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NEOLIBERALISM AND THE DESUBJECTIVIZED SUBJECT: POWER, IDENTITY, AND THE HOLLOWING OF THE SELF

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Abstract

Neoliberalism is not just about the economy. It is a system that slowly strips people of their ability to act freely. It weakens their interior lives, vitality, and freedom is redefined into something more akin to the market. In today's world, people are also encouraged to use their freedom to climb the economic ladder by building social capital, working harder, managing their time more efficiently, and making "smart" choices based on data and performance metrics, even when those choices aren't truly free. The neoliberal subject lives in a world where neoliberal ideological formation has done deep cultural work doesn't just affect policies, it also shapes how we think, limit our ability to dream that another world is possible. Neoliberalism, in this sense, doesn't just manage the world, it manages our imaginations. Drawing on thinkers such as Michel Foucault, Patric Plesa, Byung-Chul Han, Shoshana Zuboff, and others, the paper examines how neoliberalism fosters a distinct kind of individual, one who relinquishes political power, transforms their inner life into a means of performance, and trades genuine autonomy for market-driven self-management, performing, and conforming within systems shaped by algorithms, debt, and surveillance. Drawing on political theory, sociology, and cultural analysis, explains how neoliberalism reshapes people into economic tools, while erasing the foundations necessary for independent thought, a genuine sense of self, and meaningful participation in democratic life. It argues that power today does not work by repressing individuals, but by creating a more limited version of themselves that is governed not through force, but through the illusion of freedom.

Keywords

Neoliberalism, Subjectivity, Desubjectivity, Subject, Agency, Self-Determination

Shape without form, shade without colour, Paralysed force, gesture without motion

T.S. Eliot's "The Hollow Men"

We had the experience but missed the meaning, And approach to the meaning restores the experience
T. S. Eliot's poem "The Dry Salvages"

Introduction

Since the late 20th century, neoliberalism has evolved beyond being merely an economic approach based on free markets and privatization, becoming a governing philosophy that shapes nearly every aspect of life. Neoliberalism has reshaped not only economies and institutions but also the very nature of subjectivity. Rather than being a neutral backdrop to economic activity, neoliberalism functions as a system of subject formation and exploitation, one that systematically alters how individuals experience others, themselves, their freedom, and their role in society. This system exploits people by turning their basic need to survive into a commodity that can be marketed and sold back to them for profit (Plesa, 2025). Rather than enabling genuine freedom, it forces individuals into competition, where success under neoliberalism often means exploiting others, such as running businesses that pay workers the lowest possible wages. This reduces social relations to transactions and instrumental exchanges (Plesa, 2025, p. 34).

To succeed under neoliberalism, you must turn inward and treat yourself as both the product and the entrepreneur (Plesa, 2025, p. 34). Plesa (2025) describes this as a form of self-usury, where the individual sells aspects of their identity, experiences, or emotions that can be branded and sold (p. 34). It's not just about

showcasing talents or skills; it's about selling your personal history, even your pain, as a commodity for public consumption (Plesa, 2025, p. 34). In this system, vulnerability becomes marketable entities; stories of depression, trauma, or disability are transformed into social media content, attracting attention, sponsorships, and profit (Plesa, 2025, p.34).

In today's neoliberal society, where self-worth is judged by income and financial independence, personal value is increasingly defined in market terms, reflecting Foucault's (2008) insight that neoliberalism does not restrict freedom but reshapes it by encouraging individuals to adopt market values and regulate themselves (Plesa, 2025, p. 50). This shift or transformation in behavior is central to the concept of the neoliberal desubjectivized subject. Instead of being guided by reflection, morality, or political agency, the self under neoliberalism becomes a collection of measurable outputs and self-managed behaviors (Brown, 2015; Han, 2017). The casualties of are the neoliberal desubjectivized individuals, whose instrumentalized existence is reduced to productivity, consumption, or conformity, the tools of class power.

This paper addresses the role that neoliberalism plays in reconfiguring the very foundations of agency, self-determination, and interior life. Through the lens of the neoliberal desubjectivized subject, it examines how individuals are reshaped into self-optimizing agents governed by market rationality rather than autonomous decision-making. Drawing on interdisciplinary perspectives from political theory, cultural studies, and critical sociology, the analysis highlights how neoliberalism hollows out subjectivity, reducing human experience to conformity, performance, and economic value.

Neoliberalism as a Regime of Subject Formation

In the Enlightenment, the subject was viewed as a rational, autonomous individual whose capacity for thought, morality, and politics formed the basis of reason and freedom (Horkheimer et al., 2020). In *Two Lectures*, Foucault argued that subjectivity is not innate but formed through power and discourse, as individuals acquire their identities, agency, and roles within society (Butler, 1997). For example, consider the modern workplace, where workers are often presented as independent individuals who freely choose a job and use reason to pursue their personal goals. Foucault, however, would argue that workers' identity as an "employee" is shaped by systems of power, employment contracts, corporate hierarchies, performance reviews, workplace norms, and even professional language. These structures do not just manage the worker's behavior; they actively shape how the worker understands themselves and defines their place in society.

In this way, the person's subjectivity gets produced through power relations rather than expressed from within. Foucault (1961/1988a) contends that our sense of self is shaped by historical processes, a dynamic he termed subjectification, which refers to the ways history influences how we think about and define ourselves (Plesa, 2025, p. 30).

Subjectivation can also refer to different processes depending upon one's worldview, for instance, it may describe how individuals become subjected to various ideologies, manifold institutions, or state power (Traue & Pfahl, 2024, p. 26). Or it can refer to subjectivity, how people feel, think, and relate to the world, sometimes even beyond their immediate circumstances (Traue & Pfahl, 2024, p. 26). Importantly, it also signifies the process through which a person gains the capacity to act as a subject (Traue & Pfahl, 2024, p.26). "Conceptions of the self are not fixed but continually evolve" (Plesa, 2025, p. 30). The term "subjection" captures two related ideas: being subjected to power-controlled, disciplined, or dominated conditions, and being made into a subject, with identity, self-awareness, and agency (Deacon, 2006).

These transformations take shape in institutions like prisons, schools, and courts, which does not just regulate people's behavior but also actively shape their identities, social roles, and ways of understanding themselves (Jabal & Rivière, 2007). Just like the worker and the student, the prisoner's identity is not solely a product of personal agency but is historically and institutionally molded to conform to dominant power structures. Moskowitz (2019) explains that capitalism operates by shaping individuals into a specific type of person, one who thinks and acts like an economic actor, always focused on owning, trading, and valuing things (p. 86). In this system, people are primarily viewed in terms of what they possess, much like the commodities they own. They get evaluated by a logic that treats everyone and everything as comparable and interchangeable (Moskowitz, 2019, p. 86).

Moskowitz (2019) argues that capitalism relies on people perceiving themselves and others primarily as owners or potential owners of goods, which helps maintain its notion of justice (p. 86). As Tairako (2018) explains, in a capitalist system, the mutual dependence of workers is obscured because the work they do for one another is concealed within the exchange of commodities, making their connections appear not as genuine social relationships between people but as abstract relationships between the products they produce and trade. Imagine a farmer who grows wheat and a baker makes bread, rather than seeing their connection as two people working together to feed a community, capitalism frames it as an exchange between wheat and bread, turning a human relationship into a transaction between products.

For example, recently, a black leather Birkin bag once owned and used by Jane Birkin, although it showed signs of scratches and stains, was auctioned at Sotheby's for €8.6 million or $10 million, setting a world record for a handbag (Palumbo, 2025). Despite its worn condition, it was valued as an exceptionally rare luxury item (Palumbo, 2025, para.1). The handbag illustrates fetishization because its value is treated as if it comes from the object itself its distinctiveness, aura of status, and exclusivity, rather than from its practical use or the labor that produced it, and through the auction this ordinary item is transformed into a social totem, a marker of class distinction and cultural capital, where it's worth is detached from utility and connected instead in symbolic power (Bourdieu, 2018).

Capitalism simplifies the transaction to a mere exchange of money for an exclusive handbag, masking deeper social relations and making it appear as if value lies solely in the object, rather than in the relationship between people involved in the exchange (Zuboff, 2019).

The process of shaping individuals' identities in the neoliberal era began in the 1990s, as the economy shifted toward neoliberal policies, which then evolved into a broader neoliberal culture and, eventually, a set of cultural values spread through self-help books, workshops, and similar tools (Plesa, 2025, pp. 31–32). According to Harvey (2005), this transformation replaced traditional government with "governance". Neoliberal governance seeks to reduce public services, making individuals responsible for managing their own lives and assuming duties such as healthcare, financial security, and personal safety that had once been the responsibility of the state (Plesa, 2025, p. 32).

Han (2017) argues that neoliberal psychopolitics continually invents new and more sophisticated ways to exploit people, often disguised as opportunities for personal growth. Through endless self-management workshops, motivational retreats, and seminars on personality development or mental training, individuals are encouraged to pursue limitless self-improvement and greater efficiency (Han, 217, p. 28). However, this pursuit often serves the interests of the system, extracting more productivity from individuals under the guise of empowerment (Han, 217, p. 28).

Han (2017) explains that neoliberalism employs subtle techniques of control that seek to profit not only from a person's labor but also from the whole person, including their attention, energy, and even their life itself (p. 28). In this way, neoliberalism turns the entirety of human existence into a resource for exploitation, shaping individuals who appear autonomous but are molded to fit economic norms (Hans,2017, p.28). Wiede (2020) argues that trustworthy agency acting from one's convictions gets replaced by a hollow version in which a person's capacity to act is judged by how well they comply with established norms or directives, making obedience appear as if it were a genuine choice.

Neoliberalism legitimizes the right to exploit through its policies, while its cultural norms condition individuals to accept and even internalize their exploitation (Plesa, 2025, p. 33). According to Davis (2014), neoliberal ideology promotes a deceptive meritocracy in which success is attributed to competition and failure is blamed on personal shortcomings (Plesa, 2025, p. 33). The mandate for self-optimization under neoliberalism is not human flourishing but maximizing efficiency, performance, and measurability according to market standards (Han, 2017, p. 28). This push toward constant self-improvement is less about personal fulfillment and more about conforming to economic pressures that define worth in quantifiable terms (Han, 2017, p. 28).

Foucault's insight lies in showing how deeply our sense of self has become entangled with the logic of the market (Moskowitz, 2019, p. 85). If, as he argues, the market is now the main authority for determining truth under capitalism, then it does more than explain prices or trade; it shapes how we understand who we are (Moskowitz, 2019, p. 85). The market doesn't just reflect our choices; it absorbs the very structure of subjectivity, treating us as part of its system. In this view, people are no less "economic data" than tax forms or production reports (Moskowitz, 2019, p. 85). Our identities are framed in market terms, making us see ourselves first and foremost as economic beings (Moskowitz, 2019, p. 85)

Freedom is only a temporary phase, experienced when shifting from one mode of life to another, until the new state reveals itself as another form of coercion (Han,2017, p.8) In contemporary life, we no longer see ourselves as subjugated "subjects" but as self-directed "projects," constantly reshaping and optimizing ourselves (Han,2017, p.8). This apparent freedom masks a deeper, self-imposed compulsion, where internal pressures to achieve and improve replace external forms of domination (Han, 2017, p. 8).

What is Desubjectivization?

Han's notion of modern freedom is best understood through the lens of desubjectivization, which explains how contemporary forms of power reshape our sense of self and agency (p. 8). He explains that what feels like freedom is usually temporary; we feel free only when moving from one way of living to another, until the new situation turns out to be another form of pressure (Han, 2017, p. 8). In the modern world, people no longer view themselves as openly controlled "subjects" but as self-directed "projects," constantly striving to improve and optimize themselves (Han, 2017, p. 8). That is what desubjectivization looks like in everyday life: the stable, reflective self gets replaced by a self that is always working on itself and measuring its worth (Abramov, 2022).

This situation highlights how anonymous online marketplaces contribute to the desubjectivization of workers, who come to feel like mere extensions of a vast, digital socio-technical system governed by surveillance and control (Abramov, 2022, p.36). It also emphasizes how specialized equipment is designed to integrate low-skilled workers into the platform's complex algorithmic infrastructure (Abramov, 2022, p. 36). This situation also illuminates how, in capitalist societies, human beings no longer experience their labor as an expression of their inner purpose or creativity; instead, labor becomes a means of survival, stripped of meaning, autonomy, and dignity (Marx, 1844). As Erich Fromm explains, people transfer the attributes of life and creativity onto their products, commodities, technologies, institutions, and then worship [and made slaves of] their creations as if they had power over them (Fromm, 1961).

Foucault's idea of self-governance also helps explain this shift. Instead of being forced to obey by an outside authority, people now enforce rules on themselves, driven by an inner pressure to perform and succeed (Foucault, 1991). Postma (2015) argues that under neoliberalism, the human subject becomes a "performative subject," motivated by internal imperatives to optimize performance rather than respond to external coercion. These pressures change how people act and make choices from the inside, playing a key role in how neoliberal power works (Smith, 2022). Han's idea of the "project-self" shows that what seems like personal freedom can actually be a form of control (Graham, 2022).

Desubjectivization can be examined through both sociological and philosophical frameworks that explore the formation and undoing of the subject (Nakawa, Uegatani, Otani, & Fukuda, 2023). Post-structuralist thinkers such as Foucault, for example, investigate how individuals are constituted through processes of governmentality, where disciplinary systems and self-regulation practices actively produce the modern subject. However, these exact mechanisms that "subjectivize" individuals also constrain their autonomy by embedding them within networks of power and control (Wiede, 2020). For instance, in educational settings, students are taught to regulate their behavior, track their academic progress, and internalize performance metrics. While this fosters self-discipline and productivity, it also reduces the student to a measurable unit of achievement, shaped to fit institutional goals rather than personal growth, an example of subject formation that simultaneously limits genuine agency (Tao & Jing, 2023).

"Desubjectivization doesn't mean that subjectivity disappears entirely, it means that our sense of self is either reduced or reshaped in a new way." In Foucault's terms, this occurs through the very mechanisms that initially produce the subject, such as disciplinary institutions (Monter, Parker, & Starr-LeBeau, 2017), schools, surveillance (Peddiraju, Pamulaparthi, Adupa, & Thoutam, 2022), and technologies of the self (Hernández-Ramírez, 2017). Control today isn't just about laws or visible rules; it is built into the everyday systems we interact with (Stojnić, 2018). Stojnić (2018) explains that these control systems operate across all areas of life, influencing our thoughts, behaviors, and everyday routines, reflecting what philosopher Gilles Deleuze described as a "society of control" (p. 220). In this kind of world, power operates quietly and constantly through technology, institutions, and routines (Stojnić, 2018, p. 220).

Deleuze explains that, unlike Foucault's disciplinary societies, where governments tended to treat people in two ways at once (Stojnić, 2018, p. 220). They treated people as part of a larger group while also shaping each person's identity as a separate individual (Stojnić, 2018, p. 220). But in today's Deleuzian world, "society of control," things have shifted. It's no longer about counting or organizing people in fixed ways (Stojnić, 2018, p. 220). Instead, power also works through digital codes (*password*, while on the other hand disciplinary societies are regulated by *watchwords*) and data, breaking people down into fragments, what Deleuze calls "dividuals" (Stojnić, 2018, p. 220). These are not whole individuals, but bits of information, behaviors, or patterns that can be tracked, analyzed, and managed in increasingly subtle and complex ways (Stojnić, 2018, p. 220).

In this process, the subject loses some of their essential qualities, including agency, interiority, and self-determination, in addition to losing the ability to act freely and intentionally (Đukić, 2020). Like the haunting in T.S. Eliot's poem *"The Hollow Men*," which depicts modern man as being in a state of spiritual emptiness and existential angst. Also, like his modern predecessors, postmodern man inhabits a world in which meaning, vitality, and authenticity have been drained away. Truth dissolves into thin air, leaving behind a self that gestures but cannot act, speaks but cannot believe (Eliot, 1925, ll. 11–12). The move toward data banks marks a pivotal development in understanding how today's digital systems of control function, especially in the way they reduce individuals to quantifiable units of information strips away human dignity and humanity (Stojnić, 2018, p. 222).

When subjectivity is reconfigured, the individual no longer functions as a fully autonomous agent. The capacity to act purposefully is now distributed across social, technological, and institutional systems instead of primarily resting with the individual (Han, 2015). This makes people more reactive and connected to larger structures, reducing their sense of acting independently (Beyer et al., 2016). Foucault's concept of subjectivation illustrates how institutions like schools, prisons, and governments not only restrict people but also shape their identities (Foucault, 1977). Today, the self is viewed less as a fixed individual and more as something fluid, shaped by shifting networks of social power (Bauman, 2000).

For example, social media disrupts our ability to form a cohesive sense of self, as algorithms and public reactions influence not only how we present ourselves but also how we think, feel, and reflect. This fragmentation

extends even to our inner lives, affecting our emotions, moral awareness, and capacity for self-reflection (Hutto & Gilbert, 2014). The brilliance as well as the tragedy of our current era we have learned to weaponize compassion itself (MacLean, 2025). Institutional violence now arrives cloaked in the rhetoric of protection. At the same time, policies of exclusion are sold as inclusion, and systems that inflict harm are promoted as instruments of healing (MacLean, 2025, para. 6). We have engineered a society driven by good intentions. However, it manufactures suffering with the cold efficiency of an assembly line (MacLean, 2025, para. 6).

> The evangelical who votes to separate families at the border does so because he believes in the sanctity of family. The liberal who supports policies that gentrify neighborhoods does so because she believes in community de-velopment. The conservative who opposes healthcare expansion does so be -cause he believes in personal responsibility. The progressive who advocates for policies that close rural hospitals does so because she believes in efficiency. They have all found ways to make their hearts beat in rhythm with their principles, even when those principles produce results that would seem to contradict their deepest values. Every denied asylum claim becomes a state-ment about national sovereignty. Every banned book becomes a declaration about family values. Every closed clinic becomes a testimony to the preservation of life. We have learned to make meaning from misery, to transform human pain into political profit (As Quoted in MacLean, 2025, para.7,11).

Desubjectivization also occurs through moral outsourcing, where individuals come to trust and depend on institutions, party lines, or algorithmic logic for their moral decision-making. In the name of “efficiency,” “personal responsibility,” or “sovereignty,” people internalize the talking points and the party line, sidelining the need for critical thinking. These talking points transform moral contradictions into socially accepted actions, causing individuals to adopt political identities that diminish their capacity for empathy and the consequences of their actions. Modern society has developed a remarkable capacity for moral compartmentalization, allowing us to tolerate contradictions that earlier generations might have found revolting, even revolutionary (Maclean,2025, para.9). The real tragedy is not that they are villains, but that they are simply humans struggling to be good in a world where genuine goodness is nearly out of reach and avoiding cruelty is almost impossible (Maclean,2025, para.15).

Domains of Desubjectivization

Self-determination in the realms of labor and work is the ability to set one's own goals and values, free from the control of outside systems that dictate what should be pursued or how success should be measured (Kadigi et al.,2021). Byung-Chul Han (2015) in The Burnout Society argues that in neoliberal achievement societies, individuals internalize coercion and become their own taskmasters, leading to chronic self-exploitation, anxiety, and burnout (p. 17). Han highlights a paradox in late modernity. The “animal laborans," or (the being who labors for survival), was once associated with simple, almost animal-like, repetitive work (Han, 2015, p. 18).

However, today’s version is far from passive. Instead, people are hyperactive and anxious, constantly driven to perform and produce (Han, 2015, p. 18). Han suggests that modern life has reduced nearly every form of human activity to labor, yet this labor is accompanied by restless, nervous energy (Han, 2015, p. 18). This hyper-neurotic state reflects a deeper cultural condition, where self-imposed pressure to achieve dominates existence rather than external compulsion (Han, 2015, p. 18). By the 1980s and 1990s, the rise of new styles of business (neoliberal) management, global finance, and technology-driven workplaces changed the relationship between employers and employees (Abramov, 2022, p. 48). These changes promoted labor deregulation, which was presented as giving workers more flexibility and freedom, but in practice, they often meant loosening protections and shifting risks onto employees (Abramov, 2022, p. 48).

This transformation gave rise to widespread precarious employment on call work and zero hours contracts, where wages are paid only for hours worked (Precarious Employment, 2021; Crawch, 2020), and soon extended to the reclassification of workers as self-employed or even "individual entrepreneurs," a move cynically portrayed as liberating them from the obligations of permanent employment (Abramov, 2022, p. 48). In industries shaped by platform capitalism, work became completely “liquid,” driven by algorithms, global supply chains, online marketplaces, and the use of digital day laborers treated as replaceable parts (Abramov, 2022, p. 48).

In the gig economy, platforms like Uber extend this model, using algorithmic management to monitor and discipline workers, while celebrating flexibility in practice, yet producing instability, limited autonomy, and the reduction of human labor to data points governed by metrics and customer ratings (Abramov, 2022, p. 48). Neoliberalism reshapes subjectivity into the human capital it needs, encouraging individuals to participate willingly rather than feeling the alienation characteristic of the industrial era (Posta, 2015). It presents itself as a

comprehensive and inevitable system that promises personal satisfaction, social benefits, and progress across various domains, including political, educational, medical, and environmental (Posta, 2015, p. 32). Full compliance with its logic is framed not only as serving individual interests but also the collective and ecological good (Posta, 2015, p. 32).

Technology and Surveillance

Shoshana Zuboff's concept of surveillance capitalism shows how digital platforms collect information about us and analyze behavioral data to predict and influence human actions (Saura, Ribeiro-Soriano, & Palacios-Marqués, 2022). Social media also transforms the individual into a predictable consumer profile by favoring performative displays over genuine selfhood, reducing emotional experiences to simple engagement metrics (Civila & Jaramillo-Dent, 2022).

Zuboff's The Age of Surveillance Capitalism presents a disturbing account of how technology companies, particularly in Silicon Valley, exploit user data to predict and influence behavior (Holloway, 2019). Earlier, in her 2002 work The Support Economy, she examined capitalism's struggle to shift from mass consumption toward a personalized model (Laidler,2019, para.2). As Laidler (2019) observed, the technology to match supply more precisely with demand had finally arrived (para.2). However, early e-commerce innovators seemed more intent on monitoring users and driving ad revenue than realizing this transformative potential (Laidler,2019, para.2). Initially, this appeared to be the inevitable turbulence of a significant transition. However, by 2007, it was evident that a new form of capitalism had taken hold, one driven by rapid monetization rather than the fulfillment of individual needs (Laidler, 2019, para. 3).

Today, if one browses the internet or scrolls through social media searching for a car, guitar, or any other product, one will quickly find yourself flooded with targeted ads from Google, Facebook, or YouTube promoting the very items just looked up (Holloway, 2019, para. 2) This is no coincidence it is precisely what Zuboff describes as surveillance capitalism (Holloway, 2019, para. 2). In today's market-driven system, personal data is a valuable commodity gathered through widespread online tracking, often by "free" services like Google and Facebook gather this data to fuel advertising and influence consumer behavior (Holloway, 2019, para.2).

Over the last decade, surveillance capitalism has taken shape as a new way of organizing social and political life (Zuboff, 2015, p. 79). For Google and other primary "big data" companies, the personal information they gather is reduced to nothing more than strings of digital bits (Zuboff, 2015, p. 79). In the process, aspects of our thoughts, preferences, and behaviors, which are integral to our subjectivity, are transformed into marketable products (Zuboff, 2015, p. 79). The deeper meaning or intent behind what people do online is irrelevant to these firms. What matters is collecting small fragments of data, turning them into massive "big data" sets, and monetizing them, a process that shows just how indifferent these companies are toward the people they call their "users" (Zuboff, 2015, p. 79).

People today are not just internet users; they are also a source of raw material for the digital economy. The information we generate becomes both the resource companies' harvest and the target of the products and services they create (Zuboff, 2015, p. 79). Because many transactions now occur online, activities that were previously invisible can be tracked and incorporated into business agreements in ways that were not possible before (Zuboff, 2015, p. 81). For example, if someone stops making car payments, the vehicle can be located and disabled remotely. Insurance companies can decide whether to approve a claim based on a driver's recorded behavior. Employers can even confirm whether remote employees are working by using data from their smartphones, such as location, timestamps, or photos (Zuboff, 2015, p. 81).

Kevin D. Haggerty and Richard V. Ericson (2001) argue that we are beginning to understand that surveillance is driven by the goal of connecting systems, merging disparate practices and technologies into a unified whole. This drive for integration is what allows us to think of surveillance as an "assemblage," since these combinations can exponentially expand its overall capacity (Haggerty & Ericson, 2001, p. 610). Unlike Orwell's state-controlled Oceania, this assemblage functions across both governmental and non-governmental institutions (Haggerty & Ericson, 2000, p. 610). Philipkoski (1998) argues that the police are constantly seeking ways to connect their various computer systems and databases. For example, the FBI's forensics division has been working to integrate fingerprint, ballistics, and DNA databases (Haggerty & Ericson, 2001, p. 610). Another example of such integration is the regional police computer network in Central Scotland (Haggerty & Ericson, 2001, p. 610).

> Phone conversations, reports, tip-offs, hunches, consumer and social security databases, crime data, phone bugging, audio, video and pictures, and data com -munications are inputted into a seamless GIS [geographic information system], allowing a relational simulation of the time-space choreography of the area to be used in investigation and monitoring by the whole force. The Chief Constable states: 'what do we class as intelligence in my new system in the force? Everything! The whole vast range of information that comes into the possession of a police force during a twenty four hour period will go on to

> my corporate database. Everything that every person and vehicle is associated with'(As Quoted in Haggerty & Ericson,2001, p.610).

They explain that what we are seeing is the merging of previously separate surveillance systems into what can be described as a new "surveillant assemblage" (Haggerty & Ericson, 2001, p. 606). This assemblage works by detaching human bodies from their physical locations and breaking them down into separate streams of information. These streams are recombined into unique "data doubles," which can be examined and used as targets for intervention (Haggerty & Ericson, 2001, p. 606). Data doubles travel through many places where decisions are made (Haggerty & Ericson,2001, p. 613-614). Governments, social media platforms, and marketers increasingly target them.

However, it is not their physical bodies or even their thoughts that are under direct watch. Instead, surveillance focuses on their consumption patterns, their "data double," a digital profile constructed from their online footprint and consumption behavior (Haggerty & Ericson,2001, p. 618). This profile is used to predict what they might buy and to shape attitudes that make them more open to exploitation as consumers (Haggerty & Ericson,2001, p. 6i8). Surveillance technologies not only track our consumptive habits and monitor how we work. When people cross borders, their physical bodies are recorded into digital systems, turned into data points. At the same time, those digital records shape what can happen to their bodies (Stojnić, 2018, p. 222). As Kuster and Tsianos explain I *"Erase Them! Eurodac and Digital Deportability,"* when refugees are fingerprinted at Europe's borders, their information spreads instantly through EU systems, making deportation an ever-present possibility. Even as people move across borders, their "data doubles" move faster, their digital profiles is inscribed into the body itself, forcing individuals to carry it wherever they go and restricting their freedom of movement (Stojnić, 2018, p. 222).

As a result, the desubjectivized subject of neoliberal capitalism loses a sense of personal agency. Algorithms subtly shape choices, promoting conformity, self-surveillance, and passivity while discouraging dissenting thought (Montag & Elhai, 2023). As surveillance becomes routine and invisible, it is normalized, making resistance seem futile or irrational and thereby reinforcing compliance (Zuboff, 2019). In surveillance capitalism, the engineering of souls is replaced by the engineering of behavior, reducing humans to animal-like patterns of action stripped of reflective meaning (Zuboff, 2019, pp. 376, 382). Decades earlier, Arendt foresaw this danger in behaviorism, warning of a diminished view of thought as a mere function of the "brain" that could be transferred to "electronic instruments" (Zuboff, 2019, p. 382).

> The last stage of the laboring society, the society of jobholders, demands of its members a sheer automatic functioning, as though individual life had been submerged in the overall life process of the species. The only active decision still required of the individual was to let go, so to speak, to abandon his individuality, the still individually sensed pain and trouble of living, and acquiesce in a dazed, "tranquilized," functional type of behavior. The trouble with modern theories of behaviorism is not that they are wrong but that they could become true, that they actually are the best possible conceptualization of certain obvious trends in modern society. It is quite conceivable that the modern age which began with such an unprecedented and promising outburst of human activity may end in the deadliest, most sterile passivity history has ever known" (As Quoted in Zuboff, 2019, p. 382).

Affective Life

Lauren Berlant's concept of "cruel optimism" captures how neoliberal subjects cling to life structures (careers, relationships, education) that hinder autonomy. Mental health issues like burnout and anxiety reflect the emotional cost of self-optimization. Cruel optimism occurs when something you long for ultimately hinders your own well-being. It could be food, a particular kind of love, an ideal of a good life, a political cause, or even a small new habit meant to improve you. Such desires are not cruel by nature (Berlant,2011). They become cruel only when the object of your desire ends up undermining the very purpose that made it desirable to you in the first place (Berlant, 2011, p. 2).

An example, cruel optimism could be the pursuit of a prestigious career. Someone might believe that landing a high-status corporate job will bring security, fulfillment, status, and respect. At first, the goal seems worth every sacrifice, including working long hours, being constantly available, and engaging in endless skill-building. However, over time, the job may demand so much energy and time that it erodes relationships, compromises health, and leaves the person feeling burnt out, disconnected, and even disappointed. In this case, the career, the very thing they hoped would enrich their life, ends up becoming the main obstacle to their well-being. Berlant argued that our identities are formed less through intentional, reflective decisions and more through unconscious drives and attachments that often operate beyond our awareness (Killian, 2021). Berlant suggests that the American

Dream is itself a form of cruel optimism (Killian, 2021, para. 2). means that the very promise it holds upward mobility, personal fulfillment, and security through hard work, can end up undermining the well-being of those who pursue it.

People sometimes cling to attachments that are ultimately harmful to themselves or others (Ryan, 2016, para. 7). While this might sound like masochism, Berlant's argument frames it differently (Ryan, 2016, para. 7). She does not claim that people take pleasure in cruel optimism; instead, she sees it as a strategy for survival. What sustains it is the comfort found in simply being in a relationship or situation, even when its actual content may be harmful because, as Berlant notes, "the very pleasures of being inside a relation have become sustaining regardless of the content of the relation" (Ryan, 2016, para. 7).

Berlant's concern is not with how strong this optimism feels but with how people use it (Ryan, 2016, para. 7). Holding on to fantasies of the "good life," despite harsh realities, can help people endure daily life. For many, the routines of everyday existence would feel unbearable without a larger dream or fantasy to make them seem worthwhile (Ryan, 2016, para. 7).

Political Implications

Neoliberalism de-democratizes life by shifting risk and responsibility onto individuals, dismantling collective support, and applying market logic to all areas of life. The isolates desubjectivize subjects, encouraging them to interpret systemic inequalities as personal failures, which fosters self-blame, shame, and distrust, especially in our commanding institutions. Wendy Brown (2006) captures this prevailing sentiment in American Nightmare, noting that over the years Americans have witnessed actions such as court rollbacks, regressive tax policies, certain state practices, anti-immigrant measures, and corrupt electoral processes. These developments, she argues, have not only hollowed out democratic political culture but have also shaped citizens in ways that make them less democratic.

> This is the citizen who loves and wants neither freedom nor equality, even of a liberal sort; the citizen who expects neither truth nor accountability in governance and state actions; the citizen who is not distressed by ex-orbitant concentrations of political and economic power,routine abrogation's of the rule, of law, or distinctly undemocratic formulations of national purpose at home and abroad (As quoted in Brown,2006, p.692)

Given our discussion of the desubjectivized subject as an alienated individual, this is a person whose agency and intentionality have been shaped, and in many ways diminished—by external systems such as surveillance capitalism. Mass culture reflects a deep cultural impoverishment and the loss of individuality. It represents a constant pursuit of what Freud refers to as "substitute gratifications" (Storey,2009). According to critics of mass culture, these substitutes prevent access to genuine satisfaction (Storey, 2009, p. 31). Van den Haag believes that when people turn to mass culture, they try to fill a sense of emptiness inside. However, instead of feeling better, the shallow entertainment only exacerbates that emptiness. Over time, the more people rely on it, the harder it becomes for them to feel truly satisfied (Storey, 2009, p. 31). The individual becomes trapped in a bleak routine, like a cultural addict, endlessly oscillating between boredom and superficial distraction without ever finding genuine fulfillment (Storey, 2009, p. 31).

> Though the bored person hungers for things to happen to him, the disheartening fact is that when they do he empties them of the very meaning he unconsciously yearns for by using them as distractions. In popular culture even the second coming would become just another 'barren' thrill to be watched on television till [Steve Colbert] comes on (As quoted in Storey,2009, p.31).

Mechanisms like algorithms and predictive analytics erode self-reflective individuality, stripping away the autonomous center of decision-making. As a result, the individual feels powerless, disconnected, and deprived of meaning, becoming reactive rather than intentional. In this condition, they often seek voice, empowerment, and a renewed sense of self through collective agency, finding belonging and purpose within mass movements. Arendt saw the roots of totalitarianism in mass movements built on "atomized, isolated individuals, "politically indifferent people, often neither poor nor unintelligent, who rarely engage in ordinary politics (Berkowitz, 2017). Lacking attachment to everyday concerns, they are drawn instead to grand, ideological causes that promise historical significance (Berkowitz, 2017, para.5) For Arendt, their essential homelessness fuels a desire to escape reality's randomness, making them receptive to movements offering meaning and certainty (Berkowitz, 2017, para.5).

> Simone Weil wrote that "to be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul." The modern condition of rootlessness is

> a foundational experience of totalitarianism; totalitarian movements succeed when they offer rootless people what they most crave: an ideologically consistent world aiming at grand narratives that give meaning to their lives. By consistently repeating a few key ideas, a manipulative leader provides a sense of rootedness grounded upon a coherent fiction that is "consistent, comprehensible, and predictable"(As Quoted in Berkowitz, 2017, para.6).

Life in America often feels unnecessarily complex, burdened with overwhelming obstacles that make achieving happiness nearly unattainable, turning it instead into a constant struggle to survive (Lazar,2025). From the perspective of many non-Americans visiting here or living here "The Land of the Free still feels like The Wild Wild West" (Lazar,2025, para.1). Even women and children are also left without social or welfare protection (Lazar,2025, para.9). Individuals stripped of autonomy, rights, and meaningful political agency feel reduced to mere instruments serving the neoliberal state objectives, rather than being recognized as self-determining people worthy of protection.

Conclusion

In the neoliberal era, subjectivity itself became a site of contest. Although neoliberalism typically refers to state policies, corporate practices, and globalization, it relies on specific forms of individual subjectivity, which both shape and sustain it (Postma,2015). Neoliberalism, despite its promises of reward, imposes two profound losses: it flattens human life into the one-dimensional logic of homo œconomicus and excludes the majority from meaningful participation in the world (Arendt, 1998), all while extracting surplus value from people and their environments (Postma, 2015, p.32). Its consequences are destructive for both humanity and the planet. (Postma, 2015, p.32). The relationship between neoliberalism, neoliberal culture, and the desubjectivized subject is complex and mutually reinforcing. Neoliberalism reshapes the sociocultural field to reflect and serve market logic, while neoliberal culture reflects and reproduces the values of neoliberal ideology, normalizing neoliberal values like competition, individualism, and consumerism.

Knowledge and power are not a path to freedom, but rather a tool of power that shapes and controls society (Traue & Pfahl, 2022, p. 28). Still, even though people are influenced and limited by these systems of power and knowledge, they possess sufficient agency to push for change (Traue & Pfahl, 2022, p. 28). Performance metrics are disciplinary tools. Workplace rules and metrics influence how people behave, but employees can still collectively push back (Padilla, Netto, & da Silva, 2020). Control does not erase the chance for change it can even create room for purposeful action (Foucault, 1977; Traue & Pfahl, 2022, p. 28). In neoliberalism, the self is not lost but used as a tool, and recognizing this is the first step toward resisting, regaining agency, and rethinking identity beyond capitalism (Steger & Roy, 2021).

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