

Matthew Flisfeder

The Entrepreneurial Subject and the
Objectivization of the Self in Social Media

The Production of the Self in Social Media

Recent studies on labor and social media have emphasized the idea of prosumption: a confluence of production and consumption, first described by Alvin Toffler (1980). Much of the research in this area has appropriated Dallas Smythe's (1977) conception of the "audience commodity" and its work—the idea that TV programmers produce audiences to sell to advertisers, and in the process audiences work to produce themselves as an "audience commodity" by learning to buy the products advertised on TV. Similarly, social media users can be said to be producing a "prosumer commodity" by producing the data that corporate social media companies use to sell to advertisers (Fuchs 2014; see also Andrejevic 2013; Cohen 2008; Dyer-Witheford 1999; Manzerolle 2010; and Mosco 2009). The idea of the prosumer commodity, I believe, offers an adequate way of conceiving users' exploitation on corporate social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and others. There is also an added ideological dimension to the kind of exploitation of labor that we see in this instance: because social media involves play, on the one hand, and participatory political

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and cultural communication (i.e., organizing solidarity campaigns, community, etc.; perhaps the production of a new public sphere) on the other, and because use is apparently voluntary, it is difficult to see how it is a mechanism of exploitation. Jodi Dean (2002, 2009, 2010) has dubbed the latter “communicative capitalism,” signifying the way in which the Internet promotes the ideals of democracy while actually reinforcing stronger forms of capitalist exploitation and control. Detractors of this position may argue that even if users are central to the production of content that generates profit for corporate social media sites, the service they provide the site is in effect paid for by the service that users receive from the social media platform. Fuchs (2014) has indicated the fallacy of these kinds of arguments by demonstrating that the value users produce through their willful inscription of personal data into the matrices of social media databases far outweighs the value of the service provided by corporate social media. The Internet prosumer commodity is, in fact, made of the massive amounts of data (“big data”) that social media companies package and sell to advertisers (and hand over to government surveillance agencies, such as the National Security Agency—hence the term “dataveillance”).

However, there is another, albeit still ideological, way to approach the problem of social media labor. The conception of the prosumer commodity in some ways seems to hint at the idea of ideology as “false consciousness.” The user, in this instance, remains unaware that the use of social media constitutes a form of labor, let alone exploited labor. Here, we are at the level of ideological critique in the form of “truth as revelation”—that is, if people knew the truth, they would revolt. However, it is necessary to note some of the functional elements of subjectivization involved in the use of social media. We should recognize, for instance, the prevalent use of social media not only for play or participatory culture but also, and increasingly, for the purpose of work-related activities; the professional social media site LinkedIn is surely the most obvious example, designed as it is specifically for the purpose of professional networking. In the context of an increasingly precarious labor force, sites like LinkedIn have become essential for maintaining work- and business-related contacts. LinkedIn thus serves as a model for understanding much of the activity in which people are now engaged on social media—that is, social media use *as* work. Social media, in this respect, have become a platform for the performance and presentation of a commodified Self.

Here, I am using the category of the (capital “S”) Self to distinguish it from that of the “subject.” The Self, I claim, is an alienated representation of the subject, congealed in the form of the signifier (or the Lacanian master

signifier), which for Lacan represents the subject for the Other. As a signifier, the Self materially obfuscates the subject; and, in the psychoanalytic context, the subject remains unaware of this and constitutes her identity, in part, by misrecognizing the signifier as a fuller representation of her-Self. The subject performs her identity *as* a Self through the signifier that acts as the image of her ideal Self viewed from the perspective of the Other.¹

What I have in mind with the idea of “performing” the Self on social media is closely connected to constructions of reputation, or what Alison Hearn (2010) refers to as the “digital reputation economy.” Hearn describes a process of “self-branding” in which the subject is transformed into a “commodity for sale on the labor market[, which] must also generate its own rhetorically persuasive packaging” (427). She adds that, “nowadays, social media like Twitter or Facebook provide a new ‘protocol’ for social relations; they allow individuals’ personal connections to become more durable [and] representable” (429). Since social media make our connections and images of the Self more “durable” and “representable,” they can be seen as objectivized facets of the Self. They objectivize our “digital reputation.”²

“Self-branding” or “reputation management” on social media presents one aspect of the neoliberal subjectivization of individuals as “entrepreneurs-of-the-self.” As one report explains, “Reputation management has now become a defining feature of online life for many internet users . . .”; because “search engines and social media sites play a central role in building one’s reputation online,” social media users must be “careful to project themselves online in a way that suits specific audiences” (Madden and Smith 2010). One discerns in this passage the type of “rational choice” rhetoric employed by neoliberal advocates of entrepreneurial ethics. The public profile on social media platforms has become less an open space of communication and self-identification than a place for exhibiting and curating (see Hogan 2010) the (professional/entrepreneurial) Self.

My choice of distinguishing between the Self and the subject is strategic given the critical stance I propose in what follows on the conception of the entrepreneurial subject in social media. The Self, I claim, represents an objectivization (read as reification) of the subject. The Self that is produced on social media is therefore not a “subject” but, rather, part of a process of reifying the subject. The ideology of social media works by objectivizing the subject rather than by producing subjectivity. My conception therefore stands in opposition to Michel Foucault’s (2008) definition of the neoliberal subject in his lectures on “biopolitics.” I demonstrate that the entrepreneurial ethics of neoliberalism involve the further reification of the subject, as an

object-commodity that I am calling the Self, exemplified by the profile page so ubiquitous on social media. Although it may be conceived as an element of subjectivity and identity formation in the Information Society, I contend that the construction of the public profile page represents instead the objectivization of the subject.

Whereas Foucault claims that the neoliberal subject produces herself *as* subject, I argue instead that the neoliberal subject works to further objectivize the Self. Although Foucault's analysis is based on the idea that we are dominated through the mandate to become subjects, I claim that this demand is in fact one of objectivization rather than subjectivization. As well, with the rising necessity for "self-branding," in the context of a post-Fordist society that relies increasingly on contract and precarious labor, the time spent outside of "work time," or the time when labor-power is put to use—what we are used to thinking of as leisure time, and (in Marxian terms) the time spent on the reproduction of labor-power—now becomes subdivided in order to include the time necessary for the promotion of the Self, understood in neoliberal terms as *investing* in one's own *human capital*. I argue, instead, that the objectivization, and hence the commodification, of the Self in social media functions as an additional form of unpaid free labor in contemporary neoliberal capitalism. Self-promotion is simply an added aspect to the neoliberal ideology of entrepreneurialism, and social media provide the space that facilitates its operation.

The Neoliberal Subject

Two important differences distinguish the liberal subject from the neoliberal subject. On the one hand, the liberal subject can be characterized as a free laborer. On the other hand, he is also a subject of exchange. In the liberal conception of the market, both capital and labor represent positions of free agency—both are free and equal individuals (in the eyes of the law), endowed with rights, who enter into the market and agree to a "fair" exchange of labor-power for wages. The latter would be impossible to conceive as equitable without a subject who is free to enter into the market and exchange a commodity for a price. Where the liberal subject is one of rights before the eyes of the law, the neoliberal subject, in contrast, is "human capital," no longer the subject of exchange but of competition (see Feher 2009). In this way, neoliberalism differs from classical liberal economics by positing the worker as an active subject, making "rational choices," engaged in competition with others for access to "scarce resources," instead of as an

“*object* of supply and demand in the form of labor power” (Foucault 2008: 223; emphasis added). Here, wages are seen not as the price in exchange for labor-power but as a return on investment in one’s “human capital.”

Foucault’s thesis was that power lies at the heart of both liberal theories of sovereignty and Marxist conceptions of class domination. As Thomas Lemke (2002: 51) explains: “While the former [liberals] claim that legitimate authority is codified in law and it is rooted in a theory of rights, the latter [Marxists] locates power in the economy and regards the state as an instrument of the bourgeoisie.” In his later work, Foucault sought to displace these two conceptions of power. Through his discussion of neoliberalism, human capital, and the entrepreneurial agency of the neoliberal subject, Foucault advances a conception of subjectivity that relies less on juridico-political and class models of power. Rather, the neoliberal, entrepreneurial subject as human capital is, according to Foucault, a subject that self-authorizes. As Andrew Dilts (2011: 145; emphasis added) puts it, “For Foucault, the neoliberal account of human capital opens the grounds of subjectivity, redirects his attention beyond the ways in which we are *made* subjects by force relations and allows him to think about the role that subjects play in their *own* formation.” Because neoliberals emphasize the role of (“rational”) *choice*, there is a sense in which the subject here is formed freely and is interpellated, not by ideology or by repression but by the immanent truth effects of the neoliberal economy. What Foucault finds in the theory of human capital is a material conception of subjectivity that moves beyond Marxist and liberal conceptions of ideology and subjectivity. The neoliberal subject, for Foucault, is an effect of the truth regime of neoliberal governmentality.

Human capital refers to “everything that in one way or another can be a source of future income”; that is, it consists of “all of those physical and psychological factors which make someone able to earn this or that wage” (Foucault 2008: 224). One may invest in his or her human capital through practices of consumption; but consumption is taken as a productive activity. Neoliberalism sees people as “investors in themselves” and, therefore, “treats people not as consumers but as producers” (Feher 2009: 30). Time spent on the production of *reputation* is an important element of investing in the Self. The subjectivization of workers, from this perspective, comes through the active agency of investing in the Self, making us all an entrepreneurial Self, or an entrepreneur-of-the-Self. For the neoliberal subject, as an entrepreneur-of-the-Self in competition with other neoliberal subjects and constantly investing in his or her human capital, everything, “from marriage, to crime, to expenditures on children, can be understood ‘economically’ according to

a particular calculation of cost for benefit” (Read 2009: 28). This, according to Jason Read (2009: 28), means that we have to drastically rethink and expand the category of labor in neoliberalism: “Any activity that increases the capacity to earn income . . . is an investment in human capital.”

Foucault’s objective, according to Read (2009: 28), “is not to bemoan [the neoliberal conception of human capital] as a victory for capitalist ideology . . . so much so that everyone from a minimum wage employee to a C.E.O. considers themselves to be entrepreneurs.” Instead, Foucault’s project demonstrates how neoliberalism represents a new “regime of truth,” complete with its own form of subjectivization: *homo oeconomicus*, or the “entrepreneurial subject” (Read 2009: 28), distinguished from *homo juridicus*, or the “legal subject of the state.” No longer is the subject guided by rights and laws; for *homo oeconomicus*, investment and competition are activities that render the subject into a position of self-control through self-reflexivity and the production of the Self as entrepreneur. Now, “the worker, on his own initiative, is supposed to guarantee the formation, growth, accumulation, improvement, and valorization of the ‘self’ as ‘capital’” (Lazzarato 2012: 91).

The conditions for enacting this conception of the neoliberal subject have been put into practice through varying austerity measures and the dismantling of the post-war welfare state. That is, through the “contemporary trend away from long term labor contracts, [and] towards temporary and part-time labor,” and through austerity measures that turn needs (formerly subsidized by the state) and basic resources into exchange values, the neoliberal entrepreneurial subject has no choice but to practice an ethic of investing in the Self, in human capital, and to enter into relations of competition. As Read (2009: 30) puts it, this has been an “effective strategy of subjectification” that encourages workers to avoid seeing themselves as workers, and to view themselves instead as “companies of one.”

Digital Labor and the Internet Prosumer Commodity

How does this logic of investing in one’s own human capital, of investing in the Self, impact the way that we use social media? Consider, for instance, the types of activities in which one engages through social media. We “share” articles, images, and memes; we “like” or “favorite” content posted by others; we can write about our thoughts, our opinions, and create short polemics (in 140 characters or less on Twitter); we can also, and importantly, “follow” and “friend” others, creating a social network. All of these activities—of which this is only a small account—help to produce the Self on social media. The

profile page is a register of all of our activities, all of our comments and posts, and, importantly, all of the networks to which we connect that makes our production of Self much more durable and representable, and therefore “objectifiable.” Further, we act as curators of our profiles: we invest time in reading through articles (or, at the very least, the title of articles) before we post them; we invest time in deciding what to say in our status updates; we invest time in building (and maintaining) a network that makes us appear desirable to others; all of which requires us to be rather self-reflexive if we are interested in producing a Self that is to be desired by others, and which will help us develop a desired reputation. Suffice it to say that a lot of work goes into the construction of the Self and one’s digital reputation in social media.

Like all activities in the neoliberal context, using social media should be seen as a form of work or labor. But how might we conceive social media labor when it is viewed predominantly as a leisure activity? Writing about Facebook, Christian Fuchs (2014) notes that user-generated data—data about users—is compiled by the site and transformed into an “Internet prosumer commodity,” not unlike the audience commodity. Fuchs concedes the fact that it is difficult to perceive the existence of exploitation on social media sites like Facebook. However, he argues that forms similar to that of commodity fetishism mask the exploitative aspects of corporate social media. It is precisely the commodity form of Facebook that hides the production of exchange value behind the veil of use values. The Facebook platform is created as a use value that satisfies users’ communicative and social needs but at the same time serves Facebook’s profit interests (Fuchs 2014: 257). The “object-status” of users—that is, the commodification of users’ contributions to the profitability of the site—remains concealed by the production of the social network (261). Social media users are therefore, according to Fuchs, workers: “The online work they perform on social media is informational work, affective work, cognitive work, communicative work and collaborative work. This work creates profiles, content, transaction data and social relations” (265). But, also, in order for social media platforms to work, “users need to be quite active, social, creative and networked” (265).

Fuchs and others thus demonstrate the way that users’ activity on corporate social media is in actuality a form of exploited and alienated labor, which the presentation of social media use as a leisure activity obscures. Yet in the context of corporate, for-profit platforms, like Facebook and Twitter, the data and information that users provide, the profiles that they produce, and the content that they share contribute to the production of the Internet prosumer commodity upon which these companies generate surplus value and

profit. Significantly, work, here, is conceived not as such but rather as play and leisure. It is also, in this sense, that the promotion of the Self through social media may not be seen as work—that is, as value-producing activity.

While I do not dispute the critical political economy approach to corporate social media represented by Fuchs's research, my interests here lie more with the way in which users deal with their objectivization and commodification. Fuchs, in fact, explains this quite well. Referring to Pierre Bourdieu's categories of social, cultural, symbolic, and economic capital, Fuchs (2014: 116) puts the matter thus: people make use of social media because it allows them access to (1) an accumulation of social relations (social capital); (2) an accumulation of qualifications, education, knowledge, etc. (cultural capital); and (3) an accumulation of reputation (symbolic capital). However, "the time that users spend on commercial social media platforms generating social, cultural and symbolic capital is the process of prosumer commodification transformed into economic capital. Labor time on commercial social media is the conversion of Bourdieusian social, cultural and symbolic capital into Marxian value and economic capital" (Fuchs 2014: 116). Two things follow from this situation: first, social media are designed to encourage users—by creating and fostering pleasurable incentives—to spend increasing amounts of time using the platform, voluntarily handing over data about themselves, and helping to create the prosumer commodity; second, the demands of the neoliberal labor market force users to employ social media as a means of further accumulating and representing their social, cultural, and symbolic capital as part of the Self.

Self-Management 2.0: A 24/7 Job

Fuchs notes that terms such as "social media and Web 2.0 were established around 2005 in order to characterize World Wide Web (www) platforms like social networking sites (e.g., Facebook, LinkedIn), blogs (e.g., Wordpress), wikis (e.g., Wikipedia), microblogs (e.g., Twitter, Weibo), and user-generated content sharing sites (e.g., Youtube)" (2013: 2). But more significantly, as Daniel Trottier explains (2014: 14; emphasis added), Web 2.0 services "are typically made up of individual profiles. In most cases, a user cannot simply visit a site like Facebook; they have to *build a presence there*. Profiles are a kind of biographical space, where users provide information about themselves." Social media websites like Facebook, therefore, differ significantly from the Internet of the 1990s in that they limit anonymity and encourage the manufacture of individuality and Self-hood.

Equally significant about social media, demonstrating its evolution beyond cyberspace, is the fact that they encourage users to construct identities more concretely than in previous iterations. As Geert Lovink (2011: 41) notes, social media and the rise of Web 2.0 provide “little freedom anymore to present yourself in multiple ways.” The combination of entrepreneurial incentives and the rise of the post-9/11 security state make masking one’s identity online nearly impossible—or at least more difficult: “the hedonistic excesses at the turn of the millennium were over by the 2001 financial crisis and 9/11 attacks. The war on terror aborted the desire for a serious parallel ‘second self’ culture and instead gave rise to the global surveillance and control industry. . . . Web 2.0 tactically responded with coherent, singular identities in sync with the data owned by police, security, and financial institutions” (Lovink 2011: 40).

Social media create an atmosphere that encourages the production of a realistic representation of the Self. For example, Lovink (2011: 40–41; emphasis added) explains that within Facebook there exists “a pathological dimension of commitment to the real self going hand in hand with the comfort of being only amongst friends in a safe, controlled environment. . . . Differences of choice are celebrated so long as they are confined to *one* ‘identity.’”³ Confined to a single, realistic identity, and within the context of the neoliberal valorization of the entrepreneurial Self, social media have helped to generate a “*self-management*” wave, transforming into a “*self-promotion machine*” (Lovink 2011: 41–43; emphasis added). Managing one’s Self becomes a full-time job, which blurs the lines between professional and private life: “in the competitive networking context of work, we are trained to present ourselves as the best, fastest, and smartest” (Lovink 2011: 42). The Self-management wave of Web 2.0, using the self-promotion machine of social media, has aided in extending the length of the working day, transforming into what Jonathan Crary (2013: 9) refers to as “24/7 temporalities”: “it’s only recently,” Crary notes, “that the elaboration, the modeling of one’s personal and social identity, has been reorganized to conform to the uninterrupted operation of markets, information networks, and other systems.” Thus 24/7 renders “the idea of working without pause, without limits” (Crary 2013: 10).⁴

Social media also allow for the extension of the workday beyond all available working hours. There is no “off switch.” And although none of us can really be shopping, playing games, working, or blogging 24/7, today, no waking moment exists when we are not shopping, consuming, or using/exploiting networks. The invasion of 24/7 temporalities becomes all-pervasive

(Crary 2013: 30). Social media and 24/7 temporalities thus speak to an environment of productivity that does not stop and in which profit-generating activity operates 24/7 (Crary 2013: 62). They have a global reach, operating elsewhere while we sleep so that when we wake up, commands await us in our e-mail inboxes when we start the day. Even those activities that were only conceived as acts of consumerism have now become productive “techniques of personalization” (Crary 2013: 72). Producing the Self is a labor-intensive operation, and we are constantly given incentives and prescriptions by consumer society to reinvent and manage our intricate identities. All of this is championed, however, as “entrepreneurial heroism,” which surmounts the asymmetry between the individual and the “grid” (Crary 2013: 98). Everything that one does is now “deployed in the service of adding dollar or prestige value to one’s electronic identities” (Crary 2013: 99).⁵ In a world of constant competition, of total commodification, “reification has proceeded to the point where the individual has to invent a self-understanding that optimizes or facilitates their participation in digital milieus and speeds” and everyone “needs an online presence, needs 24/7 exposure, to avoid social ‘irrelevance’ or professional failure” (Crary 2013: 104).

Human Capital or the Reproduction of Labor-Power?

Today, 24/7 temporalities call into question how we imagine the structure and length of the working day. Usually, we think about the typical working day as something separate from leisure time. We use our time outside of work to eat, sleep, and relax, all of which contributes to the reproduction of our ability to work. Marx calls this period the time necessary for the reproduction of labor-power. The latter is an integral part of his analysis since it helps to explain why the price of wages appears fair in the labor market: the wage is the fair price for labor-power since it covers the costs of those materials that we need to reproduce our ability to work—the cost of rent, transportation, food, clothing, etc.—that is, the commodity that workers are selling to the capitalist.⁶ Exploitation occurs not because workers are paid below the value of their labor-power but because workers are put to work for an amount of time in which they produce their own value plus an additional value for which they are not paid, which becomes the surplus value that is appropriated by the capitalist.⁷

Workers use their earned wages to satisfy physiological needs, pay rent, pay for transportation; but they can also deploy wages to increase the value of labor-power—spend on education, physical health, and communica-

tion technologies and gain access to social and cultural networks. In neoliberal terms, the laborer *invests* in her *human capital*. My claim, though, is that what the neoliberal ideology conceives as investing in human capital remains nothing more than what Marxists refer to as the reproduction of labor-power: consuming in order to reproduce the commodity that the laborer sells on the market to meet her means of subsistence.⁸ With neoliberalism, however, we begin to witness, on the one hand, a decreasing wage (in real terms) that is below the true value of labor-power as well as divestment from public infrastructure and social services that helped to subsidize the cost of living. On the other hand, people are encouraged to borrow in order to invest further to increase the value of their labor-power/human capital. This works toward the transformation of nearly all activity into value-producing activity. Borrowing to invest: we see here, in parallel with the rise of the neoliberal entrepreneurial subject, the emergence of the neoliberal debt economy.

As Silvia Federici (2014: 235) explains, “since the 1980s, a whole ideological campaign has been orchestrated that represents borrowing from banks to provide for one’s reproduction as a form of entrepreneurship, thus mystifying the class relation and the exploitation involved.” Added to this, we have seen processes of wage deflation, reductions in public spending, rising levels of personal debt, and precarious labor. According to Lazzarato (2012: 94), these processes have contributed to the neoliberal conception of the entrepreneur-of-the-Self, whose activity is restricted to managing employability, debts, drops in wages, and the reduction of public services, all of which function according to the terms of business and competition.

Reproduction of labor-power is now seen as a wholly entrepreneurial activity, where both work and work on the self are reduced to a command to become one’s own boss, absorbing the risks and costs now externalized onto the rest of society by business interests and austerity governments. Neoliberal entrepreneurialism was promised as a form of liberation; instead, it has turned out to be a mechanism for downloading the costs and risks that neither businesses nor the state are willing to take (Lazzarato 2012: 93). As a result, more stress is placed on the individual entrepreneurial Self to add to his or her reputation, since this is the character upon which future income depends.

Given the overlap between the neoliberal ideology of human capital—of investing in one’s human capital—and the Marxian category of the reproduction of labor-power, it is possible to conceive the production of human capital as less the production of subjectivity and more the production of the subject as an object-commodity, that of labor-power. Investing in one’s

human capital, in other words, is simply the neoliberal ideology speaking to the necessity to reproduce labor-power as an object.

Social media and the necessity to self-brand, however, pose a new problem. While one is involved in the reproduction of labor-power, a second object-commodity is being produced that operates as a mechanism for the sale and marketing of the first: the production of the Self as a brand identity, or in social media, the production of a public profile through which one may market oneself as a worker or as human capital (depending on one's ideological perspective). The production of the Self, I claim, is similar to what Tiziana Terranova (2004: 74) refers to as "supplementing," that is, bringing home supplementary work: the increasing necessity of working outside of the traditional office. This, she explains, has been affected by the expansion of the Internet, which has given "ideological and material support to contemporary trends towards increased flexibility of the workforce, continuous reskilling [and] freelance work" (74). In the context of social media, the following question needs to be addressed: does investment in the Self count only toward the reproduction of labor-power, or is the time invested in the reproduction of labor-power now also allocated to the production of Self as image/brand? In other words, can we now think of a triple division of the day, between (1) labor-time, (2) time for the reproduction of labor-power, and (3) the time necessary for the marketing of labor-power and the promotion of the Self?

The Neoliberal Self as the Object of the Subject

It is difficult to conceive of user activity on social media both as a form of labor and as an objectivizing practice for a couple of reasons that are specific to postmodern capitalism. On the one hand, as I have already noted above, using social media appears as a form of play and entertainment; on the other hand, it appears to provide a platform for the construction of a Self as subject. Consumer culture and the rise of the information society have created the appearance of a free society outside of direct technocratic or authoritarian control. Information communication technologies, for instance, have eased accessibility to knowledge, which has largely been democratized; furthermore, the pleasure ethic, and the injunction to enjoy in consumer society discredits the notion that our society is based on prohibition and repression. In fact, as Slavoj Žižek (1991) argues, postmodern society is one that is no longer based upon the *prohibition* to enjoy and is organized instead around the constant *obligation* to enjoy. In this sense, though they come from opposite perspectives, Žižek's thought parallels Foucault's in trying to

conceive subjectivization outside the operation of direct repression. This is the central problem for the postmodern critique of ideology: how to think the operations of ideology outside of mechanisms of direct and overt control.

The historicity of the postmodern subject is further destabilized by the perceived lack of alternatives to global capitalism. Mark Fisher (2009) describes this as “capitalist realism.” Drawing on the thesis, often attributed to Žižek and Fredric Jameson, that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism, Fisher explains the reigning contemporary ideology not as a form of mystification, or even repression, but as a form of cynical realism. As Fisher (2009: 2) puts it, capitalist realism denotes “the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible to even *imagine* a coherent alternative to it.” The “realism” of capitalist realism should be understood as the kind of response elicited when one proclaims the viability of alternatives to capitalism, the response that so many of us on the left receive from cynics who encourage us to “be realistic,” or to quit being so “idealistic.” As Fisher (2009: 5) puts it, this “realism” is “analogous to the deflationary perspective of a depressive who believes that any positive state, any hope, is a dangerous illusion.” This kind of cynicism, according to Žižek (1989), is precisely the form that ideology has taken in a supposedly “post-ideological” era.

Žižek (1989) defines cynicism as a mode of ideology by drawing on Octave Manoni’s formula for fetishism disavowal, “*Je sais bien, mais quand même . . .*” (“I know very well, but nevertheless”). As I have argued elsewhere (Flisfeder 2014), there is a perverse core (in the strict Lacanian sense) to the form of ideology in postmodern society, and cynicism, as a form of fetishistic disavowal, is the manner in which ideology continues to operate in digital culture. As Todd McGowan (2009: 29) explains, cynicism is “a mode of keeping alive the dream of successfully attaining the lost object [of desire] while fetishistically denying one’s investment in this idea.” But the danger of cynicism is that “it allows subjects to acknowledge the hopelessness of consumption while simultaneously consuming with as much hope as the most naïve consumer” (29). It is here, I claim, through the cynical preservation of desire, that we can locate a conception of the subject that stands in opposition to the one proposed by Foucault in his lectures on neoliberalism. The apparent absence of prohibition has brought not the breakdown of Authority but rather the willing back into existence figures of Authority that preserve the subject’s ability to desire (since desire is only possible if it is posited in opposition to its prohibition; or, as Foucault [1990: 95] puts it, “where there is power, there is resistance”).

New media and information communication technologies play a central role in adding to the deconstruction of prohibition. Access to one's desire is no longer prohibited by time or by the delay required to attain the lost object: everything is present, locatable in the database. This access, however, produces a dilemma for the desiring subject. New media and cyberspace are capable of potentially suffocating desire—desire is operative only insofar as the object desired remains (forever) lost. Cyberspace thus confronts the subject with the impossibility of desire since, as McGowan (2013: 67) puts it, “thanks to the emergence of cyberspace, the subject has the ability to experience its castration as the effect of its own desire rather than as the effect of an authority demanding sacrifice . . . [Cyberspace] alters the subject's awareness of prohibition, and this not only disguises the working of the Law but also exposes the fundamental structure of desire.” Cyberspace, in other words, confronts the subject/user directly with the fact that (in Lacanian terms) the big Other does not exist—that power is not in fact (in accordance with Foucault) occupied by some agent or figure of Authority. However, as McGowan indicates, recognizing the absence of prohibition universalizes prohibition: in order to preserve desire from suffocation, the subject clings to power, willing it into existence. The perverse core of contemporary neoliberal subjectivity is that which, in order to preserve desire from suffocation, compels the subject to cling to some conception of the prohibiting agency.

How, then, to save desire from suffocation, given the context of the absence of prohibition, instant access, and abundance? Here we are able to begin thinking about the role of social media in preserving the agency of the big Other. Social media, I claim, are the manner in which capitalism has succeeded in reintroducing lack, scarcity, and Authority into a world of instant access and abundance. They are also a platform for re-positing the existence of the big Other through the *network*. Furthermore, it is by alienating oneself materially, through the production of a material signifier—the public profile; the signifier that represents the subject for another signifier—that stands for both the production of the Other and the Self, in the spaces of social media. The subject produces the Self as signifier and object, rather than as subject—or, to borrow a phrase from Frank Smecker (2014), the signifier represents the Self as “the object of the subject.”

Here, we are dealing with alternative conceptions of subjectivity (the Foucauldian conception and the neo-Lacanian conception), and the way to resolve the contradiction between the two is to conceive the subject in the case of Foucault—human capital, the entrepreneur-of-the-Self—not as subject, but as object (precisely what Foucault does not want to do). What the

neoliberal subject produces is not himself or herself as subject, but the Self as object. Investing in one's human capital is the production of the Self as object-commodity.

On the Becoming Subject of the Objectivized Self

I have been arguing that the Self represents the objectivization of the subject in two ways, contextualized by neoliberalism and social media. On the one hand, drawing upon Lacanian and neo-Lacanian conceptions of subjectivity, I have argued that the subject is objectivized through its alienation in the signifier, and in the order of the big Other, or the Symbolic order. Through social media, this process is enacted in the production of the public profile and its presentation, performance, and exhibition on the social network. The construction of the public profile and participation in the social network are two aspects of the desire to will back into existence some figure of Authority or prohibition on which the subject is able to constitute his or her desire, a figure of prohibition that appears lacking in the context of postmodern consumer society but that makes all desire possible. On the other hand, the subject is objectivized through the production of a Self as brand image. The Self is, in this sense, an object-commodity that is put to use in the service of Self-promotion. The latter is a condition, in an atmosphere of precarious labor, for the further accumulation of paid work. I have suggested that the working day is now divided into three parts: labor-time, time for the reproduction of labor-power, and the time necessary for the *promotion* of labor-power and the reputation of the *Self*. Social media mask the latter as the production of subjectivity and are in this sense comparable to commodity fetishism in its traditional definition. The question remains, though: if all activity is objectivizing activity, where can we locate the subject? Which notion of subjectivity is adequate for thinking the objectivizing operations of neoliberalism and social media labor?

I have argued, against Foucault, that investing in one's human capital is not, in fact, a subject-producing activity; despite the fact that Foucault intended to posit the subject as a category of domination, I have argued instead that neoliberalism extends the reification of the subject and that this objectivization results in both the exploitation and domination of the subject. Subjectivity in the sense that I have in mind is therefore much closer to the nonreified consciousness of what traditional Marxism refers to as proletarian class consciousness. But we need not necessarily discard the Foucauldian conception of subjectivity. Instead, we should posit his as the ideological form

of subjectivity (one reason why his account is so convincing) while at the same time invoking a conception of proletarian subjectivity, which is what is truly at stake in critical ideological analysis.

The subject posited by Foucault represents the individual caught in ideology insofar as it misrecognizes its objectivization as a condition of its subjectivization. Now, my claim is that it is not simply possible to reveal to the subject the fact of its objectivization in the circuits of exploitation, since—for starters—the realism of “capitalist realism” makes this a known fact. The subject’s sense for the preservation of desire also binds her to the existing relations of domination and power in order to preserve her desire. In this essay, I have demonstrated that the neoliberal Self does not produce herself as subject but rather further objectivizes her life as a condition of exploitation in neoliberal capitalism; furthermore, the traditional categories of Marxist analysis—alienation, reification, commodity fetishism, reproduction of labor-power, absolute and relative surplus value—still provide a much more adequate means of conceptualizing subjectivization and exploitation, even in neoliberal conditions, than the theory of human capital.

The shift that has accompanied neoliberalism, therefore, has been not at the level of subjectivity but—and Foucault is correct in at least this regard—with the material practices that have accompanied the resurgence of the capitalist class in the post-welfare state period. Domination and control have become increasingly self-imposed, and the Self-promotional aspect of social media—their use as a tool to further objectivize, reify, commodify, and sell the Self—plays a central part in this process under the conditions of twenty-first-century capitalism.

Notes

- 1 In the Lacanian sense, the signifier is the signifier of a lack that is the subject. The subject represents the lack or gap in the Symbolic order. The latter represents what Lacan referred to as the “big Other” (*grand Autre*). It is the order of meaning and signification, often reified in cultural, social, and political institutions. While the big Other does not exist in actuality, its existence must be posited in order to guarantee community and communication.
- 2 We should also take note of the wide range of social media analytics tools and applications now available for users to measure and evaluate their reach and reputation across various social media platforms, such as Klout, SumAll, and Google Analytics. Other applications, such as Tvalue.com, also allow users to see an estimate of their monetary value on social media sites, that is, how much revenue they bring in for the company.
- 3 Lovink also comments critically on Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg’s statement that “having two identities for yourself is an example of a lack of integrity” (cited in Lovink 2011: 41).

- 4 The Marxist argument here should also note the extension of absolute surplus value as mechanisms emerge to draw out relative surplus value.
- 5 The online application tvalue.com measures the value of one's Twitter account. Users have the option of posting this to their Twitter feed. This can have the effect of either helping to sell the Self (i.e., "this is what I'm worth") or encouraging competition between users to amass more followers and to create more posts; all the while, the profit generated continues to be alienated from the prosumer. Klout.com also allows users to measure the degree of impact that they have across various social media platforms.
- 6 "[T]he value of labor-power is the value of the means of subsistence necessary for the maintenance of its owner" (Marx 1990: 274).
- 7 Therefore, as David Harvey (2010: 102) explains, the laborer as subject of exchange still exists within the cycle, C-M-C (commodity—money—commodity), whereas for the capitalist, the cycle is that of M-C-M' (money—commodity—M'=M+ΔM, where ΔM is surplus value).
- 8 Harvey (2010: 103) also notes the fact that "needs" are historical, dependent upon the history of class struggle.

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