoliberal achievement culture is misleading. Neoliberal individualism is powerfully resilient, persistent even when the neoliberal macroeconomic order is showing signs of fracture (Davies, 2014; Streeck, 2024). Values of individual responsibility and 'free' market competition are still operative. Yet, contrary accounts such as Han's, neoliberal subjectivation is not uniformly seductive, but is also produced by heterogeneous practices of coercion, class stratification, and conflictual psychic conditioning. People are depressed and burnt out, not (merely) because they are auto-exploiting, but (also) because the neoliberal order

will punish them with shame, unemployment, debt insolvency, and poverty if they do not perform well enough and put up the right pretences of self-motivation. They fail to collectively resist not because everyone fully identifies with neoliberalism's positive promises, but because their complaints and dissatisfactions are channelled through cynicism, defensive individualism, and paranoid survivalism.

One can be agnostic about whether there can be a more unified model of neoliberal subjectivation, but any attempt to reconstitute this unified model must first engage with the heterogeneity and fractures in the terrain of subjectivation. The mere generalisation of middle-class fantasies is no longer sufficient, because such fantasies were never meant for everyone, and now, for those they are meant for, such fantasies are also crumbling.

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Notes

1. While Foucault seems to consider neoliberal thought to promise some transcendence of disciplinary normalisations (Foucault, 2008, Lecture 10), Foucault, unlike Han, generally depicts paradigm shifts in power not as processes that render past power relations entirely obsolete. He often also remarks how traditional forms of power frequently engage with and find new functional roles in new regimes. See, for example, his various discussions of how discipline, law, and sovereignty function in new regimes of biopolitics and security (Foucault, 1988, p. 144; Foucault, 2007, Lecture 1).
2. Han's critique of Foucault is confused. Han (2015, 2017a, 2017b) have a tendency to flatten into a single 'negative' model of disciplinary power Foucault's multi-layered discussions of disciplinary power and biopolitics in his genealogical writings (see, Alphin & Debrix, 2023). He misleadingly reads (Foucaultian) discipline as repressive and 'negative', and ignores how, for Foucault, all modern modes of power contains 'positive', 'productive', and sometimes freedom-coopting/freedom-enabling aspects (see e.g. Patton, 1989, pp. 271–274).

He also ignores the deep affinities between his idea of the neoliberal subject (which he sometimes also call 'entrepreneurial') and Foucault's (2008) and Han, (2017b, ch. 5).

3. For related discussions on the obsolescence of collective emancipation and class politics, see, for example, Godignon and Thiriet (1994); Dardot and Laval (2014, pp. 259–260).
4. It is difficult to overstate Han's claim. He considers the power of the entrepreneurial ideal to have even dispensed with people's *unconscious* sources of resistance as well as *conscious* ones (Han, 2015, p. 36f).
5. Related accounts featuring unified aetiologies of depression and other prevalent psychopathologies of our age can be found in Ehrenberg (2010); Berardi (2009); Dardot and Laval (2014, p. 288f). Consider also Monbiot and Hutchison (2024, p. 6) on mental distress.
6. https://president.jp/articles/-/50957; https://x.com/sasakitoshinao/status/1445528492326600704.
7. Indeed, memes and symbols of disengagement and dissatisfaction with achievement culture and hyper-positivity abound in digital spaces – memes and comics of disengagement are not uncommon, and compilations of Squidward in *Spongebob Squarepants* hating work easily commanded millions of views and tens of thousands of likes on YouTube. It just takes a casual search to find all these.
8. The terms 'responsibility' and 'responsibilisation', common in the neoliberalism literature, can actually obfuscate two distinct senses of 'responsibility' – (1) the first is institutional (I am responsible in the sense that the institution expects me to perform – if I fail to do it, I may be penalized.) and (2) the second is ethical-psychological (I am responsible because I psychologically identify with and take it as my duty to myself/my team/my values to perform.) Han's theory of neoliberal subjecitivation emphasizes (2). However, while neoliberal governance may aim to achieve (2) through the implementation of (1) in some cases, (1) is often sufficient. Indeed, by aiming at (1) through benchmarking, auditing, and devolving 'responsibility' of innovation to individuals and units without always needing to ensure its addressees (say workers) will *willingly accept* neoliberal demands, harsher standards can be placed on workers backed by disciplinary threats.
9. This does not argue that psychiatry during the neoliberal decades *only* and uniformly serves to discipline. Han is right to emphasize the positive and 'activating' role of psychiatry and psychology in the neoliberal decades, but he is wrong to suggest that activation and enhancement *replaces* all repressive and disciplinary function psychiatry or renders these functions obsolete.
10. See relevant attitudes towards the poor in the USA in, e.g., Lamont (2000), Lamont (2019) and Silva (2019).
11. E.g., Brown (2015) considered marketising imperatives as (external) social expectations structured by social practices (p. 22) and how responsibilisation 'governs through an external moral injunction' (p. 133), 'forcing the subject to become a responsible self-investor and self-provider' (p. 84).
12. Consider also Hartmut Rosa's analogy of (capitalist) modernity with a slipping slope, with promises of betterment behind imperatives of growth gradually degrading into threats and necessities of survival (Rosa, 2013, esp. ch. 4).
13. A powerful support that Wacquant gives for the carceral state as actually *neoliberal* is how carceral expansion emerged in the USA in 1980s, despite collapse in state spending in other (especially welfare) areas (Wacquant, 2009, ch. 5).
14. On capitalist dependence on zones of 'pillaging'/' extraction' and 'disposal', see also Bauman (2005, ch. 2); Monbiot and Hutchison (2024).
15. See data summaries in Milanović (2019) and Piketty (2014).
16. For the other accounts, see Boltanski and Chiapello (2018); Brown (2015, 2019); Fraser and Jaeggi (2018, pp. 80–86, 199–202); Honneth, 2012; Streeck, 2016).

17. Of course, as they grow to be more indebted, states themselves are also well under the discipline of its international investors due to their need to refinance their debt. See, for example, Gindin and Panitch (2012, esp. ch. 9); Streeck (2016, ch. 2).
18. One gets a snippet of Han's inability to recognize the persistence of disciplinary practices in maintaining the neoliberal status quo is found in his discussion of the Asian financial crisis, where he argues that the IMF's structural adjustment operations in South Korea used 'oppressive' force against protests only in 'positing'/'re-programming' moment of neoliberal reforms, while the 'system-preserving' power of neoliberalism remains tethered to 'freedom' commanding 'consensus' (Han, 2021, p. 18).
19. Indeed, even strongly Marxist accounts such as Harvey (2005, p. 13); Fraser and Jaeggi (2018, ch. 2) acknowledged that neoliberalisation have been contingent on cultural and social factors aside from than economistic ones. Capitalist considerations of neoliberalizstion is relevant so long as we accept that (i) the capitalist class has benefited and been empowered by the neoliberal order, and (ii) have harnessed significant power and interest to defend their class privilege and wage against challenges and contradiction in other spheres.
20. See Ehrenreich (1989). Such anxiety is well shared in discussion of middle-class culture in, for example, Lamont (2019), Layton (2020) and Streeck (2016, ch. 1).
21. See Žižek (2008).

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