

Subjectivity in Need of Reconceptualization? The Neoliberal Mediation of Working Existence in the Network Society

Abstract

In this essay I seek to come to a critical understanding of what we are today in relation to our present understood as the globalizing neoliberal governmentality in which life is reduced to constant work under conditions of strict control. As such, the focus of the paper is limited to what might be termed 'knowledge' workers subject to mechanisms of control and constant surveillance in neoliberal network societies. To understand the way in which we are governed by mechanisms of control, I draw on Foucault's analyses of neoliberal governmentality in his Collège de France lectures of the late 70s. I further seek to understand the 'culture', 'ethos' or 'spiritedness' of work under and in relation to conditions of control that serve to incite neoliberal knowledge workers to *willingly* work all the time, by drawing on the ancient notion of *thumos*.

Keywords

Foucault; neoliberalism; governmentality; control; knowledge workers; work; thumos

Bio

Benda Hofmeyr is Professor in the Department of Philosophy, University of Pretoria, South Africa. She lived in the Netherlands for almost a decade where she completed her doctoral studies and postdoctoral research and worked at the Jan van Eyck Academy in Maastricht. She still maintains strong collaborative ties with the Radboud University Nijmegen where she obtained her doctoral degree in Philosophy on the work of Foucault and Levinas. Her research interests fall within the broad ambit of contemporary Continental philosophy (especially thinkers following in the wake of Heidegger with emphasis on post-structuralism and phenomenology) with an enduring fascination for the inextricable entanglement of the ethical and the political. For more information: benda.hofmeyr@up.ac.za and/or www.bendahofmeyr.com

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7601-6127>

Although the subject deems itself free, in reality it is a slave. In so far as it willingly exploits itself without a master, it is an absolute slave
(Han 2017:16)

In this contribution, I undertake a philosophical anthropological interrogation with a distinctive sociological slant to grapple with the following question: what are we – as knowledge workers – today in relation to our present understood as the globalizing neoliberal governmentality in which life is reduced to constant work under conditions of strict control?

This critical issue goes to the very heart of philosophical anthropological reflections on what constitutes subjectivity in the contemporary era. I argue that within the present context of the foregrounded debates of pressing issues pertaining to identity politics, this question on the human subject reconceptualized as entrepreneurial ‘project’, is of equal need of critical debate. This given the fact that the knowledge economy in the networked era has become a decisive force in determining the human condition in the developed as well as in growing parts of the developing world, which are aggressively targeted by mobile device manufacturers. It is estimated that more than five billion people of the global population of seven billion have mobile devices, and more than half of these are smart phones with Internet connectivity. In fact, research predicts that in the Internet age, the existential condition of being a knowledge worker conceived as human capital will come to represent one of the quintessential determinants of the human condition.

To put it succinctly, how is the neoliberal inter-networked mediation of working existence compelling us to come to a reconceived understanding of human subjectivity?

This question may be approached by breaking it down into what I consider to be its two component parts: the first part analyses the government(-ality) of control in our present network society by firstly specifying what I understand under “neoliberalism”. I then turn to Foucault’s analyses of neoliberal governmentality, which draws on a more comprehensive understanding of ‘government’ dating back to the 16th C, which is not limited to political structures. Based on his contention that there is no power without knowledge, he introduces the notion of “governmentality”, which conjoins government to a certain *mentalité* conceived as an economic rationality. The first part concludes by analysing how “governmentality” may serve as a critique of neoliberalism. The second part of my argument turns to the ‘culture’, ‘ethos’ or ‘spiritedness’ of work under and in relation to conditions of control within the sphere of knowledge work in the age of the neoliberal network society. I contend that the knowledge worker is overinvested in work, an overinvestment that appears to be disproportionate to absolute necessity or correlative gain in terms of wealth (increased financial incentives or material gain), mental, emotional and physical well-being or overall quality of life. This part concludes by attributing this overinvestment to an ambiguous ‘ambition’, which I conceive as thumotic satisfaction. The third and final part attempts to come to a critical understanding of the ‘hinge’ conjoining neoliberal governmentality to the ancient spiritedness. In other words, how does neoliberal capitalism succeed in tapping into the ancient spiritedness to generate the competitive entrepreneurial spirit, which is the latter’s driving force?

A critical reflection on this distinctively Foucaultian inquiry regarding a diagnostics of our present and if and how it necessitates a reconceived notion of subjectivity has to account for our situatedness in what Manuel Castells (1996, 2000) famously dubbed the “network society”. The argument presented here is thus set against the backdrop of the “Information Technology Revolution” that inaugurated what Castells describes as based on “informationalism, globalization and networking”. Such a “network enterprise”, he shows, radically transformed the world of work and restructured capital-labour relations. The genealogy of Foucault, for its part, provides a way of thinking about the ontology of “power” and subject-formation that is not based on a hierarchy or closed totality. Erikson (2005: 596) argues that by developing a kind of network-based perspective, Foucault “created prerequisites for research practices in which the object of analysis appears as a system of continuously reorganizing relationships”. This is significant, he continues, because the model of the network has the same objective, namely “to enable us to think about complex technological, theoretical, economic and political processes in a coherent way that nevertheless cannot be reduced to a system”. Castells’s definition of a network as “a set of interconnected nodes” (1996: 470) is instructive here. What is important is that the identity of the nodal points is formed through their position and function as parts of the whole. The intersections of a network, therefore, do not have any privileged distinct meaning-content, but have meaning only in relation to their function in the topology of the network. Being interconnected the nodal points are subject to constant transformation in response to the force field in which they are embedded, which in turn constantly restructures the network. Conceptually, the network of neoliberal governmentality with its respective interconnected nodes is therefore itself a constantly changing constellation subject to revolutionizing forces of creative destruction in response to dynamics of resistance that is not external to the network, but an intrinsic feature of its ontology and functionality. Hence, the analyses offered here can in no way be conceived of as final or definitive, but rather as part of an open-ended debate attempting to capture what can only be considered as a fleeting, singular historical formation. I nevertheless contend that even such analytical “snapshots” afford us critical insights into some enduring features of the ontology, functioning, and effects of the network called neoliberal governmentality.

I. The Government(-ality) of Control

The fact that the present-day knowledge worker – a term that I will define in due course – is subject to constant control, which has, at least in part, turned him/her into a subject that lives to work rather than working to earn a living¹, is an intriguing phenomenon to say the least. As I will argue, this phenomenon is inextricably linked to the pervasive neoliberalization of our private, public and professional lives. The coming into power of neoliberalism at the end of the 70s coincided with the creation

¹ It might be noted here that the COVID-19 pandemic and the consequent lockdown measures that were put in place to varying degrees in countries across the globe have resulted in knowledge-workers not merely working from home, but ‘sleeping at work’, which was *possible* precisely by the availability of the inter-connected technological means to continue working and collaborating in real time with colleagues and employers both locally and globally across time zones with little or no regard for ‘office hours’. This enforced utilization of this *possibility*, I would venture, will change the way knowledge-workers work, and become the *probable* or perhaps even the obvious, if not the only, way of working.

and development of the Internet in the last three decades of the 20th C (cf. Castells 1996: 45). The subsequent exponential growth in the Internet on account of the ongoing expansive and increasingly sophisticated technological infrastructure, and the utilization of the Internet in all areas of human activity (in April 2020, approximately 4.57 billion people were active internet users, encompassing 59% of the global population)² has been a decisive facilitator of the increasing globalization of neoliberalism. Importantly, Castells (1996: 101) distinguishes between a *global* economy and a *world* economy. The latter, he states, is not a new phenomenon. A world economy is an economy in which capital accumulation proceeds throughout the world and has existed in the West at least since the 16th C, as Fernand Braudel (1967) and Immanuel Wallerstein (1974) have taught us.³ A *global* economy is something different, he explains: “an economy whose core components have the institutional, organizational, and technological capacity to work as a unit in real time, or in a chosen time, on a planetary scale” (Castells 1996: 102). Thus,

“[w]hile capitalism is characterized by its relentless expansion, always trying to overcome limits of time and space, it was only in the late twentieth century that the world economy was able to become truly global on the basis of the new infrastructure provided by information and communication technologies, and with the decisive help of deregulation and liberalization policies implemented by governments and international institutions” (ibid., p. 101).

What Castells calls the “new economy” has three distinctive and intertwined features: it is *networked*, which made possible its being *global*, but it is also what he terms *informational*: “It is *informational* because the productivity and competitiveness of units or agents in this economy (be it firms, regions, or nations) fundamentally depend upon their capacity to efficiently generate, process, and apply knowledge-based information” (ibid., p. 77). This feature of the “new economy” explains the central role of knowledge work and the fact that it has become inextricably tethered to information technologies. As we shall see, this is one of the key enabling features of the living-to-work development. First, however, I have to briefly explain what exactly I mean when I speak of neoliberalism. Far too often, the term is mobilized as a vague blanket descriptor of our economic present in the developed and in some parts of the developing world, which offers little or no critical purchase. Secondly and more to the point, what does it mean to conceive of neoliberalism as a “governmentality”?

Neoliberalism

Classical liberalism, as we know, is a political philosophy that propounds the maximization of individual liberty while restricting the use of force to achieve this end. With neoliberalism the emphasis shifts from a political philosophy to a political *programme*. Neoliberalism may be understood as the globalized and globalizing political programme that espouses economic liberalism or ‘laissez faire economics’ as the only means of promoting economic development and securing political liberty. As the dominant mode of contemporary discourse and thought – also in growing parts of the developing world thanks to mobile technologies and the Internet – it has infiltrated not only our politics and our economy, but also our common-sensical way of

² Source: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/617136/digital-population-worldwide/>

³ Cf. Braudel, F. 1967. *Civilisation matérielle et capitalisme. XV^e – XVII^e siècle*. Paris: Armand Colin; Wallerstein, I. 1974. *The Modern World System*. New York: Academic Press.

interpreting, understanding and relating to the world encompassing every sphere of life – the private as well as the public.

Importantly, there is no such thing as *one* neoliberalism that holds sway wherever it is implemented. Widely divergent incarnations, interpretations and hybrid forms are found across the globe. Sweeping general definitions prove vacuous and unenlightening. What may, however, be said about neoliberalism in general is that the central value that it propounds is *individual freedom*. A noble ideal indeed, which inspired both the American and French revolutions. For the American revolutionaries, freedom was understood negatively (freedom *from*) as something that needed protection by laws (Locke)⁴, whereas for the French revolutionaries freedom was a positive thing, the freedom of the people liberated from the rule of the sovereign (Rousseau).⁵ What, then, is ‘new’ about neoliberal freedom?

David Harvey (2005: 5) explains it as follows:

“[f]or any way of thought to become dominant, a conceptual apparatus has to be advanced that appeals to our intuitions and instincts, to our values and our desires, as well as to the possibilities inherent in the social world we inhabit. If successful, this conceptual apparatus becomes so embedded in common sense as to be taken for granted and not open to question. *The founding figures of neoliberal thought took political ideals of human dignity and individual freedom as fundamental, as ‘the central values of civilization’*. In so doing they chose wisely, for these are indeed compelling and seductive ideals. These values, they held, were threatened not only by fascism, dictatorships, and communism, but by all forms of state intervention that substituted collective judgements for those of individuals free to choose” (my emphasis).

What does this freedom of choice amount to under neoliberalism?

- (1) First and foremost, the conviction that individual freedom is guaranteed by freedom of the market and of trade. While classical liberals insisted upon a strict division between the state and society, neoliberals subordinate the state to the supposedly ‘free’ market; the state is charged with the responsibility to promote and facilitate the market by way of legislative intervention not merely as a fact of life, but as a way of life. Hence, the freedoms attached to profitable capital accumulation – the fundamental goal of neoliberal regimes – reflect the interests of capital, i.e. private property owners, businesses, multinational corporations, and financial capital (ibid., p. 7). “The interests of the community” is only represented indirectly or as an afterthought by way of the belief in the so-called ‘trickle down effect’, which I use very loosely here to refer to the myth that the enrichment of the few will eventually filter down to also improve the lives of the poorest of the poor.

⁴ Locke’s theory of freedom is contained in Book II, Chapter XXI of *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690).

⁵ Rousseau’s formulation of social contract theory argued against the idea that monarchs were divinely empowered to legislate. In *The Social Contract* (1762) Rousseau argues that laws are binding only when they are supported by the general will of the people.

- (2) Neoliberalism sees *competition* as the defining characteristic of human relations. On the one hand, freedom is the necessary condition of possibility of competition. The triumph of only one competitor tolls the death knell of competition as such. On the other hand, increased competition should in theory optimize market performance and hence contribute to increased freedom. Neoliberalism defines citizens as rational, self-responsible, entrepreneurial consumers competing for financial security and success against all others. Their profitable entrepreneurial undertakings finance their consumption; their democratic choices are the rational weighing of cost-benefit options; and any failure to obtain and retain financial security is the sole responsibility of the citizens themselves on account of the 'irrational' and hence imprudent decisions they have taken.

In the service of freedom and competition, distinctive features of neoliberal policy include the limitation of state intervention in the market (deregulation) except in the form of protecting the freedom of the market and fostering unbridled competition; the minimization of tax and social provisions (the so-called 'social safety net'); the privatization of public services; and the limitation of the organization of labour and collective bargaining of trade unions.

As a politico-economic programme, I have often referred to neoliberalism as the peculiar form that present-day capitalism takes (cf. Hofmeyr 2011). While this is arguably true, one should be mindful not to merely conflate neoliberalism and capitalism, as pointed out by Jason Michael McCann.⁶ From its inception, capitalism has been a social and economic mode of living born from the Protestant work ethic and its associated belief in personal responsibility (cf. Weber 1992 [1905]). It is the conviction that people should to some extent be socially and economically free to pursue their own interests, which includes their commercial and financial interests. Most favourably defined, one might say that it affords people the freedom to trade and accumulate wealth subject to the wider restrictions of a state, which safeguards against the risks that come with capitalist ambition and greed.

Neoliberalism, for its part, is the political development of capitalism. As such, as we have seen, it is a political and economic ideology that seeks to maximize the freedom of the market by removing all barriers to the private accumulation of wealth. It therefore becomes a kind of power onto itself, not subject to state-regulation but rather a force that mobilizes the state to further its primary objective of unmitigated profit accumulation irrespective of consequence. Neoliberalism is therefore not against regulation per se, but against regulation over which it has no control and which inhibits its objectives. As a socio-economic paradigm, the ruling ethic of capitalism is prudence, i.e. circumspection that results in the increase of wealth. The neoliberal pursuit of wealth as an end in itself and which leads to political power may be described as a politico-economic means of social control. The way in which McCann here distinguishes between capitalism and neoliberalism throws a number of features of Michel Foucault's own 1978/79 analyses of neoliberalism as 'governmentality' into relief.

Neoliberal Governmentality

⁶ Source: <https://randompublicjournal.com/2016/04/25/capitalism-and-neoliberalism-whats-the-difference/>.

According to Foucault, the workings of neoliberal political rationality can best be understood when conceived as a particular form of “governmentality”. To understand the conceptual specificity of this mode of governance, we need to revisit Foucault’s genealogy of “government”.⁷

Government

Importantly, Foucault returns to an older more comprehensive understanding of “government” dating back to the 16th C, which was not limited to political structures or a particular ministry in office. Apart from the legitimately constituted forms of political and economic subjection, it included those more or less calculated modes of action designed to pre- or over-determine the possibilities of action of other people (cf. Foucault 1982a: 221).

In a lecture presented at Dartmouth that same year, Foucault conceives of government as the “conduct of conduct”⁸:

For to ‘conduct’ is at the same time to ‘lead’ others (according to mechanisms of coercion which are to varying degrees strict) and a way of behaving within a more or less open field of possibilities. The exercise of power consists in guiding the possibility of conduct and putting in order the possible outcome (Foucault 1982b: 203).

This does not, however, suggest absolute regulation. Rather, government is the hinge that conjoins two different but inextricable techniques that is always in a “versatile equilibrium, with complementarity and conflicts between techniques which assure coercion and processes through which the self is constructed or modified by himself” (ibid., pp. 203-4). Government, then, links techniques of domination, on the one hand, to techniques of self-formation or subjectivization [*subjectivation*], on the other. As such, techniques of subjectivization are not entirely exempt from techniques of subjection but essentially distinct from them. Here Foucault makes an important corrective to his earlier analyses. Since his concern has always been with knowledge of the subject, his primary focus was on techniques of domination as opposed to the other techniques utilized in the human sciences, i.e. techniques of production and semiotic techniques. Techniques of domination, Foucault explains, permit one to determine the conduct of individuals, to impose certain wills on them, and to submit them to certain ends. Foucault’s later research into the field of sexuality soon brought him to the realization that techniques of domination cannot be understood independently from what he calls techniques or technologies of the self:

I think that if one wants to analyze the genealogy of the subject in Western civilization, he has to take into account not only techniques of domination but also techniques of the self. Let’s say: he has to take into account the interaction between those two types of techniques – techniques of domination and techniques of the self. He has to take into account the points where the technologies of domination of individuals over one another have recourse to

⁷ Foucault traced the genealogy of government in his lectures of 1978 and 1979 at the Collège de France as well as in a handful of other lectures and essays (cf. Foucault 1982a; 1982b).

⁸ Foucault is playing on the double meaning in French of the verb *conduire* – to lead or to drive, and *se conduire* – to behave or conduct oneself, whence *la conduite*, conduct or behaviour (Translator’s note) (Foucault 1982a: 221).

processes by which the individual acts upon himself. And conversely, he has to take into account the points where the techniques of the self are integrated into structures of coercion or domination. The contact point, where the individuals are driven by others is tied to the way they conduct themselves, is what we can call, I think, government (ibid.)

This Foucaultian epiphany is key to the argument proposed here. It announces Foucault's insight that disciplinary power so central to the functioning of the very institutions that he had been studying (asylums, prisons, and the like in the works up to an including *Discipline and Power* (1975)) is only one aspect of the art of governing people in our society. The exercise of power, Foucault insists, cannot be understood as pure violence or strict coercion: "Power consists in complex relations: these relations involve a set of rational techniques, and the efficiency of those techniques is due to a subtle integration of coercion-technologies and self-technologies. Of primary importance among the latter, Foucault contends, are those techniques focused on the discovery and the formulation of the truth concerning oneself. A crucial procedure harnessed in our societies towards this end is the examination of conscience and confession, which itself has a complex history. What Foucault foregrounds in this history is a telling transformation that took place at the beginning of the Christian era, when the ancient obligation of knowing oneself became the monastic precept of imperative confession to one's spiritual advisor (ibid., p. 204). For Foucault, this transformation plays an important role in the genealogy of modern subjectivity and announces the start of what he calls, "the hermeneutics of the self". It could arguably be contended that this Christian confessional turn is instrumental in the efficacy of neoliberal governmentality and actively harnessed by it to tether working subjects to its apparently unquestionable logic. This idea that guilt and penance serve the capitalist ethos dovetails with Weber's insistence at the beginning of the 20th C that the eschatological insecurity announced by Protestantism served as the very motor force of the capitalist spirit. Reflecting on the notion of philosophical anthropology almost a century later, Balibar notes a transition that took place between Aristotle and Augustine, a transition that echoes Foucault's analyses: the ancient figure makes way for the figure of the *inner* subject,

"who confronts a transcendent law, both theological and political, religious (therefore also moral) or imperial (monarchical) – because he *hears* it, because in order to be able to hear it, he has to be *called* by it. This subject is basically a *responsible*, or an *accountable*, subject, which means that he has to respond, before another person, who righteously interpellates him. Not a Big Brother, but a Big Other – as Lacan would say – always already shifting in an ambivalent manner between the visible and the invisible, between individuality and universality" (Balibar 1994: 9).

What is crucial about this development, for Balibar, is that the 'subject' is subjected to the sovereign, the lord, ultimately the Lord God in the *political* field. In the *metaphysical* field, this subject necessarily *subjects himself to himself* and thereby performs his own subjection (ibid., p. 10). One could therefore venture to say that neoliberal governmentality explicitly and implicitly relies on the *call* (vocation) of freedom, competition, and profit, a call that is heard and that requires a response before others, interpellating the neoliberal subject as either responsible and hence an

exemplary achievement-subject or as irresponsible, i.e. as a failure as a “project”⁹. Here we might think of the bizarre logic of performance management processes: designed to enable increased productivity and succeeding by engendering a culture of constant underperformance. Performance management processes infamously rely on self-assessment in the context of constant competition in which goal posts incessantly shift to remain just-beyond-reach. Applications for recognition are designed not to reward achievement, but to illuminate underperformance, to mark the worker as never-quite-good-enough. Self-assessment inevitably then becomes self-incriminatory – not unlike the Christian practice of confession. Confession, as Foucault explains, is the practice and obligation to bear witness *against oneself*. The penitent was obligated to engage in a self-performance in the form of a theatrical representation of him/herself as sinner as dead or dying – willing his/her own death as sinner. The Christian technology is aimed at self-destruction or self-renunciation. The neoliberal technology of performance management is designed to incite “stretch-performance” by designating efficient performance as underperformance.

Hence, in those early Christian technologies discussed by Foucault, the revelation of the truth about oneself cannot be dissociated from the obligation to renounce oneself (ibid., p. 221). Truth and sacrifice are intrinsically related. The one serves as necessary condition of possibility of the other and vice versa. According to Foucault, one of the major problems of western culture has been to find a way to found the hermeneutics of the self not on sacrifice of the self, as was the case in early Christianity, but on a positive, theoretical and practical emergence of the self. As we know, Foucault (1982b) famously challenges this “permanent anthropologism of Western thought” by suggesting that the problem of the self is perhaps not to discover what it is in its positivity, but to discover that the self is nothing else than the historical correlation of the technology built in our history. One of the main political problems today is therefore the politics of ourselves.

Governmentality

“Government” may therefore be understood as governing the forms of self-government by structuring and shaping the field of possible actions of subjects. This ‘structuring’ is the result of a particular ‘*mentalité*’. Here Foucault conjoins ‘*gouverner*’ and ‘*mentalité*’ and introduces the concept of “governmentality” as a “guideline” for the analysis he offers by way of historical reconstructions embracing a period starting from ancient Greece through to modern neoliberalism. As Lemke (2000: 2) explains, the semantic linking of governing and modes of thought [*mentalité*] implies that we cannot study the technologies of power that structure the field of possible action of others without an analysis of the political rationality underpinning it. “Governmentality” may be understood according to the following scheme:

Govern	◇	Mentality
Power (intervention)	◇	Knowledge (representation)
Political programme	◇	Economic rationality

⁹ Later on in this essay, I shall point out again that it was Han (2017) who conceived of the neoliberal subject as achievement-subject or “project”.

Governmentality, in other words, is two-sided: (1) the knowledge-side consists in representation; and (2) the power-side entails intervention. Representation refers to a specific discursive field defined by government, which ‘rationalizes’ the exercise of power (a pragmatics of guidance). The form in which a problem is represented determines its perception, strategy and solution. Representation, therefore, structures specific forms of intervention, the power-side of government. Political rationality is not a pure, neutral knowledge, which simply ‘re-presents’ the governing reality. It interprets and processes reality in a way that already predetermines the way in which it will be tackled by political technologies (Lemke 2001: 191) Lemke rightly contends that the concept of governmentality plays a decisive role in Foucault’s analytics of power, which he sums up as follows: “it offers a view on power beyond a perspective that centers either on consensus or on violence; it links technologies of the self with technologies of domination, the constitution of the subject to the formation of the state; finally, it helps to differentiate between power and domination” (Lemke 2000: 3).

Governmentality as Critique of Neoliberalism

Critiques of neoliberalism abound. Schematically these critiques can be divided along three main lines of argumentation: (1) neoliberalism as ideology, which offers a distorted picture of society and economy in need of an emancipatory corrective that is scientifically founded; (2) neoliberalism as economic-political reality, in other words, as the extension of economy into the domain of politics, the usurpation of the state by capitalism, the globalization that escapes the political regulations of the nation-state; and (3) neoliberalism as “practical anti-humanism” wreaking havoc on the lives of individuals, promoting the devaluation of traditional experiences, inciting processes of individualization that endanger collective bonds, threatening family values and personal affiliations through the imperatives of flexibility, mobility and risk-taking (Lemke 2000: 6). While these lines of critique certainly hold true and throw important effects of neoliberalism into relief, analysing neoliberalism as a form of governmentality augment them in a crucial sense. Instead of merely relying on the conceptual dualisms it intends to criticize – knowledge and power; state and economy; subject and power – as these three lines of critique risk doing, governmentality as critical vantage point on neoliberalism couples forms of knowledge, strategies of power and technologies of self to facilitate a more thorough-going insight into current political and social rearrangements, since it pierces the extensiveness of processes of domination and exploitation (ibid., p. 7).

Prominent governmentality scholar, Mitchell Dean (1999: 210)¹⁰ explains this in the following way: “as a form of governmentality, neoliberalism promotes a particular contemporary governing rationale, which effects the calculated and rational shaping

¹⁰ Cf. Lait (2010: 162): “At the time of publication, the first edition of Mitchell Dean’s influential text, *Governmentality: Power and Rule in Modern Society* (1999), elaborated an analytics of government through which the ever-changing rationalities and technologies governing advanced liberal societies could be diagnosed and contested. With the ideal of the welfare state receding, neo-liberal principles and objectives were becoming ascendant, prompting many to take an interest in Foucault’s lectures on the history of governmentality and emergence of neo-liberalism; but Foucault left no extended methodological commentary on genealogy and its application to the study of governmentality. Much of the importance of Dean’s first edition of *Governmentality*, then, resided in the fact that it was among the first comprehensive and systematic attempts to advance the conceptual tools and dimensions of analysis needed to perform this type of study”.

of our conduct by a multiplicity of authorities and agencies”. Hence politics and knowledge are not juxtaposed, but conjoined as “political knowledge”. The focus is on which kind of rationality informs practices or how the pragmatics of guidance is “rationalized”. Here rationality does not refer to transcendental reason, but to historical practices; it does not imply a normative judgement, since it refers to social relations (cf. Lemke 2000: 7) Specifically, it is a governing rationale that

“effects the problematization of the welfare state, and that encourages the reform of individual and institutional conduct so that it becomes more competitive and efficient. This reform is sought to be effected by extending the market rationality to all spheres, and by establishing a culture of enterprise and responsible autonomy” (Dean 1999: 210).

As a form of power [an actively implemented political intervention], neoliberal governmentality extends an economic rationality, i.e. a cost-benefit analysis to every sphere of human existence including the family, religious institutions, schools, the health sector, universities, science and the media. Every institution is subject to an economic rationality and as such conceived of as a business operating according to the profit incentive. Lemke (2000: 8) explains that the “concept of governmentality suggests that it is not only important to see if neo-liberal rationality is an adequate representation of society, but also how it functions as a ‘politics of truth’, producing new forms of knowledge ... that contribute to the ‘government’ of new domains of regulation and intervention”.

As a “politics of truth”, this economic rationality dictates that more has to be accomplished with less, which effectively means that everything has to become more efficient. Efficiency is measured by way of quantification and calculation – even if what is to be measured is strictly speaking not measurable. The process of creative problem-solving – so central to what knowledge workers do – cannot be quantified, yet we are forced to quantify it all the time. Intellectual work, for example, cannot easily if at all be measured but much of what academics must do to satisfy neoliberal criteria is designed to create this impression, because knowledge has become a source of revenue (e.g. output, impact, rating, ranking, and bench-marking). Revenue is by its very definition something that has to be measurable. In the neoliberal meritocracy¹¹, the assessment of ‘merit’ is based on quantifiable achievements. In such a meritocracy, recognition of achievement is not bestowed, but applied for and granted depending on one’s capacity to appear more efficient and productive than your competitors. Efficiency is something that needs to be actively managed hence the entrepreneurial/enterprising subject finds his/her creativity and productivity subject to over-regulation and constant control. Consequently more time is being devoted to prove their results by way of the requirement of compulsive reporting of output than to work itself. As a result of the pressure brought to bear on the neoliberal worker, intrinsic motivation wanes especially when pressure starts to take its toll in the form of the empirically increased prevalence of burnout, depression and other mental disorders (cf. Bombardelli 2016: 87-89). Verhaeghe (2014: 195) cites two pioneering studies undertaken by Richard Wilkinson, a British social epidemiologist (one with Kate Pickett) that attempted to establish if any correlation exists between the neoliberalization of a society and the increase or decrease of psychosocial well-being in that society:

¹¹ See, for example, <https://discoversociety.org/2018/10/02/meritocracy-as-neoliberal-mantra/>

“The gauge they used was eminently quantifiable: the extent of income inequality within individual countries. This is indeed a good yardstick, as neoliberal policy is known to cause a spectacular rise in such inequality. Their findings were unequivocal: an increase of this kind has far-reaching consequences for nearly *all* health criteria”.

Four of the five factors that are commonly considered to be decisive for our health are especially detrimentally affected: the fears and cares we experience; the quality of our social relationships; the extent to which we have control over our lives; and, in the final instance, our social status. Wilkinson comes to the conclusion that where there is high-income inequality, the quality of social relationships is noticeably diminished. Trust makes way for aggression, and fear causes withdrawal from community life. In addition, neoliberalization is causally connected to the increase of an individual’s levels of stress, and feelings of powerlessness and helplessness, which are commonly considered to be among the most toxic emotions (ibid., p. 196). Also here neoliberalism capitalizes on the havoc that constant work under conditions of relentless pressure and ubiquitous control wreak upon its subjects’ physical and psychological health by responding with the provision of self-management workshops and extensive corporate wellness programmes. The latter features telling topics such as, ‘How to recognize symptoms of burnout’, ‘Stress management’ and ‘How to create work-life balance’. This response demonstrates what Foucault calls the “strategic character of government”, which suggests that unintended side-effects, such as the prison system producing repeat delinquency or recidivism (cf. *Discipline and Punish* (1975)) or the economic rationality producing psychic and physical incapacitation of workers are not signs of failure, but rather serve as the very condition of existence of a particular governmentality by providing opportunities for its expansion into previously external domains. ‘Compromises’, ‘fissures’ and ‘incoherencies’, then, are actually always already part of the programmes themselves and the condition of possibility of their constant rejuvenation (cf. Lemke 2000: 9).

To understand this domino-effect of parasitic causes and cures, let us consider what it means to work in the age of control.

II. Work in the Age of Control

Neoliberal (Knowledge) Worker

Since the neoliberal worker finds him/herself subject to an economic rationality in which efficiency dictates more for less, the worker is forced to work constantly. The over-investment in work is also the result of another concomitant development: in conjunction with advances in the information technology and the internet revolution, neoliberalism spawned the flexible, placeless (or ‘agile’), ever-reachable, and hence also ever-working subject. As a result, *homo faber* regresses to an isolated – paradoxically often within the context of ‘teamwork’, task-oriented, depoliticized *animal laborans*.¹² What exactly does this Arendtian distinction imply? Richard Sennett explains it as follows in *The Craftsman* (2008: 7):

¹² Classical modernists such as Smith, Locke and Marx placed the notion of labour at the centre of their work. The resultant conflation of labour and work was famously challenged by Hannah Arendt in *The Human Condition* (1958).

Animal laborans is, as the name implies, the human being akin to a beast of burden, a drudge condemned to routine. Arendt enriched this image by imagining him or her absorbed in a task that shuts out the world, a state well exemplified by Oppenheimer's feeling that the atomic bomb was a "sweet" problem, or Eichmann's obsession with making the gas chambers efficient. In the act of making it work, nothing else matters; Animal laborans takes the work as end in itself.

By contrast, Homo faber is her [Arendt's] image of men and women doing another kind of work, making a life in common. Again Arendt enriched an inherited idea. The Latin tag Homo faber means simply "man as maker". [...] Homo faber is the judge of material labor and practice, not Animal laborans's colleague but his superior. Thus, in her view, we human beings live in two dimensions. In one we make things; in this condition we are amoral, absorbed in a task. We also harbor another, higher way of life in which we stop producing and start discussion and judging together. Whereas Animal laborans is fixated on the question "How?" Homo faber asks "Why?"

The clicking, plugged-in, working subject finds him/herself immersed in endless streams of fleeting information. Resilience is needed because the stream is eternal, but never deep. It is quick and compact: emails, podcasts, TED talks, tweets, memes, newsfeeds, fast-paced with the aid of predictive text, hash tag conventions, emojis and other acronymic messaging conventions. And it is everywhere, constantly being updated. It is in the course of these developments that knowledge work emerged as the most important driver of the knowledge economy in the neoliberal network society. The term "knowledge worker" was first coined by Peter Drucker in his book, *The Landmarks of Tomorrow* (1959). Drucker defines knowledge workers as high-level workers who apply theoretical and analytical knowledge, acquired through formal training, to develop products and services. He notes that knowledge workers would be the most valuable assets of a 21st century organization because of their high level of productivity and creativity. They include professionals in information technology fields, such as programmers, web designers, system analysts, technical writers, and researchers. Knowledge workers are also comprised of academics, pharmacists, public accountants, engineers, architects, lawyers, physicians, scientists, financial analysts, and design thinkers. A knowledge worker is therefore a white-collar worker whose main capital is knowledge – the worker that thinks for a living. They are differentiated from other workers by their ability to solve complex problems or to develop new products or services in their fields of expertise. In 2012 it was estimated that there were 250 million knowledge workers in the world. Today, one can wager there are countless more given the fact that many knowledge professions/jobs that major enterprises cannot do without, did not exist a decade ago: app developers, market research data miners, millennial generational experts, social media managers, cloud computing services, sustainability experts, and user experience design, to mention just a few.¹³

It is among this segment of the workforce that one finds the peculiar phenomenon of *living for the sake of work* as opposed to working to live. Overinvestment is

¹³ Source: <http://corporatefinanceinstitute.com/resources/knowledge/other/knowledge-workers/>

investment that is disproportionate to necessity or correlative gain. In other words, a notable percentage of the world's population is disproportionately over-invested in work with no direct correlation to any increase in quality of life. These workers may earn more, but the additional earnings do not translate into a (perceptible or apparent) increase in well-being. They are better off in only *one* sense of the phrase – *or so it would seem*.

At what point and for what reasons did the knowledge worker start to live for the sake of work? It is my contention that there are three reasons for this development. First, the neoliberal knowledge worker works all the time because s/he *has to*. S/he is compelled to be overinvested in work given the enormous amount of pressure brought to bear on him/her to become more efficient. Such pressure translates into coercion. Secondly, working is constant, because in the network society it has *become possible* to work all the time from anywhere. Advances in IT and the Internet revolution have made this possible by giving the worker the capacity, and management the control. Finally, and perhaps most importantly and most intriguingly, the neoliberal worker works all the time because s/he paradoxically *wants to*. The neoliberal knowledge worker seems to get 'off' on the challenge posed by his/her work that requires non-repetitive problem-solving and hence ingenuity and creativity. Back in the late 50s in his *Landmarks of Tomorrow*, Pieter Drucker anticipated this development when he remarked that the imperatives of modern industrial organization call for an "educated society". The days of what Drucker dubbed the "assembly line robot" are disappearing – or rather progressively being relegated to the sweatshops of underdeveloped or developing countries where monotonous routine assembly work still holds sway. The thinker, Drucker contended, was replacing the mechanically oriented "doer". However, at the time "educated society" or "thinking" workers' work was limited to watching dials and service intricate machinery (Drucker 1959). The present world of work is of an entirely different order.

Present World of Work

The present world of work is inescapably determined by the network society. The invention of electronic and nuclear technologies since the 1940s coincided with international corporations that expanded beyond national boundaries, swallowing hitherto uncommodified areas; globalized markets coupled with computer technologies transformed the world of work into a deterritorialized network of nodal interfaces, mass consumption, and liquid multinational flows of capital. Way back in 1990, prior to the hegemony of the Internet, Deleuze predicted that we are moving from a disciplinary society to a society of control. Societies of control reduce the individual to a "dividual", to "masses, samples, data, markets, or 'banks'". A person of control or "dividual" is "undulatory, in orbit, in a continuous network. Everywhere surfing has already replaced the older sports". He thus links control to the technological revolution (the machine of control is the computer), and this in turn must inevitably coincide with a mutation in capitalism. What this capitalism wants is to buy stocks. Stocks are nothing more than "coded figures – deformable and transformable", the fluctuations of which imprison the profit-seeker, who cannot afford not knowing when to buy and when to sell. Deleuze (1992: 4) explains this as follows:

The operation of the markets is now the instrument of social control and forms the impudent breed of our masters. Control is short-term and of rapid rates of turnover, but also continuous and without limit ... Man is no longer enclosed [as was the case with disciplinary power], but man is in debt.

Today the overinvested worker finds him-/herself in fully-fledged societies of control – chilling incarnations and perfections of Deleuze’s prophecy. An important aspect of this society of “free-floating” control that replaced the disciplinary society made up of environments of enclosure characteristic of every institution from the family to the school, is that the “dividual” is made to believe that s/he can ‘to do whatever s/he wants’ (as long as the job gets done). Control presents itself as a kind of freedom, in fact, an “excess of freedom”, and herein the digital panopticon differs in an important way from the Orwellian scenario of constant paranoia induced by Big Brother, as Han (2017: 69) explains. On the contrary, constant surveillance is supposedly not something to worry about; it is something to welcome in the knowledge that everything is being taken care of. Surveillance, we are assured, serves the noble pursuit of our best interests, epitomized in the safety and security of each and all. In Han’s words: “Big Brother now wears a *friendly face*. His *friendliness* is what makes surveillance so efficient”. Han wonders if “surveillance state” is not perhaps a misnomer since today no one really feels as if they are being watched or threatened. And it is precisely this *feeling of freedom* that has become the problem (ibid., p. 71). This *feeling of freedom* that accompanies control blinds us to the fact that control disperses responsibility throughout life. A diffuse matrix or network of information gathering algorithms track, code and interpret everything into patterns that are constantly being interpreted and adjudicated. Mobile devices equipped with GPS and connected to the Internet can track everything from our sleeping to our surfing patterns. If you have nothing to hide, you have nothing to fear, hence the compulsion in societies of control to police oneself through self-responsibilization and to ‘share’. We voluntarily ‘share’ the most intimate details about ourselves on social media platforms to collect ‘friends’, ‘followers’, ‘reads’ and ‘likes’ that send a thrilling endorphin rush through our bloodstreams. Constant surveillance is welcomed since it serves our ‘best’ interests after all – our social “bonds”, safety, security, well-being and health. This unwitting embrace of control explains the relative ease with which neoliberalism has succeeded in abandoning social securities. As Lemke (2000: 10) points out, the relinquishing of social securities (e.g. welfare provisions against social risks such as illness, unemployment, poverty, etc.) and political rights (e.g. the citizen’s right to privacy and protection of personal information) are not symptoms of the failure of neoliberal governmentality, but may well be its *raison d’etre* (cf. Lemke 2000: 10).

Importantly, coercion works differently from control and the difference is instructive. Coercion (YOU HAVE TO) is externally applied force that pushes or pulls, but does not incite. It achieves the minimum amount of compliance, but never conviction or whole-hearted buy-in. Control (I CAN), on the other hand, is not seen as a limitation of freedom, but as empowering, benevolent, and beneficial. Internalized as what is good for me, it becomes self-control, self-responsibilization and self-care. Han emphasizes the *positivity* and *permissiveness* of power in the neoliberal regime, which makes it an exceptionally efficient technology of power since it ensures that people subordinate themselves to power relations *on their own*: “Such a dynamic seeks to activate, motivate and optimize – not to inhibit or repress. It proves so effective

because it does not operate by means of forbidding and depriving, but by pleasing and fulfilling. Instead of making people *compliant*, it seeks to make them *dependent*” (Han 2017: 36). Hence, compliance mode makes way for wholehearted conviction. Neoliberal working subjects do more than what is required and it feels good and right.

Han (2017: 37-38) identifies a few mechanisms of what he terms the “smart power” employed by neoliberal capitalism, which to mind helps to explain – at least in part – how it succeeds in producing working subjects that *like* doing more than what is required: first, it does not operate frontally, but instead guides the working subject’s will to its own benefit. It does not rely on free choice (Wahl), but offers working subjects the opportunity of free selection (*Auswahl*). Since it constantly invites our opinions, our needs, wishes and preferences, it is able to read and assess our conscious and unconscious thoughts. Based on this and combined with its own agenda of ever increasing productivity and the maximization of profit, it presents the worker with a ‘menu’¹⁴ from which s/he can ‘freely’ choose from a list of tailor-made options designed to enable voluntary self-organization and self-optimization. As such, it manages to remain invisible. Power that remains invisible does not invoke any need for resistance. Smart power, therefore succeeds in getting workers to subjugate themselves by consuming and communicating as “they click Like all the while” (ibid., p. 38).

The overinvestment in work appears to be disproportionate to necessity or correlative gain. *On the face of things*, the overinvested worker seems to enjoy no perceived increase in quality of life¹⁵ even though s/he earns more. In 1905 Weber¹⁶ wrote about modern humanity (*Menschentum*) and its loss of freedom and referred to them as mere “cogs” in a machine”.¹⁷ The present incarnation of the subjectivity of knowledge

¹⁴ This is exactly what Foucault (1982b: 203) was referring to – and no doubt the source informing Han’s argument – when he contended that the exercise of power consists in guiding the possibility of conduct and putting in order the possible outcome. “Government”, as Foucault defines it may be understood as governing the forms of self-government by structuring and shaping the field of possible actions of subjects.

¹⁵ What “an increase in quality of life” might mean to different individuals is obviously very different for each and everyone. Here I refer to the fact that neoliberal knowledge workers are working all the time, which results in less time for recreational activities and social interactions, on the one hand, and a rise in stress-induced psychiatric disorders ranging from depression to burnout, on the other. The obvious paradox that arises is why do they do it anyway if it takes such such toll on healthy personal and social well-being? In what follows, I shall attempt to offer an argument that supplements Han’s explanation by also accounting for the fact that neoliberal knowledge workers not only have to work all the time, but they appear also to *want to*.

¹⁶ Owen (1994) places Weber in a trajectory that runs from Nietzsche to Foucault on the grounds that his work can be read as a form of genealogical understanding and critique. He contends: “For Weber, cultural science is concerned with how we have become what we are, that is to say, with articulating a history of the present”. He further adds that the “purpose of Weber’s accounts is the same as Nietzsche’s, namely to provide a ‘context of meaning’ within which the development of *Menschentum* may be understood and evaluated in terms of the fate of man in modernity” (1994:101).

¹⁷ Weber ([1905] 1992: 127-128) wrote: “... it is still more horrible to think that the world could one day be filled with nothing but those little cogs, little men clinging to little jobs and striving toward bigger ones – a state of affairs which is to be seen once more, as in the Egyptian records, playing an ever-increasing part in the spirit of our present administrative systems, and especially of its offspring, the students. This passion for bureaucracy ... is enough to drive one to despair. It is as if in politics ... we were to deliberately to become men who need "order" and nothing but order, who become nervous and cowardly if for one moment this order wavers, and helpless if they are torn away from their total

workers would appear qualitatively different as they are not bogged down by soul-destroying and mind-numbing routine work, but challenged to be increasingly creative and innovative by every new work assignment. But like the erstwhile cogs, their entrepreneurial dedication betrays an almost vocational devotion. In the world of knowledge work, creativity appears to be the new conformity. This connected, creative cog might even be capitalism's most ingenious invention to date – content, self-controlled, self-motivated and consuming while running, as we shall see, on the satisfaction that it produces.

There seems to be some mechanism at work that drives the irrational work-drivenness of the knowledge worker – an ambiguous ‘ambition’ – a mechanism that neoliberal capitalism feeds off of. It is this mechanism that I would like to come to grips with, which arguably augments Han's argument in an important way.

An Ambiguous ‘Ambition’?

In his lectures presented at Collège de France in the 70s and early 80s¹⁸, Foucault traces the genealogy of power through the last six centuries from sovereign power through to disciplinary power, from police (broadly conceived as policy, controls and management techniques), to security and government (again, broadly conceived, and as such not reducible to the state). In the end, he returns to Antiquity – to the Greco-Roman practice of care of the self as well as to that of truth-telling – in an attempt to engender a critical self-awareness of subjectivity as a contingent construction that is not merely to be discovered or deciphered, but refused and created anew in a transgressive act of negating imposed subject positions and identities. It is also there – among the ancients – that we discover what Nietzsche might have called the *Entstehungsherd* [place of emergence] of the idea that along with reason and desire, there is something like an innate human spiritedness. It is this ‘spiritedness’ that may account for the spawning of an irrational drive to live in order to work in some. It was Fukuyama (1992) who argued that labour has its origin in the ancient spiritedness that the Greeks called *thumos* [also commonly spelled ‘thymos’; Greek: θυμός]. It cannot easily be translated into English covering such qualities as indignation, courage, determination, spirit, enterprise, ambition, and so on. It encompasses ‘heart’ as opposed to ‘head’ – a kind of self-regarding instinct that ranges from self-assertion, through self-respect, to our relations with others. It involves our concern for our reputation and good name. The *thumotic* drive, as we shall see, needs to be guided or steered, though, since excess causes hubris and deficiency results in shame.

Socrates's allegory of the chariot in the *Phaedrus* (Plato c. 370 BC), which he employed to explain the tripartite nature of the soul, is well known. In the allegory, a chariot (representing the soul) is pulled by a rebellious dark horse (symbolizing man's appetites or desire) and a spirited white horse (symbolizing *thumos*). The charioteer,

incorporation in it. That the world should know no men but these: it is in such an evolution that we are already caught up, and the great question is therefore not how we can promote and hasten it, but what can we oppose to this machinery in order to keep a portion of mankind free from this parceling-out of the soul, from this supreme mastery of the bureaucratic way of life”.

¹⁸ For purposes of this study the following lecture courses are most apposite: “Society Must Be Defended” (1975/76); “Security, Territory, Population” (1977/78) and “The Birth of Biopolitics” (1978/79); “The Hermeneutics of the Subject” (1981/82); “The Government of Self and Others” (1982/83); and “The Courage of Truth” (1983/84).

or Reason, has to harness the energy of both horses, getting the disparate steeds into sync to be able to successfully pilot the chariot into the heavens where he can behold Truth and become like the gods (cf. Plato 2008: 148-149)¹⁹. It was thumos, according to Homer and Sophocles, which accounted for the daring of their protagonists, Achilles and Antigone.

Hegel produced a historicist reformulation of Platonic political theory offering us an entirely innovative way of conceiving of the importance of work by ascribing to it a thumotic origin. Writing on self-consciousness in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), he contends that work and labour are of definitive significance to the bondsman who is a labourer: “his labour is his being”, he is not merely a human who happens to labour for the sake of the lord:

Through work and labour, however, this consciousness of the bondsman comes to itself [...] This negative mediating agency, this activity giving shape and form, is at the same time the individual existence, the pure self-existence of that consciousness, which now in the work it does is externalized and passes into the condition of permanence. The consciousness that toils and serves accordingly attains by this means the direct apprehension of that independent being as its self. [...] By the fact that the form is objectified, it does not become something other than the consciousness moulding the thing through work; for just that form is his pure self existence, which therein becomes truly realized. Thus precisely in labour where there seemed to be merely some outsider’s mind and ideas involved, the bondsman becomes aware, through this re-discovery of himself by himself, of having and being a “mind of his own” (Hegel 1977: 118-119 (§ 195-196).

As noted earlier, Fukuyama famously took up this Hegelian postulation of the thumotic origin of labour in *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992). Therein he reminds us that according to traditional liberal economic theorists, desire and reason are adequate to account for the differing propensities to work. They maintain that the degree to which individuals are willing to work is essentially the result of a rational calculation in which they weigh the unpleasantness of work against the utility of the material benefits arising out of work. The notion of “work ethic”, on the other hand, calls for a different explanation. It is indicative of the fact that an over-investment in work is not strictly related to compensation, and hence irrational from a strictly utilitarian point of view:

they work so hard that they are never able to make use of their money; they can't enjoy their leisure because they have none; and in the process they ruin their health and their prospects for a comfortable retirement, because they are likely to die sooner (Fukuyama 1992: 225).

Workaholics clearly derive satisfaction from the work itself, or the status and recognition that it provides (ibid., p. 226). Work, then, appeases not the dark horse of desire, but the white stallion of thumos, what Empedocles called the “seat of life” –

¹⁹ In the *Phaedrus*, the noble white horse is described as “a lover of honour and modesty and temperance, and the follower of true glory” (Plato 2008: 148), while no explicit mention is made of thumos as in the *Republic*.

the part of the soul that seeks recognition and honour over security.

Earlier we noted that Weber (1905) famously connected the spiritedness of work to the Protestant work ethic arguing that the Calvinist doctrine of predestination led to deep insecurity. Hard work coupled to a frugal lifestyle was considered an indication of being chosen; not a means but a *sign* of God's recognition. Hence the elevation of work to the status of a "calling" coupled to a "this-worldly asceticism", which stood as testimony to one's status of having been "elected". Weber further contends that the original spiritual impulse that buttressed capitalism subsequently atrophied leading to the reinsertion of the quest for material wealth into capitalism. According to Fukuyama (1992: 227),

"the idea of duty in one's calling" [nevertheless] lived on "like the ghost of dead religious beliefs" in the contemporary world, and the work ethic of modern Europe could not be fully explained without reference to its spiritual origins.

Social theorists like Bourdieu (1998), Boltanski and Chiapello (2007) as well as Sennett (2006) investigated what happened to that spiritedness under conditions of the new capitalism – how it transmuted into a kind of narcissistic self-aggrandizement at the expense of collective bonds. Boltanski and Chiapello specifically emphasized the new capitalism's network-based form of organization founded on employee initiative and autonomy in the workplace, which they describe as a putative freedom bought at the cost of material and psychological security, and resulting in a more successful, pernicious, and subtle form of exploitation.

More recently, Han (2017) defined the neoliberal worker as an "achievement subject" or "project" as opposed to "subjugated subject", who embraces the freedom of the "I can", which itself becomes a source of compulsion or coercion. As a project in the making, the achievement-subject is characterized by an insatiable desire for recognition. Exemplary of this logic is the phenomenon of the so-called life-coach or motivational speaker such as the American, Anthony Robbins with his moto: "Commit to CANI: Constant And Never-ending Improvement". CAN is limitless and hence announces an endless and compulsive process of achievement and optimization. The critical question is: *just how does neoliberal capitalism succeed in tapping into the ancient spiritedness to generate the competitive entrepreneurial spirit, which is its driving force?*

III. The Hinge Between Neoliberal Governmentality and the Ancient Spiritedness

It was specifically from Becker's work (*The Economic Approach to Human Behaviour*, 1976) that Foucault in his lectures deciphers the rationale of neoliberal governmentality in its clearest form, distilling its nucleus as the figure of the enterprising self. Foucault notes that the neoliberals were quick to realize that the optimization of the self's entrepreneurial or enterprising capacities requires investment. Hence the now familiar economic injunction: invest in human capital! Whenever previous economic theories have tried to account for labour, they reduced it to time or wages paid, disavowing it as concrete labour with qualitative human variables. It was reduced to a commodity, to the effects of value produced. The

neoliberals, on the other hand, discovered that key to the science of economics is something that precisely cannot neatly be quantified and accounted for, i.e. human behaviour or the internal ‘rationality’ or ‘strategic’ programming of individuals’ activities. If economics “is the science of human behaviour as a relationship between ends and scarce means, which have mutually exclusive ends”²⁰, then the key focus of economic science, according to the neoliberals, is the analysis of a form of human behaviour. In which way (and why) do individuals allocate these scarce resources to alternative ends? (cf. lecture of 14 March 1979 (Foucault 2008: 215-233)). Economics is not therefore the analysis of processes, a key conviction of economic theorists such as Ricardo and Adam Smith (ibid., pp. 219-220). Even Marx, who made labour one of the central axes of his analysis, conceived of labour as labour power, i.e. not concrete labour, but labour measured by time, sold at the going market rate. This abstraction of labour is not due to capitalism itself, as Marx would have argued, but rather due to the economic theory that has been constructed of capitalist production. In other words, “the abstraction is not the result of the real mechanics of economic processes; it derives from the way in which these processes have been reflected in classical economics (ibid., p. 221). A key difference therefore, according to Foucault, between classical liberals (up to the beginning of the 20th C) and the neoliberals is that the former focused on (1) the mechanisms of production; (2) the mechanisms of exchange; and (3) the data of consumption within a given social structure; and the interaction between these three mechanisms. The neoliberals, on the other hand, insisted that the focus of study should rather be on the nature and consequences of “suitable choices, i.e. the study of the way in which and the reasons why scarce resources (labour as human capital) are allocated to competing ends (ibid., p. 222). Why do we choose to invest our labour power in this work rather than the other? Why does the worker spend so much time on this task as opposed to other component tasks of the job? What makes the worker more invested, committed or motivated to work? To bring labour into the field of economic analysis, one has to put oneself into the position of the one that works.

What, in short, does working mean for the person who works? (cf. Foucault 2008: 223). For US economists Schultz and Becker, people simply work to earn a wage, i.e. an income. From the point of view of the worker, the wage is not the price at which s/he sells his/her labour power, but an income. An income is the product or return on a capital. Inversely, capital is everything that in one way or another can be a source of future income. This capital – *human capital* – is therefore “all those physical and psychological factors which make someone able to earn this or that wage”. For the worker, his/her labour is capital, “an income stream”, as Schultz (1971: 75) calls it. According to Foucault (2008: 225), this is not a conception of labour power, but a conception of “capital-ability”, which turns the worker himself into a sort of enterprise for himself. The worker thus becomes an enterprise-unit.

In neoliberalism, then, a reconceived notion of *homo oeconomicus* takes centre stage: *homo oeconomicus* as an entrepreneur of him-/herself – a notion that Han (2017) takes from Foucault (2008). The classical conception of *homo oeconomicus* is the partner of exchange, who assesses needs (demand) based on which utilities might be supplied for exchange. In neoliberalism, the worker as enterprise-unit is an entrepreneur of

²⁰ Foucault (2008: 222) argues that the neoliberals returned to a definition of the object of economics put forward around 1930-32 by English economist, Lionel Robbins.

him-/herself – being his/her own capital, his/her own producer, and his/her own source of earnings. The man of consumption, Foucault says, referring to Becker's postulates in "On the New Theory of Consumer Behaviour" (1973), insofar as he consumes, is also a *producer*. What does he produce? He produces his own satisfaction (utility; use-value); *he produces the satisfaction (use-value) that he consumes* (ibid., p. 226).

How should we understand the "satisfaction" produced and consumed by the knowledge worker? Knowledge work in the network society is nothing like the plodding, soul-destroying kind of work that fuelled preceding incarnations of capitalist economies. In fact, what sets creative problem-solving work apart from previous forms of work is its exemplary ability to produce *thumotic* satisfaction – an existential satisfaction not reducible to mere economic use-value, since it is essential to the well-being of the soul. Nor should this 'satisfaction' be understood as mere 'job satisfaction', which is commonly attributed to personality-job 'fit'/alignment and empirical facts about the nature of the job, the workplace and relationships with colleagues and management. Knowledge work is engaging not merely because it is creative, but because it produces thumotic satisfaction. The desire for satisfaction is insatiable, however. This voracious desire propels further consumption, i.e. work. It is therefore an endless and self-generating cycle of work consumption and satisfaction production.

To be sure, a disproportionate investment in work is not a new phenomenon. Indeed, since the industrial age (esp. from the 19th C) when the phenomenon of labour became a central part of human existence, a certain segment of the labour force (specifically the factory and business owners) always seemed to be disproportionately invested in work (cf. Herzberg, Mausner & Bloch Snyderman (1959). Weber, as we know, ascribed it to the Protestant work ethic. Unmoored from its religious underpinnings, this work ethic may still hold some explanatory force for the capitalist spirit in some contexts, and human beings still strive for recognition. However, it fails to account for the capitalist spirit in the network society. Neoliberal governmentality of control actively engenders an irrational work-drivenness amongst knowledge workers by tapping – not into their rational or desiring selves – but into their thumotic selves. In the network society, constant work has become *possible* for the first time. What is now possible has also become *desirable*.

In conclusion, then, I return to my original question: what are we – as knowledge workers – today in relation to our present understood as the globalizing neoliberal governmentality in which life is reduced to constant work under conditions of strict control? The typical neoliberal knowledge worker is characterized by his/her *paradoxical* addiction to work. For the knowledge work addict, beyond the world of work there is not only escapist consumption and guilt-laden procrastination, but also a soul-seated craving for a kind of satisfaction of an existential and/or ontological kind. This kind of addiction defies reason and desire on account of the thumotic source from which it derives. In other words, for the constantly self-controlled, self-responsible, neoliberal knowledge worker, work addiction is fuelled by the thumotic satisfaction it produces. It is therefore *not* the appetites that are associated with contemporary capitalist profit-seeking and consumption, as is generally assumed – not the dark horse of desire – *but the spirited white stallion of thumos*. The neoliberal foregrounding of human capital as most decisive for optimizing productivity and

increasing profit provides the answer to how neoliberal capitalism succeeded in tapping into the ancient spiritedness to generate the competitive entrepreneurial spirit, which is the latter's driving force.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Balibar, E. 1994. "Subjection and Subjectivation", in Copjec, J. (Ed.) 1994. *Supposing the Subject*. London: Verso, pp. 1-15.
- Boltanski, L. & Chiapello, E. 2007. *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Gregory Elliot. London: Verso.
- Bombardelli, O. 2016. "Review of Verhaege, P. 2014. *What About Me? The Struggle for Identity in a Market-based Society*", in *Journal of Social Science Education* 15(1): 87-89.
- Bourdieu, P. 1998. "The Essence of Neoliberalism" in *Le Monde diplomatique*, December, trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro. On the Internet: <https://mondediplo.com/1998/12/08bourdieu>
- Castells, M. 1996. *The Rise of the Network Society*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.
- Dean, M. 1999. *Governmentality. Power and Rule in Modern Society*. 1st Ed.
- Dean, M. 2010. *Governmentality. Power and Rule in Modern Society*. 2nd Ed. London: Sage.
- Deleuze, G. 1992. [1990]. "Postscript on the Societies of Control", in *October* 59: 3-7.
- Drucker, P. F. 1959. *Landmarks of Tomorrow: Report on the New Post-modern World*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Erikson, K. 2005. "Foucault, Deleuze, and the Ontology of Networks", in *The European Legacy* 10(6): 596-610.
- Foucault, M. 1977. [1975]. *Discipline and Punish. The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Allen Lane. London: Penguin Books.
- Foucault, M. 1982a. "The Subject and Power", Afterword in Dreyfus, H.L. & Rabinow, P. 1982. *Michel Foucault. Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*. Sussex: The Harvester Press, pp. 208-226.
- Foucault, M. 1982b. "About the Beginnings of the Hermeneutics of the Self: Two Lectures at Dartmouth," with an introductory note by Mark Blasius, in *Political Theory*, 21 (1993), pp. 198-227.
- Foucault, M. 2003. *Society Must Be Defended. Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-76*, trans. David Macey. London: Penguin.
- Foucault, M. 2005. *The Hermeneutics of the Subject. Lectures at the Collège de France, 1981-82*, trans. Graham Burchell. New York: Picador.
- Foucault, M. 2007. *Security, Territory, Population. Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977-78*, trans. Graham Burchell. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Foucault, M. 2008. *The Birth of Biopolitics. Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-79*, trans. Graham Burchell. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Foucault, M. 2010. *The Government of Self and Others. Lectures at the Collège de France, 1982-83*, trans. Graham Burchell. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

- Foucault, M. 2010. *The Courage of Truth. Lectures at the Collège de France, 1983-84*, trans. Graham Burchell. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Fukuyama, F. 1992. *The End of History and the Last Man*. New York: The Free Press.
- Han, B-C. 2017. *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power*. London: Verso.
- Harvey, D. 2005. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Hegel, G. W. F. 1979. [1807]. *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Herzberg, F., Mausner B. & Bloch Snyderman, B. 1959. *The Motivation to Work*. New York: Wiley.
- Hofmeyr, A. B. 2011. "The Culture and Subjectivity of Neoliberal Governmentality", in *Phronimon* 12(2): 19-42.
- Lait, M. 2010. "Review of Mitchell Dean *Governmentality. Power and Rule in Modern Society*, 2nd Ed. (London: Sage, 2010)", in *Foucault Studies* 10: 169-172.
- Lemke, T. 2000. "Foucault, Governmentality, and Critique", paper presented at the *Rethinking Marxism Conference*, University of Amherst (MA), 21-24 September.
- Lemke, T. 2001. "'The Birth of Biopolitics' – Michel Foucault's Lecture at the Collège de France on Neoliberal Governmentality", in *Economy & Society* 30(2): 190-207.
- Littler, J. 2018. *Against Meritocracy: Culture, Power and Myths of Mobility*. London: Routledge.
- McCann, J. M. 2016. "Capitalism and Neoliberalism: What's the Difference?" on the Internet: <https://randompublicjournal.com/2016/04/25/capitalism-and-neoliberalism-whats-the-difference/>
- Owen, D. (1994). *Maturity and Modernity: Nietzsche, Weber, Foucault, and the Ambivalence of Reason*. London: Routledge.
- Plato 2008. [circa 370 BCE]. *Phaedrus*, trans. B. Jowett. The Project Gutenberg Ebook.
- Schultz, T. W. 1971. *Investment in Human Capital: The Role of Education and Research*. New York: The Free Press.
- Sennett, R. 2006. *The Culture of the New Capitalism*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Sennett, R. 2008. *The Craftsman*. London: Allen Lane.
- Verhaeghe, P. 2014. *What About Me? The Struggle for Identity in a Market-based Society*, trans. Jane Hedley-Prôle. Ghent: Scribe.
- Weber, M. 1992. [1905]. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons. New York: Routledge.
- Weber, M. 1944. [1909]. "Bureaucratization", a speech Max Weber gave to the *Verein für Sozialpolitik* (Association for Social Policy). From Appendix I, in Mayer, J. P. (1944). *Max Weber and German Politics*. London: Faber & Faber Ltd., pp. 125-131.
- Source: <http://faculty.rsu.edu/users/f/felwell/www/Theorists/Weber/Max1909.html>