The Human Condition in a Neoliberal World 1
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Abstract
This article considers the subject that neoliberal rationality constructs. By engaging first with Michel Foucault’s account of the entrepreneurial self, then with contemporary critical theorists who build upon and move beyond Foucault’s account, it considers three aspects of the human condition under neoliberal hegemony: the moral, the political, and the existential.

If the outcome is so different from our aims—if, instead of freedom and prosperity, bondage and misery stare us in the face—is it not clear that sinister forces must have foiled our intentions, that we are the victims of some evil power which must be conquered before we can resume the road to better things?

Friedrich Hayek, The Road to Serfdom

Introduction
Friedrich Hayek’s The Road to Serfdom is today, above all else, a testimony to irony. The book is punctuated with frightening images of lives reduced to unfreedom, people seen as mere means, and populations sacrificed on the altar of central planning. As if Moms, the Greek god of satire and irony, himself ordained it, The Road to Serfdom has turned out to be the first cobblestone in the road to neoliberal serfdom. Everything Hayek expected socialism would bring has seemingly come true under a regime he himself helped lay the theoretical foundations for—a fact all the more ironic because Keynesianism, for all its flaws, never led to the totalitarian regime Hayek claimed it would.

Let us quickly forget Hayek. My aim is not to criticise this primus inter neoliberales—I think history has sufficiently done so. It is useful, however, to ask how neoliberal rationality has constructed those modes of subjectivity its intellectual avant-garde always feared social democracy would result in. My aim, then, is to consider the mode of subjectivity that is not only endorsed but constructed by neoliberal rationality. A note on terminology and methodology: neoliberalism is understood here not as an ideology, a class project, a political theory, or a political programme, although all of these are to some degree part of it. Instead, I take neoliberalism to be, first and foremost, a mode of reasoning that casts the entirety of human life in economic terms. With Wendy Brown, I refer to neoliberalism as a "political rationality", that is "a specific form of normative political reason organizing the social sphere, governance practices, and citizenship."2 Although I

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1 This article is the result of a research project funded by the Honours Academy of Radboud University Nijmegen, the Netherlands.

2 Wendy Brown, “American Nightmare: Neoliberalism, Neoconservatism, and De-Democratization,” Political Theory 34 (2006) 6: 690-714, 693; Wendy Brown, Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution (New York: Zone Books, 2015). Note that a political rationality is not the same as a form of governmental, which is what neoliberalism is quite commonly understood to be by Foucauldian analysts. While the latter is a mode of governing that replaces sovereignty over the course of modernity, the former denotes a mode of reasoning. Since I aim to understand the ways in which neoliberalism has influenced thought about the self, politics, society, etc., I prefer to see it as a rationality rather than a mode of governmental (although the latter is implied by the first). See also Wendy Brown, Edgework: Critical Essays on Knowledge and Politics (Princeton:
The Self as Enterprise

To understand the human condition experienced by neoliberal subjects we should first turn to Michel Foucault’s lectures on The Birth of Biopolitics, where Foucault develops an account of homo oeconomicus as it is reconstructed by neoliberal theory. Neoliberalism, as Foucault explains, redefines subjectivity on the model of the entrepreneur, first and foremost through the notion of ‘human capital’. Human capital, as understood by the recently deceased Gary S. Becker (referred to by Foucault as “the most radical of the American neo-liberals”), is the name given to the set of skills, abilities, and resources gathered in one person, upon which this person’s income—either monetary or psychic—is based. Some such skills, abilities, or resources are largely innate (for instance one’s intelligence). Whilst others can be developed over the course of one’s lifetime (for instance one’s physical condition) although most are the result of a combination of innate ability and subsequent development. Importantly, neoclassical economists such as Becker define economic action wholly and exclusively in terms of activities somehow related to human capital, and as such economic activity becomes seen as either, on the one hand, investment in or detraction from human capital, or, on the other, the obtaining of (psychic or monetary) income based on previously amassed human capital.

Viewed separately, the notion of human capital is not especially radical. Classical liberalism already assumed that one’s income is based upon one’s skills and training, and Adam Smith even considered expenditures towards the development of vocational skills to amount to “capital fixed and realised, as it were, in [one’s] person.” However, what sets neoliberalism apart from classical liberalism (and this is part of what merits the prefix), is that, in Foucault’s terms, it starts “to apply economic analysis to a series of objects, to domains of behavior or conduct which were not market forms of behavior or conduct.” Neoliberal rationality, then, analyses not only people’s economic activity.
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(with Smith, those activities that spring from our natural propensity to ‘truck, barter, and exchange’) in terms of competition and investment, but all of their action. It turns economics, the study of economic behaviour, into “praxeology”: the study of human action as such.8 With the rise of rational choice theory in the post-WWII period, economic analysis becomes one of the most prominent methodologies applied in the humanities and therewith economics quickly replaces the artes liberales of yesteryear as the core curriculum for social scientists.9 “Economic imperialism”, indeed.10

Taken together, the notion of human capital and the widened scope of economics result in a redefinition of subjectivity and the subject. While economic activity is analysed in terms of human capital, at the same time economics broadens its scope, colonises the social sciences, and defines all human action as economic action, thereby effectively recasting every human activity as either the obtention of income, or the appreciation or depreciation of human capital.11 Homo oeconomicus, the subject once confined to economic analysis, is not made to disappear (notwithstanding neoliberals’ insistence on the contrary)12 but is instead redefined. For while homo oeconomicus in the classical liberal conception was a “partner of exchange” based on “a problematic of needs,”13 under neoliberalism homo oeconomicus becomes modelled on the enterprise, that is, a business firm, meaning that the “regulatory principle” behind the activity it engages in is to be sought in “the mechanisms of competition.”14 The subject, like the firm, is understood to consist of capital and is likewise required to compete in markets. Homo oeconomicus becomes “an entrepreneur, an entrepreneur of himself.”15 The entrepreneurial self, in short, is the self who is constantly engaged in investing in her own human capital because she must compete in a marketplace; it is the self “who incurs expenses by investing to obtain some kind of improvement.”16 Such expenses can be financial, temporal, social, physical, or otherwise.

The neoliberal subject for Foucault is thus the subject who invests, who competes, who appreciates her human capital.17 This subject is considered to behave like an enterprise

10 The term “economic imperialism” was used candidly by Gary Becker to describe the effect rational choice theory and its offshoots (e.g. public choice theory) have had on the social sciences. See “Economic Imperialism: An Interview With Gary Becker,” Religion & Liberty 3 (1993) 2, at http://www.acton.org/pub/religion-liberty/volume-3-number-2/economic-imperialism, accessed 05 May 2014.
12 Take for instance Ludwig von Mises’s claim that “[m]odern subjective economics [...] neither limits its theorems to the actions of businessmen alone nor deals with a fictitious homo oeconomicus.” (Von Mises, Human Action, 64.) Von Mises means that economics deals not merely with economic action but with all human action. He appears to be unaware that this means not that homo oeconomicus is dismissed, but rather that it eclipses all other homini.
13 Foucault, The Birth of Biopolitics, 225.
14 Ibid., 147.
15 Ibid., 226.
16 Ibid., 230.
17 Cf. Feher, “Self-Appreciation.” I do not want to linger on this point, but it is worth pointing out
and, crucially, sees herself as an enterprise. She is made to conform to entrepreneurial standards through an ethics of the self and, indeed, the newly fashioned neoliberal “[h]omo oeconomicus is someone who is eminently governable.” The point here is that whereas homo oeconomicus as the classical political economists understood it had to be left alone (“one must lass-fer”)

the neoliberal subject is so intimately tethered to her surroundings—being made to compete, to adjust to mechanisms of supply and demand—that, to paraphrase Foucault’s own definition of governmentality, her conduct becomes easily conducted. The neoliberal subject will always respond to socio-economic reality, because her survival, her income, depends on her adaptation to changing circumstances. In the words of Michel Feher: “it is [...] possible to govern subjects seeking to increase the value of their human capital, or more precisely, to act on the way they govern themselves, by inciting them to adopt conducts deemed valorizing and to follow models of self-valuation that modify their priorities and inflect their strategic choices.” One merely has to consider ‘welfare-to-work’ or ‘workfare’ programmes to understand how such self-government unfolds in everyday life.

Here ends Foucault’s account of the neoliberal subject. Although he did not address the topic himself, we can use the framework he provides to ask what kind of subject neoliberal rationality constructs after having become hegemonic. In what follows I will consider the neoliberal subject’s moral agency, her political agency, and, somewhat more practically, the condition she finds herself in. These three accounts are of necessity rather brief—my aim is to point out some implications rather than to thoroughly consider their theoretical underpinnings.

**Neoliberal subjectivity**

* Moral agency

Neoliberal theory deals with private subjects who “do and permit what they will” according to their own preferences and value orientations within the limits of legally permissible action. They are not required to take any mutual interest for one another; they are thus not equipped with any moral sense of social obligation. The legally requisite respect for private liberties that all competitors are equally entitled to is something very different from the equal respect for the human worth of each individual.

J. Habermas, *The Postnational Constellation*

When neoliberal rationality becomes the hegemonic imaginary, a meaningful sense of moral agency is the first casualty. This is not merely to say that entrepreneurial subjects

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19 Ibid.


will treat each other—as well as themselves—as mere means, although this is certainly the case. The argument runs deeper, for the point is that neoliberal rationality undermines the very possibility of any non-instrumental moral agency by reconstructing the subject exclusively along entrepreneurial lines. Let us see how this goes.

Firstly, and most importantly, the entrepreneurial logic neoliberalism commits its subjects to turns them into unabashedly self-interested micro-enterprises. The place proper to enterprises, however, is the marketplace. This means that subjects, whose activity is always somehow related to human capital—be it competition with other persons (i.e. other human capitals), appreciation or depreciation of their own capital, or the obtaining of income using their capital—always act out of self-interest (and so the spirit of Bentham, much like his partially mumified remains, is still with us). But if all human activity is interpreted as self-interested (as rational choice theory assumes) we thereby lose the ability to view anything other than our own utility as an end in itself. This means nothing less than the inability to act as Kantian moral agents, because for Kant only those actions which are freely willed because our moral duty — indeed, reason itself—prescribes it, are moral in nature. Since neoliberalism assumes that all action is spurred by individual interests, it becomes impossible, among other things, to view other human beings (or indeed ourselves) as ends in themselves or to act according to our moral duty as such. The neoliberal subject is, in effect, not an inhabitant of the Reich der Zweck- (Kingdom of Ends) — she is made to pursue only her own self-interest. Although this does not mean that the neoliberal subject is entirely divested of moral agency, it does mean that the only moral agency she is capable of pertains to what developmental psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg identified as a ‘pre-conventional’ (or sometimes even ‘pre-moral’) stage in the development of morality—the morality associated with young children. In this sense, neoliberal morality is pre-eminently infantile.

Neoliberalism inherited this utilitarian understanding of morality from classical liberalism. Classical liberalism too denies that individuals are anything other than desiring beings. In this sense, the ends aimed at do not have to be egoistic: my end can be my neighbour’s happiness. This, however, is still viewed as self-interested, for ultimately I want to feel good through my neighbour’s feeling good. To put it in slightly different words: rational choice theory assumes that individuals always aim at maximising their utilities—whatever these may be. This means that even if I am being altruistic, it will still count as a maximisation of my own (altruistic) utilities. Cf. Vincent, The Nature of Political Theory, 62-63.

22 Note that this is precisely the dehumanising morality Hayek accused proponents of central planning of supporting. See The Road to Serfdom, definitive edition (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 2007 [1944]), 130.

23 Although this topic has received scant attention, there is a very serious argument to be made that neoliberalism combines elements of the political economy of classical liberalism with elements of Benthamite utilitarianism. Von Mises for instance writes: “The program of liberalism […], if condensed into a single word, would have to read: property […]. All the other demands of liberalism result from this fundamental demand.” (Liberalism: The Classical Tradition, transl. R. Raico (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, Inc., 2005 [1927]), 2.) The method von Mises uses to derive those “other demands” is straightforwardly Benthamite. Cf. Brown, Undoing the Demos, 32-34.

24 Some nuance is in order here. Rational choice theory assumes, first, that all human activity is directed at ends, and second, that humans will always opt for the way of least resistance in attaining that end. Importantly, the ends aimed at do not have to be egoistic: my end can be my neighbour’s happiness. This, however, is still viewed as self-interested, for ultimately I want to feel good through my neighbour’s feeling good. To put it in slightly different words: rational choice theory assumes that individuals always aim at maximising their utilities—whatever these may be. This means that even if I am being altruistic, it will still count as a maximisation of my own (altruistic) utilities. Cf. Vincent, The Nature of Political Theory, 62-63.

25 For a similar argument, see Brown, Undoing the Demos, 109.

ings, perpetually moving from one joy to the next.\footnote{27} The difference lies therein that while classical liberalism held that an individual’s desires are given prior to any contact with the outside world (or in other words, “what we want [...] is a fundamentally pre-rational matter”).\footnote{28} For its bastard offspring self-interestedness is wholly tethered to market mechanisms. The self-interestedness prescribed by neoliberalism is not the quasi-euclidean perpetual want-satisfaction Bentham and his liberal fellow travellers celebrated; it is, rather, the injunction to be a productive, responsible, self-investing speck of human capital.\footnote{29} As Jacques Rancière explains, the neoliberal subject is “called on to be the microcosm of the great noisy whole of the circulation and uninterrupted exchange of rights and capabilities, of goods and the Good,” and is “required to see himself [sic] [...] as his own militant, as a small alliance-forming energy, running from one tie to the next, from one contract to the next as well as from one thrill to the next.”\footnote{30} While it leads to the same outcome—a thoroughly instrumentalist understanding of the world and of people and therewith the end of Kantian moral agency—the self-interest underlying neoliberal subjectivity significantly differs from the classical liberal one.\footnote{31}

The neoliberal evisceration of moral agency should not surprise us; it is inherent in the entrepreneurial logic neoliberalism submits its subjects to. In a critique of corporate power, Joel Bakan writes that “[u]nlike the human beings who inhabit it, the corporation is \textit{singularly} self-interested and unable to feel genuine concern for others in any context.”\footnote{32} This leads him to conclude that if corporations were people, they would be diagnosed as psychopathic. Surely he is right, and surely this is what neoliberal rationality wants every human being to model their behaviour on. Neoliberal theory has never been very secretive about its simplistic understanding of morality either: For while Adam Smith (whose \textit{Wealth of Nations}, I imagine, is to be found on every neoliberal’s night stand, while the fact that the same man authored \textit{The Theory of Moral Sentiments} is conveniently forgotten) once held that “[i]t is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest,” Bernard Mandeville, the political economist from whom Hayek derived his theory of spontaneous order, actually celebrated the vices with splendid candour:

\begin{quote}
Then leave Complaints: Fools only strive
To make a Great an Honest Hive.
T’ enjoy the World’s Conveniencies,
Befam’d in War, yet live in Ease,
Without great Vices, is a vain
Eutopia seated in the Brain.
\end{quote}

\footnote{28} \textit{Ibid}, 86.
\footnote{29} I gratefully borrow the term ‘speck of human capital’ from Brown, \textit{Undoing the Demos}.
\footnote{30} Jacques Rancière, \textit{Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy}, transl. J. Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999 [1995]), 114–115. Note that while Rancière does not explicitly deal with neoliberalism or the neoliberal subject I do think that especially the mode of subjectivity he describes is intimately related to neoliberal rationality.
\footnote{31} This is of course precisely what Foucault notes when he remarks that the neoliberal subject is no longer a subject of interests, as she was under classical liberalism, but an entrepreneur of herself. See \textit{The Birth of Biopolitics}.
\footnote{33} Smith, \textit{The Wealth of Nations} (1776), 12.
Fraud, Luxury, and Pride must live,
While we the Benefits receive:
Hunger’s a dreadful Plague, no doubt,
Yet who digests or thrives without?  

The subtitle to Mandeville’s *magnum opus* neatly sums up the neoliberal understanding of morality: *private vices, public benefits*. Neoliberalism—first and foremost through Hayek, who is very much indebted to the work of this “master-mind”—took Mandeville’s lessons to heart and indeed not only condemns all of the cardinal virtues except for Prudence; it actively *prescribes* all of the cardinal vices, with the exception of Sloth (more on Sloth below), as vices are imagined to be the fuel of History’s engine: spontaneous (market) order. That this view of virtuosity is detrimental to any notion of ‘civic virtue’, upon which many democratic theories rest, requires no elaboration.

Moral agency and neoliberalism, in sum, do not go together. The subject neoliberal rationality creates cannot be anything other than a self-interested being, whose (literally) vicious behaviour is celebrated because, in neoliberal mythology, the only way to progress as a species is for individuals to behave like wholly self-interested, atomistic Benthamites.

**Political agency**

Voters and customers are essentially the same people. Mr. Smith buys and votes; he is the same man in the supermarket and in the voting booth

G. Tullock, *The Vote Motive*

Besides undermining the possibility to view themselves, others, and the world as ends in themselves, neoliberal rationality thoroughly subverts subjects’ capacity for political agency. Although it is an academic commonplace to refer to neoliberalism as a depoliticising rationality, I think that—again—the argument runs deeper.

Usually neoliberalism’s depoliticising tendency is understood to lie in its penchant for rhetorically and institutionally reducing all problems to market problems. Neoliberalism, in this sense, is indeed “the belief that the traditional questions of the polis are best answered by the market.” This depoliticising logic is inherent in most neoliberal theory, which, as I argued above, tends to understand all human action as economic action: everything is understood as either investment, consumption, competition, or income

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36 Deirdre McCloskey (who, as irony would have it, is a present-day Chicago School economist, and was a good friend of Milton Friedman’s) calls neoliberal economics ‘Prudence Only economics’ for this very reason. For her excellent work on economics and virtues/vices, see *The Bourgeois Virtues: Ethics for an Age of Commerce* (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 2006). The connection between neoliberalism and Prudence is more explicitly made in her equally excellent book *Bourgeois Dignity: Why Economics Can’t Explain the Modern World* (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 2010), 446.
obtention (although obtention of psychic income is literally equated with consumption). The creed underlying this ‘praxeological’ economics is that “[h]uman beings do not behave basically differently when they solve social and political problems compared to when they turn to economic or legal tasks.” To be sure, this is certainly one way in which neoliberalism depoliticises. If human beings are self-interested specks of human capital all round, then it follows that in the ‘political marketplace’ they are just as entrepreneurial, self-interested, and asocial as they are anywhere else.

Many authors point to a second way in which neoliberalism depoliticises. Because politics in a neoliberal era becomes solely about economic matters, which are far too complex for mere mortals to even grasp let alone decide upon, citizens quickly avert their gaze to the more interesting things in life. Neoliberalism, as Wendy Brown quite rightly points out, “reduces political citizenship to an unprecedented degree of passivity and political complacency.” Although people are still made to vote and perhaps even contribute to politics in other ways (protest, write articles for newspapers), this politics revolves around banal or inconsequential policies and voting is increasingly reminiscent of actual consumer choices. “In place of the citizen-participant,” as Sheldon Wolin explains, “the new politics courts the viewer-consumer.” What this results in is “a cant politics of the inconsequential.” Meanwhile, actual political processes are submitted to commercial or financial necessity—bailouts, reforms force-fed through IMF and World Bank despotism, the insane influence of (privately owned) rating agencies. Under neoliberal hegemony, as Rancière points out, “[t]he theme of the common will is replaced by that of the lack of personal will, of capacity for autonomous action that is anything more than just management of necessity.”

The authors discussed here are certainly right in signalling the way in which neoliberalism turns citizens into apathetic, one-dimensional men (to borrow a phrase from Herbert Marcuse) and the state into a puppet controlled by today’s greatest puppeteer: the Global Market. There is, however, another more fundamental way in which neoliberalism depoliticises. Essentially, the point is that neoliberalism reconstructs both the subject and democracy, turning them into an enterprise and a market respectively, thereby undermining the very possibility of genuine political action. Here is how this goes.

By casting subjectivity in economic terms across all spheres of life, neoliberal rationality turns political activity into another strand of the protean economic behaviour that defines all human activity. So while it is true that voters becomes consumers (or, rather, investors), as is commonly pointed out, it also means that political agency disappears. The consumer-investor cannot be a political subject, for the latter is a subject who acts in an Arendtian sense, meaning appearing, speaking, expressing oneself in a public realm not to gain a profit but to inter-act with other human beings. Such action requires that human beings see themselves as citizens of a polis, who collectively act because such

39 Brown, Edgework, 43.
41 Ibid, 112.
42 Rancière, Disagreement, 113.
43 The arguments presented here are largely (though not entirely) derived from Brown’s Undoing the Demos.
action is a *bonum in se*—not because it is a means to an end. However, because neoliberal subjects are naught but entrepreneurial and, as I already argued above, are for this reason entirely self-interested, politics becomes, in Arendt’s terms, “no less a means to an end than making is a means to produce an object,” which “happens whenever human togetherness is lost, that is, when people are only for or against other people.” In these cases, “speech becomes indeed ‘mere talk,’ one more means toward the end.”

However, while on the one hand the neoliberal subject is incapable of viewing herself as anything other than a self-interested, entrepreneurial speck of human capital, neoliberalism, on the other, denies and deconstructs the public realm that is a *conditio sine qua non* for action of this sort. The counterfeit ‘public realm’ that neoliberalism constructs in lieu of the one it deconstructed is nothing but a marketplace: an *agora*, not an *ekklesia*.

This is to say, neoliberalism does not simply *frame* democratic institutions in market terminology; its rationality in fact *reconstructs* them. As recent examples of neoliberal jurisprudence in the US make clear, neoliberal rationality recasts democracy as a ‘marketplace of ideas’ where speech—bought with economic capital—ought freely to circulate. Speech, which is understood as a commercial good rather than as the one capacity that distinguishes humans from animals (as Aristotle, Arendt, or Rancière would have it), is now understood to belong to specks of capital—which includes, crucially, corporations, monetary institutions, and the like. By recasting speech as a good bought with capital, neoliberalism allows for instance, the first amendment of the US Constitution (which protects, *inter alia*, free speech) to be interpreted as protecting not citizens from censure but the ‘democratic marketplace’ from state interference. It likewise legitimises far-reaching political inequality, because one’s economic capital is translated directly into one’s ‘political capital.’ The result: even as subjects are disenfranchised, turned into apathetic, passive consumer-citizens, and made increasingly powerless vis-à-vis the demands of global markets, the corporation is allowed into the realm of (what is left of) politics.

In effect, neoliberalism’s reconstruction of the subject is a blade that cuts both ways: by recasting the subject as an enterprise, it simultaneously bestows upon actual business enterprises a similar political subjectivity. Democracy becomes rule not by the

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45 For Arendt on the *agora*, see *The Human Condition*, 160.


47 Examples of this are legion: consider the fact that the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) agreement grants corporations the power to sue governments if their legislation damages the corporation’s interests; consider the influence (privately owned) credit rating agencies such as Standard & Poor’s or Moody’s have on nation-states, currencies, government bonds, etc.; consider the grotesque influence lobbying has on national and transnational policies; consider the influence the City of London Corporation has in the House of Commons through the Remembrancer.
people but by capital (a redefinition that goes unnoticed by neoliberals themselves, because they understand people as capital).

In sum, neoliberal rationality depoliticises the subject in a myriad of ways. On the one hand it makes her an apathetic consumer-citizen with no influence whatsoever and it makes the stuff of politics inconsequential, while on the other and more fundamentally, by making the subject an enterprise, it undermines her capacity for political action. It deals the final blow in its struggle against politics by reconstructing democracy as a ‘marketplace of ideas’. The result is a veritable plutocracy, not necessarily in the sense that the wealthy (οι πλουσίοι) legitimately rule (although that, too, is true), but rather in the sense that wealth as such (πλοῦτος: capital, the market, macroeconomic demands) legitimately rules.

**Neoliberal existence**

_Es möchte kein Hund so länger leben!

J.W. von Goethe, _Faust I_

This brings us to the human condition in a neoliberal world. For although we know that the neoliberal subject is not a moral agent nor a political agent in any meaningful sense of those words, we are still in the dark with regards to what does define everyday neoliberal life. Although lots can said and has been said on this topic, I want to draw attention to three aspects which so far have received little attention.

The first aspect defines what the neoliberal subject is called on to do in a neoliberal world. It lies at the very root of neoliberal thought, and it is inherent in the understanding of the subject Hayek endorses. In an essay on what he dramatically terms ‘true individualism’, Hayek asserts that this form of individualism “is a product of an acute consciousness of the limitations of the individual mind which induces an attitude of humility towards the impersonal and anonymous social processes by which individuals help to create things greater than they know.”

This notion of the individual is in effect a euphemism for the adage Philip Mirowski attributes to neoliberalism: “surrender your selfish arrogance and humbly prostrate yourself before the Wisdom of the Universe, as nurtured and conveyed by the market.” The ‘attitude of humility’ Hayek celebrates is, I would say, at the very core of the notion of the entrepreneurial self; it is the most fundamental moral injunction imposed upon the individual. The speck of human capital is made to be responsibly entrepreneurial by, indeed, submitting itself to market forces of supply and demand, investment and depreciation, competition and exchange.

Because neoliberalism, as Mirowski forcefully argues, induces its subjects to submit to the market, it benefits from widespread ignorance. It should be noted that this holds true merely for a specific kind of ignorance, namely ignorance with regards to social, political, or economic processes. In effect, any knowledge beyond an individual’s imme-

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48 Friedrich Hayek, _Individualism and Economic Order_ (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1948), 8. This understanding of individualism and the individual can be found throughout Hayek’s entire oeuvre.

diate interests—which is what the market works with—is suspect. The ignorant speck of capital is more easily governable than the critical citizen, which means that neoliberalism views “ignorance as a status to be produced rather than a state to be mitigated.”

This results not just in think tank representatives spreading their banal ideology like a disease; it also means that as science is economised its more critical disciplines are wont to disappear (unless they can adapt to the ‘educational market’). The ideal neoliberal subject then is, first and foremost, an idiot in both the classical and in the contemporary sense of that term.

The second aspect of the neoliberal condition, as the Italian sociologist Maurizio Lazzarato points out, is that the logic of human capital inevitably leads to indebted people.

It is easy to see how investment in the self that is human capital quickly becomes a form of debt, because neoliberal rationality holds the individual responsible for such investment. As is the case with all investment, investment in the self entails risks; risks that the individual herself must bear. This fits perfectly with the neoliberal tendency to privatise and offload all sorts of costs, including risks, debts (unless they were incurred by banks, in which case they are nationalised instead), the costs of investment, social security, and so on. Debt follows quite logically from neoliberal rationality, for the neoliberal subject, who is made to submit herself to market forces, ought to realise that any investment in skills or resources which are not in demand is a risky one. This means that in the neoliberal mind-set the individual who failed to find a job clearly must have made a poor investment choice along the way. If she chooses to study or to develop a skill, she likewise ought to realise that she alone is going to profit from those skills (or so the neoliberal myth goes), so she alone must bear the costs of the investment.

Those without the financial means to compete on the market of human capitals are as a result forced to shoulder huge debts. These debts, however, are not merely of a financial nature. The loans neoliberal subjects are made to accept bring with them moral, temporal, and social debt as well. The moral debt lies in the fact that the debtor, in making a promise, commits herself morally to keeping that promise. Indeed, “isn’t paying one’s debts,” David Graeber asks, “what morality is supposed to be all about?” Secondly, the temporal debt, as Lazzarato argues, entails a “promise to pay a debt, a promise to repay in a more or less distant and unpredictable future, since it is subject to the radical uncertainty of time.” The debtor promises not only to pay back the loan, she in fact promises to devote her futurity to repaying it. Here we already catch a glimpse of the state of precarity of the neoliberal subject (to be discussed shortly), because this subjectivity is inherently characterised by uncertainty. “Granting credit,” Lazzarato observes with Nietzsche, “requires one to estimate that which is inestimable—future behavior and

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50 Ibid., 81. Emphasis omitted.
51 For an excellent essay on neoliberalism and idiocy, see Curtis, Idiotism.
53 Lazzarato notes with Nietzsche that the word ‘debt’ in some languages, including German (Schuld), Swedish (skuld), and Dutch (schuld), means both financial debt and moral guilt.
54 David Graeber, Debt: The First 5,000 Years (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2011), 4.
55 Lazzarato, The Making of Indebted Man, 45.
events—and to expose oneself to the uncertainty of time.”\(^6^6\) Lastly, the social debt exists therein that the indebted individual has a debt not only to her creditor, but to society as a whole. Society allowed her to invest in her human capital (even if, ironically, she paid for it herself), by providing the institutions for such investment (schools, universities, infrastructure) or providing for the protection of such investment (health care, property law) and as such the individual who does not pay back in fact swindles society as much as she swindles her creditor. It is for this reason that the unemployed are treated as criminals and are made to pay back in different ways if they cannot repay financially. In the neoliberal debt economy, welfare rights, as Lazzarato attests, turn into debts. This is why “the beneficiary as ‘debtor’ is not expected to reimburse in actual money but rather in conduct, attitudes, ways of behaving, plans, subjective commitments, the time devoted to finding a job, the time used for conforming oneself to the criteria dictated by the market and business, etc.”\(^5^7\)

Whoever is indebted, is easily governable. This goes for individuals, whose debt will function as a powerful incentive to become entrepreneurial, but it likewise goes for nation-states. Historically speaking, national debt has often been used as a precursor to thorough neoliberalisation, a process that as a matter of course bypasses democratic procedures.\(^5^8\) In sum, investment in human capital implies debt, which in turn implies financial, moral, temporal, and social subjugation on an individual level and neoliberalisation on a national level.

The third and most important aspect of the neoliberal condition is that the neoliberal speck of human capital is caught in a maelstrom of anonymous, incomprehensible, unforgiving, and often violent forces that constitute the market—forces which, to add insult to injury, the subject is not only made to accept, but to celebrate. Being no longer morally or politically sovereign, the neoliberal subject’s rights, security, and at times even her survival are tethered to market demands.\(^5^9\) Meanwhile, the neoliberalised, entrepreneurial state has only one role: to conform to macroeconomic demands and injunctions. Again Rancière hits the nail on the head: “At the end of the day, proof of the right of state power is identical to the evidence that it only ever does the only thing possible, only ever what is required by strict necessity in the growing intricacy of economies within the global market.”\(^6^0\) This means that the state can legitimately cast off or forcefully reconfigure any one of the specks of capital it rules over if these should turn out to be unproductive. This conclusion follows from neoliberal responsibilisation of the individual (blaming individual subjects for market failure)\(^6^1\) combined with said reconstruction of the state. If the latter’s legitimacy no longer derives from the protection of a broad pallet of rights,

\(^{56}\) Ibid.

\(^{57}\) Ibid, p. 104.


\(^{59}\) Brown, Undoing the Demos, 110.


as with the ‘embedded liberalism’ of the post-bellum era, it has no reason to offer its
subjects anything more than minimum social protection in the case of those it hopes to
reconfigure (e.g. through welfare programmes), or anything less than brutal subjugation
in others (e.g. through violent repression of Britain’s ‘chavs’ or France’s ‘racaille’).\(^{62}\)

The main argument here is that with the disappearance of the protection of basic rights
from neoliberal state rationality, the neoliberal subject is exposed to what Judith Butler
might term a greater degree of precarity.\(^{63}\) Whilst neoliberal rationality shamelessly pun-
ishes the neoliberal subject’s constitutive other (the welfare dependent, the unemployed
(or ‘job-seeker’), the irresponsible, the unentrepreneurial—in a word, the slothful) and
whilst its punishment certainly targets certain social groups, classes, or ethnicities more
readily and more viciously than others, at the same time it constructs a society where any-
one can be cast off in the blink of an eye; where, ultimately, everyone is exposed to
disenfranchisement, social abjection, or even violent repression. We should not make
the mistake of thinking that neoliberalism only punishes the unlucky few, because even
those who are not sacrificed on the neoliberal altar of the market’s divine will are left
unsatisfied, depressed, overworked, or mentally ill.\(^{64}\)

The neoliberal subject, in sum, is more or less ignorant, more or less indebted, and more
or less exposed to abjection and punishment, but is always insecure, always submitted
to anonymous forces, and always nigh powerless to influence them.

**Conclusion**

“Nothing makes conditions more unbearable than the knowledge that no effort of ours
can change them,” Hayek writes in *The Road to Serfdom*, and if he is right, then the neo-
liberal condition of amoral, apolitical wretchedness is indeed most unbearable.\(^{65}\) Ne-
oliberal rationality, as Foucault noted presciently, reconstructs the subject along entre-
preneurial lines and casts her every activity in terms of investment, competition, and
income obtention. This rationality leads to a mode of subjectivity that is divested of
morality and of political subjectivity, and which turns everyday life into a game of Russian
roulette, where the odds are ever in favour of the rich.

Neoliberalism promised to turn everyone into an heroic entrepreneur, into a John Galt.
What it did was quite the opposite: it turned people into specks of capital, mercilessly
subjugated to market forces, ever competitive, ever self-interested, ever exposed to be-
ing cast off. Surely, following Hayek’s reasoning, we must conclude that “sinister forces”
have “foiled our intentions” and that the “evil power” responsible “must be conquered

\(^{62}\) For an illustration of this argument, see Tyler, *Revoluting Subjects*; cf. Lazzarato, *The Making of
Indebted Man*.


\(^{64}\) There is some excellent literature on the relationship between a neoliberal ethos and mental
illness and social instability. For example Richard Wilkinson & Kate Pickett, *The Spirit Level: Why
[2012]). The former book argues that inequality leads to a wide range of problems, including obe-
sity, lower life expectancy, higher criminality, etc., whilst the latter argues that a thoroughly com-
petitive society induces mental health issues, including paranoia, schizophrenia, and depression.

\(^{65}\) Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom*, 128.
before we can resume the road to better things.” This insight is of course hardly new. The real question—one we seem frighteningly incapable of answering today—is, as it always has been: How?

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66 Ibid., 65.