Subjectivity and the Productivity Movement

APPLYING FOUCAULDIAN CONCEPTIONS OF POWER TO
PRODUCTIVITY AND DIGITAL WELLNESS

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INTRODUCTION

In the last decade, the question of how to ethically design technology in an age of cell phone and social media addiction produced by design methods meant to maximize usage has become much more prominent. Concerns regarding stagnant and decreasing workplace productivity growth rates have risen alongside this. Because of these phenomenon, various companies are now researching and instituting changes in their design processes to combat technology overuse and increase productivity. In attempting to increase productivity through minimizing the distractions caused by modern technology, two new movements have formed: that of productivity and "digital wellness." Through technological advancement, people have much more access to information, resources, and other people than ever before.

Despite the many shortcomings of Foucault's philosophy, such as his limited use of sources for his generalizations and his lack of acknowledgement of issues of gender and race in regards to structures and techniques of power, many of his core ideas can be applied to the productivity movement. These long-existing techniques of power, such as self-examination, confession, and self-policing, have been transformed in light of technological advances. Despite being applied through different mechanisms, these techniques of power still function to render individuals as subjects. In particular, there are three apparatuses I would like to define: access, scheduling, and mindfulness. For the purpose of this paper, technological access is an apparatus of power in that it allows connectivity between people and to resources outside of the workplace, which in turn allows for techniques of power, specifically self-policing, to be enforced on individuals through the digital medium by way of reinstating the surveillance state. Scheduling functions to increase the reach of techniques of power such as self-examination and self-policing to daily life, as it forces one to consider what they do in a specific time frame and how to use that

time more efficiently. Mindfulness increases the influences of access and scheduling through recapitulating self-examination by coupling it with productivity, meaning that through examining oneself, one can determine what and how to produce with personal intent in mind, with the end goal being a productive, meaningful lifestyle.

In this paper, I will describe how various Foucauldian techniques of power are altered and applied in the productivity movement, and I argue that the digital wellness movement and bullet journaling system simply act as means of furthering the subjectivity enforced through the productivity movement. To do this, I will first define the productivity movement and summarize Foucault's definitions of subjectivity, self-examination, confession, self-policing, and self-actualization; then, I will define the digital wellness movement, discuss various examples of it, and describe how they further the above apparatuses of power in the productivity movement; following this, I will analyze bullet-journaling as another form in which technologies of power are applied in the productivity movement; and lastly, I will conclude that the productivity movement follows Foucault's understanding of self-examination and confession as the means of reaching self-actualization in Christianity and that self-actualization is redefined through the productivity movement as the enlightenment of the subject about how they can produce most effectively and meaningfully.

THE PRODUCTIVITY MOVEMENT

Here, I will describe the productivity movement as it has gained traction over the last decade. I will define and contrast productivity and efficiency and explain companies' transitions from efficiency-based mindsets to the productivity-based model.

According to the Oxford Dictionary, productivity can be defined as "the effectiveness of productive effort, especially in industry, as measured in terms of the rate of output per unit of input." At its base level, productivity is about doing more work with the same amount of labor. Efficiency, on the other hand, can be summarized as doing the same amount of work with less labor (Mankins). While they seem similar at first glance, productivity and efficiency are focused around different workplace structures and mindsets.

The efficiency-based workplace was the norm over a period of about thirty years. Many tools were developed to help companies identify labor hours or materials that were "unnecessary in order to produce the same level of output" (Mankins). However, earnings growth has declined into the negatives over the last decade, signifying that focusing on improving efficiency may no longer provide the benefits it had in the past. While the reason for the deterioration of earnings growth is not definite, it could be related to technological advancement. Alongside the rise of technology, productivity growth rates have slowed and began entering the negatives over the last twenty years; this could have happened because of constant information overload occurring in the digital age (Carroll). Essentially, productivity may have decreased because the workforce was overwhelmed by technological distraction, which resulted in the decline of earnings growth rates under the efficiency-based mindset. Thus, companies have turned their attention to increasing productivity. This switch requires restructuring of the workplace to remove bureaucratic barriers to productivity and "inspiring a larger percentage" of the workforce (Mankins). The productivity movement has gained traction because of the decline in benefits of running an efficiency-based workplace, and it has resulted in a more worker-centric perspective of the workplace focused on discovering personal purpose and engagement as well as building a workplace culture of autonomy and accountability.

FOUCAULT'S UNDERSTANDING OF POWER

In defining the various Foucauldian concepts I briefly mentioned above, I hope to establish a base understanding of these techniques of power, how they are traditionally applied, and how they can be transformed through the lens of productivity as forms of subjectivation.

To Foucault, subjectivity is essentially the fact of being subject. He defines it through the lens of Christianity in his analysis of Cassian's texts as being within the framework of pastoral power. In pastoral power, one is rendered subject through their obedience to the pastorate. This obedience consists of entering a permanent condition of seeking and stating the truth of oneself and the objectivation of the self (Foucault, *Hermeneutics*). In likening the pastorate to a shepherd, Foucault establishes the following about subjectivity: subjects are in a permanent state of submission in which they are collectively objectivated through individualization that is founded on the pastorate knowing their individual actions and needs, as well as the inner workings of their souls (Foucault, *Stanford*). Thus, we see that the ideal subject must engage in constant self-examination and confession to receive direction, which creates the need for total obedience and transparency with the shepherd or master.

Self-examination is a key aspect of Christian subjectivity, as it functions as a means of finding the truth of oneself. Foucault argues that through the institutionalization of the Church, self-examination was transformed from the Stoic method of sifting between good and bad actions to a form of obedience in which the renunciation of the self results in access to knowledge of the truth of God and the divinity within oneself or one's relationship to God (Foucault, *History*). The influence of obedience thus makes self-examination more concerned with the nature, substance, and origin of a thought than with good or bad actions in the Christian institution (Foucault, *Dartmouth*). Self-examination then becomes the constant looking inward

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and contemplation of the movement of every thought, and it must be coupled with confession to decipher the truth of each thought. This is because in Christian belief, according to Cassian, one must always reflect on one's thoughts and understand the origin of them through confessing them so that it could be determined whether the thought was truth or illusion (Foucault, *Louvain*). Through this process, discretio is enacted, meaning that the nature of the thought is revealed through the ease of confessing it: good thoughts are easier to confess than evil ones. The act of speaking constitutes this principle of sorting the good and bad, which must consist of constant verbalization of every thought as it forms (Foucault, *Government*). Confession can then be defined as the direct or implicit forceful extraction of information that works towards the regulation of the self. This is where self-policing is enforced, as confession determines what subjects can be discussed and how they should be talked about (Foucault, History).

Foucault defines self-policing as the constant supervision of the self resulting from the internalization of the disciplinary institution. With regards to time, worth, and production, individuals constantly examine themselves to ensure that they fit within the norms defined by institutions of power. The coupling of self-examination and confession thus enforces self-policing by way of reinstating the surveillance state in which "a state of conscious and permanent visibility" is instilled in the subject through enacting discretio (Foucault, *Discipline*). Essentially, because confession is the constant verbalization of thoughts realized through self-examination, and because discretio is an inherent component of confession, subjects have internalized the Christian institution's requirement for enacting these techniques of power on themselves to determine the truth of their character, which in turn functions to further impose Christian subjectivity on themselves.

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The ultimate goal of self-examination and confession is to reach self-actualization in the form of uncovering the truth of God and oneself, as I stated previously. Foucault terms Christian self-actualization as metanoia, the illumination of the soul as it turns from evil and detaches from sin (Foucault, *Government*). Enlightenment, therefore, is knowledge that reveals the nature of the soul regarding its relationship to the divine. In contrasting metanoia with the Stoic ideal of ascesis as a form of self-actualization through the cultivation of self rather than the renunciation of it, Foucault describes ascesis as an experience that qualifies and enlightens a subject about themselves and the world, thus transforming them (Foucault, *Government*). So, we see that self-actualization can be understood as the enlightenment of oneself through the revealing of one's divinity as well as one's position in relation to the world.

While Foucault discusses these concepts as they take form in institutionalized Christianity, he also describes how they are have come to be enforced through other institutions of power as well, such as that of the prison. These concepts can then be applied to the productivity movement through the apparatuses I described in the introduction. In the following sections, I will discuss how the apparatuses of access, scheduling, and mindfulness transform and enforce the above aspects of Christian subjectivity.

DIGITAL WELLNESS AS A TECHNIQUE OF POWER

Technology was initially developed with maximizing usage and convenience in mind. With technological advancement, the world has become more connected than ever before, allowing people to reach others outside of the workplace with minimal effort and providing them with resources previously limited to the workplace. Alongside this, however, came an overall decrease in productivity due to technology-related distractions, such as constant notifications and addictive games and social media apps. With workplace productivity declining, companies had

to find new ways to get people to produce more despite constant information overload: this ushered in the digital wellness movement.

In summary, the digital wellness movement is a recent push for understanding how technology is misused and enabling people to disconnect from it to increase mindfulness and productivity. Various tech companies, such as Google, Apple, Facebook, and Microsoft have realized the negative impact of addictive technology on productivity and are now working to combat it through increasing individual's awareness of how they currently use technology and providing ways for them to use it more mindfully. Mindfulness can be understood as the regulation of attention to instate an "alert mode of perceiving all mental contents" that allows one to gain insight "into the nature of one's mind" through examination of thoughts and feelings in terms of their subjectivity and transient nature (Walach). Essentially, these companies want individuals to be more aware of and intentional about their use of technology so that they can produce more effectively and meaningfully. Here, I will discuss the above companies' contributions to the digital wellness movement, and I will apply my defined apparatuses of power to them to develop my argument that the digital wellness movement is a technique of power meant to further render individuals as subjects.

The first company to roll out features geared towards digital wellbeing was Google. These features, available on a newly designed Android Dashboard, are meant to make phones "a little less addictive" by tracking how long an individual spends onscreen overall, the number of times they unlock their phone, how many notifications they receive, and the amount of time spent on each app. It also features a timer to limit how long an individual spends on specific apps (Pardes). Soon after, Apple released its own strikingly similar suite of features called Screen Time. With much of the same information, Screen Time presented users with daily and weekly

Activity reports showing them how they use their devices, and it gave users the option to limit app usage by categories. These categories, however, are automatically generated, and include Social Networking, Games, Productivity, and other seemingly arbitrary groups. Through these features, Google and Apple sought to empower their customers with insight into how they use technology and enable them to "take control of how much time they spend" in apps or websites ("IOS").

Microsoft Outlook also released a similar dashboard called MyAnalytics, which is geared towards work-related productivity and wellbeing. In the MyAnalytics page, users are presented with statistics regarding "focus time," collaboration and networking time, and how many days they were able to "disconnect from work." Focus Time, as Microsoft termed it, is "time for uninterrupted individual work," allowing users to "protect [their] calendar and manage distractions" by reducing notifications ("MyAnalytics"). Unique to MyAnalytics is a Wellbeing section that displays time spent "working" outside of work hours (i.e. checking and answering emails, scheduling meetings, and other Outlook related tasks) and provides suggestions for reducing stress and burnout. This dashboard also provides users with Networking and Collaboration sections that show their relationships with other people in the workplace and how much they actively interacted with them to do work ("MyAnalytics").

These technologies have a few key commonalities: they each claim to focus on increasing mindfulness and encouraging people to spend their time wisely, which can also be understood as maximizing productivity. In their search to boost workplace productivity to increase profits, companies have discovered that worker-centric ideologies, such as encouraging workers to find meaning in their work through mindful engagement and building cultures emphasizing autonomy

and accountability, presented under the guise of digital wellness are very impactful and provide various opportunities to reinforce mechanisms of power over their users (Mankins).

In emphasizing mindful use of technology, these companies deploy mindfulness as an apparatus of power. As I defined it in the introduction, mindfulness couples self-examination with productivity. Thus, mindful use of technology requires the examination of how one uses technology and how they can use it more productively. Alongside this is the urge for individuals to find meaning in their work. This then adds the need to examine one's personal motivations for production onto the existing self-examination of how to use one's time and technology more productively, which results in the constant self-examination of Foucault's philosophy being transformed into deciphering why one produces what they do, what they would like to produce, and how they can produce more.

Confession also comes into play here as an apparatus of power, as it implicitly happens through how these digital wellbeing dashboards track and give feedback on how individuals spend their time. This feedback is coupled with guidance regarding how time could be better spent, this effectively establishing technology as the master and the individual as the subject.

With the Android Dashboard and Screen Time, for example, users are encouraged to self-track how they use technology and impose limits on apps deemed unproductive, such as games and social media. In doing so, users are constantly engaging in self-examination regarding their productivity and the nature of how they spend their time. Thus, the apparatus of scheduling is formed and deployed on users, as they feel pressured to consider how to use their time more effectively to be more productive. Scheduling is also deployed in Microsoft MyAnalytics through its encouragement of using Focus Time and minimizing work-related distractions by way of self-examination coupled with self-policing. In forcing individuals to consider how they

spend the day and how they can allot more time specifically for uninterrupted work, companies enforce Foucault's definition of obedience on people through encouraging constant self-examination as a means of increasing production, rendering them subjects to productivity.

In the digital age, the Foucauldian concept of the surveillance state is increasingly prominent in that self-policing is continuously becoming more effective. Returning to the above examples, individuals using Android Dashboard, Screen Time, and MyAnalytics are encouraged to self-police by way of maximizing productivity to avoid deviancy from the productivity movement by spending time unproductively. Coupled with this need to avoid deviancy is the pressure of autonomy and accountability enforced in the modern workplace, which further enforces self-policing through individualization in that it recapitulates Foucault's shepherd's (in this case, the company's) position as a guide who must know the individual's actions towards being more productive as well as their thoughts regarding productivity.

As I mentioned at the start of this section, technological advances have resulted in people and organizations having more access to resources and other people than ever before. This apparatus of access has resulted in existing mechanisms of power, specifically that of self-policing, to be reinstated through the digital medium. Alongside the apparatus of scheduling, access functions to further enforce self-policing through enforcing the understanding that one can produce anywhere at any time. This, along with cultural standards of workplace autonomy and accountability, forces individuals to engage in self-examination by way of scheduling while also considering how they can increase productivity outside of work, whether it be related to work tasks or other forms of productivity, such as personal projects. Thus, individuals are again subjected to productivity and are pressured to constantly find ways to produce more.

Overall, it appears that the digital wellness movement is a technique of power that functions to enforce disconnecting from the "unproductive" parts of technology to maintain and increase overall productivity through engaging in self-examination and self-policing. Through encouraging people to examine how and why they produce alongside considerations of what they can do to produce even more through deploying access, scheduling, and mindfulness to their advantage, technology has effectively rendered individuals subject to productivity through the digital wellness movement.

BULLET JOURNALING: A SECOND TECHNIQUE OF POWER

Alongside the productivity movement, the popularity of bullet journals has substantially increased. According to the creator of the bullet journal system, Ryder Carroll, it is "best described as a mindfulness practice disguised as a productivity system." He argues that the bullet journal's purpose is to help people live intentional lives that are "both productive and meaningful" (Carroll, "Bullet"). Essentially, bullet journaling is a customizable, analogue system geared towards organizing, tracking, and planning in the form of handwritten logging (Ayobi). Like the digital wellness movement, however, bullet journaling incorporates and enforces various mechanisms of power directed at increasing productivity. In this section, I will use a few key aspects of bullet journals to discuss how the apparatuses of mindfulness, scheduling, and confession act upon individuals to further render them as subjects to productivity.

One of the most essential components of bullet journaling is the process of Monthly Migration. In this process, which takes place when setting up a new Monthly Log, an individual reviews the previous Monthly Log to examine uncompleted tasks and determine whether they should be migrated over to the new Log. This is meant to ensure that the individual is "using their time wisely by focusing on what matters" through "weeding out distractions" (Carroll,

"Bullet"). Thus, when a person uses this process, they are engaging in self-examination through the apparatus of mindfulness by sorting out which tasks are worth completing and which should be abandoned, which then functions to increase long-term productivity by focusing only on what is meaningful or necessary to a particular individual. Once more, the transformation of Foucault's concept of constant self-examination becomes evident: in sorting tasks based on necessity, usefulness, and meaning, individuals are subjecting themselves to the mechanisms that encourage increased productivity.

Bullet journals also incorporate extensive self-tracking through which an individual can understand daily habits, mood fluctuations, and various aspects of health, exercise, and wellness. In tracking many aspects of personal life, individuals again engage in self-examination recapitulated as mindfulness, and they determine how they can use their time more productively in terms of building on the habits they track. This process of daily logging also incorporates the scheduling apparatus into its enforcement of mechanisms of power through the act of planning out one's day as a means of determining how to most efficiently use one's time and energy – this results in self-policing which takes the form of maintaining personal accountability in relation to completing daily tasks and engaging in self-tracking itself. By doing this, individuals constantly engage in self-examination to gauge their daily productivity through maintenance of the tracking mechanisms they use in their bullet journal and pressure themselves to continue to produce in this manner. Thus, bullet journaling in itself is a form of productivity in that it is considered productive to maintain one, is a means of self-examination centered around reflecting on one's productivity, and is an enforcer of self-policing through the urge to maintain its upkeep.

Aside from the deployment of self-policing and self-examination through maintenance of the journal itself, these apparatuses are further enforced when coupled with confession through

the medium of social media. Here, confession works to further enforce self-examination and self-policing in terms of productivity through maintaining accountability by way of encouraging consistent production and reflection. When sharing images of bullet journal spreads on social media, many people include descriptions or reflections on "how and why [they] designed their notebooks" (Ayobi). In Foucault's philosophy, the apparatus of confession focuses on regulating the self through verbalizing the movement of thoughts and determining their nature; individuals thus engage in self-policing through speaking about and posting their bullet journals because the act of doing so is verbalizing their internal examinations of how to be the most productive. This act coupled with the desire to maintain productivity furthers the enforcement of self-policing through urging people to consistently confess their progress towards peak productivity and take in feedback so as to improve their bullet journals and therefore become even more productive. Again, we see that posting a bullet journal spread is an act of producing in itself due to the nature of creating and maintaining content. In the cycle of producing a bullet journal spread, producing a post about the spread while confessing the process by which they produced, and getting feedback so as to improve the bullet journal, therefore increasing productivity, individuals enter a condition of seeking and stating how to produce, what to produce, and why to produce, which renders them as subjects of productivity.

CONCLUSION

As defined by Foucault, subjectivation consists of a subject entering a permanent state of submission in which telling the truth of oneself constitutes one's subjectivity to a master who provides guidance. In the productivity movement, we see that this concept of subjectivation is transformed: instead of truth-telling, one renders oneself subject through self-examination and confession of how, why, and what they produce, and guidance thus takes the form of instructing

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and encouraging the subject to increase their productivity through further reflection on how they can derive meaning from what they produce and how they can produce more effectively.

Through the apparatus of mindfulness, self-examination becomes focused around one's personal goals and intentions, the nature of how one spends their time, and what could be done to spend that time more effectively to maximize productivity. As seen in the digital wellness movement, mindfulness then functions as a means of reflecting on how to decrease unproductive use of technology and determining how time could be better spent. Through bullet journaling, mindfulness also functions in this way; however, instead of focusing on technology usage, bullet journals focus on task completion and how time is used in general, and mindfulness functions to determine how to more efficiently use time to complete tasks deemed important to the subject.

Access also acts as an apparatus of power in the productivity movement through its ability to increase an individual's reach regarding resources and other people. Thus, access becomes a recapitulation of self-policing because it reinstates the surveillance state through the digital medium, which then enforces constant self-examination focused around whether one is being productive enough to avoid deviation from the standards of the productivity movement and how one can increase productivity due to their increased access to resources geared towards creation and production. The digital wellness movement effectively deploys this apparatus through showing individuals how their time is spent, which then forces individuals to consider how and when they can produce the most in and out of the workplace.

Scheduling, another apparatus of power formed in the productivity movement, consists of coupling self-examination and self-policing with productivity, which then modifies them to enforce constant reflection on how time is spent, how it could be spent, what could be produced, and when it could be produced. Thus, it furthers the techniques of power deployed through

mindfulness and access and applies them to the realm of short and long-term planning. In examining technologies of the digital wellness movement, we see that scheduling becomes an apparatus through the inherent self-examination on how to spend time more wisely by allotting time specifically to be productive and appropriately engaging with technology. Scheduling is also an apparent apparatus in bullet journaling, as the maintenance of spreads is centered around task completion and self-tracking and results in constant examination of the meaning derived from tasks, how time is spent in the short and long term, and understanding one's personal behaviors to better manage them for maximized productivity.

As an implicit apparatus of power in the digital wellness movement, confession enables the establishment of the shepherd-sheep dynamic Foucault examined in his writings by appointing the computer, which receives information on how individuals spend their time and provides guidance for improvement and increasing productivity. Confession becomes a transformed apparatus of the productivity movement when it is coupled with self-policing through the medium of social media. In sharing bullet journal spreads, for example, confession functions to enforce the cycle of producing, confessing, examining how to produce more effectively, and producing again through enforcing accountability and the urge to consistently produce.

All these apparatuses function in the productivity movement to render individuals as subjects. Through constant self-examination with regards to how time is spent and what one produces and implicit or explicit confession of how individuals use and improve their use of time, the goal of self-actualization in the productivity movement becomes to enlighten subjects about how to most efficiently and effectively maximize productivity.

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