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**POVERTISM, EXPLOITATION,  
AND THE POLITICAL ECONOMY  
OF MANUFACTURED  
VULNERABILITY**

**TIMOTHY SPEED**

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**Povertism, Exploitation, and the  
Political Economy of Manufactured  
Vulnerability**

Timothy Speed

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## Impressum / Publication Information

Author: Timothy Speed  
Independent Researcher  
Straße zur Eiche 10  
04916 Schönewalde  
Germany

Email: [info@timothy-speed.com](mailto:info@timothy-speed.com)  
Website: <https://timothy-speed.org>

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<https://orcid.org/0009-0002-0143-5949>

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# Povertism, Exploitation, and the Political Economy of Manufactured Vulnerability

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## Abstract

The present volume examines the political, epistemic, and economic structures through which modern welfare states produce, stabilize, and functionalize social vulnerability. The point of departure is the observation that poverty, institutional marginalization, and epistemic invisibility cannot be understood merely as accidental side effects of social systems, but frequently arise from specific administrative logics, knowledge orders, and labour regimes.

The first contribution develops the concept of **povertism** as an analytical category describing mechanisms through which poverty is not merely administered but actively produced and deployed as an instrument of social discipline. Using the German Hartz IV and Bürgergeld systems as central examples, the analysis shows how administrative procedures, sanction regimes, and categorical classifications generate structural vulnerability while simultaneously delegitimizing the knowledge and experiences of those affected. In this context, a functional concept of **right-wing radical effects** is proposed that does not refer to ideological self-descriptions but to institutional practices in which human dignity becomes effectively conditionalized.

The second contribution extends this analysis to the political economy of knowledge production. It examines a largely overlooked form of structural exploitation: the **exploitation of neurodivergent epistemic labour**. Many forms of long-term analysis, theoretical innovation, and cultural production emerge under conditions of institutional distance and material insecurity, while their results may simultaneously circulate within scientific, cultural, or political discourses. This constellation leads to a systematic decoupling of epistemic production from economic recognition.

The volume brings together perspectives from political economy, Critical Disability Studies, theories of epistemic injustice, and critical analyses of state administration. It argues that poverty, institutional marginalization, and epistemic invisibility in modern knowledge societies should not be understood solely as social problems but as structural components of existing orders of power and knowledge.

Against this background, the volume raises the question under which institutional and economic conditions socially necessary forms of work—particularly long-term epistemic labour—can be stabilized. Models of universal social security, such as the **Universal Care Income**, appear in this context not only as social policy reforms but also as possible infrastructural conditions for sustaining forms of knowledge production that cannot easily be integrated into existing labour and value regimes.

**Keywords:** povertism, poverty-based discrimination, welfare state violence, structural violence, manufactured vulnerability, political economy of poverty, welfare state governance, Hartz IV system, Bürgergeld system, workfare regimes, administrative power, poverty production, classism in welfare systems, social policy critique, institutional marginalization, neurodivergent epistemic labour, exploitation of knowledge work, epistemic injustice, knowledge production and poverty, neurodivergence and labour, autistic epistemology, critical disability studies, poverty and knowledge systems, political economy of knowledge, epistemic exploitation, institutional invisibility of labour, non-market work, long-term epistemic work, Universal Care Income, post-work welfare systems, social security and epistemic labour

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## Introduction

The present volume brings together contributions that examine a field of structural violence that has so far received only limited systematic attention in social-scientific and legal debates: the relationship between poverty, administrative power, and the epistemic foundations of modern welfare states.

In public discourse, poverty and social insecurity are usually understood primarily as problems of insufficient resource distribution or individual life circumstances. Welfare-state institutions are therefore typically interpreted as instruments designed to alleviate these problems. Such a perspective, however, remains incomplete. Modern welfare systems are not merely reactive mechanisms responding to pre-existing social hardship. They also constitute complex administrative orders that actively shape social realities through their own categories, procedures, and logics of power.

The contributions in this volume proceed from the observation that certain forms of social vulnerability do not arise solely from economic processes but can also be stabilized—or even produced—through institutional practices. Administrative classifications, sanction mechanisms, procedural logics, and epistemic attributions influence which life situations are

regarded as legitimate, whose voices appear credible, and which forms of work are recognized as socially valuable.

At the center of the analysis stands the concept of **povertism**, which describes poverty not merely as a socio-economic condition but as a structural practice through which vulnerability can be produced and utilized. From this perspective, poverty appears not exclusively as the outcome of economic inequality but also as a component of particular modes of state governance in which existential insecurity may function as an instrument of social discipline.

Closely connected to this analysis is a second question that extends beyond classical poverty research: the political economy of epistemic labour. Modern knowledge societies rely heavily on the production of knowledge, analysis, and cultural innovation. At the same time, many forms of this epistemic labour receive little institutional recognition or economic stabilization. This tension becomes particularly visible in connection with neurodivergent forms of work and knowing, which often involve long-term, intensive forms of object engagement but cannot easily be integrated into established institutional career structures or labour regimes.

The contributions collected in this volume argue that this constellation does not merely represent a marginal phenomenon of individual biographies. Rather, it points to structural characteristics of contemporary knowledge and labour orders in which epistemic production and economic recognition increasingly diverge. In such contexts, a specific form of structural exploitation can emerge, in which socially relevant knowledge is produced under conditions of persistent material insecurity.

Methodologically, the volume combines perspectives from political economy, critical welfare-state research, theories of epistemic injustice, and approaches within Critical Disability Studies. At the same time, a substantial part of the analysis is grounded in an unusual empirical constellation: a long-term investigation of institutional practices conducted through the perspective of artistic research and neurodivergent epistemic practice.

Within the series *Studies in World-Formation*, this volume therefore forms an interface between socio-political analysis and epistemological inquiry. The investigation of poverty, administration, and knowledge production is understood here not merely as a social policy issue but as part of a more fundamental question: under which conditions modern societies generate, stabilize, or render invisible forms of knowledge.

The analysis suggests that these questions cannot be treated separately. The economic conditions of labour, the institutional structures of administration, and the epistemic boundaries of scientific knowledge orders are deeply intertwined. Where these structures systematically marginalize particular forms of work or knowledge, the consequences extend beyond individual biographies and touch upon the functioning of knowledge societies themselves.

The present volume thus aims to contribute to an expanded analysis of modern welfare states—one that considers poverty, institutional power, and knowledge production as interconnected dimensions of contemporary social order.

# Poverty as Manufactured Vulnerability Povertism, Classism, and Functional Right- Wing Radicalism in the German Welfare State

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## Abstract

The present work develops a conceptual framework for the analysis of poverty-related forms of discrimination and violence in contemporary welfare regimes, with a particular focus on the German Hartz IV system, the subsequent Bürgergeld system, and the new basic income support scheme (2026). The point of departure is the observation that established concepts such as classism insufficiently capture central mechanisms of administrative dehumanization, epistemic dispossession, and the targeted production of vulnerability.

On the basis of the longitudinal empirical corpus of work:

Speed, T. (2025). *SPEED'S WORK – An Autistic Intervention in the Concept of Work in the Age of AI and Robotics*. Zenodo. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17826640>

ISBN: 3819249281 (de) and ISBN: 3819277358 (en),

the term *povertism* (poverty-based racism) is introduced as an independent analytical category. Povertism does not denote a mere stigmatization of already poor population groups, but rather a structural practice of the active production of poverty as a prerequisite for control, sanctioning, and social devaluation.

In addition, a functional concept of right-wing radicalism is developed that is not tied to party-political self-ascriptions or extremist symbolism, but to human-rights-relevant criteria such as the systematic hierarchization of human dignity, the withdrawal of epistemic and existential rights, and the institutional legitimation of suffering. From a historical perspective, continuities with social-racist and eugenic patterns of thought are traced, without posing an identity-establishing equation with National Socialist crimes.

The work explicitly understands itself as a conceptual clarification against the accusation of exaggeration and contributes to the theoretical grounding of critical research on welfare statehood, administrative violence, and the political economy of manufactured vulnerability.

## **1. Introduction: Concepts, Power, and the Trivialization of Structural Violence**

The debate surrounding the German Hartz IV and Bürgergeld system has, since its introduction, been characterized by a striking imbalance. While empirical findings on mental illness, social destabilization, existential insecurity, and institutional harshness are comprehensively documented, the conceptual sharpness of corresponding critique is regularly called into question. In particular, wherever critics use terms such as racism, right-wing radicalism, or structural violence, a discursive defense pattern sets in that aims less at substantive refutation than at semantic disqualification.

This observation is not based on a blanket assumption, but on the repeated experience that conceptual critique of welfare-state practice is often deflected not substantively, but linguistically—for example by invoking the alleged inappropriateness, exaggeration, or political loading of the terms used. The debate thus shifts from the question of the appropriateness of the practices described to the question of which terms are allowed to count as legitimate at all.

This work takes up precisely this point. It proceeds from the thesis that the accusation of “exaggeration” does not primarily constitute a scientific argument, but rather a normalization strategy aimed at maintaining the institutional self-description of the welfare state as neutral, caring, and democratic. Terms are rejected not because they are analytically imprecise, but because they make visible power relations that remain concealed in the normal operation of state administration.

At the same time, it must be noted that many critical analyses do indeed encounter conceptual limits. Concepts such as classism or social exclusion do capture aspects of social inequality, but often remain at the surface of stigmatization, status difference, or cultural devaluation. They insufficiently explain why modern welfare regimes systematically produce conditions under which poverty is not merely administered, but actively produced, reproduced, and functionalized.

The present work therefore pursues a dual objective. First, it seeks to show that certain terms deemed “inappropriate” in political discourse can indeed fulfill a precise analytical function when they are cleanly defined and functionally derived. Second, it argues that the Hartz IV and Bürgergeld system can only be adequately analyzed if it is understood not exclusively as a social policy instrument, but as a regime of power and discipline that deliberately deploys existential vulnerability.

The focus is thus explicitly not on individual attribution of blame or moral accusation, but on the analysis of structural modes of operation that are precisely subject to critical scrutiny because they operate independently of individual intentions. Neither individual administrative employees nor specific political actors stand at the center, but rather institutional logics, legal frameworks, and epistemic practices that stabilize and reproduce themselves over time.

## **2. Methodological and Empirical Foundation: *Speeds Arbeit* as Autistic Long-Term Structural Analysis and Artistic Research**

The empirical foundation of this investigation is formed by the corpus of work and experience *Speeds Arbeit* (*Speed's Work*), which emerged between 2001 and 2025. This corpus comprises multiple book publications, filmic works, artistic-documentary materials, theoretical texts, as well as an extensive body of administrative correspondence, administrative files, and institutional interactions. It represents the result of decades-long, continuous research that was not planned retrospectively, but produced under real social, economic, and administrative conditions of constraint.

In contrast to classical social-scientific studies that examine temporally limited surveys or samples, this material allows for a temporally deep-layered analysis of institutional patterns. Precisely through the long observation period, it becomes visible that central mechanisms of the German social and administrative system reproduce themselves with remarkable stability across different legal versions, political constellations, and organizational restructurings. The empirical value of the corpus thus lies not in its number of cases, but in the identification of structural invariances over time.

Accordingly, the claim of this investigation is not statistical representativeness, but structural insight. What is generalized are not frequencies or distributions, but mechanisms of effect, decision logics, and escalation patterns that appear repeatedly and independently of individual actors. In this sense, the work follows a qualitatively analytical understanding of generalization as established in ethnography, critical institutional analysis, and case theory.

The mechanisms of effect reconstructed here do not stand in contradiction to existing quantitative and qualitative studies, but converge with them at a structural level. Studies on the psychological consequences of sanctions, on permanent existential insecurity, or on the escalation dynamics of administrative procedures confirm individual effects that *Speed's Work* reconstructs through temporal depth of focus.

### **2.1 Research under Conditions of Constraint: Provoked Empiricism**

A central characteristic of *Speed's Work* is that the empirical data did not emerge under controlled research conditions, but were produced by institutional interventions themselves. The provocation did not consist in violations of rules or strategic misconduct, but in the consistent articulation of rights, the non-adaptation to implicit norms of conformity, and the insistence on formal equal treatment.

Sanctions, benefit reductions, administrative requirements, medical and administrative assessments, as well as judicial proceedings repeatedly generated situations of existential intensification. These situations are not to be understood as methodological disturbances, but as empirically highly revealing constellations in which institutional logics emerge with particular clarity.

The term *provoked empiricism* as used here does not mean the intentional creation of crisis situations, but rather the fact that the system under investigation itself produces those conditions under which its mode of operation becomes visible. The empirical data are thus not

a reaction to an experimental intervention, but to real, consequential administrative decisions. Precisely for this reason, they differ fundamentally from hypothetical models or simulation-based analyses.

This form of empiricism makes it possible to analyze institutional action not only in terms of its normative claim, but in its concrete effects. It renders visible how administration reacts to deviation, how it generates, stabilizes, or escalates pressure, and how it deals with subjects who do not fit smoothly into prescribed roles.

## **2.2 Autistic Epistemology as a Condition of Knowledge**

A central methodological aspect of this work is the autistic position of the researching subject. As an autistic author and artist, the author is neither fully integrated into academic assumptions of normality nor positioned outside institutional power relations. This double marginality is not a biographical addendum, but an epistemic condition of knowledge production.

Autistic modes of perception and processing are characterized, among other things, by an increased sensitivity to rule incoherences, implicit norms, semantic shifts, and double-bind structures. In bureaucratic contexts that rely heavily on unspoken expectations of adaptation, performative compliance, and implicit loyalty, these characteristics become a specific analytical advantage. Contradictions between formal legal frameworks and factual practice, between official rhetoric and actual effect, become particularly salient.

This perspective does not replace other forms of analysis, but supplements them with a dimension of knowledge that often remains invisible in neurotypical research settings. *Speeds Arbeit* analyzes not only what institutions document or claim, but what they actually do, particularly where their implicit assumptions fail or turn into violence.

## **2.3 Artistic Research as a Necessary Methodology**

The methodological positioning of this work lies in the field of artistic research. Here, it is not understood as an aesthetic supplement to classical science, but as an autonomous form of research that becomes particularly productive where linear, standardized methods reach their limits. Artistic research allows for the integration of theory, practice, perception, and documentary material in a manner that renders complex, processual, and affective dimensions of institutional violence analyzable.

Filmic works, narrative structures, formal repetitions, and aesthetic decisions do not function as subjective expression, but as analytical instruments through which temporal dynamics, relational patterns, and logics of escalation become visible. Artistic research makes it possible to investigate those aspects of administrative practice that elude purely propositional description, yet nonetheless produce real effects.

Precisely in its interplay with autistic epistemic practice, an unusual and thus far scarcely researched constellation emerges: a long-term, embodied investigation of structural violence conducted by a person who is themselves permanently an object of those very structures. This constellation is not replicable, but it is theoretically connectable and critically verifiable.

## 2.4 Delimitation from Autobiographical Narrative

A clear conceptual delimitation is necessary at this point. *Speed's Work* is not an autobiographical account of suffering in the narrower sense. Personal experiences do not function as an end in themselves, but as empirical material through which institutional regularities, decision logics, and power structures can be reconstructed. The analytical focus does not lie on individual states of mind, but on recurring structural features of administrative practice.

The epistemic value of this corpus arises precisely from its uniqueness: its long duration, its internal coherence, and the situational inevitability of the documented interactions. In this form, it constitutes a first-of-its-kind investigation that analyzes welfare-state violence not from external observation, but from within its internal dynamics.

## 3. Classism Reframed: From Social Devaluation to Administrative Logic

In contemporary debates, the term *classism* is often used as an analogy to racism or sexism and denotes the devaluation of people on the basis of their social origin, level of education, or economic position. In this form, the term is analytically useful, but only to a limited extent for the investigation of welfare-state practice. It often remains at the level of social attitudes, cultural distinction, or individual prejudice.

In the context of the Hartz IV and Bürgergeld system, classism operates less as a moral disparagement than as an institutionalized administrative logic. It is expressed not primarily in explicit judgments of devaluation, but in legal categories, standardized procedures, and implicit expectations that define whose statements are considered credible, whose actions are regarded as rational, and whose needs are recognized as legitimate.

This shift is decisive: classism appears here not as a social marginal phenomenon, but as a structuring principle of state practice.

### 3.1 Classism as an Epistemic Practice

A central characteristic of this form of classism is the systematic epistemic dispossession of benefit recipients. Poverty functions not only as an economic status, but as an implicit signal of a lack of reliability, rationality, or personal responsibility. Statements concerning health limitations, psychological burdens, or biographical ruptures are subject to a permanent reservation and require continuous justification.

Drawing on Fricker's concept of testimonial injustice, it can be argued that poverty here operates as a structural credibility deficit. Epistemic devaluation does not occur on the basis of individual untruthfulness, but on the basis of the social position itself. Classism is thus not merely a matter of social inequality, but a form of institutionalized knowledge hierarchy.

This epistemic dimension is central to the analysis of welfare-state violence, as it explains why those affected are not only materially constrained, but are also systematically prevented from articulating their situation as epistemically capable subjects.

### **3.2 The Categorization Lie**

This epistemic practice is stabilized by an institutional fiction referred to here as the *categorization lie*. Formally, welfare institutions emphasize the individual assessment of each single case. In practice, however, processing occurs predominantly through standardized categories such as “fit for work,” “subject to cooperation obligations,” “relevant for sanctions,” or “eligible for support.”

The categorization lie consists in the rhetorical invocation of individuality while systematically negating it in practice. Biographical complexity, neurodivergent ways of life, non-market forms of work, or chronic burdens are documented, but exert only limited influence on decision-making processes. What remains decisive is the fit with the designated category, not the actual lived reality.

Precisely because categories carry legal consequences, this is not a neutral simplification, but a technique of power that determines which forms of life are recognized as legitimate.

### **3.3 The Limit of the Concept of Classism**

As precise as this analysis is, it simultaneously marks the limit of the concept of classism. Classism explains how people are devalued, categorized, and epistemically devalued. It does not, however, sufficiently explain why the system has a structural interest in placing people in this position on a permanent basis.

In particular, it remains unclear why welfare-state institutions do not merely react to existing poverty, but produce conditions under which poverty is reproduced or intensified. The concept of classism describes the form of devaluation, not its logic of production.

This analytical gap is decisive. Without addressing it, it remains incomprehensible why sanctions, benefit reductions, or bureaucratic escalations persist despite demonstrable harm. It is at this point that the following conceptual extension begins.

## **4. Povertism: Poverty as a Produced and Functionalized Structure**

The term *povertism* is introduced in this work in order to close an analytical gap that is not adequately captured by either classism or general poverty research. While classism describes forms of social, cultural, and epistemic devaluation, the concept of povertism targets the active institutional production, stabilization, and utilization of poverty as an instrument of governance.

Povertism thus denotes neither a prejudice nor an individual attitude, but a structural logic in which poverty is not primarily understood as a social problem to be overcome, but as a functional element of state regulation. Within this framework, poverty appears not as a failure of the system, but as a condition of its effectiveness.

## 4.1 From Reaction to the Production of Poverty

Classical social policy narratives present the welfare state as a reactive instance: poverty is regarded as an external condition to which responses such as support, assistance, or activation are applied. This perspective, however, overlooks the fact that central mechanisms of the Hartz IV and Bürgergeld system themselves generate conditions under which poverty is stabilized or deepened.

Sanctions, benefit reductions, delayed procedures, permanent review obligations, and the coupling of existential security to behavioral norms lead not only to temporary restrictions, but to lasting existential insecurity. Poverty is thus not merely administered, but produced processually.

What is decisive here is not whether poverty would be theoretically reversible, but that in the institutional execution of the welfare state it is in fact treated as a permanent status, the overcoming of which is tied to conditions that are structurally scarcely attainable, particularly for vulnerable groups—such as neurodivergent, chronically ill, or socially isolated persons.

### 4.1.1 The Double Access to Poverty (“Double Hit”)

A central element of this logic of production consists in the fact that poverty is understood in welfare-state discourse almost exclusively as individual failure or private deviation, although it is predominantly structurally produced. Poverty arises not only through market mechanisms, but to a decisive extent through state action—whether through omission (inadequate wages, lack of security, deregulation) or through direct interventions (sanctions, cuts, exclusion mechanisms). The state is thus not merely a reactive instance, but a co-producer of the conditions under which poverty emerges and persists.

At the same time, the social benefits system intervenes precisely at this structurally produced poverty once again—yet not with recognition of its causes, but with a re-individualization of responsibility. Those affected are forced into a regime of activation, control, and behavioral norming that treats their situation not as the result of institutional deficits, but as an expression of personal inadequacy. This double access—first the structural production of poverty, followed by its moral and administrative individualization—leads to a secondary devaluation of those affected.

This mechanism, which *Speed's Work* describes as the “double hit,” transforms structurally harmed persons into purportedly guilty ones. Poverty is thus not only materially produced, but simultaneously epistemically recoded: from an outcome of systemic conditions into a personal flaw, from a victim of state and economic structures into an object of disciplinary availability. The structural causes remain invisible, while those affected are once again burdened, controlled, and normed.

The welfare-state logic that addresses poverty exclusively as an individual problem is therefore not neutral, but functional. It stabilizes precisely those structures that produce poverty by shifting responsibility and depoliticizing critique. An analysis of povertism must grasp this double movement—production of poverty and subsequent attribution of blame—as a coherent mechanism in order to adequately capture the violent character of the system.

Within this logic lies the actual democratic endangerment of povertism: when poverty is structurally produced and simultaneously coded as individual failure, a mechanism emerges by means of which potentially any social group that is politically, culturally, or economically undesirable can first be pushed into poverty and subsequently automatically delegitimized, devalued, and rendered disciplinable.

#### **4.2 Povertism as a Technique of Power**

Povertism operates as a technique of power by deliberately deploying existential vulnerability in order to enforce conformity, adaptation, and self-discipline. The securing of the material basis of life is tied to conditions that go far beyond the guarantee of legal minimum standards and intervene deeply in the conduct of life.

In this process, an asymmetrical relationship emerges in which benefit recipients appear not as bearers of social rights, but as contingently assessable cases. Poverty functions as a permanent state of pressure that restricts courses of action, delegitimizes resistance, and undermines long-term perspectives. In this sense, povertism is not merely economic, but disciplinarian and epistemically effective.

A central effect of this logic consists in the fact that suffering does not appear as a system error, but as a legitimate consequence of insufficient adaptation. Responsibility for structurally produced situations of distress is thus shifted onto those affected themselves—a mechanism that is central to the stability of the system.

#### **4.3 Povertism and Racism: Structural Homology Rather Than Equivalence**

The use of the term *povertism* deliberately draws on theories of racism without positing an equivalence between poverty and biological racism. What is meant is not an identity of phenomena, but a structural homology: in both cases, a socially ascribed status functions as a total marker that overrides individual characteristics, morally charges deviation, and legitimizes exclusion.

Within the povertist regime, poverty is treated not as a situational condition, but as an indicator of character. Benefit recipients appear as inherently deficient, in need of explanation, and in need of control. This logic corresponds to classical features of racist orders: anti-individualization, collective attribution, and the legitimation of unequal treatment.

The fact that poverty is not formally coded as biological does not relativize this structure. What is decisive is that it becomes institutionally effective as a permanent social marking that systematically restricts access to rights, credibility, and social participation.

#### **4.4 Povertism as a Precondition for Right-Wing Radical Effects**

Povertism forms the structural foundation for those right-wing radical effects that are analyzed in the following section. By effectively conditionalizing human dignity and binding existential

security to requirements of conformity, a condition emerges in which fundamental rights no longer apply universally, but become dependent on usable behavior.

This dynamic is not the result of extremist ideologies, but an effect of administrative normality. Precisely herein lies its danger: povertism prepares the ground for forms of state practice that undermine human rights standards without understanding themselves as anti-democratic.

## **5. Right-Wing Radicalism as a Mode of Effect: Human Dignity Under Condition**

In public discourse, the term *right-wing radicalism* is predominantly associated with party-political actors, ideological programs, or explicitly anti-democratic movements. In this work, by contrast, it is used in a functional sense in order to analyze modes of effect of state practice that can occur independently of political orientation or self-classification.

This conceptual shift is necessary because certain human-rights-relevant effects of modern welfare states are not captured by classical concepts of extremism. What is meant are not ideological positions, but structures in which equality, legal subjectivity, and claims to protection are factually suspended or conditionalized.

### **5.1 Functional Right-Wing Radicalism: Conceptual Definition**

In this work, *functional right-wing radicalism* refers to those institutional modes of effect in which fundamental rights are no longer treated as inalienable, but as behavior-dependent. Human dignity is not formally denied, but practically relativized: it no longer applies universally, but only under certain conditions.

Characteristic of this mode of effect are three interconnected elements:

1. the systematic hierarchization of rights,
2. the legitimation of suffering as a necessary or educational means,
3. the epistemic devaluation of those affected by these practices.

Only the interplay of these elements constitutes functional right-wing radicalism. Not every form of state coercion or hierarchization falls under this concept. What is decisive is that existential vulnerability is not treated as a condition to be avoided, but is deployed as a functional instrument.

### **5.2 Conditionalized Dignity in the Welfare State**

In the context of the Hartz IV and Bürgergeld system, this logic becomes evident in the coupling of existential security to standardized behavioral requirements. The claim to material basic security is not understood as a social right, but as a contingent benefit that can be restricted, withdrawn, or suspended in cases of deviation.

This practice produces an implicit hierarchy of persons: those whose way of life is considered conforming, and those whose existence is placed under reservation. The formal recognition of

human dignity remains in place, but is functionally relativized in practice. Rights are not openly abolished, but are in fact gradually withdrawn.

It is precisely this form of creeping erosion that distinguishes functional right-wing radicalism from openly authoritarian regimes. It does not operate through states of exception, but in the normal operation of democratic administration.

This conditionalized dignity materializes particularly clearly in instruments such as integration agreements, which formally appear as cooperative contracts but functionally establish a sanction-backed structure of obedience. The original context of poverty—such as structural unemployment, health-related limitations, or institutionally produced precarity—is systematically obscured. In its place emerges a new narrative order in which poverty itself is no longer the problem, but insufficient cooperation. Guilt is not examined, but presupposed; relief occurs only through demonstrated conformity.

This recoding is legally and politically highly problematic. It transforms social rights into probation-dependent obligations and shifts the focus away from material existential security toward standardized behavioral governance. The integration agreement thus functions less as an instrument of assistance than as a preemptive contractual penalty: those who do not sign or fail to meet the implicit expectations risk existential disadvantages, regardless of the actual cause of their poverty.

This logic is reinforced by a linguistic reframing of the system itself. Terms such as “basic security for jobseekers” semantically erase poverty and replace it with a purely functional status. Existential distress no longer appears as a social problem, but as a temporary lack of labor-market conformity. This reduction of complex life situations to a one-dimensional functional criterion is characteristic of authoritarian mechanisms of alignment in modern administrative states: deviation is not criminalized, but administratively normalized and rendered sanctionable.

It is precisely this combination of contractual fiction, recoding of guilt, and linguistic depoliticization that makes conditionalized dignity in the welfare state a central carrier of functional right-wing radicalism. The violence does not lie in the open abolition of rights, but in their systematic transformation into rewards for obedience.

### **5.3 Delimitation from Right-Wing Extremism and Authoritarian Ideologies**

The conceptual usage developed here explicitly implies no equivalence with right-wing extremist ideologies, historical crimes, or authoritarian regimes. Right-wing extremism refers to political movements or programs that openly reject the democratic order. Functional right-wing radicalism, by contrast, describes effects that can arise within formally democratic structures.

This distinction is analytically central. It makes it possible to name human-rights-violating effects of state practice without attributing extremist intentions to actors. It is precisely this separation of intention and effect that renders the concept scientifically precise and prevents its reduction to a mere polemical term.

The danger of functional right-wing radicalism does not lie in the conscious abolition of rights, but in their administrative hollowing-out under the guise of efficiency, controllability, and attribution of responsibility.

#### **5.4 Right-Wing Radicalism as a Phenomenon of Normal Operation**

The conceptual definition proposed here leads to an uncomfortable, but analytically necessary conclusion: right-wing radical modes of effect are not confined to political extremist margins. They can emerge in the normal operation of state institutions when these systematically conditionalize human dignity, legitimize suffering, and delegitimize critique.

This observation implies no historical equivalence or moral dramatization. Rather, it points to a structural danger of modern administrative states in which market logics, efficiency criteria, and populist moral economies take precedence over universal rights. Functional right-wing radicalism is thus not an exceptional case, but a risk inherent in system logic.

Precisely because these dynamics occur within legal and democratic forms, they often escape perception. Their analysis therefore requires a conceptual precision that goes beyond classical models of extremism.

### **6. Historical Contexts: Social Racism, Eugenics, and the Continuity of Administrative Selection**

The analysis of contemporary welfare-state practice requires a historical contextualization that avoids equivalences while taking structural continuities seriously. The embedding undertaken here in social-racist and eugenic traditions does not pursue the aim of morally delegitimizing present-day institutions or equating them with historical crimes. Rather, it serves to reconstruct modes of thought and administrative logics that can continue to operate across different political systems.

Modern bureaucracies in particular are characterized by the rhetorical marking of historical ruptures, while operative categories, classification schemes, and mechanisms of selection partially persist. The question is therefore not whether contemporary social policy is “still” racist or eugenic, but which structural features of earlier regimes continue to operate in transformed form.

#### **6.1 Social Racism and Anti-Individualization**

Even before the emergence of biological theories of race, forms of social racism existed in which poverty, “asociality,” or “work-shyness” were treated as collective characteristics. What was decisive was not the attribution of biological traits, but the construction of a social Other that was regarded as deficient, dangerous, or inferior.

Central to these logics is anti-individualization: individual life situations are not regarded as contingent or in need of explanation, but as expressions of a stable social type. Precisely this logic reappears in modern administrative practice when benefit recipients are treated primarily as cases, risks, or problem situations, whose individual speech is systematically relativized.

The recourse to social-racist concepts does not serve historical dramatization here, but analytical precision: it makes visible that the devaluation of certain groups is not bound to biological categories, but operates through social classification.

## **6.2 Eugenic Thought Patterns and Administrative Rationality**

Eugenic programs of the early twentieth century combined social policy governance with biologist assumptions about worth, capacity for performance, and reproductive capability. For the present analysis, it is not the ideology of these programs that is decisive, but their administrative logic: the notion that social problems can be efficiently solved through selection, control, and exclusion.

Historically, this logic operated not only in explicitly authoritarian regimes, but also in reform-oriented welfare concepts. Decisive here is the shift from social support toward examination, evaluation, and sorting-out. Modern welfare states have abandoned the biologist premises, but not necessarily the selective rationality.

When contemporary systems distinguish between “eligible for support” and “not eligible for support” persons, elevate usability to an implicit norm, and tie existential security to adaptation performances, this does not constitute a return of eugenics, but rather a functional transformation of selective administrative logics.

## **6.3 Ruptures, Transformations, and Conceptual Caution**

The emphasis on structural continuities must not be confused with a denial of historical ruptures. The legal anchoring of human dignity, international human rights regimes, and democratic control mechanisms constitute real differences. Precisely for this reason, it is analytically necessary to distinguish between ideological continuity and structural affinity.

The historical reference undertaken here explicitly operates with the concept of structural affinity. It does not claim an identity of systems, but points to recurring patterns of administrative rationality: classification, selection, normalization, and the legitimation of unequal treatment.

This differentiation is decisive in order to combine historical sensitivity with analytical sharpness.

## **6.4 Historical Depth of Focus as a Critical Instrument**

The inclusion of historical contexts fulfills a critical function in this work. It prevents contemporary practices from appearing as natural, inevitable, or purely technocratic. By

making the historical conditions of their emergence visible, it becomes clear that present-day administrative logics are likewise contingent and subject to change.

Historical depth of focus does not serve moral accusation here, but the denaturalization of institutional self-descriptions. It opens an analytical space in which contemporary forms of social selection can be understood as the result of specific decisions and power relations—and thus remain, in principle, open to critique and transformation.

## **7. Concepts, Defense, and Responsibility: On the Political Economy of De-Naming**

The preceding sections have shown that classism, povertism, and functional right-wing radicalism are to be understood not as moral attributions, but as analytical concepts for describing structural modes of effect. Nevertheless, a substantial part of public, administrative, and legal contestation is directed not at the practices described themselves, but at the terminology with which they are named. This section analyzes this shift as an autonomous phenomenon of power.

### **7.1 “Exaggeration” as a Discursive Defense Strategy and a Human-Rights Distortion of Reality**

The accusation of exaggeration is not a neutral measure of scientific appropriateness. It functions as a normative boundary-setting that determines which descriptions of social reality are considered permissible and which are not. This accusation most frequently targets those concepts that do not merely describe power relations, but expose them in their mode of operation.

In the context of the welfare state, this defense strategy has a specific human-rights dimension. The system is highly dependent on the reinterpretation or concealment of factual conditions through legal terminology, administrative categories, and institutional rhetoric. Terms such as “cooperation,” “support and demand,” “personal responsibility,” or “reasonable burden” do not function as neutral descriptions, but as performative assertions that produce legal facts.

This linguistic production of facts is particularly effective in judicial proceedings. Courts are structurally embedded in the task of securing institutional coherence and the preservation of the state’s self-image. Severe systemic deficiencies are often neutralized not through explicit denial, but through rhetorical recoding: structural violence appears as an isolated case, systematic devaluation as administrative routine, and existential endangerment as social-policy reasonableness.

In this context, the accusation of exaggeration fulfills a dual function. On the one hand, it delegitimizes the critical description of real conditions. On the other hand, it stabilizes a legally produced normality in which practices that are problematic from a human-rights perspective appear proportionate, necessary, or without alternative. The boundary between factual determination and normative assertion is thereby systematically blurred.

A populist dimension is added to this dynamic. The welfare state operates within a public discourse that morally charges poverty and legitimizes social harshness. References to “benefit

abuse,” “fairness toward taxpayers,” or “work incentives” generate a resonance space in which structural violence is not only accepted, but expected. Administration and the judiciary operate within this framework and reproduce it linguistically.

## **7.2 Hermeneutical Injustice and Epistemic Control**

From an epistemological perspective, this mechanism can be described as a form of hermeneutical injustice. When those affected or critical researchers lack, or are denied, the concepts needed to adequately articulate their experiences, structural violence remains invisible or is individualized.

The demand to refrain from using terms such as racism or right-wing radicalism in the context of welfare-state practice does not constitute neutrality. It represents a refusal of concepts that systematically narrows the space of interpretation. Certain experiences may be lived, but may not be named in a language that would render their structural dimension visible.

Concepts themselves function here as instruments of power. It is not their analytical quality that determines their admissibility, but their political disruptive potential. Control over language thus becomes control over reality.

## **7.3 Scientific Conceptual Work, Responsibility, and the Rule of Law**

A central misunderstanding consists in equating analytical conceptual usage with moral accusation. The concepts developed in this work—povertism, functional right-wing radicalism, administrative dehumanization—do not initially aim at attributing individual attitudes, but at describing structural modes of effect that operate independently of personal intentions.

This conceptual restraint must not, however, be confused with irresponsibility. In a constitutional state governed by the rule of law, it is not only permissible, but necessary, to render violence recognizable, nameable, and thus also justiciable. Concepts are the prerequisite for being able to identify culpable action and institutional breaches of duty at all.

Precisely because state violence is often exercised in a divided, formalized, and seemingly anonymous manner, there exists the danger of systematic diffusion of responsibility. Without precise concepts, concrete decisions disappear behind procedures, jurisdictions, or asserted inevitability. Scientific conceptual work is therefore a prerequisite of legal responsibility, not its opposite.

The confrontation of responsible persons with analytically grounded concepts does not constitute a prejudgment, but the necessary preliminary stage of rule-of-law review. Only when it is clearly named which forms of violence, degradation, or discrimination are present can questions of individual responsibility, breach of duty, or culpable conduct be meaningfully addressed.

The demand to refrain from such concepts effectively amounts to transferring structural violence permanently into a legally non-graspable state. Critique is not refuted, but

linguistically neutralized; responsibility is not clarified, but dissolved. Scientific conceptual work, in this sense, is not an escalation, but a democratic necessity.

## **8. Conclusion: Concepts as Democratic Infrastructure**

The present work has shown that the analysis of the Hartz IV and Bürgergeld system requires a conceptual expansion that goes beyond established concepts of social inequality. Classism alone captures neither the active production of existential vulnerability nor the specific mechanisms of administrative dehumanization that are effective in modern welfare regimes. With the concept of *povertism*, an analytical category has therefore been introduced that understands poverty not as a given condition, but as a politically and institutionally produced instrument.

In addition, a functional concept of right-wing radicalism has been developed that makes it possible to analyze human-rights-relevant effects of state practice without resorting to intentional or party-political attributions. This perspective makes visible that right-wing radical modes of effect are not bound to political extremist margins, but can occur in the normal operation of administrative systems when human dignity is conditionalized, suffering is legitimized, and critique is epistemically delegitimized.

The historical embedding in social-racist and eugenic traditions did not serve to establish equivalence, but to provide contextualization. It shows that certain logics of selection, devaluation, and discipline are deeply anchored in the history of modern administration and vary across different political systems without fully losing their structural core.

A central concern of this work was the rejection of the accusation of conceptual exaggeration. It was argued that this accusation itself is part of a power strategy aimed at limiting the space of legitimate critique. Concepts are not merely linguistic labels, but epistemic tools that determine which forms of social reality become visible and discussable. Their refusal does not signify neutrality, but the stabilization of existing power relations.

In this sense, the conceptual work developed here understands itself as a contribution to the democratic infrastructure of critical research. It does not aim at scandalization, but at analytical responsibility: where state practice has existential consequences, the language of analysis must do justice to this reality. Only in this way can welfare statehood, social rights, and human dignity be not merely formally asserted, but made examinable in terms of their actual effects.

The present analysis is deliberately diagnostic in orientation; it nevertheless implies that models which decouple existential security from requirements of conformity are structurally suited to avoiding the mechanisms of violence described here.

The analysis presented here is possible in this form only because it is based on a unique constellation of long-term institutional exposure, autistic epistemic practice, and artistic research—a constellation that cannot be replicated, but whose results are theoretically connectable and verifiable.

The analysis of povertism also reveals a second structural dynamic: the systematic exploitation of epistemic labour produced under conditions of marginalization. See next paper.

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# The Exploitation of Neurodivergent Epistemic Labour

## Abstract

The present contribution examines a form of structural exploitation that has so far received little analytical attention: the exploitation of neurodivergent epistemic labour. The point of departure is the observation that certain forms of knowledge, analysis, and cultural production frequently emerge under conditions that simultaneously prevent their economic recognition. Particularly among neurodivergent individuals—such as autistic researchers, artists, or activists—forms of work can be found that produce complex analyses, theoretical innovations, and cultural contributions over long periods of time without being integrated into established institutional or economic structures.

The text argues that this constellation does not constitute a coincidental marginal phenomenon but points to a structural characteristic of modern knowledge and labour orders. Certain forms of knowledge arise precisely from positions of relative institutional distance or marginalization. At the same time, it is precisely this distance that leads to these contributions not being recognized or remunerated as regular work. The production of socially relevant knowledge is thus systematically decoupled from those who produce it.

On this basis, the concept of *the exploitation of neurodivergent epistemic labour* is proposed. It describes a situation in which knowledge, cultural innovation, and analytical work may become socially effective, while their producers remain structurally excluded from the material and institutional resources that would be necessary for the sustainable stabilization of this work. The analysis combines approaches from Critical Disability Studies, political economy, and theories of epistemic injustice and shows that poverty and institutional marginalization in such constellations may function not merely as accompanying phenomena but as functional components of the existing order.

The contribution understands itself as a conceptual foundation for a further investigation of the relationship between neurodivergent forms of work, epistemic production, and the limits of contemporary regimes of value and labour.

## 1. Introduction

In modern knowledge societies, the production of knowledge is regarded as one of the central resources of societal development. Science, cultural production, critical analysis, and theoretical innovation are regularly presented in political programs, economic strategies, and academic discourses as key drivers of progress. At the same time, however, a remarkable structural asymmetry becomes visible: a significant part of the work from which such insights actually emerge takes place outside the institutional and economic structures that are officially responsible for the production of knowledge.

This situation becomes particularly evident in connection with neurodivergent forms of work and knowledge production. Autistic or otherwise neurodivergent individuals frequently develop working modes that are strongly oriented toward the long term, display a high degree of specialization, and cannot easily be integrated into the temporal, social, and organizational requirements of institutional wage labour. At the same time, precisely such modes of work can lead to the emergence of complex analyses, theoretical innovations, or cultural contributions whose societal significance often becomes visible only with considerable temporal delay.

A structural paradox emerges here. Certain forms of knowledge arise precisely under conditions in which they cannot be recognized as regular work. Long periods of intensive engagement with a subject, relative institutional distance, and a high degree of independence from organizational routines often stand in direct contradiction to the criteria by which work is evaluated and remunerated in modern economies.

Another characteristic of many processes of knowledge production must also be considered: there exists knowledge that escapes any form of external commissioning, because such steering would distort the conditions of its emergence. Its dynamics follow their own temporal structure (*Eigenzeit*) and are neither linearly plannable nor fully controllable.

The result is a situation in which individuals can perform extensive epistemic labour over years or even decades without this work being reflected in stable economic structures. Research, theoretical development, artistic production, or social analysis arise under conditions of material insecurity, while their results can simultaneously flow into public discourses, scientific debates, or cultural developments.

This constellation can hardly be adequately described if it is interpreted merely as individual failure, as a marginal phenomenon of cultural production, or as a biographical peculiarity. Rather, it points to a structural characteristic of modern knowledge and labour orders. Certain forms of knowledge tend to emerge at the margins of institutional systems, while these systems simultaneously determine which forms of work are considered legitimate and which remain invisible.

The present investigation begins precisely at this point. It asks under which conditions epistemic labour emerges that may be socially relevant while its producers remain permanently excluded from the material and institutional prerequisites that would be necessary for the stabilization of this work.

Particular attention is therefore given to neurodivergent forms of work. These are often characterized by a specific combination of intense focus, long-term object binding, high sensitivity to systemic inconsistencies, and comparatively limited adaptation to the implicit social expectations of institutional environments. Precisely these characteristics can lead to situations in which neurodivergent individuals are perceived in institutional contexts as difficult, uncooperative, or unreliable, even though their work simultaneously produces complex analytical or theoretical achievements.

The perspective developed here therefore understands this situation not primarily as an individual problem of integration or adaptation. Instead, it proposes to analyze it as a specific form of structural exploitation: the exploitation of neurodivergent epistemic labour.

What is meant by this is a constellation in which knowledge, analysis, and cultural innovation emerge under conditions that systematically prevent their economic recognition. The work itself may become socially effective, while its producers remain permanently bound to positions of material insecurity or poverty. In this sense, poverty appears not merely as an accidental accompanying phenomenon of epistemic labour, but under certain conditions as a structural element of the order within which this labour becomes possible in the first place.

The present text attempts to clarify this constellation conceptually and to relate it to existing theoretical approaches, in particular debates on epistemic injustice, structural violence, and the political economy of labour. The aim is not to formulate a final theory, but to develop an analytical framework that makes it possible to describe the largely invisible forms of neurodivergent knowledge production more precisely.

The volumes of this series themselves are ultimately part of this problem: they were produced entirely without institutional funding and are based on 27 years of unpaid epistemic labour.

**"The exploitation of neurodivergent epistemic labour refers to a structural situation in which knowledge produced under conditions of marginalization becomes socially usable while the producers remain excluded from the material and institutional conditions required to sustain that work."**

## **2. Epistemic Labour**

In order to analyze the constellation described in the preceding section more precisely, a conceptual clarification is first necessary. The term epistemic labour is used in the following to designate those forms of activity that are directed toward the production, stabilization, or transformation of knowledge. What is meant by this are not only scientific publications in the narrow sense, but a broader field of practices: theoretical analysis, conceptual work, critical reflection, artistic research, long-term observation of social or institutional structures, as well as the development of new concepts and interpretive frameworks.

In institutional contexts, epistemic labour usually appears in a strongly formalized form. It is embedded in academic organizations, research projects, funding programs, or institutional roles such as professors, research associates, or analysts. Within these structures, epistemic labour is recognized as a profession, receives an organizational form, a temporal structure, and usually also economic remuneration.

However, this institutional form represents only a part of actual knowledge production. A considerable share of epistemic labour arises outside such structures: in independent research, in artistic practice, in political analysis, or in long-term personal investigations of complex social or scientific problems. Historically, this situation is by no means unusual. Many significant theoretical or scientific contributions did not emerge within stable institutional careers but under conditions of relative independence or even social marginalization.

The decisive point, however, does not lie in the mere existence of such cases, but in the systematic relationship between epistemic labour and social recognition. Modern labour and

value orders are primarily oriented toward capturing activities whose results are quickly visible, organizationally controllable, and economically exploitable. Epistemic labour rarely fulfills these criteria. Its results often emerge over long periods of time, cannot be clearly separated from other activities, and frequently unfold their effects only with considerable temporal delay.

From this arises a structural difficulty: the work itself can be intensive, continuous, and socially relevant without appearing within the established categories of wage labour. In such cases, epistemic labour is not perceived as labour but as a hobby, a personal obsession, activism, or artistic activity without economic status. These designations simultaneously reveal societal defense mechanisms against the paradox that work and achievement are apparently not evaluated or even remunerated in congruent ways. The contradiction is often neutralized through a shift in categories.

This problem becomes particularly clear in the context of neurodivergent forms of knowledge production. Many neurodivergent individuals develop working modes characterized by an unusually strong attachment to specific subjects or questions. This form of object binding can persist for years or even decades and can lead to very deep analyses or extensive bodies of work. At the same time, such a mode of working frequently escapes the organizational structures of modern wage labour. It follows less the institutional schedules than the internal dynamics of the respective process of knowledge production.

In many cases, work is experienced as existentially necessary and not primarily as a monetary necessity. For some individuals, it indeed becomes a matter of life and death. Historical extreme cases in which individuals made enormous personal sacrifices in order to continue intrinsically motivated work can also be explained in this way.

Precisely these characteristics make neurodivergent epistemic labour institutionally difficult to read. The boundaries between research, personal interest, artistic practice, and political analysis become blurred. For organizations that depend on clearly defined roles, measurable outputs, and standardized career patterns, such a mode of working quickly becomes a problem of categorization.

A remarkable contradiction emerges here. While modern labour orders often assume that particularly demanding or intensive work leads to higher remuneration, wage labour itself appears in the constellation described here as a form of privilege compared to those who perform comparable or greater epistemic labour without institutional recognition. Such a perspective almost inevitably provokes defensive reactions and stigmatization.

The result is a paradoxical situation. Precisely those forms of intensive, long-term object binding that can lead to new theoretical insights or cultural innovations often lack the institutional form necessary for being recognized as legitimate work. Epistemic production thus remains structurally underdetermined: it exists in reality, may even produce societal effects, yet does not appear as an economically relevant activity.

The impression of a displaced priority suggests itself. On the one hand, it is claimed that institutionally formatted knowledge work justifies higher remuneration because it generates more knowledge. On the other hand, precisely this institutional framing often blocks essential parts of possible knowledge production. At the same time, individuals working without pay

frequently reach significantly higher weekly working hours and often pursue their research with greater temporal and intellectual depth.

The following sections therefore proceed from the thesis that this invisibility does not merely represent an accidental by-product of modern knowledge orders. Rather, it may itself be part of a structural constellation in which certain forms of epistemic labour can be socially utilized while their producers simultaneously remain outside the material and institutional structures required for the stabilization of this work. It is precisely this constellation that forms the starting point for the subsequent analysis of the exploitation of neurodivergent epistemic labour.

### **3. Neurodivergent Forms of Knowing and Object Binding**

In order to adequately understand the constellation described above, it is not sufficient to consider only the institutional framework conditions of labour and knowledge production. Equally relevant is the question of how processes of knowledge themselves are organized. Different cognitive dispositions lead to different forms of attention, object binding, and temporal structures of work. In this context, neurodivergent forms of knowing gain particular significance.

Many neurodivergent individuals—especially those on the autistic spectrum—develop a pronounced form of long-term object binding. Attention and cognitive energy can concentrate on specific objects, problems, or questions over very long periods of time. This binding is often not primarily motivated by external demands but arises from an inner structural resonance between person and object. In this respect, it differs markedly from many forms of institutionally organized work that are structured more strongly by external tasks, deadlines, or organizational objectives.

Such forms of object binding can lead to an unusual depth of analysis. Questions are pursued over long periods of time, hypotheses repeatedly tested, concepts refined, and theoretical connections gradually expanded. The process rarely proceeds linearly. Insights emerge in phases of intense condensation followed by longer periods of apparent stagnation or reorientation. In many cases, this process follows its own temporal structure (*Eigenzeit*), which largely escapes institutional planning.

Precisely this *Eigenzeit*, however, constitutes a structural problem for institutional knowledge orders. Research institutions, universities, or funding programs depend on time-limited projects, clearly defined goals, and predictable results. The long-term, open, and partly difficult-to-predict dynamics of neurodivergent processes of knowledge production fit only to a limited extent into such structures. As a consequence, recurring situations arise in which epistemically productive forms of work become difficult to categorize institutionally.

Another factor must be considered as well. Neurodivergent individuals often display an increased sensitivity to inconsistencies within social or institutional systems. Implicit rules, double standards, or contradictory normative expectations are therefore perceived particularly clearly. This sensitivity can be analytically productive because it makes structural problems visible that can easily remain unnoticed within established institutional routines. At the same

time, however, it can lead to conflicts, particularly where institutional stability is valued more highly than critical analysis.

Taken together, a paradoxical situation emerges. The same cognitive dispositions that can enable a high degree of epistemic productivity simultaneously increase the likelihood of institutional marginalization. Intensive object binding, limited adaptation to implicit social expectations, and the tendency to openly articulate structural inconsistencies frequently lead to situations in which neurodivergent individuals are perceived within organizations as difficult or uncooperative.

Under such conditions, epistemic work often emerges outside stable institutional positions. Research, analysis, or artistic production continue under conditions shaped more by personal necessity than by organizational integration. The work is continued because it is experienced as existentially necessary, not because it is institutionally secured.

Precisely this constellation, however, can produce a particular form of epistemic productivity. The relative distance from institutional routines in some cases opens a space of observation in which the fundamental assumptions of existing systems can be questioned. At the same time, under such conditions the material prerequisites for stable knowledge production are often lacking.

The combination of cognitive specialization, institutional distance, and material insecurity forms a central precondition for the phenomenon that will be described in the following as the exploitation of neurodivergent epistemic labour. While the epistemic results of such work processes can become socially effective, their producers frequently remain in positions of structural insecurity.

The analysis of this constellation therefore requires not only an examination of individual working modes but also an investigation of the political economy of knowledge: that is, the question under which conditions epistemic labour is recognized, institutionally stabilized, or systematically rendered invisible.

#### **4. The Exploitation of Neurodivergent Epistemic Labour**

The preceding sections have made a central constellation visible: forms of epistemic labour can produce socially relevant knowledge over long periods of time without being institutionally stabilized. Such forms of work appear particularly frequently in neurodivergent contexts in which intensive object binding, long-term processes of knowledge production, and a relative distance from institutional routines interact. The decisive question therefore concerns how this constellation operates structurally within the existing order of knowledge and labour.

An obvious interpretation would be to understand this situation as individual failure or as a problem of integration: as insufficient adaptation to institutional forms of work or as a biographical peculiarity of individual persons. Such a perspective, however, falls short. It overlooks the fact that the work processes described here can produce real epistemic results that may enter scientific, cultural, or political discourses.

The analytical difficulty lies in the fact that the social use of such insights is not necessarily accompanied by recognition of the underlying work. Knowledge can circulate, concepts can be adopted, analyses taken up, or cultural forms received without the material conditions of those who produced this work being stabilized. In this way, a constellation emerges in which epistemic production and economic recognition are structurally decoupled from one another.

It is precisely here that the concept of the exploitation of neurodivergent epistemic labour begins. What is meant is not primarily the individual appropriation of specific ideas, but a structural situation in which epistemic labour emerges under conditions that systematically hinder or prevent its institutional and material stabilization. The work itself can be productive and socially effective, while its producers remain permanently outside those structures that are usually regarded as the prerequisite for professional knowledge production.

The author worked for 27 years almost entirely unpaid, wrote 11 books, numerous papers, and produced a feature-length film. During this time, he lived predominantly on social welfare.

A central mechanism of this constellation consists in the fact that epistemic labour often becomes visible only once it has already been completed. Institutions react to insights that have already emerged, adopt concepts, adapt analytical perspectives, or integrate individual aspects into existing research programs. The long phase of knowledge production itself, by contrast, largely remains invisible. Especially where it has taken place under conditions of material insecurity, it appears retrospectively not as labour but as an individual prehistory.

In this sense, poverty or institutional marginalization can assume a paradoxical function. They do not appear merely as accompanying phenomena of epistemic labour but can become part of the structural conditions under which certain forms of knowledge arise in the first place. This is not to romanticize poverty, but to recognize that questions and priorities can become sharpened under such conditions, as can the willingness to leave zones of comfort and cross certain boundaries. The relative distance from institutional routines opens particular positions of observation, while simultaneously preventing this work from being recognized within stable economic structures.

In addition, for some autistic individuals these permanent conflicts with the world can lead to a form of overproduction that also serves to stabilize the nervous system.

The result is an asymmetrical relationship between epistemic production and the social use of knowledge. While insights can circulate and be further developed, the material foundation of those who produced them remains precarious. In this sense, it is possible to speak of a form of structural exploitation that is based less on the direct appropriation of individual ideas than on the systematic decoupling of epistemic performance from material stabilization.

Such a perspective shifts the view toward the political economy of knowledge. Modern knowledge societies do not rely exclusively on institutionally organized research but also on forms of epistemic labour that arise outside these structures and nevertheless flow into their discourses. Precisely where such forms of work persist over long periods of time, the question arises whether existing regimes of value and labour are capable at all of adequately recognizing and stabilizing these forms of knowledge. If not, this must have consequences if we as a civilization genuinely wish to expand our knowledge.

The analysis proposed here therefore does not present itself as a moral accusation against individual institutions or actors. Rather, it seeks to make visible a structural constellation in which certain forms of epistemic labour can be socially utilized while their producers remain permanently pushed to the margins of the material and institutional order. From this perspective, the exploitation of neurodivergent epistemic labour appears not as an exception but as a largely unexamined dimension of modern knowledge societies.

Too often knowledge is associated with status, while knowledge without status is frequently far more relevant.

## **5. Epistemic Limits of the Academic Knowledge Order**

The constellation described above raises a further question that goes beyond economic aspects. If certain forms of epistemic labour regularly emerge outside institutional structures while at the same time being only limitedly recognized within these structures, the question arises whether the organization of science itself may also be involved in producing this invisibility.

Modern science often presents itself as a universal instance of rational knowledge. Its methods are supposed to be objective, reproducible, and institutionally controllable. This self-description has undoubtedly enabled significant scientific progress. At the same time, however, it also produces specific epistemic boundary formations. Above all, knowledge that can arise within established institutional and methodological frameworks is regarded as legitimate.

This creates a structural problem. Forms of knowledge that cannot easily be translated into existing academic formats—for example because they follow long temporal dynamics (*Eigenzeit*), emerge from marginalized experiential positions, or blur the usual separation between research subject and research object—can easily fall outside scientific visibility.

In this way, the knowledge canon constantly runs the risk of drifting into the assimilative and self-referential. The knowledge of the poor often moves outside the logic of third-party funding.

Various debates in the philosophy of science have pointed to similar problems. Approaches such as standpoint epistemology, situated knowledge, or discussions on epistemic injustice show that social positions can influence the conditions of knowledge production. Nevertheless, the institutional structure of science remains largely oriented toward an ideal of epistemic distance, in which personal involvement or existential entanglement is primarily regarded as a potential distortion.

A particular tension emerges here in relation to neurodivergent forms of knowing. Many forms of neurodivergent knowledge production do not arise from methodological distance but from an intense entanglement of experience, analysis, and long-term object binding. Rationality in such cases is often connected with strong emotion, which is also related to neurological interconnections. Neurodivergent rationality is therefore not infrequently read as irrational or unsystematic. Yet knowledge in such cases arises not despite this entanglement but precisely through it.

From the perspective of classical academic norms, such a constellation can appear problematic. Research that emerges from existential involvement or that analyzes institutional practices from a position of structural marginalization is quickly classified as subjective, activist, or methodologically insufficient. At the same time, precisely such perspectives can open access to areas of social reality that remain difficult to perceive within institutionally stabilized forms of knowledge.

This leads to a further question: whether the current organization of science itself produces boundaries against certain forms of knowledge. The marginalization of neurodivergent epistemic labour would in this case not only represent a social or economic problem but also the expression of an epistemic order that systematically privileges certain forms of knowledge while structurally excluding others.

This can also be seen in seemingly banal matters such as access to doctoral titles (PhD). Precisely for those whose research work becomes recognizable only after decades, this access can turn into a massive denial of recognition for important research contributions. While twenty-year-olds can comparatively easily obtain a PhD, it is often almost impossible for older individuals outside institutions to receive such recognition even after decades of research contributions.

From this arises an even more fundamental question. If relevant forms of knowledge regularly emerge outside academic institutions while at the same time being only limitedly integrable within them, a second, more informal mode of knowledge production might exist alongside established academic science—a parallel epistemic practice that can become socially effective without being fully embedded in the formal structures of science.

Yet such forms of knowledge production should not be placed in an inferior position. The fact that they are de facto treated as inferior calls into question many of the fundamental assumptions on which academic institutions base their self-understanding.

The investigation of neurodivergent epistemic labour therefore touches not only questions of social justice or the political economy of knowledge. It also raises fundamental questions in the philosophy of science: who is allowed to produce knowledge, under which conditions it is considered legitimate, and which forms of knowledge can become visible within the existing scientific order.

## **6. Epistemic Colonization and the Order of Knowledge**

In recent decades, various approaches in the philosophy of science and postcolonial studies have pointed out that boundaries within knowledge are not exclusively epistemic in nature. They also possess a political dimension. The concept of epistemic colonization describes situations in which a dominant knowledge order marginalizes or absorbs other forms of knowing by translating their concepts, methods, or experiential forms into its own categories or by positioning them outside the scientific discourse.

Historically, this concept has been discussed primarily in connection with colonial power relations. European scientific systems declared their own forms of knowledge to be the universal standard and treated other forms of knowledge—such as indigenous knowledge

systems—as local, traditional, or pre-scientific. In many cases such forms of knowledge were later selectively integrated, but usually only after they had been translated into the methodological and institutional structures of the dominant scientific order.

A comparable mechanism, however, can also occur within modern knowledge societies. Institutionally stabilized scientific systems define not only methods but also legitimate forms of knowledge production. Research is expected to be organized in project-based form, results are expected to emerge within defined time frames, insights are expected to be translated into standardized publication formats, and the position of the researcher is expected to appear as methodologically distanced.

These criteria are not necessarily wrong or illegitimate. They enable cooperation, comparability, and institutional stability. At the same time, however, they produce epistemic boundary zones. Forms of knowledge that escape these parameters—for example because they follow long temporal dynamics (*Eigenzeit*), arise from existential experiential positions, or blur the clear separation between observer and object—can easily fall outside academic visibility.

In this sense it can be argued that modern science does not only produce knowledge but simultaneously establishes a territorial order of knowledge. These boundaries are rarely formulated explicitly, yet they continue to operate within institutional routines such as peer review, academic career paths, funding logics, and publication systems.

It is precisely in connection with neurodivergent forms of knowing that this dynamic becomes particularly visible.

## **7. Epistemic Labour, Value, and the Question of Another Knowledge Economy**

If the analysis described above is correct, a further consequence follows from it. The current knowledge order then appears not only as a system of knowledge production but simultaneously as a system of value attribution. It determines not only which forms of knowledge become visible but also which forms of labour are considered legitimate foundations of societal value creation.

In modern economies, labour is generally defined through institutional roles, contracts, and monetary remuneration. Within this framework, knowledge production appears primarily as labour where it is organized within academic institutions, research organizations, or economic innovation processes. Forms of long-term, independent epistemic labour, however, frequently fall through the cracks of this logic.

The result is a paradoxical situation. Societies that understand themselves as knowledge societies depend to a considerable degree on epistemic labour, yet recognize only a part of this labour as economically relevant. Forms of long-term analysis, cultural research, or critical knowledge production arise under conditions of material insecurity, even though they may potentially contribute to the stabilization or further development of societal knowledge orders.

This observation touches upon fundamental questions of the political economy of knowledge. If socially necessary forms of epistemic labour remain outside existing labour and value orders,

a structural tension arises between knowledge production and the economic organization of society.

Against this background, alternative concepts for securing epistemic labour gain importance. Proposals such as a universal basic income or other forms of universal social security have often been justified in political theory with reference to technological change or the automation of labour. From the perspective of the analysis developed here, however, another aspect can be added: such models could also be understood as infrastructural preconditions for forms of epistemic labour that escape institutional planning and yet may be socially necessary.

In this context, the concept of a Universal Care Income—developed in other works by the author—also gains significance. This model understands income not primarily as compensation for market-based wage labour but as a societal infrastructure for stabilizing activities that are necessary for the functioning of complex societies without being adequately captured within the existing logic of markets and institutions. This includes not only classical forms of care work but also forms of long-term epistemic labour, cultural production, and social stabilization.

From this perspective, the question of income security appears not only as a social policy issue but also as an epistemic one. If certain forms of knowledge can arise precisely under conditions of relative institutional distance and at the same time be socially relevant, the question arises whether modern knowledge societies must organize their economic foundations in such a way that such forms of labour remain possible at all.

Modern knowledge societies therefore face a fundamental challenge: they must not only further develop their institutions of research but also reconsider the economic conditions of knowledge production itself. The question under which conditions people can engage in long-term epistemic labour without falling into permanent material insecurity thus becomes a central political question for the future.

### **Conclusion: Knowledge, Eigenzeit, and the Crisis of the Knowledge Order**

The analysis of neurodivergent epistemic labour ultimately leads to a more fundamental question: how does knowledge arise at all, and under which conditions can it arise? This question forms the background of the entire series *Studies in World-Formation*. Knowledge does not simply emerge within institutions. It emerges in a field of tension between openness and stabilization—between gap and form. Without openness, no new insights can arise. Without structure, insights cannot be stabilized. Every knowledge order moves within this balance.

The problem of modern academic systems is that this balance is increasingly being lost. Universities and research institutions produce ever more form, ever more formatting, ever more administrative stabilization—while the spaces of real epistemic openness become smaller. Research is organized in project-based form, knowledge is pressed into standardized publication formats, and academic careers follow normalized organizational logics. The result is a form of knowledge production that manages knowledge ever more efficiently while producing less and less genuinely new knowledge.

The symptoms of this development are visible in many fields. In physics, for example, the distance between mathematical model production and empirically verifiable explanations has

been growing for decades. In other disciplines, simulation increasingly replaces real theoretical work. Academic systems produce enormous quantities of text, models, and citations—while the actual capacity to explain complex reality stagnates or in some places even declines.

In this situation, those forms of knowledge production that partly escape institutional planning gain importance. Research following its own temporal structure (*Eigenzeit*), long-term object binding, and subjective epistemic practice no longer appear merely as marginal phenomena but as a necessary counter-movement to an increasingly formalized knowledge order. Precisely where research emerges from personal involvement, intensive analysis, and long-term engagement with a subject, perspectives can arise that remain difficult to perceive within institutional routines.

This dynamic is further intensified by the current development of artificial intelligence. AI can reorganize and simulate enormous amounts of existing knowledge. In doing so, it reinforces precisely that side of knowledge production which has already become dominant: the reproduction, variation, and recombination of existing discourses. What it cannot replace are those processes in which new questions emerge, reality becomes visible in unexpected ways, and knowledge arises from a long-term relationship between subject and object.

It is precisely in this context that it becomes visible why the exploitation of neurodivergent epistemic labour is not merely a social policy problem. It concerns the epistemic infrastructure of modern societies itself. When those individuals who conduct independent research, analysis, and conceptual development over long periods of time are systematically pushed into material insecurity, not only individual lives are damaged. A part of the knowledge production on which complex societies depend is destabilized at the same time.

The question under which conditions such forms of labour can remain possible is therefore not a marginal issue. It concerns the future of the knowledge society itself. Models such as a Universal Care Income, as developed in other works by the author, can in this context be understood not only as social policy reform. They can also be read as an infrastructural response to a structural problem of knowledge production: how can spaces of epistemic openness be stabilized without at the same time suffocating them institutionally?

The neurodivergent epistemic labour examined here makes visible a problem that extends far beyond individual biographies. Modern knowledge orders run the risk of losing their own foundation: the capacity to recognize reality in genuinely new ways. Where knowledge is only reproduced, simulated, and formalized, world-formation no longer takes place. It is precisely at this point that the question of *Eigenzeit*, subjectivity, and independent research becomes central again.

Not because it is romantic.

But because without it, new knowledge often can no longer arise at all.

**The coherence of this series over three decades is not the result of retrospective systematization, but of the persistence of the same operatoric difference across different domains of inquiry.**

## About the Author

Timothy Speed is an independent artist-researcher working on operator-based ontologies, world-formation, and neurodivergent epistemology.

His work connects philosophy of physics, consciousness studies, and social theory through the framework of operatoric research.

Further publications, papers, and archival materials are available at:

<https://timothy-speed.org>

<https://zenodo.org/communities/operatoric-research-corpus>

*(The present text constitutes an interface translation into neurotypical academic discourse. This translation functions as an accessibility measure necessitated by dominant linguistic and epistemic conventions. It does not represent the native epistemic form of the research, but a communicative adaptation required for participation in standardized scholarly exchange.)*

**A more in-depth paper on the methodology can be found here:**

Speed, T. (2025). Recursive Knowledge Instead of Additive Knowledge Accumulation - On the Epistemic Structure of Embodied, Neurodivergent Research (Version 1). Zenodo.

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18054997>

**A paper providing an overview of the work can be found here:**

Speed, T. (2026). Introduction to an Operator-Based Research Program - World, Work, Value, Consciousness – Structure and Boundary Questions Beyond Representational Models (Corpus Overview / Survey Paper / Meta Paper) (Version 1). Zenodo.

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