All Things Optimal

1. ‘Precariousness’ bears down on the entrepreneur and precariat alike, yet each holds markedly different relations to insecurity and risk. They are both entangled with the competitive threats and inequalities of the market, but are ultimately distinguished by an inverse capacity to exploit such uncertainties. If the entrepreneur and precariat appear as ubiquitous social categories, their applicability needs to be considered across gradations of disparity and socio-economic positioning. To speak of *the entreprecariat* is thus to invoke an ambivalent intersection of competing forces of struggle and subjectivation, liberation and vulnerability, 'creative destruction' and control, autonomy and exploitation; and to size up the devastating stakes of late neoliberal societies.
2. For Joseph Schumpeter, the expediency of the entrepreneur lay in a singular capacity to generate the future through nonconformity. This was to be achieved by forging new associations between existing fields of knowledge, by connecting together diverse cultural, technological and social milieus in order to catalyze change. Such recombinant activity, moreover, could attract capital through the prospect of monopolizing whatever novelty might arise (despite the idealistic entrepreneur’s supposed disinterest in pure monetary gain). We should approach such heroic myths with some skepticism today. The fact that ‘creative destruction’ relies on the mobilization of existing resources, practices and concepts, for instance, means the production of innovation itself becomes a question of strategic planning. This premise is the basis of corporate R&D or the *entrepreneurship* of the firm, which sees overlapping, complex frameworks for continuously assessing value embedded into every possible setting. It has generally been accompanied by the elaboration of non-hierarchical forms of organization that foster innovation by the reticulation of worth. Commercial digital services, for example, are explicitly built with this logic of diversified valorisation in mind, yet the average user might only confront their power laws and asymmetries. Here, we already encounter a key problem of the entreprecariat: the conversion of new associations into viable, long-term strategies.
3. Conditions of systemic uncertainty allow optimization tools and techniques to thrive in specific ways. First emerging as a subset of applied mathematics, optimization focuses on modeling solutions to practical problems or ‘classes’ of problems as contexts for abstract reasoning and the invention of logical methods. On a purely practical level, optimization links the axiomatic neo-classical actor in economics to programming in computer science. Optimal solutions, in this way, pivot on maximum output for minimum input through abstract formulae, algorithms and functions. Implemented as techno-economic systems, moreover, they deliver instruments to measure competitiveness and unequal outcomes, and in doing so, they augment and extend that great neoliberal anti-institutional institution of the market. They have become increasingly central to how all things *problematic* are predisposed today.
4. To optimize is sometimes cast in metaphysical or evolutionary terms, yet its genealogy arises from the formalization of decision-making in the context of operations research (OR) during the Second World War. During this period in the United States, physicists and mathematicians sought ways to improve and shape military strategy, while remaining outside the rank and file of command. Their techniques aimed for interventions through statistics and symbolic rules, eventually paving the way for increasingly subtle modes of control like cybernetics and game theory. Optimization, in this sense, arose as a kind of auxiliary apparatus of management, wherein computational procedures and protocols mediate settings of institutional judgment. With our recent shift towards commercial digital services for self-management and the explosion of big data, there is a renewed urgency to take account of these lineages in developing a political philosophy of *the decision*.
5. Seeking to tame precariousness, the sovereignty of optimal decision-making spreads a distinctly computational worldview. Gains in efficiency might be consider in terms of utilitarianism from Jeremy Bentham onwards, but the deterministic operations of big data more closely resemble an algorithmic will to power, super-charged by automation. Here, the optimal is not merely efficient, but appears as a logical guarantee (despite the dubious premises that might undergird these processes). When data is taken as given, optimization seems to lead an independent creative existence; a life lived according to its own set of rules. The computational can be additionally framed as a form of ‘full rationality’ in this self-perpetuating state, while users are increasingly posited as bounded, suboptimal and in need of correction. We thus arrive into conditions of an overwhelmed, anxious and vulnerable subject, surrounded by ‘dark patterns’ that at once shape and evade their immediate knowledge, yet still bearing full responsibility for the outcome of bad decisions.
6. One actor’s optimization is another’s exploitation/expulsion: there is cruelty to the pursuit of optimal easily lost in the affirmative ethos of the upgrade. The discrimination of progress is fundamental. Think of sorting algorithms like Least Recently Used, Explore/Exploit calculations for A/B testing or measures for Optimal Stopping – such computational techniques disperse decision-making into system configurations beyond reproach of those swept up in their operations. They are purely concerned with categorization and the production of hierarchies, yet their functions remain veiled by user experience design strategies, intellectual property regimes, access rights and other forms of black boxing. If we desire any independent understanding, then the empirical dimensions of inquiry unfold on the fraught terrain of interface diagnostics and hacking. Attaining critical knowledge thus involves a concerted struggle that almost inevitably leads above and beyond a mere technical conception of ‘the digital.’
7. Optimization might be deployed in a variety of means and ends, but it finally culminates in a tyranny of methods. As Vilém Flusser claims in his short essay ‘Beyond Machines,’ whenever we encounter an apparatus, we must deal with the transformation of imperatives into functions. There are, he added, nevertheless many different ways of functioning. One could, for instance, be the ‘good functionary’ fixated on personal career performance; one might strive for reforming the apparatus through the technocracy of digital methods; one could hope to minimize one’s impact on an environment through optimization; or nihilistically troll the functions of the apparatus in various states of despair and resentment. Yet whatever position is taken, it seems impossible to fully overcome a relation to methods after the rule-based structuring of knowledge is embodied into automatic computing infrastructures. For Flusser, in these surroundings, we are yet to comprehend how ‘work’ itself has undergone a total transformation – that is, not the capacity to take the world as it is (*ontology*), but the capacity to change it (*deontology*).
8. To seek the optimal drives decision-making into higher altitudes (it is no coincidence that early optimization techniques were referred to as ‘hill climbing’). In the twenty-first century, we face an environment marked by multiple peaks, where the heights of profit becomes suicidal and a rugged fitness landscape calls out for new sources of strength, but where data-driven technologies now seem to frequently hinder our alternate ascents. For the future of collective political life, we need to develop new capacities for scaling up: experimental forms of transparency, opportunities for negative feedback, injections of noise, and the diversification of more-than-digital methods. Caught in the paradoxes of subjugation and empowerment – itself a complex set of problems inherited from sovereign power – the entreprecariat provides one suggestive context, one possible starting point among many, for such a radical retooling of all things optimal.