Producing Subjects: A Theoretical Examination of the Effects of Neoliberal Human Capital Theory on Subjectivity and Subject Formation

Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Research Practice.

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Abstract

Producing Subjects is a theoretical examination of the effects of neoliberal human capital theory on subjectivity and subject formation. This thesis analyses how subjectivities are shaped by neoliberalism, considering it as a project that traverses and condenses economic, socio-cultural and political realms. Momentum is building for contesting neoliberalism at an economic level, however its colonisation of other arenas remains under-examined. Via its 'interpellative arm', human capital theory, neoliberalism operates at the level of ontology, shaping a 'common-sense' worldview that makes it difficult to imagine other realities, let alone collectively produce emancipatory left political projects.

After initially outlining some salient features of neoliberal epistemology, I will contrast Marx's social concept of capital with the hyper-individualist neoliberal concept of human capital. From this theoretical clash we can locate specific effects that indicate the presence of human capital theory in progressive discourse, and thus a 'progressive subject' conceived as human capital. I will explore what results politically as neoliberal subjects shape – and are shaped by – progressive political and cultural discourse, recognising always that the relationship between subjects and discourse is complex and dialectical.

This exploration involves designing a reading method based on critical discourse analysis, and applying it to two bodies of progressive discourse: the online platforms VICE and Everyday Feminism (EF). This novel reading method establishes a set of markers of human capital theory, and then locates these markers in discourse produced by VICE and EF. The specific focus on progressive discourse as a data source is necessary as I contend that neoliberalism often underpins the thought and action of those who identify as opposed to its political consequences and logic.

The reading method produces evidence that supports this thesis's contention, which is reflected upon at some length in a concluding analysis: many forms of progressive discourse unwittingly reproduce neoliberal norms via the production of a subject as human capital. Indeed, neoliberal human capital theory is a structural determinant of the progressive discourse analysed via this thesis's innovative reading method. The effects of human capital theory on subjectivity and subject formation — the ontological and epistemological implications of neoliberalism — are therefore far-reaching and profound, and call for urgent theoretical intervention.

Student Declaration

I, Paddy Gordon, declare that the Master of Research Practice thesis entitled *Producing Subjects: A Theoretical Examination of the Effects of Neoliberal Human Capital Theory on Subjectivity and Subject Formation* is no more than 60,000 words in length including quotes and exclusive of tables, figures, appendices, bibliography, references and footnotes. This thesis contains no material that has been submitted previously, in whole or in part, for the award of any other academic degree or diploma. Except where otherwise indicated, this thesis is my own work.

Signature

Date 15.08.2020

This thesis is dedicated to Jessica and Ella, without whom it would not have been possible.

Many friends and family have been generous with their time, incisive with their critique and unstinting in their support. The arguments herein have been developed and refined both via reading and via lively discussion with the aforementioned friends and family: my gratitude for their patience, guidance and kindness is deep. I am humbled by the support I have received. You all know who you are, and I offer the sincerest thanks for helping me turn monologues into dialogues. I couldn't ask for a better community of constructive critics.

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Introduction

Overture

In a discussion at the University of Chicago in October 2012, the Nobel Prize winning economist and exponent of human capital theory Gary Becker engaged in a conversation about the course of Michel Foucault's lectures collected in *The Birth of Biopolitics*, specifically the chapters on American neoliberalism and the development of human capital theory, with Francois Ewald and Bernard Harcourt.[1] After pleasantries and a long digression from Ewald about the sympathies between Becker and Foucault's analysis of human capital, Harcourt offers a critique:

> The notion of investing in human capital creates distinctions and discriminations as to which parts of the population you invest in, and which parts of the population you don't invest in…once we have all bought into – and here's the question of subjectivity – once *we all* have bought into the notion of human capital, once it is part of our collective imagination, then it produces these policies of growth that involve investing in some populations and not in others. There are populations that are not worth investing in (Becker, Ewald & Harcourt 2012, p.9).

The pertinence of Harcourt's intervention can be seen in the ontological orientation towards human capital theory by subjects who would consider themselves active in resisting injustice and oppression under actually existing neoliberalism. If indeed *we all,* as Harcourt maintains, accept human capital theory – and thus the capital accumulating and competitive individual – as the ground of subjectivity, then the politics of progressive subjects becomes a project of agitating for investment in populations that have suffered underinvestment.

We can see this approach in an article co-written by Sandra Kim, founder of the activist web platform Everyday Feminism, where she aims to show readers "how to leverage our

[1] Ewald was a student and perhaps a confidant of Foucault, who later became better known as "ideological standard bearer of the Medef, France's primary employer's organisation" (Behrent 2010, p.587). Harcourt is a Professor of Law at Columbia University, and has edited many editions of Foucault's works (Harcourt 2019).

privilege in social movements to create lasting social change" (Kim & Cole 2013). Whilst these aims are worthy, the underpinning philosophy aligns very well with a Beckerian approach: social change occurs via investment and divestment in human capital, or by creating conditions for the oppressed or marginalised to invest in themselves:

> Those that are marginalized – who are often of racial and ethnic minorities, lower education levels, and low-income backgrounds – often lack or have limited access to the social capital, leadership, and resources that are critical to achieving social transformation.
>
> And this is precisely where leaders can leverage their privilege and power to prioritize and proactively support marginalized voices into becoming leading voices in our social movements (Kim & Cole 2013).

Kim's call to action closes in the ontological terrain, and means that any subjectivity remains on neoliberalism's terms even when subjects are expressly struggling for emancipation from injustices operational in a neoliberal capitalist mode of production. Indeed, there is no outside here to the neoliberal capitalist system, although the unequal relationship between privileged and oppressed individuals can be instrumentalised by the privileged to help uplift the oppressed, and privileged individuals can enact processes of self-reflection and introspection in order to understand their role in perpetuating oppression. Paradoxically, however, privilege and oppression are both situationally variable and constantly shifting as well as essences that inhere in socially marked individuals. Within the epistemological framework delineated above by Kim, the focus of progressive discourse undergoes a subtle but definitive shift towards a micro-economic conception of power and its distribution – we could say a more Foucauldian notion – with the corollary being an individualisation of oppression and privilege and the means of contesting these. Very broadly, the shift from a collectively constituted to a hyper-individual subject is a defining feature of actually existing neoliberalism *and* neoliberalised discourse.

Neoliberalism and Subjectivity

Neoliberalism is a complex and contested topic, and having achieved the status of buzz-word risks being emptied of meaning due to over-application. Although few would dispute its hegemony over the past 30 years, this free market ideology continues to spill into other arenas, overflowing from the sphere of the economic into cultural, social and political

realms. Of course, neoliberalism was never merely an economic project: from the very beginning, we can locate ambitions far beyond privatisation, financialisation and deregulation. “Those who wish to resist the encroachments on individual liberty must direct their attention to...wider areas as well as to those in the strictly economic field” (Plehwe 2015, p.23) reads a significant passage in the Mont Pelerin Society’s (MPS) draft statement of aims, and the MPS, founded in 1947 under the authority of Fredrich August von Hayek, was set up – and still exists – as an institution to produce and promote neoliberal discourse, ideology and policy.[2] Although the valorisation of individual freedom, the free market, and competition – and the need for a strong state and moral code to underpin a society of competitive free enterprise – are foundational and even canonical ideals for neoliberals, in practice neoliberalism is malleable and adaptable, with no fixed or immutable doctrine despite its tendency to produce essentialised and ahistorical discourse in a variety of arenas. Neoliberal discourse adjusts readily to complement, extend or dissolve coexisting political, social and cultural currents. Throughout the discourses of neoliberalism and its critics, across academic disciplines and theoretical traditions, we find a general assent that neoliberalism is dense, complex and epochal, a fundamentally dynamic project. This is where the assent tends to end, however, and Marxist and post-structuralist critical readings have produced different definitions of neoliberalism, as well as contestation regarding its emphases and ends, epistemology and ontology, and history and future. Where we can locate some consensus is in the acknowledgement of amorphousness.

As such, this thesis will necessarily draw on a range of theoretical traditions and critical resources, situating paradigmatic thinkers in dialogue with each other in order to first articulate a working definition. There must be a grounding recognition, however, that neoliberalism exists in a dialectical relationship with subjects and discourse, much as subjectivities and discourses also interrelate dialectically. Neoliberalism is productive and generative, and works to shape and shift understandings of what objects in cultural, political, social and economic arenas are or can be, and how they can be analysed. Foucault detects a shift in neoliberal economic analysis that is the at the heart of the entire

[2] See Appendix 3 for both the complete draft statement and a link to the official statement of aims. The latter is much more anodyne, as Dieter Plehwe points out in his introduction to *The Road to Mont Pelerin.* The official aims’ blandness arguably highlights neoliberalism’s depoliticising tendency, which will be discussed throughout this thesis.

neoliberal project, and this shift is particularly pertinent for us as it undergirds both the constitution of subjectivity and the articulation of discourse: the conditions of possibility that exist for certain subjects and certain discourses to appear. This is the shift that occurs so that:

> Economics is not therefore the analysis of processes; it is the analysis of an activity…no longer the analysis of the historical logic of processes; it is the analysis of the internal rationality, the strategic programming of individuals' activity (Foucault 2004, p.223).

In short, neoliberalism constitutes both an ontological orientation and a condition of epistemological possibility, and thus reproduces itself by structuring discourses that both support and oppose it.

If neoliberalism is a dominant or hegemonic paradigm, then it follows that any individual's subjectivity is configured in its shadow. Considerations of subjectivity are as old as philosophy, and the relationship between subjects and dominant economic, political and cultural structures have always been complex and dialectical. As neoliberalism is a project that tends to overflow from 'the economic' and into other fields, neoliberal subjectivity must be assessed in this light. Throughout this thesis, I will argue that our subjective possibilities are paradoxically depleted by the boundlessness of neoliberalism. This depletion has had particularly deleterious consequences on the political left: as 'culture' 'the social' and 'the political' are economised, suffused with the free market logic of competition and individualism, there has followed a concomitant foreclosing of subjective potentialities, especially those that situate the subject primarily and ideally in relation to others. What Marx called our species-being is radically attenuated under neoliberalism, with such collectivist conceptions of both society and the subject (with the corollaries of social solidarity and class consciousness) presented in many discourses as either undesirable or literally unthinkable, beyond the horizon of possibility in a neoliberal episteme. The production of left political imaginaries has a mostly dismal recent history, and the world-wide ascendancy and empowerment of right-wing social forces points powerfully to the need to advance beyond conceptions of a society populated by diverse individuals.

The central contention of this thesis is that neoliberalism has reshaped society in large part by reshaping subjects: at a deep, subjective level, the adoption of neoliberal notions of the

self and the world ensure that the neoliberal subject continues to be refined in its reproduction. Marx could be describing such a subject when he diagnoses in bourgeois economics a society of individuals

> …in which each individual is a totality of needs and only exists for another person, as the other exists for him, in so far as each becomes a means for the other. The economist…reduces everything to man, i.e. to the individual (Marx 1963, p.181).

Precisely neoliberalism's irreducible individualism makes such an account of individuation – and crucially, for neoliberals individuation is also subjectivation[3] – a logical way for a project of defensive constructivism to proceed, although the influence of neoliberalised institutions, states and policies in establishing neoliberal hegemony should of course not be underestimated. We must examine how neoliberalism interpellates subjects, however, and throughout this thesis Judith Butler's extension of Althusserian interpellation will be assumed as operational in the dialectic between subjects and discourse. Butler describes how:

> It is by being interpellated within the terms of a language that a certain social existence of the body first becomes possible…to be addressed is not merely to be recognised for what one already is, but to have the very term conferred by which the recognition of existence becomes possible. One comes to 'exist' by virtue of this fundamental dependency on the address of the Other (Butler 2013, p.5).

This passage reveals the importance of discourse for constituting subjects, and with neoliberalism's infamous disavowal of society, the "Other" (Butler 2013, p.5) is individualised, so that we as subjects are ostensibly able to confer on ourselves the term(s) under which our lives are carried out. This is perhaps the most radical subjective transformation that neoliberalism enacts, and is in large part what neoliberal freedom

[3] I use this term following Judith Butler in *The Psychic Life of Power,* who in turn is building upon Foucault's late work on subjectivity and Althusser's account of interpellation. For Butler, subjectivation "denotes both the becoming of the subject and the process of subjection" (Butler 1997, p.83). For neoliberals, the valorisation of 'the individual' and a subject conceived as human capital entails both a *self-determined* becoming (radical individual 'freedom') and an inevitable subjection (to the market and its ineffable logic).

consists of. The subject who is ultimately responsible for themselves is thus the ideal subject of neoliberalism, and in neoliberal discourse this subject has a name: human capital.

Throughout this thesis, I contend that human capital theory functions as the interpellative arm of the neoliberal project, and that via locating a subject conceived as human capital we can discern neoliberalism as epistemological framework and ontological underpinning. Human capital is paradoxically both an ideal type of subjectivity towards which one must aspire and the only possible subjective modality, that which we always already are and which we must reshape ourselves into. This paradox of subjectivity also applies to privileged and oppressed individuals in progressive discourse. We may express our identity in an almost infinite array of combinations, but the fundamental, essential nature of the human being is human capital. We calculate costs and benefits, invest in ourselves, and maximise our utility, and indeed Gary Becker has posited that familial love – which even Marx acknowledged as "real ties" (Marx & Engels 1998, p.52) – can be understood in economic terms:

> Sufficient 'love' by one member guarantees that all members act as if they loved other members as much as themselves. As it were, the amount of 'love' required in a family is economized: sufficient 'love' by one member leads all other members by 'an invisible hand' to act as if they too loved everyone (Becker 1996, p.181).

Although Becker is obviously speaking at a certain level of theoretical abstraction, this example lays bare just how far the economising logic of human capital extends: there is literally no sphere of human existence that cannot be analysed and therefore understood in economic terms, and the neutrality such an approach presupposes has assisted tremendously in the depoliticisation (and the concomitant ahistoricism) that has helped consolidate neoliberalism as our only possible reality. Margaret Thatcher's "there is no alternative" ('TINA') was epoch-defining. Now, as human capital, we do not merely live under this axiom: we produce it as true, and produce ourselves as micro-legitimations of this truth.

The late Mark Fisher had a profound appreciation of how 'TINA' carries an *"ontological"* weight for a subject that is human capital, whereby "it is not just that people are persuaded of certain beliefs, but rather that the beliefs people have reflect the way that forces in

society are composed in contemporary capitalism" (Fisher 2018, p.462-522). This thesis argues that a rigorous process of analysis – which involves developing and deploying a method of reading – is necessary to locate the extent to which human capital has successfully interpellated subjects (of course interpellation is never complete or totalising, just as a subject is never completely stable). This reading method locates human capital theory operating in ostensibly progressive discourse, and is perhaps a novel account of how, rather than merely influencing certain modes of progressivism, neoliberalism in fact provides the necessary structural conditions for the production of progressive discourse. Human capital's discursive capture allows for the neoliberal structuration of ostensibly emancipatory heuristics, and in making discourse proceed structurally in a certain way, the radical potential of the dialectical relationship between subjectivation and social formations is annulled. Therefore, in order to think other subjective possibilities neoliberalism will need to be overcome.

So what of resistance, then? The discourse analysed in this thesis comes from the broadly progressive online platforms VICE and Everyday Feminism (EF). These platforms were selected for a range of similarities – a vast array of content, a progressive political position, a young and savvy subject posited as receiver – and differences: VICE is a for-profit media behemoth with a slick, distinctive visual style and an ironic affect, whilst EF is run by a small team, is always explicitly political (although for EF the 'political is personal' to a quite radical extent), earnest in tone, and has a decidedly 'community' feel, in sharp contrast to VICE's ultra-professional but 'edgy' aesthetic. However, despite differences in style and overarching affect, in 2014, the year from which data is collated, both VICE and EF engaged consistently with politics and with broader cultural and lifestyle issues, and they continue(d) to aim at younger audiences who are looking to shape and construct their subjectivities (note that EF has stopped publishing new content at time of writing).

Representative of a platform format that is at the vanguard of how ideological content is disseminated today, both VICE and EF aim at producing subjects who are, crucially for this thesis, resistant to the oppressions and injustices that certain socially marked individuals face in a neoliberal capitalist society, indeed subjects who might agitate to resist neoliberalism. Both platforms offer guides, educational material and practical resources for subjects to act in opposition to social injustice, and analyse politics and culture through a lens highly critical of those who perpetuate or enable injustice: their discourse presumes a progressive subject as its receiver. Although VICE has a long and politically varied history,

its current politics tend decisively towards social progressivism. VICE's history of both covert and overt cohabitation with capital, and crucially its mid-2000's progressive turn, make it an ideal discursive producer to analyse for a perhaps more manifest iteration of a subject as human capital. EF is further to the left, and words like 'radical' and 'revolutionary' feature prominently in its discourse: it represents precisely a mode of identitarian progressivism that is paradigmatic, and such discourse is in many respects a break with previous articulations of 'revolutionary' discourse. For EF, revolution and radicalism are understood as occurring primarily introspectively, processes by which individual subjects come to perceive themselves and the world in profoundly different ways. A generous reading would posit a Butlerian "insurrection at the level of ontology" (Butler 2006, p.33) as EF's radical aim, however from a materialist left political position a number of critiques can be developed. Regardless, both platforms produce discourse and foster cultural production that responds to the injustices and oppressions of actually existing neoliberalism, and indeed this is precisely the rationale for their selection as data sources.

If we can locate in VICE and EF's discourse a subject conceived as human capital, we can also trace the expansive reach of neoliberalism and the concomitant extent to which such a subject is produced as 'common-sense'. The permeation of neoliberal discourse into cultures that might be sites of resistance shows precisely how dominant this model of subjectivity is, and thus a theory emerges as to why neoliberalism persists despite the ruptures of political hegemony in our recent past. An explanation for the political and strategic impotence of the mainstream left in the face of right-wing uprisings may emerge also.

The discourse analysed is from the year 2014, as this was a time in the recent past where the discursive tendencies exemplified by VICE and EF were consolidated and fairly widespread – perhaps even close to hegemonic – on the left. These discourses of identitarian progressivism afforded little scope for a materialist critique of neoliberalism, however, and the social discontent and political-economic stagnation that existing neoliberalism had produced was instead weaponised by the right, with an array of alarming consequences. 2014 represents a period just prior to the above-mentioned hegemonic ruptures and right-wing resurgences: in hindsight, much progressive discourse was unable to systematically critique neoliberalism precisely because it was structured by its norms, and proceeded from an ontological grounding in human capital theory.

Thesis Summary

This thesis proceeds via the articulation of some of the most salient features of neoliberal theory, examining what neoliberalism is and how it operates. There is not scope for a definitive conceptual history – assuming such a project is even possible – but some pertinent elements of neoliberal philosophy, and specific expansions and contractions of epistemological possibilities in a neoliberal society, are examined in Chapter One. In the same chapter, I argue that an essential element in the production of the subject as human capital has been establishing neoliberal ideas as 'common-sense', and that contrary to many critical understandings, neoliberalism is profoundly moralistic and has always employed the state to secure the outcomes it desires. Contradictions thus abound, however part of neoliberalism's success has been precisely its ability to subsume contradictions, to cohabitate with and absorb a diverse array of social movements and cultural tendencies.

Chapter Two traces the historical development of the concept of capital, starting with Marx's understanding of capital as a social relation and contrasting this with the highly individualised neoliberal approach to thinking human capital. From this opposition we can locate a range of the effects of the epistemic shift to human capital as a universal and/or ideal discursive subject, prominent among which is the elision of labour and thus class as a concept. This chapter then explores historical alternatives for thinking subjectivity, before considering what results for politically progressive subjects and their discourse when human capital theory provides an ontological underpinning and an epistemological frame. To reiterate, the focus on progressivism is intended to demonstrate the extensive reach of neoliberal ideas, which reveals in turn how productive, dynamic and adaptive the project can be, and in identifying a progressive subject conceived as human capital – although crucially this conception may not be conscious or explicit – we can discern precisely the extent of neoliberalism's reach, and the generativity coterminous with its productivity.

In order to identify a progressive subject as human capital it is necessary to analyse progressive discourse, and in Chapter Three I outline a method of reading for the presence of this subject. Drawing on critical discourse analysis, a dialectic between close and distant reading is employed both to establish certain markers of human capital theory in operation and to concretely trace discursive instances of such theory. The subject as human capital in progressive discourse is primarily a latent rather than manifest presence, however

consistency across bodies of discourse despite stylistic variations is evidence of the underlying neoliberalism that produces human capital as 'the subject of the discourse'.

Chapter Four is where the reading method is applied, focusing on the online platforms VICE and EF. Seven distinct but related markers of human capital theory in discourse are elaborated upon, and the theoretical development and practical location of these markers is supported by a critical discourse analysis of articles from VICE and EF. The location of each marker, which highlights human capital theory in operation and thus the effects of neoliberalism on subjectivity and subject formation, involves close reading articles from 2014, with each marker analysed in relation to two articles from each platform. The corpus (see Appendices 1 and 2 for links to the full articles) is modest in overall size but rigorously analysed, as the considerable depth necessary to establish neoliberalism's covert discursive operation necessitates working with a relatively smaller corpus. Additionally, as the analysis locates themes, tropes and concepts rather than a more granular focus on specific terms or grammatical particularities, the selection of seven distinct articles from each platform, with one article corresponding to each marker, is methodologically logical, and, most importantly, productive of data.

The thesis concludes with a reflection upon my findings. Chapter Five summarises both the history and discursive propensity of VICE and EF, as well as these platform's positionality with regards to neoliberalism and their potential for generating or supporting a radical politics. Who is the subject their discourse addresses, and can progressive platforms position a subject who might elude interpellation into human capital? This final chapter also examines what results from the intertwining and condensation of political, economic and cultural trends in a neoliberal episteme, and considers at some length what the implications for a radical left political project propelled and supported by the subject who inhabits the discourses analysed might be. Indeed, I will conclude by contending that even much ostensibly radical progressive discourse shows the influence of neoliberalism, and thus that neoliberalism's effects on subject formation are even more profound, subtle and far-reaching than has previously been imagined. If human capital theory informs the discourse even of those who seek to challenge a neoliberal system, then the ontological implications of neoliberalisation become clearer. Clearer too will be just how widespread – politically, socially and culturally – neoliberalism really is.

Chapter One

The Individual's Terrain: Neoliberalism, Human Capital Theory and Common-Sense

What is Neoliberalism?

Neoliberalism is the sum of its etymological parts and plenty more besides: neo certainly, in the sense of new and/or revived, and also liberal, as grounded in the political ideology that emphasises personal freedom via economic self-sufficiency and limited government. But in neoliberalism we find not merely an extended or recently fashionable liberalism but a new and world-shaping doctrine, a highly individualist form of capitalism that has presided over the death of its collectivist rival and achieved a remarkable degree of hegemony. Friedrich Hayek states early on in *The Road to Serfdom* that "there is nothing in the basic principles of liberalism to make it a stationary creed; there are no hard-and-fast rules fixed once and for all" (Hayek 2007, p.71), and in this acknowledgement of malleability we can locate the seeds of neoliberalism's success, as well as a level of disingenuousness that structures the 'neo' iteration of the liberal-capitalist project. At the outset, and at the risk of obviousness, it must be noted that neoliberalism is not a definite thing to which one can point, any more than liberalism or capitalism is.

Neoliberalism can be understood and studied as a system of social relations, a covenant of economic and political ideals, and an ideology that interpellates subjects: a cynical, elitist project of gradual, systemic and systematic intellectual infiltration aimed explicitly at restoring class power and redistributing wealth to the 1%, and the idealist, ardent, impossible dream of unfashionable individual dreamers in the sleep of creeping collectivism, a true believer's cry against the post-war tendency of western countries towards central economic planning. Neoliberalism "borrows, evolves and diversifies. It is constantly 'in process'" (Hall 2011, p.708), and this plasticity has undoubtedly helped it to thrive despite the often ruinous effects of neoliberal economic policies, and a great deal of public antipathy towards these. Indeed, neoliberalism's very elusiveness means that its accountability – or even basic visibility – at a day-to-day subjective level remains low: what is seldom named (who today claims to be a neoliberal?) is seldom conquered. With neoliberalism we find both a set of political-economic creeds that have had definite and profound material consequences in application, and a collection of cultural, social and indeed moral ideals that bolster the neoliberal political economy these material consequences engender. Whilst there are fairly generally acknowledged historical

milestones to which we can point in tracing the neoliberalisation of different economies – the work of the "Chicago Boys" (Fischer 2015, p.306) in Pinochet's Chile, the 1979 appointment of Paul Vockler as chairman of the Federal Reserve**,** Margaret Thatcher's ascension to power in Britain – and we can likewise advance certain cultural forms as emblematic of a neoliberal logic (the culture of celebrity and reality television, for example), this thesis's focus on the effects of neoliberal human capital theory on subjectivity and subject formation means that we must identify neoliberalism at work in individuals. So, how can we measure the structuring of individual subjectivity by an economic doctrine? How might human capital theory specifically serve as the 'interpellative arm' of the neoliberal project? And as any successful ideological project must involve producing 'common-sense', what does neoliberal common-sense look like?

Let us begin with tracing the historical development of neoliberal theory and its major tenets. There are a number of thinkers who have contributed to what Philip Mirowski calls the "neoliberal thought collective" (Mirowski 2015, p.417), however among this throng Friedrich Hayek stands out as a master. Hayek's mastery can be understood in the sense that Žižek lends to it in *Trouble in Paradise,* whereby the master

> …is the one who helps the individual become subject...His message is...a liberating 'You can!' But 'can' what? Do the impossible, i.e., what appears impossible within the coordinates of the existing constellation (Žižek 2015, p.183-188).

Ironically, Žižek is seeking a master who could be the figurehead of a movement to overturn the neoliberal consensus, whereas Hayek enabled the thinking of a neoliberal social order against the collectivist grain of the times. Probably the most sophisticated of canonical neoliberal thinkers, we can posit the arrival of neoliberalism's conceptual maturity in his work. After publishing *the Road to Serfdom* in 1944, Hayek co-founded the Mont Pelerin Society in 1947, inviting 36 other scholars to strategise and collaborate in defence of 'liberalism'. This elite group, initially comprised mostly of economists with a smattering of historians and philosophers, remains active as an assortment of academics and business leaders[4]. Unyieldingly framing their goal as protecting economic and political

[4] Membership was capped for many years at 500, and the MPS is not an easy society to join. Those who share its values, and who have their application supported by a current

liberalism, a constructivist defensiveness has long been a feature of neoliberal epistemology**.**

The MPS has been home to many neoliberal luminaries, and a draft statement of aims from 1947 reveals some essential neoliberal principles, although it must be emphasised that there is not any one authoritative or definitive doctrine or set of commandments that has guided policy implementation and propaganda. These aims are nevertheless illuminating for any attempt to define neoliberalism, and are much more forthright than the diluted official statement found on the Society's website (Appendix 3). A selection is presented below:

> 1. Individual freedom can be preserved only in a society in which an effective competitive market is the main agency for the direction of economic activity…
> 4. The decline of competitive markets and the movement toward totalitarian control of society are not inevitable…
> 5. The preservation of an effective competitive order depends upon a proper legal and institutional framework. The existing framework must be considerably modified…
> 7. …Those who wish to resist the encroachments on individual liberty must direct their attention to…wider areas as well as those in the strictly economic field…
> 8. Any free society presupposes, in particular, a widely accepted moral code. The principles of this moral code should govern individual no less than collective action (Plehwe 2015, p.22-24).

Each of these aims represents a key plank of the neoliberal project, both intellectually or theoretically and as it has been realised in material political, economic, social and cultural ends. Point one, which allocates to the market the most vital of roles, the preservation of individual freedom – as David Harvey notes, here the neoliberals "chose wisely, as individual freedom is indeed a compelling and seductive ideal" (Harvey 2007a, p.5) – is probably what most commonly comes to mind when considering neoliberalism and neoliberal subjectivity. However, there is a tension here, as whilst neoliberals – such as Hayek – posit the market as both omniscient and utterly neutral, submission to its

member, are next able to apply for membership between April and June 2020 (*About MPS* n.d).

ultimately unknowable ways is not optional if we want to enjoy the freedoms market societies guarantee us. Mirowski has pointed out that in practice neoliberalism has sought to "dismantle those aspects of society" that might resist the logic of the market: for neoliberals, "freedom and the market" are "treated as identical" (Mirowski 2014, p.12). We are free as neoliberal subjects so long as we behave in ways that respect the market's logic: those subjects deemed "unfit for the marketplace" are likely to have their freedoms radically curtailed (Mirowski 2014, p.10).

The market distributes knowledge, goods and services throughout the social body via the action of the price system, and it stimulates and rewards those who are most capable and offers them opportunities to better their lot by applying themselves. Most crucial, however, is its role in "validating competition and enterprise as the general form of society" (Dardot & Laval 2014, p.101). This last explicitly connects the market with subjectivity, and highlights that the individual freedom about which neoliberals wax lyrical is highly contingent: we have our freedom only in so far as – or even to the precise degree that – we accept the market as a system of validation for our free choices. Indeed, the more arenas in which the market – or a market logic – is able to operate, the freer individuals will be, as they are able to exercise ever more choice about what they consume, and to produce in increasingly competitive conditions that ever more accurately reflect an appropriate social order. What can be figured as consumption and production is greatly expanded in a neoliberal society: Milton Friedman, for example, argues in *Capitalism and Freedom* that discrimination based on race is merely a consumption choice that can be priced out of the realm of possibility (Friedman 2002, p.110-111). In practice, the expansion of the market and its logic means that more and more systems and practices – education, health care, the arts and law enforcement as well as identity-formation, social bonds and the production of one's online persona – must submit to the market's omnipotent discipline. Wendy Brown puts it succinctly: "market principles frame every sphere and activity" (Brown 2015, p.67).

Arriving at Brown's diagnosis above, however, was not an historical inevitability, just as neoliberals felt that neither socialism or even milder forms of state collectivism were. Hayek composed *The Road to Serfdom* in 1944, in reaction to the collectivist trend of western political economy: in the post-WWII years, collectivist social democracy was somewhat ascendant, and Hayek's antagonism towards socialism was not widely reflected. This is of course to paint with very broad brushstrokes, however the key point is that at the level of discursive power and ideology – and in light of a *perpetuum mobile*

dialectic between ideological currents and material conditions that shapes subjects and their society – a genuine struggle between alternate modes of social, political and economic organisation was underway.

A detailed history of the Keynesian turn, or the Fordist compromise between labour and capital, is beyond the scope of this thesis, though we can agree with Harvey that these measures did increase the political power of the working classes throughout much of the Global North (Harvey 2007a, p.15). Additionally, a number of revolutionary socialist movements were active throughout the Global South, with state socialism operating in Russia and much of Eastern Europe. Whilst geography delineated these distinct modes of production in operation – although planning and even ownership of key industries by the state was not uncommon in the west – ideologically the contest was not limited by borders. Hayek and his fellow neoliberals detected a drift towards socialism throughout the liberal democratic west: with capital accumulation hampered by layers of market regulations and political and social constraints, the ideals of individual freedom, free enterprise and competition were endangered unless action was taken (Harvey 2007a, p.11-16). Neoliberals were unequivocal about what lay ahead: von Mises (1980) declared that "there is no middle way" between the freedom guaranteed by markets and the totalitarianism that is the *telos* of central planning if left unchecked.

The movement towards totalitarianism via the implementation of collectivist political economic policies – the road to serfdom – can be avoided only by the relentless pursuit of the competitive ideal, and all the forces of the state must be harnessed to this effect. Contrary to the popular notion that neoliberalism is an anti-state ideology much like libertarianism (although there exist conceptual and practical overlap), no less a figure than Hayek quite clearly states that "in order that competition should work beneficially, a carefully thought out legal framework is required" (Hayek 2007, p.86). Additionally, subjects must be interpellated by the (economised) institutions of this state as competitive individuals, thinking and behaving in ways that bolster and reinforce individualism**:** Hayek queries how "to provide inducements which will make individuals do the desirable things without anyone having to tell them what to do" (Hayek 1945, p.527). The answer unfolds with an inner logic that is compelling: the inducements are provided via the transcendental knowledge allocation of the market, and these inducements produce subjects who are likely to favour and reproduce the conditions that allow markets to allocate knowledge. We can again see here the subtle but essential contradiction inhering in neoliberal 'freedom'.

In her case study of the neoliberal economic reconstruction during Pinochet's years of rule, Karin Fischer has noted how Hayek never expressed any disquiet regarding the deficit of democracy, and that a number of MPS members praised Chilean *economic* freedom without discussing the lack of *political* freedom (Fischer 2015, p.327). Even in the more democratic west, neoliberalism has had no qualms reconciling itself with authoritarianism: we can consider, as Brown notes, how "post-9/11…neoliberalism has intersected with securitization…bracketing law, democratic principle and social welfare in favour of…efficiency, control and an advantageous economic climate" (Brown 2015, p.72), as well as concrete legislation like the "sus laws", via which the Thatcher government targeted Black citizens by giving police greatly expanded stop and search powers (Gilbert, Bufkin & Mukherjee 2018). The increasingly punitive regime of testing, surveillance and 'mutual obligation' for Australian job-seekers is further evidence of an authoritarian neoliberalism in a field typically understood as outside that of law and order. As Dardot and Laval have noted, a strong state and an expanded constellation of legislation is vital to ensure

> …*the preservation of the efficiency of the market order…*the certainty provided by the legal framework must off-set the uncertainty inherent in the individual's situation in a spontaneous order such as the market order (Dardot & Laval 2014, p.137).

A reduction in democracy can be made law as long as this removes impediments to competition and free enterprise. This easy cohabitation with anti-democratic movements is one result of neoliberalism's general depoliticising tendency: when the model of the social is the market, and the logic of the market and thus accumulation and competition rule all domains, then the sphere of political contestation, and the political participation and engagement of ordinary citizens, is ominously restricted. Instead of political action, we have consumer choice, with the state creating the framework – which must be large and complex, as the multiplication of enterprises increases "the surfaces of friction" – for consumer citizens to compete in the economic game (Foucault 2004, p.175).

As the economic game expands, do other fields contract? To perhaps labour the sporting metaphor, if government is now merely umpire and stadium security guard, what role for coaches and junior players, fans and half-time entertainment? The complexity and entanglement of hegemonic paradigms and social institutions must be acknowledged, as it would be reductionist to suggest that politics, cultural production and social bonds have been utterly revolutionised and transformed, and are now determined in their totality by

neoliberal norms. A famous quote from Rupert Murdoch is illuminating in pursuing this line of inquiry, however: when asked what he would do to "save" the economy, Murdoch answered "oh you know – change the culture" (Davis 2014, p.28).

As Mark Davis (2014, p.35) notes in his study of neoliberalism in Australia, the notion that cultural factors determine what is economically acceptable is generally acknowledged as a truth by those with the capacity to shape public opinion and implement policy. Making certain ideological notions not only culturally acceptable but culturally normative – indeed productive of culture and social relations and thus determinant of political possibilities – has been a consistent neoliberal strategy. As Davis confirms, neoliberalism was never simply an economic project. How does directing attention to wider fields than the merely economic look in practice? And why is it so important that neoliberals do this?

The condensation of social, cultural and political arenas into the economic, the "economisation of heretofore non-economic domains" (Brown 2015, p.31), does not mean that these other domains cease to function: rather, like the structure of government and the state, they must be made *competitive,* with the model of the enterprise or the corporation as their blueprint. In establishing competition as normative, the groundwork is laid for neoliberalism to operate at the level of ontology, and for the on-going production and reproduction of neoliberal institutions, practices and subjects. The widespread importation of corporate jargon and concepts into non-business fields is one way of achieving this neoliberalisation, and a number of thinkers[5] have noted that corporate practices of self-assessment and measurement proliferated in the 1990s. Historically, this was a time when neoliberalism was ascendant, and social democratic parties world-wide were adopting neoliberal policies, largely because opposition lacked an adequate epistemological framework to counter these tendencies. Indeed, as Dardot and Laval point out, who could be opposed to increased efficiency and high performance standards? (Dardot & Laval 2014, p.226).

[5] See Dardot and Laval, who describe this process in the chapter "Entrepreneurial Government" in *The New Way of the World,* and Mark Fisher, who despairs at how "workers are now required to be their own auditors…Work, no matter how causal, now routinely entails the performance of meta-work…systems of permanent and ubiquitous measurement engender a constant state of anxiety" (Fisher 2018, p.464).

The economising and depoliticising tendency of neoliberalism of course provides ideological support for the project, and through this tendency we can see how neoliberalism overflows, traversing and condensing economic, socio-cultural and political realms. The resources provided in a blog for the unemployed at the Australian Government's 'jobactive' webpage offers tips on how to "psych out your competition" in a group interview – for a job as a "food and beverage attendant" (*What to Expect in a Job Interview* 2018) – as well as how to "stay in a good headspace" whilst long-term unemployed (*5 Things You Should Never Do When Applying for a Job* 2018). Competition for scarce and poorly paid jobs is portrayed here as simply the natural order of things, rather than as the result of increasing precarity via the restructuring, casualisation and flexibilisation of the labour market, and "staying in a good headspace" is never predicated upon an increase in welfare payments. Addressed by such discourse, it is hard not to agree with Dardot and Laval (2017, p.191) that the great ideological victory of neoliberalism has "consisted in 'de-ideologizing' the policies pursued".

We know, undoubtedly, that things are not as they should be: that the less fortunate do not deserve to be demonised, drug tested and subjected to punitive regimes of surveillance; that putting on a happy face is difficult when you're living on $200 a week. What has largely been lost, though, is the capacity to imagine that things could be otherwise. In a society built upon rampant individualism and competition, those left behind can be pitied, but their situation is viewed as ultimately immutable.

The rise of celebrity culture and reality television similarly represents the overspill of neoliberal economic ideals into cultural arenas. As Mirowski has described

> …the complement to a culture of celebrity has become…the unabashed theatre of cruelty…game shows used to reflexively reward the poor; now play-to-play reality tv crushes them. Computer gaming used to be about triumphs of virtuosity; now…it is all about debasement of the losers (Mirowski 2013, p.133).

Reality television is a particularly egregious example, as social relations are depicted as inherently competitive, and indeed those who compete best – which often involves gleefully severing social bonds, and using others only to advance one's own cause – are handsomely rewarded. Theoretically, anyone can become a celebrity via reality television, and the pseudo-democratic levelling of the playing field in this cultural arena – a

democratising of aristocracy whereby all subjects ostensibly have the opportunity to achieve dominance over others – is the compensation for the individualism and competition this cultural form valorises. Examples can also be drawn from public education, where starving the public system of funding (and massive government support for private education, again demonstrating the use of state intervention to back measures that shrink collectivist social institutions) pushes all those who can afford it – and many who can't – towards the 'competitiveness' of the private school system. In Australia, NAPLAN testing allows for the ranking of schools against each other on the 'My School' website, where the measurement and aggregate of individual student results determine a school's competitiveness, and the ideological background that determines concrete resource distribution is elided. Whilst the website assures users that its measuring system merely "allows for fair comparisons of Australian school students' NAPLAN test results" (*FAQs* n.d), underlying such testing regimes are neoliberal notions about the function of education as producing children who "are at one and the same time consumer goods and potentially responsible members of society" (Friedman 2002, p.33), as Milton Friedman enduringly puts it. The corollary is that measurement is necessary to drive up standards, stimulate competition and encourage consumers to choose what is best for them and their aspirations in the education market. The rise of standardised testing and various ranking systems means that education is increasingly understood as "the development and promulgation of marketable goods and services" (Brown 2015, p.191). A significant function of education, Friedman states, is "to raise the economic productivity of the human being" (Friedman 2002, p.101). Myriad other examples of such neoliberalisation could be detailed, both in Australia and globally, across a vast array of practices, institutions and cultural forms.

Finally, despite the putative neutrality of the free market and the venerated freedom of the individual, a strong moralistic strain has always been evident in neoliberal discourse. Melinda Cooper, in her indispensable study *Family Values*, describes how neoliberals "expect the strictest of virtue ethics to arise spontaneously from the immanent action of market forces" (Cooper 2017, p.60). The need for the majority of society to adhere to a moral code finds expression through a variety of neoliberal formulations, and the idea that the market will promote and reward choices suffused with morality is in congruence with a long tradition of capitalist ideology. The permeation of market logic and market discipline throughout society means "some will triumph and some will die…as a matter of social and political principle" (Brown 2015, p.65, ellipsis in original), and with the neoliberal attack

upon collective social institutions and visible social solidarities – Pierre Bourdieu describes neoliberalism as a "project of the methodical destruction of collectives" (Bourdieu 1998) – comes the increased circulation of moralising discourse and the normalisation of a moralistic epistemological framework.

Brown (2018, p.18) names moralism as an "anti-politics", and the shrinking of the political sphere that economisation and depoliticisation initiate means that moralism is often the final flourish of the powerful and the only recourse of the oppressed: the asymmetry tends to consolidate moralistic tendencies on both sides. The fusion of neoliberalism and social conservatism that has proven an effective way to assemble social blocs into electoral majorities in many countries (think of Howard's Australia, George W Bush's America or Modi's India) is further evidence of a moralistic turn, one that is also discernible among sections of the left, particularly left-liberals whose activism is grounded in agitating for cultural recognition. Various neoliberals have framed their support for traditional values in economic terms, though the underpinning moral position is usually quite clear.[6] The moralising that often accompanies neoliberal discourse may seem unlikely at first blush, especially given that the "ethos propounded by a Friedman or a Becker…was ultimately compatible with the anti-normative desires of the New Left" (Cooper 2017, p.57). The market operates without any moral programming, but acting in socially virtuous ways and developing responsible habits tends to put individuals in the best position to reap financial rewards. In fact, neoliberalism is very much a doctrine where ultimately wealth is its own evidence of virtue, "consonant with the interests of contemporary capitalism" (Mukherjee & Banet-Weiser 2012, p.11). Strong moral orientations are perhaps inevitable as concrete social bonds are shattered**,** and indeed Brown (2018, p.38) argues that "moralism can be understood as a historically specific effect of quite isolated and vulnerable subjects".

The individualising impetus of neoliberalisation also produces a moralistic tenor, both for those who compete and win – in which case one's place is deserved – and those who are oppressed or left behind. As Chi Chi Shi has noted, powerlessness has become a mark of "political virtue" for many on the left (Shi 2018), and the tendency towards horizontality that many recent left movements have foregrounded can be read in part as a moral rather than

[6] Becker argues that "programs like social security that significantly help the elderly would encourage family members to drift apart emotionally, not by accident but as maximising responses to these policies" (Becker 1996, p.154).

strategic reaction to neoliberalism's profoundly unequal distribution of power and resources.

For neoliberals, "considerations of price and cost influence ethical and moral choices" (Becker 1996, p.18), and thus desirable moral values are best encouraged by the spontaneous interplay of market forces, and market distribution should reflect responsible individual choice: indeed, the unfettered thriving of the market should lead to the suffusion of appropriate codes of behaviour and personal responsibility in neoliberal subjects. As Cooper (2017, p.55) has so perceptively argued, neoliberals have always pursued economic policies that they see as strengthening the ties and inter-dependence of the heteronormative, white family unit – the archetypal Fordist nuclear family – precisely because state intervention in the form of welfare spending and subsidised public education tends to support familial structures and social mores underpinned by collectivist values, potentially emboldening anti-capitalist movements and critiques. For Cooper, neoliberals worry that non-normative expressions of gender, sexuality and domestic arrangements will depend heavily on state-mandated wealth re-distribution to thrive and thus undermine ideal economic processes. Ideally, "many of the functions formerly 'usurped' by the welfare state will be returned to the private family" (Cooper 2017, p.62). Building upon Cooper's argument, we can posit that a strong ethos of 'old-fashioned' personal and family responsibility entails submission to economic conditions (and normative horizons) where neoliberalism is common-sense. However contradictory neoliberal morality might be, it is key to the doctrine of 'there is no alternative'. The intertwining of moralism and social conservatism with often extreme economic liberalism or 'freedom' has been a consistent feature of actually existing neoliberalism, although of course social democratic parties have implemented their share of neoliberal reforms.

The features of neoliberalism described above are by no means exhaustive, but what can be gleaned from this overview is the malleable and adaptive nature of the project. Neoliberalism eludes simple definition, although in all spheres in which it operates it seeks to produce competition via propagating a market logic. The market is a site for both the production – Foucault's (2004, p.36) term is "verediction" – and dissemination of truth, and in this sense operates epistemologically, delimiting not only what we know but what we *can* know. Neoliberalism is inherently productive, and initiates a complex dialectic whereby the norms it propagates alter the constitution of subjects and social bodies. As subjects are interpellated as competitive individuals, they and their institutions tendentially reinforce

neoliberal values and mores, and disseminate these values – as norms – anew. Neoliberalism has been hegemonic for at least the past thirty years, both ideologically – in Terry Eagleton's sense as "the routine material logic of everyday life" (Eagleton 2007, p.37) – and as concrete government policy: privatisation and a host of deregulatory measures are its mark, as well as the contraction of the public sphere and the attenuation of the political field. We still drift along on the neoliberal tide, despite the economic failures revealed by the 2008 financial crisis.

We must now move from the production of knowledge and truth to the production of subjectivity, and examine how neoliberalism operates at the level of ontology.

Human Capital Theory

Human capital theory is a key plank of the neoliberal project. Indeed, as its interpellative arm, this ostensibly neutral notion allows for individual subjects to be ontologically moored within a neoliberal logic. The ramifications of conceiving our subjectivity as human capital are manifold, and will be explored in detail throughout this thesis. First, however, we must briefly examine what human capital theory is. Although considering human beings as a form of capital has a reasonably long history in economics, as Kiker (1966, p.481) notes, this idea faded from the mainstream of economic thought around the turn of the 20th century.

Theodore Schultz is generally acknowledged as the first modern economist to devote serious analytical study to human capital, and we can posit his work as (re)inaugurating the consideration of human beings as inherently capital bearing individuals. Gary Becker is probably the economist most closely associated with human capital theory, although the more prominent Milton Friedman (both Becker and Friedman were members of the Mont Pelerin Society, and both were Nobel Prize winners) also uses human capital as an analytical framework. Schultz developed the concept of human capital as a means of accounting for what Cooper calls "a hitherto perplexing problem in the calculation of national economic growth": that growth in physical capital and the size of the labour force were insufficient to explain a rapid rise in the United States' GDP during the first half of the 20th century (Cooper 2017, p.219).

Schultz (1959, p.115) posits human capital as a solution to the above problem, noting that "the large and rapid accumulation of human wealth that is being excluded from our

conventional measures of 'man-hours worked' and of tangible capital" can be understood as human capital. Exponents of human capital theory tend to point to its wide applicability, broad explanatory powers and elucidative simplicity, and indeed there is a certain explicatory elegance inherent in the concept. Schultz (1961, p.1) states that "much of what we call consumption constitutes investment in human capital", and for Friedman (2002, p.100) investing in human capital is "precisely analogous to investment in machinery, buildings, or other forms of non-human capital". Becker (1996, p.145) declares that:

> Human capital analysis starts with the assumption that individuals decide on their education, training, medical care, and other additions to knowledge and health by weighing the benefits and costs. Benefits include cultural and other non-monetary gains along with improvement in earnings and occupations.

Across all of these accounts, what stands out is the neutrality and common-sense tone, the sense that this notion is almost so obvious as to sit outside ideology or politics. We are all human capital – we naturally increase or decrease our 'value' by what we consume, with these inputs ranging from education to diet and exercise – and this concept provides the very ground from which we can proceed to understand and construct ourselves and our subjectivity, our world and our place in it. We could therefore denote human capital a "zero-institution" in Žižek's sense, whereby the zero-institution is:

> Ideology at its purest, that is, the direct embodiment of the ideological function of providing a neutral all-encompassing space in which social antagonism is obliterated, in which all members of society can recognise themselves (Butler, Laclau & Žižek 2000, p.113).

Human capital theory's putative neutrality opens up precisely this all-encompassing space, in which a number of ideological norms that are essential to the day to day operation and reproduction of the neoliberal project are instrumentalised. First, human capital ideally mitigates the influence of social markers like gender, race or sexuality: a "highly individualistic egalitarianism", as Jeremy Gilbert (2013, p.10) notes, "*equalizes* everyone…no handicap of birth or environment represents an insurmountable obstacle to personal involvement in the general apparatus" (Dardot & Laval 2014, p.285). Of course certain people will be better equipped to invest in themselves (and have institutions invest in them) than others, however human capital posits a democratising of aristocracy, where

all subjects ostensibly have the opportunity to achieve an elite social positionality. A corollary is that competition between subjects becomes not merely necessary but normative.

Second, individuals are interpellated as personally and ultimately responsible for themselves, as they *are themselves* their own human capital. As such, social and environmental factors have far less influence on what happens to subjects than their own rational choices, thus social bonds and solidarities may very well be superfluous. Indeed, the radical freedom to choose means we are immanently and almost absolutely responsible for the consequences of our choices, an ideological conviction that is discernible in Schultz's claim that "most of the differences in earnings are the consequence of differences in the amounts that have been invested in people" (Schultz 1962, p.1-2).

Third, as human capital we understand our own actions and consumption (remembering that consumption is re-configured as investment in one's human capital) as producing the truth of our subjectivity: individuation is predicated upon behaviours and accumulations that produce benefit for the subject, and the production of self-benefit is the *telos* of neoliberal subjectivity (Dilts 2010, p.139).

A dialectic of accumulation and individuation establishes human capital as our subjective horizon, and reinforces the neoliberal ideological impetus towards "giving a strictly economic explanation of a whole domain previously thought to be non-economic" (Foucault 2004, p.219). Intertwining with the points above is the shift that many thinkers[7] have observed in the exogenous formation of the subject as human capital, the process by which subjects recognise each other and recognise themselves in this recognition. Rather than the liberal or bourgeois subject who confronts another subject as equal based upon their freedom to form contracts, with every subject potentially a partner in exchange, human capital is rather the subject who competes with others, Foucault's (2004, p.226) "entrepreneur of the self" (see Chapter Four).

For this subject, social interactions serve broadly and structurally to appreciate or depreciate human capital. Forming and severing social ties are thus analogous to

[7] Following Foucault we also find Wendy Brown**,** Dardot and Laval, Pierre Bourdieu and Philip Mirowski, who are merely those referenced in this chapter.

processes of consumption and investment. This subject is encouraged to understand the totality of social relations as a network of competing entrepreneurial selves, and their own social positionality as flexible and dynamic: the "individual's life must be lodged…within the framework of a multiplicity of diverse enterprises connected up to and entangled with each other" (Foucault 2004, p.241). An *aspirational* subject is a subject appropriately interpellated, and such a subject can theoretically traverse economic classes and raced and gendered social stratifications, precisely because these are posited as ameliorated by human capital as an ontological framework. This double movement, whereby the positing of a subject who can transcend the structural obstacles to their self-realisation elides the very historical categories that establish such structural obstacles, is emblematic of neoliberal common-sense. With this ontological orientation as foundational, we have the subject as human capital embodying "trans-historical 'common-sense'" (Gilbert 2013, p.12), and the concomitant dehistoricising, depoliticising and individualising production of entrepreneurial subjects. Producing ourselves as human capital is how *we all* make neoliberalism work.

Common Sense

If human capital theory enables neoliberal norms to operate as a kind of common sense, we must conclude this chapter by exploring how common sense itself is produced. In *A Fortunate Man,* John Berger argues that

> …common sense can only exist as a category insofar as it can be distinguished from the spirit of enquiry, from philosophy. Common sense is essentially *static* (Berger 2015, p.104).

This explanation is useful for us in two senses, even if we must also question its final contention. Initially, Berger helps us see how the ideals that underpin the production of the subject as human capital can be widely accepted, so that the 'common-sense' of a capital-accumulating, competitive individual structures how subjects think and act at a quotidian level. The "static" nature of common sense means that subjects are continually reinforcing whatever common sense consists of in their social relations and interactions – our inherent sociality supports the collective conception and embedding of the truth of what concretely is – and thus the dynamism of the social is necessarily stifled and constrained by certain horizons of possibility. Berger's definition also allows us to locate the ideological neutrality of human capital: in the act of distinguishing from philosophy we confine the non-

philosophical category to an always-already there pre-theoretical given – something ready-to-hand in Heideggerian terminology – that exists ahistorically and indeed 'naturally'.
We have seen that neoliberalism is an explicitly constructivist project, and that it would be somewhat reductionist to designate subjectivity as universally and totally suffused with human capital theory's logic. However, we must follow Gramsci (1999, p.346) in acknowledging that "common sense is an ambiguous, contradictory and multi-form concept", and here we encounter our divergence from Berger's account: if common-sense is static, how then does it shift, as it demonstrably has done via the 'structural-ontological'[8] diffusion of human capital theory. From the subject of exchange in the period of the Fordist labour/capital compromise to the subject of competition valorised by Reagan and Thatcher, how can we depict the transformation of common sense without resorting to economic determinism (even as we acknowledge that the widespread implementation of neoliberal economic policies has had an enormous influence)? As has been argued throughout this chapter, neoliberalism has always sought to produce common sense, to make its ideals the very foundation of subjects' being-in-the-world. Dardot and Laval (2014, p.281) argue that the success and power of neoliberalism stems in large part from "establishing situations that force subjects to function in accordance with the terms of the game imposed upon them", and that this triggers a "'chain-reaction' by producing enterprising subjects who in turn reproduce, expand and reinforce competitive relations between themselves" (Dardot & Laval 2014, p.262). A dialectic between ideology and material conditions sets in motion the perpetual reproduction of neoliberal institutions, practices and subjects.

Thatcher famously said that "economics is the method but the object is to change the soul" (Mirowski 2014, p.22), and there is no arena of life, no practice too arcane, no realm so far removed from economic logic that neoliberalism cannot infiltrate, commodify and marketise it. Neoliberalism seems able to subsume anything it encounters under its infinitely malleable and totalising rationality. Gramsci cautions against an excess of either "economism" or "ideologism", yet in neoliberalism we have a conceptual and material structure wherein these Gramscian elements – ideology and the relations and forces constituting the mode of production – reinforce each other. Indeed, they combine to produce the material reality in which they appear, and thus the perceived *a priori* character

[8] I owe this term to Dr Tom Clark, who proposed it as a means of conceiving common ontological orientations across a field of individual subjects.

of that reality's social relations. These relations in turn are incessantly generative of further iterations of neoliberal reality: "the realization of a hegemonic apparatus, in so far as it creates a new ideological terrain, determines a reform of consciousness and of methods of knowledge" (Gramsci 1999, p.192). As human capital our subjectivity and its base common sense – in their ready-to-hand-ness – appear as essentially neoliberal, and do so in a paradoxically dynamic stasis: to think other possibilities, enquiry and philosophy must be seized and fearlessly employed, tearing through the neoliberal fabric and against the individualist grain. To think ourselves as other than we are is not impossible, but can seem so within the coordinates of a neoliberal ideological structure. An enriched sense of philosophical possibility, and a more just social body, will result from shattering our current neoliberal common sense.

There are broadly two distinct theoretical techniques with which a critique of neoliberalism can be developed: at the risk of oversimplification, an intertwining of these two basic modes comprises the critical apparatus of this thesis. Neoliberalism tends towards positivism and idealism philosophically, and resources bequeathed by Marx and the Marxist tradition thus remain invaluable for critiquing it. In *The German Ideology* (1998, p.37), Marx and Engels write that "as individuals express their life, so they are. What they are, therefore, coincides with their production, both with *what* they produce and with how they produce". The value of this analysis for a thorough study of the subject as human capital is clear. Marx's materialist dialectic issues a constant challenge to the idealist common-sense of neoliberalism, however Foucault's genealogical approach is also useful. This thesis bases its methodology in Foucauldian critical discourse analysis, however it also seeks to unearth the dialectical tensions that are often elided by the putative 'neutrality' of neoliberal norms, and points to the lack of dialectical motion – the stasis – that much progressive discourse shares with neoliberal theory.

Presumably for a combination of methodological and ideological reasons, Foucault declares a dialectical method inadequate to the analysis of neoliberalism, stating that "we must emphasise a non-dialectical logic if we want to avoid being simplistic" (Foucault 2004, p.42). Instead, Foucault insists upon a method that would "establish the possible connections between disparate terms which remain disparate…not the logic of the homogenization of the contradictory" (Foucault 2004, p.42).

Foucault's seminal analysis of neoliberalism is a masterful piece of scholarship, and remains a touchstone for all serious study of the neoliberal project, however there are elisions that are troubling. Brown (2015, p.75) outlines how "Foucault averted his glance from capital itself as a historical and social force", and that missing from his analysis is a consideration of how "capital…dominates the human beings and human worlds it organises". By the time of the *Birth of Biopolitics* lectures, Foucault was a strong critic of the Marxist project, and his analysis of neoliberalism's epistemological revolutions cover a theoretical and historical terrain that traditional or strictly orthodox Marxist approaches struggle to account for. We must also remember that Foucault harboured a certain sympathy for neoliberalism, in what he understood as its potential for freeing the subject from the paternalism of the welfare state, although of course he did not live to see neoliberalism's zenith. With Brown, however, who combines Marx and Foucault in her own incisive analysis of neoliberalism, we must question what results

> …when genealogy replaces totalizing and dialectical history…when the future thus becomes relatively continuous with the present, so that radical political discontent can no longer make a home in an analysis of…a transformed future (Brown 2018, p.21).

Precisely because neoliberalism presents as ahistorical and acts to depoliticise, condensing the social, cultural and political into the economic and interpellating subjects as competitive individuals, a dialectical approach seems vital to articulate a genuinely emancipatory politics, and historically more productive of the same.

With genealogy we have an elegant perambulation through a neoliberal political economy: with dialectics, we seize its contradictions as our weapon.

Chapter Two

Labourers Have Become Capitalists: Human Capital Theory and Subjectivity

Economics is not therefore the analysis of processes; it is the analysis of an activity.
Michel Foucault, The Birth of Biopolitics.

Human capital theory represents an extension of the concept of capital, and its proponents tend to emphasise the limits and inflexibility of capital conceived merely as land, labour-power and means of production. This chapter counterposes capital as conceived by Marx to neoliberal human capital, arguing that the elision of labour in the neoliberal account has been crucial in producing material and ideological effects that reinforce neoliberal capitalism's hegemony. Class divisions are elided along with labour, as Brown (2015, p.65) has noted, and political programs grounded wholly or partially in class identifications, which have historically posed significant threats to capitalist hegemony, are neutralised via the obscuring of social solidarities. This happens both ontologically and epistemologically, shaping individual subjects and larger social bodies as well as determining how these can interrelate. As such, human capital theory can be posited as a far-reaching structural-ontological solution to crises necessarily generated by capitalism in operation. In this chapter, we will consider some specific effects of human capital theory on subjectivity, and the subjective and political ramifications of the individualist conception of capital that emerges in the neoliberal account. In contrast to Marx's social concept of capital, which can be traced backwards to a Hegelian account of recognition and subject formation, and forwards to Judith Butler's emphasis on our inherent sociality and primary vulnerability, how does a subject interpellated as human capital understand their subjectivity? What are the political ramifications of a widespread turn towards an individualist subjectivity? And do even subjects who wish to resist neoliberalism perhaps reinforce human capital as a normative mode of subjectivation?

Marx Contra Friedman

To trace the emergence of human capital theory, both as an economic development and a modality of subjectivation, we must ground our investigation in related concepts of capital that have developed historically. We commence, therefore, with Marx, whose critique remains the preeminent analysis of capital as both object and process. Indeed, for Marx

capital is value *in* process[9] (Marx 2013, p.104), and he emphasises the dynamic nature of capital and its accumulation by distinguishing initially between two forms of commodity circulation. The shift from commodity – money form – commodity, (C-M-C), or selling in order to buy; to money form – commodity – money form plus surplus (M-C-M'), or buying in order to sell, still remains exemplary for understanding capitalist production. It should be noted at the outset that both processes are inherently social: they presuppose a network of social relations that enable commodities to be exchanged.[10] In the first instance, the process is rather more predictable: you have a certain good, you exchange the good for money, and then you exchange that money for another good. The money is thus withdrawn from circulation and the circuit concludes, although the process can be initiated and concluded at an infinite number of different points, and is always beginning anew. There is a regularity and a distinct finality about this circuit, however, as "selling in order to buy, is kept within bounds by the very object it aims at, namely, consumption or the satisfaction of definite wants" (Marx 2013, p.102).

Altogether more dynamic is buying in order to sell, and it is here that capital emerges: "money that circulates in the latter manner is thereby transformed into, becomes capital, and is already potentially capital" (Marx 2013, p.98). Here we can perceive the constant motion and dialectical transformation that makes capitalism as an economic system both so crisis-prone and so resilient, as the surplus value added to capital in its circulation compels capitalists to constantly throw capital into circulation afresh: in the formulation M-C-M', "the circulation of capital has…no limits" (Marx 2013, p.102). The dynamism of this process of circulation is so important that it must be re-stated, even at the risk of pedantry:

> In the circulation M-C-M', both the money and the commodity represent only different modes of existence of value itself…It is constantly changing from one form to the other without thereby becoming lost, and thus assumes an automatically active character…Capital is money: Capital is commodities…the circulation of capital, suddenly presents itself as an independent substance, endowed with a

[9] Further to this: "Capital is not a simple relation, but a *process,* in whose various moments it is always capital" (Marx 2005, p.258).
[10] Marx (2005, p.188) emphasises that circulation is predicated upon "a circle of exchange, a totality of the same, in constant flux, proceeding more or less over the whole surface of society; a system of acts of exchange".

> motion of its own, passing through a life-process of its own, in which money and commodities are mere forms which it assumes and casts off in turn…Value therefore now becomes value in process, money in process, and, as such, capital (Marx 2013, p.103-104).

Capital here emerges as fluid and moveable, both initiating a process of commodity exchange and taking on various forms during this process. Although Marx (2005, p.259) emphasises that to develop the concept of capital we must begin with value rather than with labour, capital is nonetheless inseparable from labour. Indeed, we could say that labour is the more fundamental category, as labour is something that all humans perform – it mediates our relationships with nature and with each other. Whilst we can agree with Jameson that the injunction to historicise should underpin theoretical interventions, we can locate in labour a grounding principle not historically conditioned and indeed *formally* unhistorical, as "every object…must first be appropriated by some sort of activity before it can function as an instrument, as means of production" (Marx 2005, p.257), and thus without labour there is no history, although labour as *content* is of course historically variable. Labour functions as something always-already there: it is

> …a process in which both man and nature participate, and in which man of his own accord starts, regulates and controls the material re-actions between himself and Nature. He opposes himself to nature as one of her own forces (Marx 2013, p.120).

Our labour always produces use values, which Marx defines as "nature's material adapted by change of form to the wants of man" (Marx 2013, p.123): we need certain things in order to survive, and we perform certain actions in order to produce or obtain these. With the emergence of capitalism, however, we find the capacity to labour bought as a commodity by capitalists in order to generate not just use-value but surplus-value: transformed into a commodity, labour is "*a source not only of value, but of more value than it has itself*" (Marx 2013, p.133). In this process, our labour is abstracted and becomes labour-power, as to make the many different types of useful labour carried out equivalent involves "reducing them to their common denominator…human labour in the abstract" (Marx 2013, p.48). Commodities are "objectified quantities of labour time" (Marx 2005, p.139), though if the labourer was paid the total value that their labour-time contributes to a commodity's eventual exchange value (what it is sold for on the market), there would be no gain for the capitalist, thus no capitalist production, and no concept of capital. Therefore,

every labourer necessarily performs a variable amount of unpaid and thus exploited labour, which we can locate in a commodity as surplus value, which is what leads to the profit of the capitalist, although surplus value and profit are not synonymous.[11] This simple but powerful insight – "the fact that half a day's labour is necessary to keep the labourer alive during 24 hours, does not in any way prevent him from working a whole day" (Marx 2013, p.133) – illuminates the whole field of capitalist production, and clearly shows the exploitation underpinning this form of society.

Between labour and capital there is a dialectic, and the labour process necessarily also reproduces capitalist social relations. Sellers of labour-power – free labourers – and capitalists confront each other as "economic *dramatis personae*" (Marx 2013, p.99), however these relations extend far beyond the moment of simple exchange: Marx's immense theoretical achievement is to show how a whole society, from its apparatuses of production and distribution to the ideological currents that naturalise social stratifications, is predicated upon commodity exchange and the production of exchange value. This theoretical edifice retains immense explanatory power for the analysis of capitalism and capitalist societies.

Certainly, our current social and economic conditions are not those in which Marx wrote, and indeed 40 years of neoliberal economic policy has radically reshaped our social relations. In the West, the Fordist/welfare-state compromise between labour and capital of the post-WWII capitalist golden years has developed into a far more complex social body. The society of ostensible "equality and freedom", undergirded by the "exchange of exchange values" (Marx 2005, p.249) has been unsettled, with both progressive and regressive social consequences: when "competition replaces exchange" as the basis of economic relations (Brown 2015, p.64), a certain epistemic instability becomes normative. Regardless, capital accumulation remains the *sine qua non* of a neoliberal society, although the ways in which our labour is bought – or the ways in which we are

[11] In the *Grundrisse,* Marx (2005, p.427) chides bourgeois economists, including Ricardo, for conflating these two categories. As Marx notes, "the whole value contains a fractional part which is not paid, and hence a fractional part of surplus labour is paid in each fractional part of the whole": this is how profit is derived from surplus value. These categories cohabitate closely but are not the same: it is perfectly possible for surplus value to increase whilst profit falls.

'empowered' to sell it – are both more diverse and more subtle in 21st century neoliberal capitalism.

In 1961, Theodore Schultz declared that "labourers have become capitalists not from a diffusion of the ownership of corporation stocks…but from the acquisition of knowledge and skills that have economic value" (Schultz 1961, p.3). The ideological neutrality and anodyne quasi-universality of this claim disguises how reconfiguring the labourer as a micro-capitalist solves several problems created by capitalism. First, the basis for social solidarity in resistance to capitalist exploitation is not merely eroded but gradually pushed outside the bounds of epistemological possibility. Second, the embodied sources of this potential solidarity**,** human sellers of labour-power, undergo an ontological shift as neoliberalism collapses the distinctions between labour and capital via the category of human capital. Finally, human capital as the subject who invests in themselves allows for processes of privatisation and financialisation to be presented as neutrally beneficial, increasing choice and efficiency for savvy consumers whose consumption produces their human capital. Schultz critiques Marx for building his theory "on a *presumed* dichotomy between labour and capital" (Schultz 1959, p.111, italics mine), and indeed the limited range in classical economic and Marxist conceptions of capital and labour propelled the avant-garde of human capital theorists. Increasing the range of what might be considered capital decreases the range of the political, however, as the ostensible ideological neutrality of advanced economics removes conflict from previously contested spheres.[12] For Marx, as Foucault notes, "the work performed by the worker is work that creates a value, part of which is extorted from him" (Foucault 2004, p.221), and this understanding grounds a political critique of the economic system that functions with this extortion as its fundamental condition. For neoliberals, however, the category of labour as exploitable – visible in Marx's account as quite precisely the rate of surplus value, the extraction of unpaid labour directly from labourers and fixed in commodities – disappears entirely. Human capital is the agent of this dissolution: as competing miniature capitals, our wages are not to be understood as the fruits of the purchase of our labour power but rather as income that our human capital has generated. Foucault describes how by the process of this disappearance we arrive at

[12] Such depoliticisation aligns with neoliberal claims that "the use of political channels…tends to strain the social cohesion necessary for a stable society" (Friedman 2002, p.23).

> …the opposite extreme of a conception of labour power sold at the market price to a capital invested in an enterprise. This is not a conception of labour-power; it is a conception of capital-ability (Foucault 2004, p.225).

It is impossible under these epistemological conditions for exploitation in the Marxist sense to occur, which is of course convenient for those in positions conducive to exploitation.

Milton Friedman's (mis)reading of Marx is instructive in this regard. In *Capitalism and Freedom,* he describes how "the Marxist argument is invalid" as:

> Marx recognised the role of capital in producing the product but regarded capital as embodied labour…the inference for action is that past labour should get more of the product, though it is by no means clear how, unless it be in elegant tombstones (Friedman 2002, p.167-168).

One wishes that Marx was around to answer this, as a certain style of sardonic rejoinder provides one of the great pleasures in reading him. Instead, we must note firstly that Friedman here thinks of capital – whether as embodied in humans or as constant capital – in a profoundly undialectical fashion. That is, once labour is completed it simply vanishes, and there is thus no fundamental relation between labour and capital: as accumulated labour-power forms no part of the value of commodities, surplus value as a category disappears also. As such, past labour is dead, and it would be absurd to think of compensating it, hence Friedman's quip. Yet Marx (2013, p.133-135) quite clearly states that "the past labour that is embodied in the labour power, and the living labour that it can call into action…are two totally different things…the capitalist…converts dead labour into capital…a live monster that is fruitful and multiplies". Friedman's elegant tombstones are all too prematurely installed: exploited labour is very much alive in the body of an exploited labourer, although all labourers carry a certain death within themselves, an ontological dialectic of life and death whereby "living labour" is "enslaved to dead labour" (Weil 2013, p.40). However, like bones fertilising soil in which new plants grow, value

> ...deserts the consumed body, to occupy the newly created one…The property therefore which labour power in action, living labour, possesses of preserving value, at the same time that it adds it is a gift of Nature which costs the labourer nothing, but which is very advantageous to the capitalist" (Marx 2013, p.143).

Tombstones crack open anew, and dead and living labour exist in a dialectical process that fires capitalism's creativity and generativity, as "living labour makes instrument and material in the production process into the body of its soul and thereby resurrects them from the dead" (Marx 2005, p.364). A contrast between dead *and* living and dead *or* living labour could perhaps be extended into a metaphor contrasting a historical materialist and a neoliberal understanding of just who the labouring or capital-bearing subject *is,* or potentially could be*.* Regardless*,* Friedman's fundamental elision, of course, is of labour itself. The richness of the Marxist conception of labour – as dual, as both concrete and abstract, as the creator of both use and exchange value, as a process that reproduces the social forms that condition it, and as intertwined with capital – is instead replaced with a shrunken and rather stunted notion of labour as the work of competing capitals of various sizes. Human capital as an epistemological modality therefore involves collapsing labour and capital into one category: as Foucault describes, labour as a category breaks down into capital and income (Foucault 2004, p.224). Whilst for Marx value is constantly changing forms, Friedman doesn't recognise this dynamism as inhering in the value created by human capitals, even though he posits each human as a dynamic and flexible actor in processes of production, and implicitly chides Marx for limiting the subjective possibilities of economic actors. In Friedman's account labour is recompensed and then falls still: the individual who undertakes it receives an income commensurate with the value of their own human capital under prevailing market conditions, and their current and future income will vary depending upon the human capital they currently and in the future bear. There is nothing inherently social about labour conceived thus, and the neoliberal valorisation of competition and individualism logically follow.

In keeping with the epistemological tendencies of neoliberalism, Friedman also thinks of labour as a fundamentally individual process, an example of one's freedom to choose. Different varieties of labour are undertaken by different individuals, and once these individual labour processes are completed individuals move on to the next labour process: there is no understanding of the congealing of accumulated labour that sets up divisions of labour, and thus class, as constitutive of subjectivities and society. (This move can also be detected in the progressive discourse that I will discuss later in this thesis). Capital as value in process needs labour-power as a commodity and is thus a social relation. In Marx's account the very social nature of capital, produced by labour "directly social in its character" (Marx 2013, p.36), is both obscured by and essential to capital accumulation. The shift to human capital severs these connections: this ideological move "means that all

market actors are rendered as little capitals (rather than as owners, workers, and consumers) competing with…each other" (Brown 2015, p.65). With capital inhering in each of us, emancipatory class politics cease to make sense, and capitalist social relations are reified.

Thatcher said that "class is a communist concept" (Mirowski 2013, p.117), to which one might reply that, on the contrary, class achieves its highest degree of conceptual refinement under capitalism. Regardless, economic class as a concept *is* dependent upon the existence of "the free wage labourer, who sells his labour power to capital" (Marx 2013, p.232). The social division of labour – Marx describes how the "qualitative difference between the useful forms of labour that are carried on…develops into a complex system" (Marx 2013, p.23) – means that a fundamental social antagonism exists between sellers of labour-power and its purchasers. This is of course the class struggle, which is necessarily operative in a capitalist mode of production. Capitalism therefore contains the possibility of its destruction or overthrow as part of the conditions of its operation: the exploitation necessary for capitalism to function as an economic system means that those who are exploited can form political connections that constitute an existential threat to the system.

We have already noted that the role of exploitation in generating surplus value for the capitalist is elided by considering the labourer as a capitalist. Bowels and Gintis (1975, p.76) argued this before neoliberalism's period of hegemony: "to treat the labour-wage exchange as a pure market exchange is to abstract from an essential element in the capitalist organisation: the power of the capitalist over the worker". A neoliberal would counter that the labourer always has the option of selling their labour-power – or rather deploying their capital-ability – elsewhere, and if limited opportunities force them into a precarious or exploitative situation, then past investments in human capital can likely be posited as deficient. A profound and decisive epistemological shift occurs in conceiving past labours – either performed for wages or understood as the education, training, institutional investments and broad life choices of the subject – as rather past investments in human capital, the deployment and development of one's capital-ability for a designated period.

Louis Althusser describes a "break", a "mutation by which a new science is established in a new problematic" (Althusser & Balibar 2009, p.168-169), and whilst care must be taken to maintain a dialectical rigour in the use of Althusser's concept, the labourer transformed

into a self-investing micro-capitalist is exemplary of this break. Extending the concept, Althusser's student Foucault describes a "general system of thought whose network…renders an interplay of simultaneous and apparently contradictory opinions possible" (Foucault 1994, p.75). This system of thought – a specific historical *episteme* – delineates what it is possible to think or to know: "there is always only one episteme that defines the conditions of possibility of all knowledge" (Foucault 1994, p.168). The transformation of labourer into capitalist is precisely an Althusserian break wherein the concomitant epistemic shift naturalises the subjective potentialities for labouring capital-bearers and the society they inhabit.

A Neoliberal Episteme

Following Foucault, we are thus in a neoliberal episteme. Other systems of thought remain accessible, however a neoliberal epistemological framework has grounded cultural common-sense for quite some time. Neoliberalism's cleaving to and entanglement with both socially liberal and socially conservative political programs demonstrate the internal contradictions it harbours. A combination of conservative social moralism and extreme economic liberalism, a general depoliticising tendency intertwined with fierce ideological warfare, and an exhortation to constant subjective flexibility, individualism and self-development allied with the need to make responsible choices that secure future prosperity and viable subjectivity have, if anything, strengthened the project. With widespread interpellation into the embodied contradiction that is neoliberal human capital comes Althusser's "break", the radical mutation that shifts the object of knowledge and the questions that can be posed of it (Althusser & Balibar 2009, p.168-169): this shift has produced effects that have profoundly altered, even revolutionised, the social positions subjects can occupy.

In another perfectly legible contradiction, these positions have been both severely attenuated and almost infinitely multiplied: whilst neoliberalism has without doubt entrenched a great deal of economic inequality, the notion (pervasive discursively if not at the level of what is really felt by individuals day to day) that social stratifications are either no longer existent or are malleable and traversable by individuals based largely upon their own actions has settled culturally as a kind of common-sense.[13]

[13] The discursive proliferation of meritocracy is evidence of neoliberalised common-sense, and Jo Littler highlights how "the idea that we should live in a meritocracy has become

With human capital an object for economics, as we shift from economics as the analysis of a process to economics as the analysis of an activity (Foucault 2004, p.223), we have the ideological conditions for the economisation of all domains of life, the application of market logic to every personal sphere, and thus for a revolution in how we should think, enact and embody our subjectivity. With human capital an object – indeed an objective teleology – for subjects, "the production of the *concept* of that object…as the absolute condition of its theoretical possibility" (Althusser & Balibar 2009, p.204) has occurred, and social apertures beckon human capital and only human capital to occupy them. With the caveat that – as Stuart Hall noted (2011, p.727) – "no project achieves a position of permanent 'hegemony'. [Hegemony] is a process, not a state of being", we can now see the role that human capital theory has played in establishing 'there is no alternative' as hegemonic.

In a neoliberal capitalist episteme, therefore, human capital theory is a dominant way of conceiving subjectivity. Like all processes of capital accumulation, human capital accumulation – which Becker (1962a, p.9) defines as "imbedding resources in people" – sets in motion a dialectical process. Subjects need constantly to accumulate exactly that which they are conceived as – "the person and his human capital are inseparable" (Schultz 1972, p.8) – and one's human capital thus conditions the subject's success or otherwise in education and employment, intimate relationships and friendships, and self-development and realisation. These successes – or otherwise – then bolster or deplete the subject's human capital: the subject *as* "human capital is constrained to self-invest in ways that contribute to its appreciation…organizing its dating, mating, creative and leisure practices in value-enhancing ways" (Brown 2015, p.177). Such organisation both responds to and furthers the neoliberalisation of institutions and discourses, as neoliberal subjects configure multiple arenas as sites for capital accumulation, and cultural and subcultural positionalities are opened or closed to the subject by accumulation's logic. Human capital is both "our is and our ought" (Brown 2015, p.36), and, as always for neoliberal tenets, necessitates and instrumentalises a certain dynamism. Indeed, the demands for flexibility, adaptability and risk-taking made by neoliberal institutions position human capital as the "lynchpin of the neoliberal subject" (Dilts 2010, p.138). Witness again the Australian Government's "Tips to Help You Get a Job", written in a common-sense, savvy and youthful style that will be familiar to readers of platforms like VICE and EF: "your profile

integral to contemporary structures of feeling…as uncontroversial and as homely as 'motherhood and apple pie'" (Littler 2013, p.53).

should be organic, and should grow with you because it is your opportunity to market yourself" (*Tips to Help You Get A Job* 2019). Here we can see the paradoxical demands placed on the subject when human capital is both our 'is' – "your profile should be organic" – and our 'ought' – "should grow with you". We are always already human capital, however further accumulation is mandatory if we want any right to social, professional or personal advancement or growth. Human capital is endogenous and exogenous, both what we grow into and the soil in which we cultivate the potential for growth. Incidentally, marketing oneself is a vital subsidiary activity for human capital of all kinds, interweaving entirely with the subject's actions and discursive representations. The necessity of marketing the self – which all advanced human capitals must acknowledge – is evidenced by posts on Facebook and Instagram in such abundance that specific reference is surely superfluous.

Progressive Subjectivity and Human Capital Accumulation

It is worth re-stating that as human capital, our subjective possibilities are radically attenuated despite a superficial proliferation of individual choice and potentiality. Simultaneously, much progressive political and cultural discourse has pivoted from a critique of capitalism to expanding the range of identities that demand legitimation. 'Progressive discourse' and the 'progressive subject' to which I will refer throughout the remainder of this thesis are of course not fixed or definitively determinate entities: there is a dialectical relationship between subjects and discourse, and often many layers of mediation between the hard material consequences of neoliberal policies and the thought and actions of subjects concerned with contesting oppression based upon identity or social marker – race, gender, sexuality, ability – whom I broadly denote 'progressive subjects'. In order to contest oppression, progressive subjects seek out and construct certain discourses, although the fluid nature of online interaction in particular can blur boundaries between discourses' producers and receivers. Regardless, the aim is towards a method of changing first the self and then others – in thought and in action – to further the cause of social justice. However, the interpellative call made by discourses that aim broadly to generate resistances to our current conditions – and here reformist and revolutionary demands and strategies can and do intertwine – initiates a dialectic of subjectivation where neoliberal norms of competition and individualism are constituent parts. These parts can of course be interrogated and transformed – Marx's insight that "as society itself produces man as man, so it is produced by him" (Marx 1963, p.157) is pertinent here – however in a neoliberal episteme they are necessarily contained in processes of subject-formation.

Despite progressive discourse's good intentions, therefore, neoliberal norms can reflexively provide a structural underpinning.

Discourses that shape and are shaped by subjects who wish to contest oppression proceed from historical groundings in a variety of left political imaginaries. Following Nina Power, common to all these visions of emancipation is the conviction that "capital cannot fully 'enclose' the human, whether it be at the level of its species-being, linguistic creativity, capacity for rational thought, practical activity or political desire" (Power 2012, p.170): that our current conditions and social relations are not what they should be, and that we must organise to change them. However, despite the inherent instability of any subject in any epoch, the common-sense or day to day ontological orientation of subjects in a neoliberal episteme is shaped at least in part by neoliberal norms, and the subject of progressive politics and discourse therefore often appears as "an entrepreneurial self equipped with promiscuous notions of identity and selfhood, surrounded by simulacra of other such selves" (Mirowski 2013, p.92).

Transposing Becker (1962a, p.9), who notes that "a concern with investment in human capital…may be useful to understand the inequality in income between people", neoliberalised progressive discourse similarly compels progressive subjects who are concerned with inequalities and structural oppression to get to work on themselves: this work must go ceaselessly on, and here Foucault's entrepreneur of the self steps into the spotlight. As described in the *Xenofeminist Manifesto*, "memes like…ethics, social justice and privilege checking host social dynamisms at odds with the often commendable intentions with which they're taken up" (Cuboniks 2018, p.49), and the reification of competition and individualism that underpins certain modalities of progressive subjectivity highlights just how deeply and thoroughly neoliberalism has permeated subjects and the social. Human capital theory works constantly to produce competitive individuals as subjects at a structural-ontological level, and it is clear that non-individualist notions of subjectivity must be developed and posited for any genuinely emancipatory political program.

Subjectivity and Collectivity

There certainly exist other historical possibilities that show us more collective ways of understanding ourselves. Hegel's notion of recognition describes a process of subject formation that is inherently social and relational: we come into being by recognising

ourselves in another; indeed, subjects "recognise themselves as mutually recognising the other" (Hegel 2003, p.106). Hegel writes in *The Philosophy of Right* that:

> A man is not one-sided, but limits himself willingly in reference to another, and yet in this limitation knows himself as himself. In this determination he does not feel himself determined, but in the contemplation of the other as another has the feeling of himself (Hegel 2005, p.xxxv).

There is an emphasis here on our primary relationality, the way in which we need the other's recognition to have a sense of our own subjectivity. Of course this doesn't mean that we will not compete with other individuals for resources, however our ontological grounding is far less rigid and atomised in Hegel's account, as the immanent sociality of the subject opens a space for subjectivation that isn't always already surrendered to capital accumulation. The very being of others cannot *but* impact upon one's own subjectivity. This idea is radically opposed to the neoliberal conception of the subject as "a produced means of production, as the product of investment", where the subject makes the decision to become who they are "from the acquisition of knowledge and skills that have economic value" (Schultz 1961, p.3). The shrunken and stunted conception of subjectivity that human capital theory inaugurates is open to an *a priori* Hegelian critique, as the actions of the subject as intimately and inherently bound together with others cannot be merely for that subject alone:

> Though I preserve my subjectivity in accomplishing my ends, yet in the objectification of these ends I pass beyond the simple and elementary subjectivity which is merely my own. This new external subjectivity, which is identical with me, is the will of others (Hegel 2005, p.45).

Judith Butler continues the Hegelian account of subject formation, but adds an emphasis on our primary vulnerability to each other. For Butler, the possibility of a subject for whom human capital is both our "is and our ought" (Brown 2015, p.36) is annihilated at the outset, and indeed by the very terms with which we can begin to think our subjectivity, to give an account of ourselves**.** She notes that we cannot understand our subjectivity without considering

> …our fundamental dependence on the Other, the fact that we cannot exist without addressing the other and without being addressed by the Other, *that there is no wishing away our fundamental sociality* (Butler 2009, p.33).

There is great richness that inheres in the Butlerian subject, and the process of subjectivation is understood as life-long: as such, "my account of myself is partial" (Butler 2009, p.40) and our inherent vulnerability means that humility, vulnerability, impressionability and dependence can become resources (Butler 2006, p.149-150). There is perhaps a superficial parallel between human capital theory and Butler's account, in that subjectivation is a process that is never completed, and the subject is enriched by embodying certain resources. These Butlerian resources, however, are dependent on the action of others. By definition, they are not capital that we alone can acquire, but rather they emerge collectively. Additionally, Butler calls for an embrace of vulnerability and dependency; for human capital, to embrace such notions would be to risk depreciation.

Butler's formulation also stands in subtle contrast to progressive demands for subjective legitimation based upon woundedness or suffering: we are certainly brought into being marked by power and thus potentially wounded, however her demand is not merely for a space of solace but for individual vulnerability to be radically dialectically transformed into collective strength. We must sacrifice some of our selfishness, forgo foregrounding capital accumulation and invest in others uncertain of our return, with the space of subjectivity opened to "the ways in which the enigmatic Other inaugurates and structures me" (Butler 2009, p.55). Such investments are contingent, however Butler calls for an embrace of this contingency in understanding our subjectivity, and insists on working from this always incomplete understanding, this structural particularity, towards universal political goals. We can read an implicit critique of the *political* possibilities open to the subject as Schultz's "produced means of production" in Butler's thought:

> If any…particular identity seeks to universalise its own situation without recognizing that other such identities are in an identical structural situation, it will fail to achieve an alliance with other emergent identities, and will mistakenly identify the meaning and place of universality itself (Butler, Laclau & Žižek 2000, p.31).

Identity and subjectivity are not exactly synonymous: identities are constellations of "ascriptive difference" (Reed 2013, p.49) that presuppose 'natural' socio-cultural as well as

deeply personal affective alignments, whilst subjectivity situates each embodied and potentially shifting identity constellation *vis a vis* others, as well as dominant social structures, forces and relations. In short, a subject *identifies as* but is a *subject of,* although in progressive discourse identity positions and subject positions are essentially interchangeable. Regardless, Butler implores those with progressive political aims to grasp our primary relationality, vulnerability and sociality as both epistemological necessity and strategic imperative.

However, the subject as competitive human capital can only universalise its *own* particularity: others who share our identity markers exist, but the fact that we all emerge with reified identity positions that structure our subjective possibilities forecloses any move towards a genuinely coalitional anti-neoliberal program. This is precisely an example of the mistaken identification of the meaning and place of universality that Butler refers to. The political field opened by this mistaken identification is structured by the competition for recognition, and a seemingly endless proliferation of atomised micro-universals can be found there. Each individual subject is produced as a particular type of human capital which determines how they can produce – and what they can produce for – themselves. Others are of course acknowledged, but a profound relationality constitutive of subjectivity, much less any emancipatory possibility based upon structural vulnerability, is conspicuously absent.

There is a harsh logic at play here that recalls the discipline of the market: political goals are unlikely to succeed unless we get ourselves into shape first. Dardot and Laval put it thus:

> …everyone must learn to become an ‘active’ and ‘autonomous’ subject in and through the action they perform on themselves. They will thus learn by themselves to mobilize ‘life strategies’ to increase their human capital and enhance its value. ‘Self-creation and self-development’ are what is required for ‘positioning identity’ (Dardot & Laval 2014, p.268).

One is then likely to conceive of politics as a field of individuating subjects each aiming toward their own very specific claims to universality, a whole movement of competing human capitals striving towards further accumulation via self-creation and self-

development, yet at constant risk of depreciation, with solidarity reconfigured as supporting others with the "imbedding of resources" (Becker 1962a, p.9) in themselves.

Wendy Brown notes that "even social movements that understand themselves as opposing neoliberal economic policies may nonetheless be organised by neoliberal rationality" (Brown 2015, p.202), and we can immediately locate homologies between identitarian strains of progressive discourse (perhaps the most dominant contemporary liberal-left political ideology) and subjectivity understood as human capital. In their overview of intersectionality, Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge underscore the progressive subject's orientation towards their truth and wholeness via a politics of identity, and for Collins and Bilge realising a transcendent subjectivity is seen as the necessary ground for an emancipatory politics:

> …once people are changed on the individual level, they are likely to remain so. Focusing on the self, on its wholeness, provides a major impetus for individual and collective empowerment" (Collins & Bilge 2016, p.135).

The paradox of the progressive subject as human capital involves an intertwining: of the essentialised and ahistorical 'whole self', immediately inaccessible in its wholeness due to the ontological barriers of oppression or privilege, and the quotidian subjective flexibility needed for life-long work towards this idealised, empowered subjective identification. These competing subjective horizons inaugurate a "motion" of "composing and dismantling", as identity construction "becomes a self-propelling and self-invigorating activity…identities are projects: tasks yet to be undertaken, diligently performed and seen through to infinitely remote conclusion" (Bauman 2013, p.110-111). Foucault notes that human capital "is made up of innate elements and other, acquired elements" (Foucault 2004, p.227), and subject formation and identity construction understood in the shade of human capital are therefore inherently complex processes: there are paradoxical convergences, and brittleness and fragility are coterminous with a certain immutability that essentialism propagates.

On one hand, there is an idealised, real and 'whole' subject that exists ahistorically, an essential self already there that casts its shadow across a lifetime, structuring and foreclosing possibilities and constituting a base reserve of human capital: what one enters the game with. Dardot and Laval emphasise that under neoliberalism:

> The goal is for individuals to accept the market situation imposed on them as 'reality' – i.e. as the 'rules of the game' – and thus calculate their individual interest if they do not want to lose out in the 'game' and, still more, if they want to enhance their personal capital in a universe where accumulation seems to be the general law of existence (Dardot & Laval 2014, p.170).

Human capital as a modality of understanding one's subjectivity is precisely a way of measuring the stakes one has at one's disposal. As neoliberalism overflows into progressive cultural arenas, the recognition and legitimation of subjects' identities needs to be both transparent and calculated quite precisely, so that regardless of one's position in the intersectional matrix all players can see the human capital other players possess. As subjects of progressive discourse compete for recognition in an "online economy" where a scarcity of recognition is the norm (Nagle 2017, p.76), identification of the human capital one enters the game with is vital. The reified, ahistorical and essentialised identity of the subject as human capital, of course, determines the combination of privilege and/or oppression they can expect to experience. Brown (2018, p.30) points out the peculiar historical situation of this subject, "one that holds history responsible, even morally culpable, at the same time as it evinces a disbelief in history as a teleological force". A foundational identification – outside of history – is therefore the *whole* subject, and the function of progressive politics is to be Kafka's axe, striking at the frozen sea of oppression so that our wholeness and truth can gush forth.

The other side of the coin – and the paradox must be emphasised – is the infinitely malleable and flexible capital accumulator, whose every action is an investment in the self, an enhancement of the "self's future value" (Brown 2015, p.34). This subject is unstable and dynamic, unlikely to remain the same from one day to the next. Flexibility and risk are normative conditions for neoliberal subjects, and these conditions compel us to maintain the dance of individuation across all social terrains: to abandon the project of the self is almost unthinkable. "The subject that is human capital…is at persistent risk of redundancy and abandonment" (Brown 2015, p.110), and as such must be able to reshape themselves and adapt rapidly to unpredictable conditions. The necessary flexibility of this risk-taking subject is supported ideologically by the presumption of "a self that can incorporate any attribute, take up any challenge, transcend any limitation, and embody any quality" (Mirowski 2013, p.117). We are encouraged to believe that any possibility is open to us,

despite how often concrete reality shows us otherwise: discourses of meritocracy and self-transformation are ubiquitous, and the fundamental responsibility of the individual for their own success or failure – Brown terms it 'responsibilisation' – means that the subject "above all seeks to work on himself so as to constantly transform himself, improve himself" (Dardot & Laval 2014, p.265). The tirelessness valorised here plays a role in interpellating the subject as an entrepreneur of the self, with Althusser's notion of interpellation as ensuring "subjection to the ruling ideology or the mastery of its 'practice'" (Althusser 1994, p.104) undergoing a shift as every subject is subjected to the limitless demands of their own self-production. We have here a Foucauldian governmentality of the self *par excellence*, with the corollary that if every subject is responsible for themselves then failure is naturally also an individual problem.

Subjectivation, Individuation and 'The Work'

Human capital, as capitalist and labourer in one, is:

> …the business, the raw material, the product, the clientele and the customer of her own life. She is a jumble of assets to be invested…but equally an offsetting inventory of liabilities to be pruned…She is both headline star and enraptured audience of her own performance (Mirowski 2013, p.108).

The paradox Mirowski identifies serves to flatten processes of individuation, and manifests in progressive discourse and for progressive subjects as a demand to constantly 'do the work' in order to become more woke: a better ally and/or a truer embodiment of one's identity. Writing for EF, Jamie Utt details the bind of the progressive subject as human capital, and implicitly connects the entrepreneurial neoliberal self, constantly investing in their human capital, always at work, to the struggle for emancipation from oppression of various kinds:

> Allies Don't Take Breaks.
> The thing about oppression is that it is constant. Those who are oppressed and marginalized in our society do not get to take breaks and respites. Thus, if you truly want to act in solidarity, you cannot simply retreat into your privilege when you just don't want to engage. This is one of the hardest things for me in being an ally. Sometimes I just don't have the energy to respond to my super classist uncle or to that racist comment from a Facebook friend. I don't want to get into an endless

> discussion about how they 'didn't mean it that way' or how I'm 'just being too PC or sensitive'. But People of Colour have no choice but to resist racism every single day of their lives. Women have no choice but to weather the shit storm of misogyny every day of their lives. Differently abled people have no choice but to deal with and respond to ableism every day of their lives. And in the end, part of the privilege of your identity is that you have a choice about whether or not to resist oppression (Utt 2013).

Here we find oppression conceived as occurring fundamentally at the level of the individual, for both the privileged and the oppressed, and thus as progressive subjects we must be "always on", to borrow Mark Fisher's phrase. Fisher emphasises that "always-on pressure…means that there is no longer any end to the working day" (Fisher 2018, p.501), and indeed an "always-on" individual that is "unable to ever switch off" (Fisher 2018, p.501) seems to be the ideal progressive subject: "allies don't take breaks" and "educate themselves constantly" (Utt 2013). Incidentally, this prohibition on idleness is shared by Schultz, who notes that "human capital deteriorates when it is idle" (Schultz 1961, p.13). For the contemporary progressive subject, much like the neoliberal entrepreneur of the self, there is a constant injunction to 'do the work', however this work can seem totally abstract: a process of emotional labour that is on-going and ceaseless in a present where oppression constitutes the only possible epistemological framework. Allies are advised by EF that "working with us looks like checking in not only once, but consistently, about everything" (Stephens 2018), and that they must "commit endless time and energy to be in full solidarity" (Loubirel 2016). Exactly what 'the work' materially consists of is elusive. For the oppressed, the work involves the labour of educating others or reiterating and defending accounts of one's positionality, though the function is to legitimate the self and tell one's story rather than provide the ground for solidarity. Indeed, as Chi Chi Shi describes, "solidarity amongst the oppressed is impossible, because it is a relationship of competition between differently-discriminated people" (Shi 2018). Jeff Sparrow concurs: "with identities (and thus privilege) combining…almost without limit, solidarity was forever deferred" (Sparrow 2018, p.161). Regardless of one's positionality, it is stressed at the outset (here by EF's Clarissa Brooks) that "it's vital to make changes in your personal life that will eventually change in your work and activism" (Brooks 2017), which reinforces how processes of subjectivation and individuation for contemporary progressive subjects primarily involve looking inward. Internal, individual work is how we change both ourselves and the world, how both the oppressed and their privileged allies can navigate the abstract

social constellation of subaltern subject positions. Moreover, 'the work' is not only abstract and individual, but needs to be done perpetually and simultaneously by a competing multitude of individuals. With no sense of systematic concretisation, however, the congealing of social labour into a variegated accumulation that might ground and structure an emancipatory politics slips from the field of possibilities. This abstraction and atomisation of the means of countering oppression necessarily abstracts and atomises oppression itself: an abstract, idealised oppression, however, is reified, depoliticised and ahistorical.

There has been a large-scale political turn in progressive discourse and subjectivity: the fundamental struggle is for recognition and legitimation rather changing the underlying social structures that oppress some and privilege others. As Sparrow (2018, p.161) has noted, the left's increased focus on micro-aggressions provides evidence of this turn, as at every moment a new instance of oppression or privilege can arise. In such conditions, activism necessarily takes on a micropolitical, situationalist and 'everyday' character, wherein introspection and individual work are fundamental, and social solidarities are inherently problematic: even well-meaning allies are likely to perpetuate oppression in their efforts to bring about change. If oppression is conceived as fundamentally structural then there are potentially moments of both respite and collectivity, social oases where individuals connect and organise, but here every individual connection must be interrogated for oppressive content and unearned privilege. Oppressed individuals seem to have little agency to contest their oppression, and allies can only really 'do the work' of looking deeper into what Sparrow identifies as their "personal complicity" (Sparrow 2018, p.159) in perpetuating oppression. Rather than challenging structural oppression, then, such moves tend to position individuals in competition with each other in a market of privilege. The progressive subject is caught between two impossibilities via the paradoxical confluence of their subjectivation and their individuation, with human capital undergirding this aporia. Xenofeminism offers exemplary diagnostic resources here, underscoring the "plural but static constellation" of identity possibilities towards which one can aim at the same time as "we are told to seek solace in unfreedom, staking claims on being 'born' this way" (Cuboniks 2018, p.45). In this diagnosis, we can locate human capital as both the apotheosis and the limit of subjective possibility.

Chapter Three

Subjectivity and Discourse: A Dialectic

In a neoliberal episteme, individual subjects are conceived as human capital, and human capital theory functions as the interpellative arm of the neoliberal project. Neoliberalism is a constructivist project, and seeks to establish, consolidate and reproduce itself via action at both societal and individual levels. Neoliberalism re-structures institutions – for example, the full privatisation of Australia's employment services system in 1998 (Bennett et al. 2018): and produces subjects – that need to "stay competitive in the job market" (*Findind a Job When You're Over 50* 2018) – for example. The taking-up of neoliberal ideals at the level of individual subjectivity, so that these permeate "emotions, desires, passions and feelings, beliefs and attitudes" (Dardot & Laval 2014, p.286), represents a 'structural-ontological' dialectic, whereby individuals shaped by various discourses inform institutions that produce discourses that further shape individuals, and so on *ad infinitum*. Norman Fairclough (2001, p.1-2) describes a "dialectical relationship between discourse…and other elements of social practice", including how "discourse figures in ways of being, in the constitution of identities". Both the subject's ontological grounding and epistemological framework are discursively mediated, and

> …the process of 'changing the subject' can be thought of in terms of the inculcation of new discourse…Inculcation is a matter of…people coming to 'own' discourses, to position themselves inside them, to act and think and talk and see themselves in terms of new discourses (Fairclough 2001, p.3).

This thesis has sought to locate and describe the dialectic(s) that operates to produce the subject as human capital, and to thus demonstrate the fluid malleability of neoliberalism as it irrigates both contestable language and corporeal speakers, soaking through into society, culture, and politics, deliquescing ideology and materiality. Neoliberalism undoubtedly seeks to produce a certain kind of truth and certain kinds of subjects. As an ideology, a regime of governmentality and a distinct political economy, I have argued that it has enjoyed hegemony precisely because it is able to produce effects at a very deep subjective level: it can operate as what Brown (2015, p.35) calls "sophisticated common-sense". As such, we should be able to find evidence of neoliberalism at work even in those who identify as resistant to its effects, precisely because the 'progressive subject' often unwittingly reinforces a neoliberal logic in their thought and action. The question then

arises as to how this might be measured: if a large-scale neoliberal subjective turn has occurred – and there are thinkers on the left who dispute this – we will need to analyse progressive discourse, and its production and reception, to support this contention. Such discourse

> …fight[s] oppression like racism and sexism via an intersectional feminist lens that 1) considers social media…an indispensable tool and 2) strongly resists separating the on-line from the off-line (Zimmerman 2017, p.55).

As such, on-line platforms for the dissemination of 'progressive discourse' – discourse that shapes and is shaped by subjects who wish to contest oppression based upon identity or social marker – will be the bodies of discourse that are analysed. Regardless of the content on which it operates the markers this analysis locates remain consistent. The methodological process should be applicable across a range of discursive formations. To locate evidence of human capital theory in cultural and political discourses intended to either position progressive subjects or provide resources for activists who aim at changing unjust social conditions, a reading method must be developed and applied. By locating consistent terms, tropes, injunctions and stylistic conventions – a set of markers – in operation across a variety of content, we can posit neoliberalism as structuring the discourse under consideration, and thus point to human capital theory as an ontological underpinning. In this chapter, I will articulate this reading method, and then provide some background on the example discourses.

Critical Discourse Analysis: Locating Neoliberal Texts

The reading method is based upon critical discourse analysis, which in turn is heavily influenced by Foucault, who defines discourse as "merely representation itself represented by verbal signs" (1994, p.81). Discourse operates on levels other than mere representation: witness how discourse as a "single network of necessities…made possible the individuals we term Hobbes, Berkeley, Hume, or Condillac" (Foucault 1994, p.63). These thinkers' relevance to this thesis is marginal, but absolutely crucial is Foucault's insight into the role of discourse as setting the epistemological conditions for certain types of subjects to appear.[14] Reading Foucault, Julianne Cheek (2004, p.1142) argues that "a

[14] We should note in passing Spivak's (1999, p.69) critique: that Foucault reintroduces an undivided subject into the discourse of power, and perhaps we can bolster this with

discourse consists of a set of common assumptions that sometimes, indeed often, may be so taken for granted as to be invisible or assumed". Further, this distinction between latent and manifest content, wherein we read for structural elements that the producers and receivers of the discourse under consideration may not be aware are present, is crucial for locating human capital theory in progressive discourse, although we must remember that "discourse analysis is an approach rather than a fixed method" (Cheek 2004, p.1145). Cheek also describes how discourses "both enable and constrain the production of knowledge" (2004, p.1142): using critical discourse analysis as a diagnostic tool to uncover common-sense neoliberal assumptions is crucial for those who wish to articulate alternatives. If we want to resist or even overthrow this ideology and its grounding mode of production, we must know it when we see it. In short, methodologically we need to be able to analyse a body of discourse and point to certain markers consistently locatable within it that are evidence of a subject conceived as human capital. The readings in this thesis aim neither to judge nor moralise. Rather, the intent is diagnostic: if even cultural spaces that understand themselves as resistant to neoliberal injustices produce discourse informed by neoliberal logic, the efficacy of their political tactics in contesting neoliberalism is likely to be limited.

The objective of this thesis is twofold: to be an academic advance and to provide a theoretical tool that enables a range of political interventions. The reading method outlined here involves refining and deploying a form of critical analysis that can reveal the infiltration of neoliberal notions into discourses that might be sites of resistance.

There are of course concrete gains that can be made by neoliberal activism, or what Banet-Weiser and Mukherjee call "commodity activism", and indeed these theorists emphasise that "within the evolutionary history of capitalism, consumers have consistently – and often contradictorily – embraced consumption as a platform from which to launch progressive political and cultural projects" (Mukherjee & Banet-Weiser 2012, p.6). Additionally, many 20th century political struggles, including the civil rights movement in the United States, were:

Eagleton's (2007, p.15) claim that ruling ideologies must also engage significantly with the wants and desires people already have, "catching up genuine hopes and needs".

> Founded on the promise of the *market* to deliver social acceptance and democratic rights, and on the force of mobilizations of *consumers* to effect social and political change. In each instance, tactics of social action engaged with rituals and institutions of commerce and capitalist exchange to demand political freedom and equality (Mukherjee & Banet-Weiser 2012, p.7).

However, in times of political crisis like this moment, with right-wing populists in charge of many of the world's largest economies, and far-right movements ascendant whilst the neoliberalised mainstream left and social democratic parties seem adrift electorally, tactically and indeed spiritually – what does a labour party mean when human capital has replaced labour? – the gains made by commodity activism will not be sufficient to reverse rampant economic inequality. Nor will this activism address the root causes of the climate change that replaces individual death with collective extinction as our horizon of philosophical possibility.[15] In short, commodity activism will not seriously challenge neoliberalism. Progressive discourses informed by neoliberal normativity may provide respite for individuals and degrees of cultural recognition and representation for marginalised identity groups, as well as encourage more ethical consumption, but none of this is sufficient to bolster political movements that seek genuinely radical material change. Indeed, such discursive inadequacy can be highlighted precisely by locating a subject conceived as human capital.

The reading method I have developed consists of a dialectic between close and distant reading. A set of markers of human capital theory – terms, tropes, injunctions and stylistic conventions – have been identified via distant reading. Via close reading these are located in concrete occurrence. This methodology highlights how human capital theory influences

[15] Beyond the scope of this thesis are the implications of collective extinction replacing individual death. Arguably, the social movement that engages most openly with tropes of extinction still demands 'revolutionary reforms' that remain at least partially grounded in a technocratic/expert consensus understanding of political change and thus constrained by neoliberal norms. Regardless, a seed of radical political possibility is planted by thinking of collective extinction rather than individual death as an ultimate horizon of possibility. We must remember though that 'thinking extinction' is an epistemological advance for *Western* subjects and societies: the possibility of actual extinction continues to be very real for many indigenous communities outside the frame of anthropogenic climate change.

subjectivity and subject formation by drawing upon specific examples from the particular discursive formation under consideration. Initially, distant reading determines the set of markers of human capital theory: these are explored in detail in the following chapter. Through a synthesis informed by Marxist dialectics and ideology critique and Foucauldian discourse analysis, neoliberal texts have been analysed in order to establish the set of markers that produce these texts as definitively 'neoliberal'.

The search for these markers guides the close reading of texts published on two on-line platforms: the news and culture platform VICE, and the activist politics and culture platform EF. Analysing a number of different texts from each platform in this way allows the researcher to build up a body of evidence to determine whether the discourses in question – and thus the subjects positioned and ideologically interpellated in the production and reception of this discourse – reveal the effects of human capital theory on subjectivity and subject formation.

VICE, EF and Digital Platforms

Fourteen different pieces of content – articles, 'listicles' and 'how-to' guides, seven from each platform – will be analysed in order to locate distinct and definite occurrences of each different marker of human capital theory. Each marker will be highlighted and discussed via an exemplary article: one article from each platform will correspond to each marker, thus presenting two definite instances of each individual marker operating in discourse. Additionally, some articles reveal the auxiliary presence and intertwining of other markers in the set. Links to the data-set will be presented in Appendixes One (EF) and Two (VICE).

The content analysed is from 2014: studying a specific period of the recent past allows us to identify the historical context and material conditions underpinning discursive production. As Marx (2009, p.35) reminds us, "upon the social conditions of existence, a whole superstructure is reared of various and peculiarly shaped feelings, illusions, habits of thought and conceptions of life". 2014 was a year of relative calm before the tumult of the 2016 US election and Brexit, after which there was an alarming upsurge in far right political activity, often in countries who had lived through several decades of neoliberal economic policies (i.e. the United States, the United Kingdom, Brazil, France and Australia). In 2014, however, with a person of colour the president of the United States, and the nascent alt-right confidently dismissed by liberal experts as basically harmless and

even intriguingly subversive[16] – young men who might play with transgression via fascist symbols or engage in Nazi LARP-ing, but who ultimately just spent too much time on the internet and were unlikely to mobilise politically – a certain degree of political complacency in combination with hypersensitivity, moral righteousness and performative 'wokeness' structured much mainstream progressive discourse. Similarly, much of the left seemed to recoil from material analysis, as the programmatic structure of left neoliberalism was oriented towards equality of opportunity within "given patterns of capitalist class relations" (Reed 2013, p.53). Just prior to the populist eruptions that have disrupted the technocratic, expert consensus of globalist neoliberalism – and simultaneously the vague neoliberal progressivism represented by discourses of 'diversity' – the cultural ascendance of identitarian progressivism and a defanged intersectionality found distinctive expression on various online platforms. This was a period of hegemonic neoliberalism where the left seemed primarily concerned with removing or erecting barriers to cultural representation and self-expression. In 2014 we thus find perhaps the zenith of certain modes of progressive discourse, and by focussing on discourse from this year we can also analyse the subjects producing and receiving it – self-consciously "excluded social forces, whose consent has not been won, whose interests have not been taken into account" (Hall 2011, p.727) – at a moment of their emboldenment and ascendancy in the struggle for hegemony.

VICE and EF produce discourse for such "emergent" (Hall 2011, p.728) subjects. As contemporary producers of accessible progressivism both address young audiences, attempting to shape emerging political consciousnesses. VICE is "a global media channel focusing on investigative journalism and enlightening videos…original reporting on everything that matters" (*Facebook About Vice* n.d) whilst EF is an "educational platform for personal and social liberation...through intersectional feminism" (*About Everday Feminism* n.d). EF aims to "amplify and accelerate the progressive cultural shifts taking

[16] Angela Nagle describes a fawning Esquire interview with notorious neo-Nazi hacker and troll weev. In a style typical of a bourgeois establishment publication, the article extols trolling, giddily stacking 'high' cultural tropes to present its readers with a digestible account of a putatively avant-garde, carnivalesque and titillatingly transgressive performance art: "trolling is the more high-minded business…a tradition that goes back to Socrates, Jesus and the trickster god Loki, from Norse mythology. Aurenhemier [weev] likens himself to Shakespeare's puck" (Nagle 2017, p.29-30).

place across the US and the world" (*About Everday Feminism* n.d), and so explicitly illustrates the productivity inherent in the relationship between subjects and discourse. Platforms constitute perhaps the avant-garde of capitalism, and some thinkers (Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, Helen Hester and the Laboria Cuboniks collective, Jodi Dean and Jeremy Gilbert are most relevant for this thesis) argue that 'platform capitalism' is in fact a new iteration of capitalism that seeks a post-neoliberal hegemony, and that such a project is already discernible in the emergence of vast tech monopolies like Facebook and Amazon (Srnicek 2017, p.6, 42-43). Gilbert argues that "digital platforms are in some senses the most sophisticated tool for enabling potent collectives that has ever been developed" (Gilbert 2017, p.36), and activist platforms undoubtedly offer a wealth of opportunities to make strategic political connections, build movements and share radical ideas with a large number of people quickly. EF aims explicitly at positioning progressive subjects, and in providing resources for them to overcome oppression is evidence of a platform format deployed specifically to be a multi-purpose tool for activism. Like VICE, there is a wide variety of content published, and the platform constitutes an "enclosed ecosystem" (Srnicek 2017, p.110) for analysing and contesting oppression by situating subjects in relation to their own oppression and privilege. Srnicek and Williams point to both the interpellative potential of platforms and their existence as sites of political struggle:

> Platforms are the infrastructure of global society. They establish the basic parameters of what is possible, both behaviourally and ideologically. In this sense, they embody the material transcendental of society: they are what make possible particular sets of actions, relationships, and powers. While much of the current global platform is biased towards capitalist social relations, this is not an inevitable necessity (Williams & Srnicek 2016).

To operate as sites of genuine resistance to neoliberalism, platforms must be seized, re-engineered and used collectively: as the *Xenofeminist Manifesto* notes, "there are incessantly proliferating tools to be annexed" (Cuboniks 2018, p.35), however the use of platforms for merely personal 'liberation' consolidates a subject as human capital at the vanguard of technological development, and thus elides such development's radical

potential.[17] VICE's shift from fashionable 'underground' magazine to mainstream media platform illustrates just how generative neoliberalism can be when underpinning cultural and social discourses and formations: it can intertwine with 'radical' quasi-apolitical discourse or earnest progressivism as well as conservative discourses, structuring an array of cultural forms for discursive production. This thesis has insisted upon a complex dialectical relationship between subjects and discourse, between ideology and the material conditions of existence, and even though neoliberalism operates by interpellating subjects as human capital, it is worth asking to what extent, and in what circumstances, we can "assume a linear and determinative relationship between the macro-economic logic that would eventuate in neoliberalism and the micropolitical expression of that logic in the self-conceptions and actions of individuals" (Wolfe 2018, p.92). We must bear this question in mind throughout the remainder of this thesis, as we analyse and compare the subject of VICE and EF's discourse.

Although of course we cannot simply denote any receiver of discourse from these platforms a certain type of subject merely because of discursive reception, the subject

[17] The *Xenofeminist Manifesto* (2018, p.19) highlights that "the real emancipatory potential of technology remains unrealised". Such thinking resonates with the theoretical radicalism of Marxism, and echoes Jameson's analysis in *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Jameson 2000, p.225-226), where Jameson urges us to heed "Marx's demonstration of the materialist dialectic…the hard lesson of some more genuinely dialectical way to think historical development and change. The topic of the lesson is, of course, the historical development of capitalism itself and the deployment of a specific bourgeois culture. In a well-known passage Marx powerfully urges us to do the impossible, namely, to think this development positively and negatively all at once; to achieve, in other words, a type of thinking that would be capable of grasping the demonstrably baleful features of capitalism along with its extraordinary and liberating dynamism simultaneously within a single thought, and without attenuating any of the force of either judgment. We are somehow to lift our minds to a point at which it is possible to understand that capitalism is at one and the same time the best thing that has ever happened to the human race, and the worst. The lapse from this austere dialectical imperative into the more comfortable stance of the taking of moral positions is inveterate and all too human: still, the urgency of the subject demands that we make at least some effort to think the cultural evolution of late capitalism dialectically, as catastrophe and progress all together".

implied by the accumulated weight of discursive content, the ideal subject positioned and interpellated, can reveal the extent of neoliberalism's cultural permeation.

There are potentially innumerable data that could be analysed to show the influence of human capital theory on subject formation: these two platforms were chosen for a variety of reasons, and their similarities and differences are instructive. First, both are prolific: VICE publishes new material daily, and whilst EF has ceased publishing new articles at the time of writing, between 2012 and 2018 they published an enormous amount of content. Their Facebook page is still updated regularly with old articles. Both platforms position themselves as politically progressive (EF is generally further to the left than VICE, however) and aim to cover a wide spectrum of issues. Both aim at millennial audiences, and seek to help individuals make sense of themselves and their place in the world: their subjectivity, intersubjectivity and social contexts. Both produce guides, listicles and 'how-to' articles, and aim to keep viewers up to date with contemporary politics and culture, although the very fact of reception positions the receiver as already 'in-the-know'. Both are accessible and use a casual style: there is a first or second person, youthful, savvy, idealist but common-sense tone to much of the writing; a distinctive house style that can make distinguishing between individual authors difficult, which aligns with the 'flattening but productive' discursive logic of neoliberalism alluded to earlier. And indeed, this is the ultimate reason these two platforms were selected: despite their stylistic and political differences they both aim to position and interpellate progressive subjects. Though presenting a myriad of potential subject positions and corresponding heuristic discourses, this proliferation is superficial, and ontologically rigid. My contention is that both VICE and EF show *par excellence* a neoliberal logic – although at quite different levels, as will become clear – and thus are ideal bodies of discourse to analyse to show the influence of neoliberal human capital theory on subject formation.

Resistance to Interpellation?

In order to read such discourse for evidence of a subject conceived as human capital, it is necessary to bear in mind Fairclough's (2009, p.165, italics in orginal) contention that "discourses which originate in some particular social field or institution…e.g…neoliberal economic discourse…may be *recontextualized* in others". This insight highlights the totalising ideological density and generative fluidity of neoliberalised discourse, as well as the many different ideological currents that cross, combine, contradict and overflow in processes of interpellation. Žižek points to the constitution of subjectivity against the terms,

norms and effects of oppressive paradigms when he claims that "the subject never fully recognises itself in the interpellative call: its resistance to interpellation…is the subject" (Butler, Laclau & Žižek 2000, p.115). Certainly for progressive subjects, defining oneself as 'other' to that and those which subordinate, oppress and enjoy hegemony is a normative process – fundamentally, and ontologically, progressive subjectivation cannot really be otherwise. Neoliberalism is uniquely well equipped to operate even in resistance to interpellation, however: the powerful and pervasive interpellative call to understand oneself as human capital intertwines with a socially-mediated emancipatory heuristic that proceeds from an 'empowering' and ubiquitous radical individualism. As the interpellative call overshoots the target, the space opened for anti-normative subjectivation is conditioned by the reification of individualism and competition as anthropologically fundamental. The subject produced – despite their inherent instability – navigates a society of individuals interpellated to encounter each other as competitors: indeed, the dialectic of neoliberal subjectivation produces subjects who are paradoxically pregnant with human capital's *a priori* positivities. There is no alternative because there is no outside.

This far-reaching and abstract methodological speculation must be tempered somewhat. The structure of the Left's historical projects – whether the radical abolition of capitalism or social justice and egalitarian social democracy – has not been universally replaced by stereotypical and simplistic neoliberal desires for rampant consumption and limitless self-expression. As Eagleton notes:

> …ruling ideologies can actively shape the wants and desires of those subjected to them; but they must also engage significantly with the wants and desires people already have, catching up genuine hopes and needs (Eagleton 2007, p.14).

Neoliberalism famously presents itself as an inevitable historical culmination – 'TINA' is one of the most well-known tenets of the project – and with Žižek we can discern a "resignation at the heart" (Butler, Laclau & Žižek 2000, p.95) as a corollary in much contemporary progressive discourse, a tacit acknowledgement that history is over and it is a question now of positioning ourselves as best we can to share in the spoils and the spotlight. However one understands ideology and interpellation – whether within a Marxist framework that acknowledges some kind of false consciousness, that the ruling ideas in any epoch are the ideas of the ruling class, or with a Foucauldian suspicion of grand ideological narratives, focussing instead on the way subjects are induced to govern

themselves in accordance with power understood as decentred, mobile and productive – there is little doubt that many progressive discourses put forth subjective and political possibilities that operate with individualism, competition and limitless self-development as primary structural determinants, rather than foregrounding any kind of collectivity or solidarity. This is precisely how progressive subjects define themselves in opposition to the structural oppressions of neoliberal capitalism whilst remaining ontologically on neoliberalism's terms. Indeed, the constant abstraction of oppression by large segments of the left, its positioning as inhering individually rather than systemically, is compelling evidence of the permeation of neoliberal ideology into cultural and political spaces that might otherwise be sites of resistance. Marx's admonition of Feuerbach – that "he merely wants to produce a correct consciousness about an *existing* fact; whereas…it is a question of overthrowing the existing state of things" (Marx & Engels 1998, p.65) – could be applied equally today to many progressive political tendencies, where to merely articulate one's subjectivity and/or subjugation and understand how it is impacted by social forces *is* the political itself. The utter inadequacy of many progressive responses to contemporary political upheaval, particularly neoliberalised downward mobility and the rage of the déclassé petit bourgeois, transpired precisely because progressives lacked the political resources to comprehend "the points of least resistance, at which the force of will can be most fruitfully applied" (Gramsci 1999, p.209) in a decaying and fractured neoliberal society. Indeed, many understood social justice as proceeding from contesting reified neoliberal social positions. A perceived freedom and boundlessness seduced progressive subjects into recognising their resistant subjectivity and a concomitant radical intersubjectivity in the residues deposited by free market waves: sediments remain children of the tide, however, and "ending man's alienation by reconciling him with his own essence" (Foucault 1994, p.327) in a neoliberal episteme means growing alone, and reifying structural aloneness – competitive individualism and atomisation – as 'essence'. With each progressive subject a separate drop in the ocean of resistance, we are unable to stop sea levels rising, and with reactionary right-wing social forces seriously contesting for hegemony, the use-value of a reading method that might uncover human capital theory structuring subjects and discourse is hopefully clear.

Chapter Four

The Subject of the Discourse: Reading for Human Capital Theory

There are a number of markers of human capital theory in operation. These might be discernible in interlocutions, in both 'legacy' and social media, in cultural production (films, theatre, television, song lyrics, poetry – the potential list is obviously very long), in workplace communications and employee agreements, in government and corporate announcements, memoranda and press releases, and so on. Brown has described some significant features and effects of neoliberalism that she in turn derives from Foucault's analysis in *The Birth of Biopolitics,* and these provide the overarching structure for the whole repertoire of manoeuvres of human capital theory in operation: under this broad conceptual umbrella, we can locate specific instances of the subject as human capital. Brown describes some general or overarching effects of neoliberalism as follows: "competition replaces exchange; inequality replaces equality…human capital replaces labour…entrepreneurship replaces production" (Brown 2015, p.62-67). These are the most salient features for the articulation of a reading method, and with these as a framework for devising a methodology, the specific manoeuvres are detailed below, with each supported by examples from the discourse of VICE and EF. Each marker corresponds to two separate 2014 articles or guides from each platform, although for some markers supplementary articles also provide support. The thorough examination needed to establish evidence for each marker means that the following chapter is significantly longer than the others in this thesis.

Hyper-individualism (Appendix 1a, 2b, 1d)

First, and perhaps foremost, we find the tendency towards individualism: this is so pronounced in some cases that we could denote it 'hyper-individualism'. Writing for EF, Akilah S. Richards evinces such hyper-individualism in her discussion of "feminist expression" (Appendix 1a: 'Why I Love That Beyoncé 'Sexed Up' Feminism and Radical Self-Expression'), where each individual must define what feminism means for themselves by "trying on and taking off" (Richards 2014a). For Richards, feminism is "about a *fit,* not a phraseology" (Richards 2014a), which severs any connection to a collective or socially-mediated feminist discourse or tradition, and reduces a complex and historically variable array of political events, demands and social relations to an abstract personal resonance, where affective identification and epistemic validity are synonymous. Incidentally, this assumes the ability to spend large resources of time in processes of self-exploration to find

such a fit, and concomitantly posits 'feminist' as a category both broad enough to encompass the many subjects who do not constitute "a movement of irrationally pissed off lesbians" and specific enough to apply to each individual's "own daily choices" (Richards 2014a): if a subject can't apply feminism thus, then a feminist is "simply a cheerleader of an outward cause…not an example of the embodiment of the thing I claim to believe" (Richards 2014a). The process of coming to understand oneself as a feminist is analogous here to the process of developing, exploring and constructing one's distinct individuality, and the need to "*define* and apply feminist principles to *my own daily choices*" (Richards 2014a, italics mine) moves the discourse immediately and definitively into the realm of hyper-individualism. Here, the individual's definition of a vast and multifaceted discursive formation – in this case 'feminism' – elides the complex and intertwining series of historical events, cultural practices, institutional oppressions and material relationships that the term can denote. Instead, the meaning of the formation in question is determined ultimately by individual ascription, something "to define and express…through my own soul" (Richards 2014a). That such hyper-individualism also erodes collective epistemic frameworks – much as Hayek and the Mont Pelerin society set out to produce a decisive epistemological shift from collectivism to individualism – is clear when Richards declares that "I wanted my personal struggles and revolutions to be echoed…instead of just amplifying the collective existing voices" (Richards 2014a). Under this hyper-individualist rubric any social movement can be thus individualised: in the process, radical potentialities are evacuated and constitutive complexities and dialectical tensions are smoothed over, so that whatever the individual wants to express or explore in themselves becomes what is expressed by the signifier they have taken on and individualised. In *One Dimensional Woman*, Nina Power pithily describes what results from such an individualised feminism:

> Stripped of any internationalist and political quality, feminism becomes about as radical as a diamanté phone cover…Slipping down as easily as a friendly-bacteria yoghurt drink…[this] version of feminism, with its total lack of structural analysis, genuine outrage or collective demand, believes it has to complement capitalism in order to sell its product (Power 2009, p.30).

This is analogous to Richards's declaration that "there needs to be dialogue that represents and facilitates the experience of feminism in more individualized, more personal contexts" (Richards 2014a): for a capital accumulating subject, feminism, much like any other lifestyle or consumption choice, must reflect the individual's essence and

uniqueness, or be modified – defined and expressed, tried on and taken off – until it does so. As such, 'feminism' here becomes merely a framework through which to understand and pursue individuation: "my connection to feminism needed to apply directly to me, as much as it applies to my gender and my society as a whole" (Richards 2014a). This is a paradigmatic expression of neoliberal subjectivity, with categories like gender, society and feminism abstracted into universals that are only accessible to the subject through the prism of their hyper-individual singularity.

The classical liberal subject was also 'the individual', a subject whose freedom and purpose were determined over and above their responsibility and positionality *vis a vis* collective social institutions, however each (white, male, heterosexual) subject's pursuit of their own interests was understood as contributing to establishing the harmony, justice and order of the whole: "the spontaneous and uncontrolled efforts of individuals were capable of producing a complex order" (Hayek 2007, p.69). We find in classical liberalism an acknowledgement that some arenas of life need to operate on collective terms, however, and Foucault maintains that "the liberal art of government is forced to determine the precise extent to which…individual interests…constitute a danger for the interest of all" (Foucault 2004, p.65). The balancing of individual freedom and the collective good is an essential element of this liberal art of government. With neoliberalism, by contrast, there are no bounds – in theory – to the domain of the individual and the individualisation of domains. Of course a degree of homogeneity and consensus is necessary to ensure the functioning and reproduction of the market and social institutions, however the radical individualism of neoliberalism seeks to position subjects who within "the rules that secure consensus among members of the body politic", are able – precisely as individuals – to "calculate their terms of exchange with the state or with political authority", as Public Choice theorist James Buchanan puts it (Buchanan 1984, p.16). Ulrich Beck's sociological analysis is valuable for tracing the full ramifications of a *socially-mandated* individualist term: what initially seems like a paradox dissolves with Becks' argument that "individualisation is always individualisation with (and against) others…individualisation is intrinsically defined by the normative claims of co-individualisation" (Beck & Willms 2004, p.67). Beck (2004, p.101) also argues that "individualisation can no longer be understood as a merely subjective phenomenon…for the first time in history, the individual rather than the class is becoming the basic unit of social reproduction". We can posit this emergence, this on-going becoming, as directly linked to the dialectic of neoliberal subjectivity: we seem a long way from the Marxian subject who "in his individual existence is at the same

time a social being" (Marx 1963, p.154), however Marx was also critiquing a social disembedding, albeit one produced by a very different form of capitalism. It is not that our underlying and inhering sociality has evaporated, however: rather, under neoliberal conditions "the norm is that one must individualise" (Beck & Willms 2004, p.67), and neoliberalism's constructivism is clearly evident in the social injunction to individuality. Although a moment's considered reflection reveals the depth and extent to which we are socially embedded, dependent, interrelated and vulnerable, the conception of the entrepreneur of the self as a subject who "act[s]in the illusion of their boundless autonomy" remains a pervasive subjective aspiration, an "ideal type" of subjectivity (Beck & Willms 2004, p.74-75). Indeed, Volosinov (1973, p.89) pointed to exactly this in *Marxism and the Philosophy of Languag*e, highlighting how "individualism is a special ideological form of the 'we-experience' of the bourgeois class". A significant consequence of such individualism in progressive discourse, which is understandably very concerned with locating oppression and privilege, is that oppression and privilege tend to reside only in individuals rather than also in political and economic systems or social structures: "their privilege actually makes them responsible for injustice and oppression…I, as a person of privilege, collude with oppression every day" (Utt 2014, see Appendix 1d: 'True Solidarity: Moving Past Privilege Guilt').

As neoliberalism has produced a "decline in overarching social narratives…by multiplying them so that no single one can achieve an undisputed hegemony" (Beck & Willms 2004, p.101), individualism has spread ideologically from the right and centre-right (from the easily parodiable Randian position to more nuanced accounts such as Hayek's) to the left, where a suspicion of collective bodies is sometimes evident insofar as these will necessarily perpetuate oppressions and inequalities, although these last tend to be essentialised and ahistorically understood. Allied to this individualism is the tendency to *responsibilisation*, wherein the subject is forced "to become a responsible self-investor and self-provider" (Brown 2015, p.84), with the ostensibly boundless subjective possibilities of the neoliberal individual checked by the inherent riskiness and inequality of a world of competing individuals.[18] Such responsibilisation often appears in progressive discourse as

[18] I have deployed Ulrich Beck's account of individualisation in theorising hyper-individualism, and for Beck this social tendency is coterminous with his famous account of a risk society. He notes – quite presciently – the increasing "individualisation of risk", and

self-help with an 'ironic-but-actually-serious' tone, a style pioneered by VICE and now widely prevalent on the racist alt-right. Hyper-individualism is intertwined with responsibilisation in the grounding, implicit assumption of such discourse that the self is ultimately responsible for their own situation, and similarly for how they might change it. Witness VICE's guide 'How to be Less Stupidly Poor in 2014' (Appendix 2a), whose headline conveys an explicit link between financial disadvantage and low intelligence, casting poverty as the fault – the responsibility – of impoverished individuals. VICE 'ironically' admonishes the reader thus:

> The problem with you, you see, is that like much of your generation, you're treading water: trapped in an endless adolescence of drinking your wages, ignoring the future, and being a dick. And now your bank account looks like Dresden. Blame austerity if you like, blame the baby boomers for sucking up all the cash and turning it into golf courses, blame bankers, blame oligarchs, blame your mom, blame God, blame Dawkins, blame whoever, eventually you're gonna have to sort your financial situation out yourself or you'll be dead in a gutter by 45 (Foster 2014).

Superficially a humorous and relatable piece of common-sense, the discourse's receiver is implicitly posited as 'in-the-know', and credited with living an authentic bohemian/creative youth that they must now grow out of in order to become a responsible self-investor. "Grow up, cool, hard partying boho, and become the ultimately sensible capital accumulator you really are" is roughly the moral injunction here, although a youth of irresponsible hedonism is for VICE also a form of culturally elite human capital investment. As such, this injunction functions as an affective hook, ensuring that the underpinning valorisation of responsibilisation and anti-structural, individualist economic thinking – the Beckerian insight that "if ability were symmetrically distributed, earnings would also be" (Becker 1962a, p.47) is precisely the economic logic of the passage above – are disseminated via the discourse's reception. Becker (1962a, p.45) further maintains that "an emphasis on human capital…helps explain differences in earnings", and explaining the radical inequalities that exist under neoliberalism by mere differences in human capital lets the system off the hook, positioning individuals as ultimately responsible for anything they lack. Underlying Appendix 2a's caustic humour is an interpellative call to become a

that "individuals are forced to bear more and more of the consequences of decisions they've been forced to make" (Beck & Willms 2004, p.71).

responsibilised individual, to properly invest in your human capital: "with a little determination, hard work, and a huge helping of my advice nuggets, in a few short months you could go from an excellent example of why National Service should be reinstated to an actual functional, contributing, comfortable member of society!" (Foster 2014). Again, witness the implication that only a properly responsibilised individual is socially worthwhile: this neoliberalised value system works to establish a competitive ontological outlook both amongst individuals striving towards responsibilisation and also *within* individuals themselves; indeed, "the relationship to oneself, quite as much as the relationship to external goods, must take as its model the logic of the enterprise as a unit of production engaging in competition with others" (Dardot & Laval 2014, p.100). Finally, as Brown notes, "when we are figured as capital in all that we do and in every venue, equality ceases to be our presumed natural relation with each other" (Brown 2015, p.38). In practice, such figuration tends to normalise competition in spaces where solidarity and collectivity might be assumed: such normative inequality, and the consequent need for hyper-individualism and responsibilisation that inequality produces in subjects, is clearly discernible throughout VICE's guide above, and also – in a very different affective register, but with a similar hyper-individualised focus – in EF's call to "understand and accept your role in oppression" (Utt 2014, see Appendix 1d). Individualism and responsibilisation, and the competition between and within subjects that these imply and initiate, are strong indicators of human capital theory operating in discourse.

Political Situationalism (Appendix 1b, 2b, 2e)

> Selfies can be radical…you don't have to apologise for noticing yourself. Drink yourself in. Celebrate yourself. Never feel guilty for announcing your presence. You deserve to fill up space (Tatum 2014a).

EF's Erin Tatum seems to be consciously echoing Walt Whitman's famous *Song of Myself* from Leaves of Grass in her EF article 'Selfies and Misogyny: The Importance of Selfies as Self-Love' (Appendix 1b), and there is certainly a radical individualism detectable in Whitman's poem. Individualism is also present across the various situational consequences that Tatum posits as resulting from the simple act of photographing the self, and Tatum valorises the selfie as a tool of self-empowerment and political action. Intertwined with individualism, however, is a certain particularism, a foreclosing of universality or universal political goals: after all, if we are all competitive self-interested

subjects, to what extent are collective projects even possible? As has been noted, neoliberalism has both dehistoricising and depoliticising tendencies, and human capital's focus on the microcosmic assemblage of assets, liabilities and potentialities that comprises each subject confines political programs to specific, distinct and non-porous arenas.

Naïve universalism is certainly not to be mourned, but in situationalism we find a foreclosing of any political possibility that extends beyond the immediate terms (and the social relations these imply) of a situation, which likewise bars the extension of one's particular experience into a consociative and systematising totality. Here we have conditions in which subjects are able to "avoid[s] the necessity of making and defending non-situationalist political claims" (Shi 2018). This tendency is detectable throughout Appendix 1b, where Tatum maps out a number of situations that might be politicised, and advocates the use of the selfie as a strategic micropolitical tool for feminist empowerment, but fails to connect these individual situations to a broader critique of patriarchy, let alone capital. Whilst there is certainly political potential in Tatum's claim that "it's not a coincidence that many of the unsavoury personality traits associated with a selfie obsession – being superficial, vain, lazy, or desperate – are also commonly used as misogynistic insults against young girls" (Tatum 2014a), the various results of taking selfies: "an instant confidence boost…a vehicle for raising the self-esteem of your friends…a subtle way of promoting positive self talk…it's the empowerment aspect of selfies that starts to make people squirm" (Tatum 2014a) are all confined to fairly specific situations, and have results that remain rooted in individual affective affirmation, precisely politics as self-help.

Despite proffering the selfie as an everyday tool for political empowerment, consciousness raising and activism – which might resonate with Helen Hester's work on hacking and repurposing within Xenofeminism[19] – and detailing both how "entire industries depend on the perpetuation of women's inferiority complex" and "teen girls are…written off as stupid, over-emotional…[which] teaches them to always anticipate and even accept a certain degree of misogyny" (Tatum 2014a), the assumed subject of this discourse seems to dissolve after each separate oppressive situation, or at best flit from oppressive situation to

[19] Hester describes how Xenofeminists must "advocate for the strategic redeployment of existing technologies to reengineer the world": in short, "the master's tools can dismantle the master's house" (Hester 2018, p.97-98).

oppressive situation. Each situation can be ameliorated, however developing the collectivity necessary for changing the structural conditions that Tatum goes some way to identifying as "vested economic interest[s]" (Tatum 2014a) is foreclosed by the very 'everyday radicalism' of self-affirming micropolitical acts. Moreover, under such discursive conditions anything can be political if it makes the subject feel positive about their self-image, which again draws political focus inwards, largely eliding the potential for understanding the development and historical specificity of the "vested economic interest[s]" (Tatum 2014a) that profit from young women's insecurity. Such interests remain abstract, and thus considerations of how they might be contested fall out of the realm of epistemic possibility, especially in combination with an enhanced appreciation of the self as the primary goal of acting against such oppression. This is not to police or authorise what might fall under the rubric of 'the political' (even though the radicalism Tatum locates in selfies could be posited as fairly tenuous), nor to suggest that boosting the self-esteem of insecure young women is not important or potentially without radical consequences. However, without explicitly connecting what *are* posited as political actions to dominant discourses or structures of oppression – these occur only as vague references to "society", "the internet" and "entire industries" (Tatum 2014a) – each situation is merely illuminated with the temporary fire of an individual's micro-politics and then snuffed out.

We can see a similar lack of dialectical potential in much neoliberal discourse: for example, Hayek's concern that under central planning, "the individual would more than ever become a mere means, to be used by authority in the service of such abstractions as the 'social welfare' or the 'good of the community'" (Hayek 2007, p.130). For Hayek, as for Tatum, such collective abstractions are inherently oppressive. More pertinently, there is a foreclosure of dynamic interrelation between subjects and institutions, and no desirable, let alone emancipatory, transformation possible outside of the individual's own self-directed practices. Many practices can be 'radical' and 'strategic' for EF, but such radicalism and strategy stops at the boundaries of each particular political situation.

Any subject's particular experience is of course to a degree unique and singular, however a genuinely coalitional political program (for example uniting unions, environmental groups and refugee rights activists on the left) necessitates various degrees of subsumption of

purely individual experience and rights claims.[20] Human capital theory tends to reinforce a politics whereby situations present as atomised occurrences. Power relations are certainly evident – Becker (Becker, Ewald & Harcourt 2012, p.11) agrees that human capital is "a theory about how individuals behave under various circumstances…there [are] power relationships involved in these circumstances, and power of different types" – but these are not traced out beyond the bounds of the particular situation into an adumbration that might enclose a suite of political struggles. Human capital in operation discourages the connecting of particular political situations into a broader conceptual apparatus of emancipation: in instances where posting – or even speculating about the possibility of extrapolating – universal political claims are either expressly or tacitly prohibited by the terms of engagement in a political situation, we can often discern human capital theory providing a discursive and subjective underpinning.

VICE's article 'NATO 2014: 100 Protesters Fight Against Britain's 'Biggest Ever Security Operation' (Appendix 2b) displays a related but distinct variety of political situationalism. Using an ironic tone throughout, the article is exemplary of VICE's discursive practice when reporting current affairs, which tends towards an atomistic understanding of the political that produces situationalism in a majority of instances. This tendency is woven through VICE's discursive fabric: in VICE's 2014 Style Guide (Appendix 2e), under "Basics", the examples chosen to demonstrate correct headline writing are 'A Factory Collapse in Bangladesh Killed More Than 400 Workers' and 'A$AP Rocky is cool'. This juxtaposition is an in joke for the most 'in' of initiates – VICE's writers – and in the moment of tension generated by the stark association we can see clearly just how depoliticising and dehistoricising VICE's discourse is, and indeed is intended to be. Political situationalism is a logical result, and in Appendix 2b this is generated by a faux-vérité or 'flat' description of the hapless efforts of a handful of protesters at a NATO conference. Throughout the text, the savvy, ironic smirk that is VICE's discursive signature lingers:

[20] Of course the complexities of degrees of privilege must be taken into consideration when organising coalitions on the left: in the Australian context particularly, any struggle that does not centre first nations' voices is deeply problematic. This point is not to dismiss the need to recognise intersecting asymmetries of power, but rather to insist that the working through of appropriate terms of representation is part of the *process* of politics, not its end result.

> Protesters descended on last week's NATO summit to let the world's leaders know just how evil they all are…it's great that people care enough about what they call the 'war-mongering' body to camp out in a wet field…Everyone was expecting Barack Obama to drive past in his motorcade, but he never did – presumably because there are other entrances to the castle and his security detail isn't stupid. The activists I was following seemed to have their plans foiled by this development…People complained that the turnout was poor and insisted something proper would have happened if only more anarchists had turned up (Webb 2014).

Beyond the combination of social commentary and reportage, however, is the evacuation of context entirely. Various protest actions are described, and interviews with both a serious activist and naïve, angry teenagers give the article its subjective dimension, yet each incident, action and interview is presented as a discrete and disembedded occurrence, and thus meaningless on its own terms, let alone when weighed against the power and scale of the summit.

The summit itself – or indeed any history, context or analysis regarding NATO – remains uninterrogated, and in the flat, ironic depiction of atomised, frustrated and ineffectual responses to it, any genuine understanding of why such an organisation might be protested, let alone a gesture towards the potential universal terms of an emancipatory political struggle, is foreclosed. The hegemonic and structurally immutable nature of globalist institutions is an ideologically neutral common-sense that in turn makes resistance to them absurd. A generous reading could advance that perhaps certain anarchist epistemologies are under subtle critique, and that the bedraggled and ridiculous representation of the protesters is intended to show the inadequacy of 'business-as-usual' activism against hegemonic neoliberalism: that protesting various symptoms will never reach the underlying cause, and that new modes of organising political struggles must be developed. Even if this is the intent, however – and recalling the above mentioned style guide (Appendix 1e) may inform our speculations here –protest against neoliberal institutions is posited as always already fragmented, and discursively, structural political situationalism means that the anti-NATO actions described quickly descend into the realm of anti-political farce.

A neoliberal model of governance and decision-making by cloistered and inscrutable technocratic elites radically condenses the sphere of the political. As Brown puts it in

Undoing the Demos, "political life…[is] remade by neoliberal rationality…As neoliberalism wages war on public goods and the very idea of a public…it dramatically thins public life without killing politics" (Brown 2015, p.39). This dramatic thinning, what we might call the condensation of the political into the economic, is evinced discursively in the article's conclusion. "There are still people willing to citizens-arrest civil servants and superglue their hands to Barclays furniture" (Webb 2014), the author writes, deploying a fond, ironic nostalgia for a time when politics and protest might have meant something. Political situationalism reinforces an anti-political neoliberal common-sense as the only savvy or indeed realistic subjective modality, and likewise business-as-usual neoliberalism as the only conceivable model of the social. Indeed, the protesters are almost to be pitied for their attempts to oppose the natural order of things, and to connect particular injustices and oppressions into a broader – let alone universalist – discourse that might hint at a contestation of neoliberal hegemony is explicitly ridiculous precisely because it is out of the bounds of what is epistemologically possible.

Positivism and Ontological Rigidity (Appendix 1c, 2c)

Neoliberalism's hegemony results from a complex interrelation of forces, however crucial to the project has been what Joanna Oksala calls "the doctrine of economic neutrality", an idea that has "reorganised our political ontology in carving out an autonomous realm of economy that cannot be interfered with politically" (Oksala 2012, p.122-123). The economisation that neoliberalism enacts transposes this neutrality to an array of socio-cultural spheres, and at the level of subjectivity assumes a positivist framework for acquiring knowledge and making choices. Becker (1996, p.25) declares that "widespread and/or persistent human behaviour can be explained by a generalised calculus of utility maximising behaviour", and this in turn presupposes a basically neutral, measurable and calculable *habitus* in which the subject maximises their utility, although the market is paradoxically idealised as transcendent. In other words, what can be experienced can be measured, with costs and benefits calculated, and on the basis of this we make rational choices. Positivism provides an "atomistic, ontological view of the world as comprising discrete, observable elements and events that interact in an observable, determined and regular manner" (Collins 2018, p.48), and this understanding structures neoliberal conceptions of the subject as human capital in their world. It should be noted that many of the first wave of European neoliberal intellectuals, particularly Hayek, were vehemently opposed to the positivism that was intellectually fashionable in inter-war Europe, as:

> …they associated Positivism with Marxism and Totalitarianism, and they saw danger in the contemporary and closely related 'scientism' which attempted to apply positivist scientific methods to social and economic spheres" (Hull 2006, p.149).

Here we must briefly distinguish different strands of neoliberal philosophy, and contrast the anti-positivism of Hayek – arguably more an ideological gambit "in support of his particular opposition to socialism", from which he constructed a theoretical edifice on "very flimsy foundations"[21] (Hull 2006, p.151) than a fully realised opposition on the grounds of epistemic utility – with the methods of American neoliberals like Milton Friedman and Gary Becker. The tendency is particularly pronounced in Friedman, who argues that "positive economics is in principle independent of any particular ethical position or normative judgement…it deals with 'what is', not with 'what ought to be'" (Friedman 1994, p.181).

Public choice theorist James Buchanan's claim that economists' "understanding and explanation of human interaction *depends critically on predictable responses to measurable incentives*" (Buchanan 1984, p.15, italics mine) further sums up the positivistic, almost behaviourist epistemology that often grounds neoliberal explanations about what induces subjects to act and chose as they do. Buchanan posits a rational, calculating, cost-benefit weighing individual as universal subject, a subject whose choices will both benefit from and support the "economisation of heretofore non-economic domains", to again underline Brown's diagnosis (Brown 2015, p.31). What has previously been understood as 'the social', with its attendant complexity, interrelations and solidarities, is now both locus and result of multitudinous politically neutral processes of assessment, measurement and calculation, with positivism an appropriately impartial orientation for the multitude of individuals traversing this terrain. Tastes and preferences

[21] Mirowski (2015, p.423) describes Hayek's article "The Use of Knowledge in Society" as the "ur-text" of the Mont Pelerin "thought collective", however Hull (2006, p.151) argues that "the principal aim of the paper appears to be to refute collectivist arguments". As such, the anti-positivism of earlier European neoliberals was perhaps more strategic than deeply held. In broadening the understanding of what might constitute knowledge, a solid and enduring ideological foundation for the valorisation of the free market was laid. For more on the development of early neoliberal knowledge and its divergence from positivism, see Hull, whose argument I find convincing.

replace desires and drives,[22] even with regards to processes as 'deep' as racism, sexual orientation and political beliefs, and in academic contexts we find an analogous "resiling from theory, reflexivity and critique in favour applied and technocratic knowledge because the latter are valued more highly in the market" (Thornton 2004, p.8). Many neoliberal theorists use a sophisticated combination of conceptual and critical approaches, of course, however as positivism trickles down into discourses broadly aimed at a non-academic audience – platforms like VICE and EF, or blogs for job-seekers written by employment services providers – claims regarding knowledge and appropriate behaviour that specify what can be personally experienced, measured and classified as the ground of truth – what we might denote a naïve empiricism – are so common that they must be posited as structural.

In the conclusion of R Nithya's EF article 'Breaking Down the Problem with Mansplaining (And Other Forms of Privileged Explaining)' (Appendix 1c), Nithya claims that "the *only way* to begin to understand" the positions and experiences of those who do not share our identities, experiences or oppressions "is to listen to those who *do* know" such impressions and injustices "personally" (Nithya 2014, italics mine). This claim reveals an underlying positivism as a framework for understanding the self and the world, and positivism is similarly evident in the behaviourist injunction for readers to redesign "our own behavioural patterns for a better social interaction and experience" (Nithya 2014). Lived experience is obviously a means of acquiring knowledge, and the raw fact of another's oppression can in a very real sense only be ontologically constitutive for that particular individual, however to posit the limits of understanding as ending with each individual's own experience is precisely to view the world as atomistic, and the other subjects who inhabit it as utterly discrete, socially sundered, and monadic. The consequences of such a view for political programs that aim to contest oppression are fairly obvious. Although Nithya gestures towards the structural and social nature of oppression when she claims that "privileged explaining…is a reflection of the institutionalised power and privilege hierarchy at the individual level" (Nithya 2014), the resolute positivism of the means of locating, acknowledging and acting upon privilege abstracts the oppressive structures – capitalism, patriarchy, heteronormativity – that privilege certain subjects, and obscures how these materially lead to oppressions being enacted and re-enacted. Instead, subjects who are

[22] Witness Friedman again: "it is hard to see that discrimination can have any meaning other than a 'taste' of others that one does not share" (Friedman 2002, p.110).

socially marked a certain way will tend to behave in predictable ways unless they themselves make a rational decision to alter their behaviour. If we can only meaningfully access knowledge through our own lived experience, then the "splaining" processes Nithya (2014) describes are likely to be infinitely repeated: without the possibility of crossing epistemological boundaries, understandings across different social ascriptions are foreclosed. Although those who share similar privileges or oppressions will share knowledge or its lack, the social itself dissolves into an atomised array of individuals, wherein we each can indeed only know what appears directly to us.

Nithya's article is typical of EF's discourse in that those with privilege are understood as maximising the utility this grants them in a very Beckerian sense. The unearned advantages of privilege are understood as almost mechanically compelling subjects to behave in predictable and indeed highly rational ways that are nevertheless oppressive: indeed, those with privilege cannot but maximise this 'utility' in their interactions with others, and thus it is only rational and sensible that the privileged, whether consciously or not, oppress the less privileged at every opportunity. As such, a subject that is calculating, rational and utility maximising is posited in the guise of both oppressor – who enjoys what Becker might call the "goods" that their dominance affords them – and the oppressed, who lacks the capacity (or the inherited human capital) to maximise their own utility, are disadvantaged in the rational actions and choices open to them, and at constant risk of acquiring social "bads" (Becker 1996, p.203). Becker declares that

> …now everyone more or less agrees that rational behaviour simply implies consistent maximization of a well-ordered function…only rational behaviour has much chance of surviving a very harsh competitive world (1962b, p.1).

In a very concrete sense EF would agree. In order to change behaviour so that the less privileged have opportunities to maximise their utility, to stop the oppression inherent in privileged explaining, for example, the receiver of the discourse is assumed to be a rational individual who assesses each situation from within the unbreachable epistemic boundaries of their own identity and experience, calculates the balance of oppression and privilege, and uses a form of behaviourist conditioning to change their own behaviour and thus gradually erode oppression. Nithya asks "how do you go about making this behavioural change?", and answers with "we must rethink and restructure the narrative of our society" (Nithya 2014). To change the dominant discourse, which would solve the structural

problem of privileged explaining, individuals are urged to use positivist methods to systemically understand the limits of their knowledge, observe their own behaviour, and alter their behavioural conditioning according to the privilege asymmetries of each situation.

In addition to positivism, we can often locate an ontological rigidity operating in concert with human capital theory. With human capital a dominant and properly ideological subjective norm, all possible subject positions are fixed in place in a field predicated upon the capital accumulating individual as the ground of subjectivity. Our subjective possibilities may appear infinite – James Penney (2014, p.142) points to the superficial adaption of Deleuze and Guattari's flows of desiring production, so that "in the unceasing flux of desire, I can access 'n' genders, 'n' sexes, 'n' 'identities'" – but in cold, hard market reality, underneath the postmodern play we are allowed on the surface, we always are and only can be human capital. Indeed, the putative liberatory purging of subjective ontological rigidity that certain forms of queer politics (for example) enact and celebrate merely reveals "the process by which capital has absorbed the antinormative critique of late Fordist liberation movements" (Cooper 2017, p.253). We can locate this process in VICE's article 'What We Learned About Trans Culture in 2014' (Appendix 2c), where beneath the free-wheeling and feel-good valorisation of trans individuals achieving wealth, fame and social status there lurks an ontological rigidity that bars expressions of non-heteronormative sexuality from contesting the reified social relations from which oppressive ontological categories emerge. Rather, recognition, representation, achievement and legitimation within the rationality of the dominant order are uncritically celebrated and explicitly to be aspired to. Although of course the message that "trans people exist" (Lees 2014) and are subject to greater degrees of oppression, violence and mental illness than many other subjects is a message to be amplified and circulated regardless of discursive conditions, the contrast with the *Xenofeminist Manifesto's* diagnosis of the failings of contemporary queer politics is stark:

> When the possibility of transition became real and known, the tomb under nature's shrine cracked, and new histories…escaped the old order of 'sex'. The disciplinary grid of gender is in no small part an attempt to mend that shattered foundation…The time has now come to tear down this shrine entirely, and not bow down before it in a piteous apology for what little autonomy has been won (Cuboniks 2018, p.45).

The uncritical lauding of celebrity culture, branding and cultural representation throughout Appendix 2c[23] posits the trans subject as precisely cavorting in the shadow of the shrine. As non-heteronormative identity categories proliferate and are legitimised – "Facebook changed their gender options, so now you can be…whatever the hell you like, so long as it's on their list of 54 gender identities" (Lees 2014) – their easy absorption into discourses such as VICE's risks both eliding the on-going material struggles of vulnerable trans subjects, as well as emptying certain social ascriptions of their radical political potential.

Margaret Thornton (2004, p.12) describes how "the movement away from the dissonant language of in-equality in favour of diversity serves to depoliticise further a competitive market environment in which inequality is necessarily normative". VICE's discourse precisely consolidates this normative inequality in the demand that human capital be recognised in all its diversity. In the name of diversity, Appendix 2c legitimises neoliberal capitalist ideological production – in which celebrities, fame, wealth and consumption are all key elements – along with the trans subject. Whilst the cultural safety that some may feel via the circulation of such discourse is important, Appendix 2c also celebrates "the success of the successful and the power of the powerful", which Sparrow (2018, p.147) identifies as structural features of any politics of representation. With trans subjects needing and at times achieving recognition as legitimate, successful and powerful human capital accumulators in the sphere of celebrity – as the pinnacle of human capital inheres in such rarefied spheres and from there eventually trickles down – they are at risk precisely to the extent that they are barred from accessing means and enacting processes of capital accumulation. Identity categories construed as non-normative in a capitalist mode of production are therefore reified, and their legitimation poses no challenge to capitalism's foundational myths nor to the vagaries of its neoliberal iteration. Rather, the ontological rigidity that is normative when human capital is subjectivity's ideal type is reinforced, and

[23] A sample is presented here: "The reason we love her is not just because she's a successful actress appearing on Netflix's *Orange Is the New Black…*it looks like Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie have accepted their trans son…I don't think there was a news outlet in Britain that didn't cover Kellie's transition in minute detail and she, bless her, lapped up the attention, jumping straight onto *Celebrity Big Brother*….Laverne Cox got an Emmy nomination. Lea T was named as the face of Redken" etc (Lees 2014).

the conditions that produce the very real material risk that subjects marked as non-normative face remain uninterrogated.

Returning to Appendix 1c, we can also discern ontological rigidity throughout: this rigidity is representative of EF's discourse as a whole. In the contention that "the kyriarchy in our society makes sure that privileged groups remain privileged and continue to benefit from the oppression of several groups" (Nithya 2014), we can locate ontological rigidity in the hard demarcation of privilege and oppression, with a universalising abstraction – the kyriarchy – posited as overseeing and guaranteeing the exacting repetition of certain behaviours by certain groups, which implies both a mechanical and rather crude behavioural determinism on the part of the privileged and a complete negation of the agency of the oppressed. However, Nithya also notes that privilege and oppression are situationally shifting: "power and privilege change with context" (Nithya 2014), and thus positivism slides back in to cohabitate with ontological rigidity in the assumption that a set of 'privileged' and 'oppressed' behaviours are always already situationally determined. For EF, despite the superficial fluidity of individual identity categories and the ability of different identities to oppress each other in different situations, the power asymmetries existing in every separate instance will tendentially precipitate certain behaviours and lead to relatively predictable results, and thus must be studied and understood primarily via one's own experience. Again, the resonance with Beckerian notions of utility maximisation must be noted. Becker declares in *Accounting for Tastes* that:

> Behaviour…can be said to be 'rational' because individuals are still assumed to make forward-looking, maximizing, and consistent choices. But the type of rationality modelled here is quite different, and much more relevant, than that found in standard models because behaviour is influenced by habits, childhood and other experiences, and culture, peer pressure, and other social interactions (Becker 1996, p.23).

Becker's expanded understanding of rational behaviour sets the ground for the conceptual contraction discernible in a discursive model of oppression and privilege that posits inevitable behavioural responses to certain identitarian determinants or social conditions. Socially marked individuals behave in predictable and indeed calculable ways in expressing both their specific individuality (with its shifting balance of privileges and oppressions) and in navigating the particularity of the situation they find themselves in. A

naïve empiricism emerges here that aligns with the neoliberal conception of a capital accumulating subject maximising their utility in an environment that is fundamentally measurable, although with one significant caveat: for neoliberals and EF respectively, 'the market' as knowledge arbiter and 'society' as oppressor function as transcendental abstractions that exist as the result of all human interactions; the unknowable, immutable and omnipresent exceptions that prove the positivist rule. Not all instances of positivism or ontological rigidity are instances of the fetishisation of human capital, but these makers point to a certain essentialism and subjectivism that increase the likelihood of neoliberal traces.

Essentialism: Privilege and Oppression Reified (Appendix 1d, 2d)

Along with rigidity and positivism, essentialism is also a marker of human capital theory operating in discourse. Neoliberalism develops an essentialist logic at two discursive levels. Initially, there is the binary established between a market society and the state planned alternative, a stark theoretical either/or (actual political reality is of course much less binary) wherein either "the order governed by the impersonal discipline of the market or that directed by the will of a few individuals" (Hayek 2007, p.208) must reign. This positions both social possibilities and the forms of subjectivity imaginable within them outside of history in a manoeuvre of conservative essentialism that in turn resonates with neoliberalism's constructivism: we must build 'x', or they will build 'y'; both 'naturally' and unerringly tend towards a particular result. There exist regional variations in particular conditions and circumstances, however the universal trend is deterministic in both cases, and thus history and the future loses any fluid or dialectical interplay and we lurch from one essentialised social formation to another. For neoliberals, the subject is putatively empowered by their absolute responsibility for themselves, however in actuality they have little power, as the market if allowed to operate properly leads inexorably to correct decisions being rewarded and just social processes enacted: mere individual will is no match for this transcendent mechanism.

In the VICE article 'Human Capital Contracts Could Revolutionize the Way We Borrow Money' (Appendix 2d), the anonymous author laments that "I tend to be a fatalist when it comes to good things happening with money. Ultimately, dollars flow in directions that can't always be controlled" (*Human Capital Contracts* 2014). The statement comes towards the end of the article – which has a tone closer to an establishment liberal publication like *The New Yorker* than VICE's standard flat irony – in which the author

intertwines his own story of exploring human capital contracts to pay for a computer science course with an account of the failure of tech start-ups Pave and Upstart, both of whom set out to offer loans based upon future earnings, an idea that the author traces to "a footnote buried in economist Milton Friedman's co-written 1945 book *Income from Independent Professional Practice*" (*Human Capital Contracts* 2014). The article is thoughtful, with a resigned, almost melancholy character, however we can locate an essentialism throughout that addresses the reader as always-already human capital: a subject who receives a return on invests they embody. VICE's depoliticising discursive thrust – "Pave and Upstart could have provided an intelligent, timely, and humane service, one that placed confidence in the abilities of individuals" (*Human Capital Contracts* 2014) – presents human capital as both concept and common-sense, an ideal and inevitable modality of subjectivity.[24] For the savvy and therefore world-weary millennials whom the discourse addresses, the failure of something 'radical' is to be expected in a world where the inevitably of capitalist social relations and the free market conclusively prohibit peeling away layers that might reveal an outside. If "even computer programmers armed with Milton Friedman's theories and ample venture capital" (*Human Capital Contracts* 2014) cannot effect a change in the manifestly unjust structures of student loans in the United States, then an ironic and anti-political submission to the doctrine of 'TINA' is common-sense. Essentialism is a logical consequence of this valorisation of the market, which is coterminous with neoliberalism's depoliticising and dehistoricising tendency. Indeed, there is a strong echo of Hayek throughout Appendix 2d: witness Hayek's claim that by submitting to the market

> …we are every day helping to build something greater than any one of us can fully comprehend…the refusal to yield to [market] forces…is the product of an incomplete and therefore erroneous rationalism (Hayek 2007, p.212)

[24] Whether human capital is an ideal modality of subjectivity is ambiguous until the end of the article, although denoting the one critic of the contracts cited a communist is a small but significant ideological move.

Although cold hard neoliberal reality has revealed that what we have built is a vast and disempowering edifice of inequality and personal indebtedness, the author tacitly evinces an ahistorical and essentialist acceptance of the market as allocator and arbiter. He (the author is gendered but has no by-line) is "reluctant to join my millennial brethren in the student loan market", and as "human capital contracts gamble on the latent potential of the individual", he sees little personal risk in taking up a loan that has "one inarguably revolutionary quality" in its inversion of "the standard power dynamic of loan finance" (*Human Capital Contracts* 2014).

Presenting human capital contracts as "inarguably revolutionary" (*Human Capital Contracts* 2014) reinforces human capital's ideological neutrality without paradox, as the revolutionary potential lies merely in recognising the essential nature of the subject *as* human capital. We can locate a thorough-going essentialism here: again, "dollars flow in directions that can't always be controlled" (*Human Capital Contracts* 2014), and thus contra this randomness to which hapless subjects can do nothing but submit, the market is an always already operating aggregator that inscrutably orders such randomness. We can thus understand the blooming of essentialism regarding the market as an epistemological bulwark, a discursive anchor necessitated by human capital's hypostatisation. Additionally, the notion that 'progress' in the realm of finance capital might deliver individuals from a spiral of debt and precarity amounts to positing the vanguard of indentured servitude as the potential germ of a kind of emancipation. As Hayek (2007, p.211) notes, "a complex civilisation like ours is necessarily based on the individual's adjusting himself to changes whose cause and nature he cannot understand", and thus we must trust in the truth and justice of timeless and elemental mechanisms that determine our conditions: indeed, it is only "from free competition that any social progress [will] be generated" (Dardot & Laval 2014, p.92). The theoretical paradox this sets up in combination with the idealisation of the market and neoliberalism's positivism cannot be gone into further here but should be noted.

At a second, more individual level, a subject who seeks to "enhance their future value" (Brown 2015, p.22) is supported by essentialised notions of what one might be or become. As the society in which we live can ultimately only be free or unfree despite the way it develops and the interactions of its subjects, likewise as subjects we find our freedom or otherwise already established and constrained or enjoyed in advance. We all

have some degree of power to invest in our human capital and better our lot, however this ahistorical process of investment is the only means by which we can initiate change. As Foucault notes, it is a definitively neoliberal understanding to posit that

> …if there is innovation…this is nothing other than the income of a certain capital, of human capital…of the set of investments we have made at the level of man himself (Foucault 2004, p.231).

Such an understanding is epistemologically structural for identitarian progressivism, wherein the identities embodied by marginalised subjects emerge via a negative cascade of social and institutional disinvestment that reinforces the atomisation and responsibilisation of oppressed individuals, resulting often in a defensive constructivism of identity that has obvious echoes of neoliberal epistemic frameworks. In progressive discourse, an embodied essentialism often manifests as a fetishisation of oppression (Cuboniks 2018, p.47): as EF's R. Nithya writes, "there is a privilege/oppression dichotomy in society...we are most likely to find ourselves oppressed because of certain identities, and privileged because of certain others" (Nithya 2014, see Appendix 1c). A privilege/oppression dichotomy structures much progressive discourse, however in line with the apolitical and unhistorical epistemology of neoliberalism privilege and oppression are almost infinitely situationally variable but at root ontologically rigid. There is no real prospect of changing these fundamental categories, although our habitation of them is constantly situationally shifting, and our positionality is thus both immutable and highly flexible.

EF's Jamie Utt highlights exactly this essentialism in his article 'True Solidarity: Moving Past Privilege Guilt' (see Appendix 1d). The article is a guide to assist activists in working through the guilt and shame they will necessarily feel regarding their identity. Utt here reifies ascribed social markers as a subject's essential nature, enacting precisely the subjectivation via identification process that James Penney describes: "what is universal in subjectivity is that all subjects…have mistakenly taken themselves to correspond with the markers of social identity with which they have chosen to affiliate" (Penney 2014, p.186). Privilege checking guides are a staple of EF's discourse, and although this discursive mode is often naïve and earnest, thus easily parodiable, it is well worth taking seriously the subject addressed by such discourse. Utt (2014) writes,

"*I'm a racist, classist, sexist, ableist homophobe who is ruining everything everywhere"*, and this self-loathing, an individualised horror at the world's injustices and one's own inability to change them, is intended as a heuristic for subjectivation, a device for progressive subjects to recognise themselves and their guilt, pain and powerlessness, even as they also recognise that they hold infinitely more power or privilege than many others. However, as is typical of EF, this realisation serves primarily as a spur to individual action – "the process of overcoming privilege guilt must inevitably be intensely personal" (Utt 2014) – and Utt urges readers to proceed thus:

> Self-reflect…Understand and Accept Your Role in Oppression…Recognise that Knowledge of Privilege is not Enough…Participate In and/or Create Community Acting for Justice…Stay in Touch with Why You Feel Guilty (Utt 2014).

Immediately discernible is that all stages bar one involve only individual action, and Shi argues that privilege theory's

> …contemporary popularity is in line with the neoliberal individualism which renders it compatible with systemic injustice; as a programme for action, privilege theory foregrounds change upon the self, rather than upon the world, as resistance is reduced to self-reflection (Shi 2018).

Reflection on one's essence – which reveals that we are either inherently oppressed or inherently privileged, and also how we might regardless oppress each other in specific situations – has indeed replaced more concrete political action as the primary goal or 'the work' of the activist in much progressive discourse: here, EF is paradigmatic. Moreover, in such reflection, "'feelings' and 'experiences' acquire a status that is politically if not ontologically essentialist – beyond hermeneutics" (Brown 1995, p.42). It is difficult to move from the individual 'feelings' of guilt engendered by privilege to structural change so that privileges and oppressions are no longer produced, or even perhaps reduced: rather, subjects must act to continually deepen their understanding of their essential nature. This can involve "discussions with people who share your privileges" and "support…by people who share your identity" (Utt 2014), however again an underlying essentialism forecloses the possibility of addressing the root causes of privilege and oppression by posing solidarity or even understanding across identity

groups as epistemically impossible. Even in the stage of Utt's activist program that involves some collectivity ("Participate In and/or Create Community Acting for Justice"), the rationale for acting with others to further the cause of social justice is that individual action "is unlikely to be either accountable or effective" (Utt 2014). The foregrounding of accountability reinforces the essentialism that inheres in theories of privilege and oppression, regardless of how subtle and malleable the situational accountings of each category might be. If oppression is and has been always already present based upon identity marker, then subjects are produced as essentialised bundles of qualities that embody disadvantage and advantage in shifting but measurable quantities: as Brown describes, "persons are equated with subject positions, which are equated with identities, which are equated with certain perspectives and values" (Brown 2018, p.38). As such, subjects are necessarily also produced as unequal in their understanding of and access to truth, and the familiar progressive and frankly politically quietist moves of listening, making space, educating oneself and not making any demands on the oppressed follow logically from this position.

Finally, it is useful to compare EF's discursive essentialism with Friedman's shrunken conception of subjectivity. The alignment is not exact, but the fundamental premise is similar, and crucially, so is the underpinning essentialism:

> The liberal conceives of men as imperfect beings. He regards the problem of social organisation to be as much a negative problem of preventing 'bad' people from doing harm as of enabling 'good' people to do good; and, of course, 'bad' and 'good' people may be the same people (Friedman 2002, p.12).

In this passage we can discern an affiliation with Utt's (2014) notion of "privilege guilt": again, an essentialised social formation and subject positions are latent, and transposed into a progressive register, the role of political action (which for Friedman is in theory extremely limited) is to limit those who are more privileged from further impinging on those who are less. It is not that people are necessarily bad, but that there are human essences that are unchanging and inevitably cause damage to others, and this damage is what we must seek to mitigate. Guilt helps ensure our activism aims towards such mitigation. This sets up a political focus that is entirely complimentary with neoliberal notions about enhancing the self's value or – for progressive subjects – establishing

value for those subjects in whose oppression we are complicit. Essentialism leads to the naturalisation of categories like privilege and oppression, and in essentialism we can locate another marker of human capital theory in discourse.

The Epistemology of Provenance (Appendix 1e, 2e, 1g)

> At the end of the day, your theory amounts to little more than white noise. The integrity of our experiences and identities will never fail to transcend your 'theories' (Tatum 2014b).

So writes Erin Tatum in EF (see Appendix 1e: 'Why Your Disbelief In My Queer Identity Doesn't Negate Its Existence'), and in the decisive advantage awarded to experience over theory we can discern what Shi calls an "epistemology of provenance":

> Privilege discourse tends towards an epistemology of provenance, an 'overly subjectivist theory of knowledge' which assumes that knowledge is group-specific and derived from experience...The right to speak about certain things is tied to one's identity, and that right is denied to non-identical others. There is a privileging of the experience of the excluded, which is taken to be knowledge of systemic exclusion. The conflation of these two logics leads us to assume truth on the basis of suffering (Shi 2018).

Such a move is detectable in much progressive discourse, wherein we can discern what Reed (2013, p.52) has identified as "the striking convergence between the relative success of identitarian understandings of social justice and the steady, intensifying advance of neoliberalism". The convergence Reed identifies can be at least in part attributed to neoliberalism's valorisation of individualism and the individual, although of course in practice not all individuals are valued. The privileging of the experience of specific individuals in their irreducible singularity is a logical consequence of neoliberalism's concern with enshrining the individual as sacrosanct, and as neither socially embedded nor socially co-constituted. As this is translated into contemporary 'wokeness', where degrees of oppression and privilege are structural determinants of progressive subjectivity, the combination of the irreducibility of individual experience with what Brown (1995, p.xii) calls "wounded attachments…infelicitous formulations of

identity rooted in injury", produces a distinct approach to framing and grounding political claims, whereby greater degrees of oppression are always evidence of deeper access to knowledge and truth as well as sharper political insight. The "epistemology of provenance" (Shi 2018) develops from an intertwining of other markers of human capital – hyper-individualism, positivism and essentialism particularly – and EF's discourse is saturated with this approach. Tatum's article evinces several instances where an epistemology of provenance is visible, however almost any article written from the perspective of an oppressed individual on the platform would display a similar logic with regards to truth claims and epistemic validity (see also Appendix 1a, 1c, 1d, 1f). Tatum's specific iteration of discourse is aimed at a subject who does not share the author's identity, and the tone is irritated and possessive throughout:

> …it's incredibly insensitive to steamroll someone else's already hard-won identity with your own opinion…don't pretend you know our sexuality better than we do because you took one gender studies course (Tatum 2014b).

Whilst these are perhaps useful sentiments to guide interpersonal etiquette, the at times tacit, at times explicit claim about the worth of different frameworks of knowledge throughout the article – a claim that has undoubted political ramifications – points towards neoliberal interpretations of subjectivity, and thus a subject conceived as human capital.

In *The Use of Knowledge in Society,* Hayek contrasts an individualist framework for knowledge acquisition and distribution with the centrally planned alternative, inevitably finding the individualist framework superior. The problem of organising the knowledge in society is "a problem of the utilisation of knowledge not given to anyone in its totality" (Hayek 1945, p.520). Attempts to consolidate the numerous pieces of knowledge which subjects use to make decisions in the hands of a few individuals are therefore erroneous and inefficient as well as proto-totalitarian. Hayek (1945, p.519) claims that "knowledge of the circumstances of which we must make use…exists…solely as the dispersed bits of incomplete and frequently contradictory knowledge which all the separate individuals possess". This understanding would be welcomed as common-sense by EF, and in Tatum's article there are several examples of an overarching epistemological framework that not only privileges the knowledge of the specific individual in their specific

conditions: even further, knowledge acquired outside of such a framework is likely to be oppressive, as the iteration of such knowledge constitutes a "microaggression" that might "erode your confidence about your identity" (Tatum 2014b). Aligning with Shi's (2018) identification of the epistemology of provenance as valorising knowledge that is "group specific and derived from experience", Tatum claims that

> …when someone makes an assumption about an identity that isn't theirs, it comes off as interrogating the other person's self-perception, with the implication that their understanding is somehow flawed or inferior (Tatum 2014b).

Similarly, Tatum (2014b) chides fellow queers for "questioning the legitimacy" of each other's identity, thus inhibiting the dispersion of true, non-oppressive knowledge throughout society. There is a further echo of Hayek here, in that the most useful or important knowledge is highly personal and "of the kind which by its nature cannot enter into statistics", and also in the valorisation – for Hayek leading to the smoother functioning of the market, for Tatum to less oppression – of knowledge as ideally "dispersed among many people" so that the consequences of the "unavoidable imperfection" of each individual's knowledge may be ameliorated (Hayek 1945, p.526-530). As even oppressed individuals constantly oppress each other further with imperfect knowledge, or deny the absolute validity of an individual's knowledge about themselves, any advancement of social justice first needs individuals to legitimate their knowledge by grounding it in their own identity: it is easy to see how this can lead to assuming truth on the basis of suffering.

It is not necessarily falling prey to neoliberalism to advance that identity legitimation and recognition are political gains that must be competed for, however the figuring of oppressed individuals as holding back each other's liberation tends to reinforce an individualist and competition-based understanding of social inequality. In Kimberlé Crenshaw's famous analogy of the basement, those who are oppressed by only one social marker are from time to time "invited to climb through the hatch" into a space where they are legally protected from discrimination (Crenshaw 1989, p.152), while those who are multiply oppressed have little to no chance of doing this as they are held down by others less oppressed than them. Anti-discrimination legislation cannot account for the intersection of oppressions subjects embody, nor for the way these

identity combinations can produce unique and unprotected expressions of subalternity. Despite the usefulness of this framework in some instances, the fact that subjects must be *invited* to climb out of the basement of oppression reveals a demand for recognition addressed to the dominant (i.e. neoliberal) political order which ensures any struggle remains on that orders' terms. The familiar Marxist critiques of intersectional theory as individualistic and encouraging competition rather than solidarity among the subjugated[25] are borne out by Crenshaw's analogy. Intersectionality, like neoliberalism, is a complex and contested concept, and this thesis necessarily narrows the focus to a particular variety of its discursive deployment.

EF's intersectionality is concerned with enabling subjects to articulate and embody unique iterations and combinations of non-normative identities as part of a process of self-actualisation. There follows a valorisation of individual experience as an unmediated given, and thus a guarantor of ontological verity. Intersectionality here ingrains both individualism and competition (for recognition) in the texture of progressive subjectivity and politics. Moreover, with the "almost exclusive legitimation of emotional trauma as a currency of minority politics" comes a culture wherein "those who challenge consensus are readily perceived as traumatizing or abusive and promptly excommunicated" (Cooper, 2017, p.256): suffering or trauma determines who is allowed to elucidate what is true. Foucault's understanding of neoliberalism as constituting a political rationality, a regime of normativity and a framework for determining what can be produced as truth is very evident in the manoeuvres Cooper describes: for progressive subjects, foregrounding the experience of suffering is in many discourses a foundational stage in the articulation of political and personal truth (see also Appendix 1g). The primacy of individual affect in progressive discourse and the authentication of the subject by the iteration of their trauma can certainly be posited as aligning with neoliberal individualism, and with Michel Feher, we might well question

> …the political implications of a discourse that derives collective rights from the experience of pain, that equates the acknowledgement of a culture with a

[25] Shi (2018) notes that "conceiving of oppressions as additive…is…to conceive of the oppressed as competing, as standing on top of one another to reach the top".

> process of healing, and that assigns a therapeutic mission to legal and political reforms (Feher 1996, p.86).

The entanglement of politics and activism with discourses of self-help, or indeed cases where self-help and activism are difficult to distinguish, are further ramifications of the relatively wide-spread employment of an epistemology of provenance. Such practices highlight that this marker comes into focus against a historical background of intense hardship, suffering and oppression, however it is also a method by which the individualism and competitiveness that undergird human capital theory are reinforced.

In VICE's 'VICE: The Style Guide' (Appendix 1e), an epistemology of provenance is also discernible, although as we move into a different discursive register this marker of human capital theory manifests with significant tonal variations. A style guide by definition is aimed at the communication and dissemination of basically private knowledge, but VICE's very specific discursive style – which is saturated with irony and speaks with what I have denoted throughout this thesis a 'savvy insider' tone – contributes to the production of knowledge that in VICE's case has always been intended as a *cultural* commodity, a means of consumption to assist those already in-the-know with the production and reproduction of a cool subjectivity, whether these subjects are receivers or producers of discourse. VICE's style guide reveals another side of the epistemology of provenance, then, in which those cool enough to be addressed by this discourse are consumers of a commodified knowledge whose possession ostensibly produces for them a privileged (sub)cultural status: we find again a neoliberal dialectic of consumption and production integral to subjectivation. Throughout the guide, advice and examples such as "most places spell [the internet] with a capital *I,* but that's because they are dumb and most likely run by a bunch of old fuddy-duddies who think that the internet is just a fad like women's rights or macaroons" and "there are 5 million people here, but only 2 percent of them are cool" (*Vice: The Style Guide* 2014) address the discourse's receiver as a subject who precisely through their existing knowledge of what is cool and culturally correct are privileged in their access to truth. This is not the assumption of truth on the basis of suffering or a marginalised identity, but rather on the basis of an individual's achievements of cultural status and social position, their identification with a "cool capitalist way of life that does

not appear to insist on conformity" (McGuigan 2014, p.234). Such an identification relies structurally on a Hayekian notion of knowledge wherein

> …practically every individual has some advantage over all others in that he possesses unique information of which beneficial use might be made…how valuable an asset in all walks of life is knowledge of people, of local conditions, and special circumstances (Hayek 1945, p.521-522).

The 'truth' or knowledge revealed by VICE's style guide is precisely that those who contribute to VICE's discursive production are authorised to produce truth by the individual advantages they embody. The instruction to "avoid writing in an edgy voice like some people who wish they wrote for us tend to do" (*Vice: The Style Guide* 2014) makes a clear demarcation between the real truth of VICE's cultural cachet and edginess – and how this is to be reproduced – and that of the epistemic flailing of mere imitators. Likewise, throughout the style guide we find a constant casual misogyny,[26] as well as an 'ironic' transphobia that is not to be reproduced for the public:

> **–Trannies**
> If someone is transgender, use the pronoun of his or her preferred gender (*Vice: The Style Guide* 2014).

Seemingly innocuous, the disconnect between the transphobic private term and the politically correct public gendering is a knowing wink to VICE's discourse producers, a means for those with access to specific and valuable knowledge to recognise the

[26] See Appendix 2e, specifically that many examples used to demonstrate correct style refer to situations that could easily be construed as evincing feminine subjugation. Such examples constitute a running joke throughout the style guide: "Shut up, woman. I know what I mean to say…Japanese *kogal* girls fuck businessmen for cash…the internet is just a fad like women's rights…The latter example is only correct if you do not believe women are people. Are you one of those jerks? Oh…seriously? Uh-huh. 'Inferior,' you say? I don't know if Jesus actually said th…riiiiiiight. I mean, as long as you're grammatically consistent, I guess, or whatever" (*Vice: The Style Guide* 2014, last two ellipses in original).

epistemological divide between themselves and subjects without such knowledge. This is reinforced by consciously using an offensive term for transgender subjects in advising writers to use a trans person's preferred gender so as not to cause offence: precisely the initiated, privileged holders of cultural knowledge are those able to recognise and reproduce such 'irony'. A subtle but definite tendency towards a Hayekian epistemology appears here in the valorisation of a mode of knowing which is inherently private; Will Davies has highlighted the proliferation of private knowledge – used to enhance status and positionality rather than any kind of public or common good (Davies 2018) – under neoliberal capitalism. Further, as Jim McGuigan notes, "neoliberal selfhood is especially discernible…in the lifestyles, aspirations and frustrations of entrants to the 'creative industries'" (McGuigan 2014, p.224). For such subjects, who undoubtedly make up all of VICE's writers and many of their readers, an epistemology of provenance, or the ultimate superiority of the Hayekian private knowledge that grants special insight into the truth of what is valuable in specific social conditions, is an indispensable component of their subjectivity: an unparalleled mechanism for human capital accumulation.

The Entrepreneur of the Self: 'Doing the Work' (Appendix 1f, 2f)

The entrepreneur of the self is developed by Foucault in *The Birth of Biopolitics* to highlight both an ideal type and a normative form of human capital's subjectivation. Foucault (2004, p.226) develops this model of neoliberal subjectivity by building on the classical liberal *homo economicus,* the "man of exchange, the partner, one of the two partners in exchange" (Foucault 2004, p.226). Foucault details how in neoliberalism:

> There is also a theory of *homo economicus,* but he is not at all a partner of exchange. *Homo economicus* is an entrepreneur, an entrepreneur of himself…the stake in all neoliberal analyses is the replacement every time of *homo economicus* as partner of exchange with a *homo economicus* as entrepreneur of himself, being for himself his own capital, being for himself his own producer, being for himself the source of [his] earnings (Foucault 2004, p.226).

Writing for EF, (see Appendix 1f: 'Embracing Feminine Energy in Entrepreneurship'), Akilah S. Richards states that "the idea of work-life anything is absurd, as we are always alive, whether at work or at play…my work and my life are not separate, no more than

my gender and my experience" (Richards 2014b). Richards is describing herself as an entrepreneur of the self in this passage: as Dardot and Laval note, "the pure dimension of entrepreneurship…*is a relationship of self to self*" (Dardot & Laval 2014, p.112). Writing for VICE, Jorge Arangure Jr. expresses a similar sentiment in a different discursive register: in '2014: The Year of the Activist Athlete' (Appendix 2f), Arangure Jr. contends that "the era of the careerist athlete…is over…you can sell shoes and fight inequality at the same time" (Arangure Jr. 2014). In the transition from careerist to activist athlete, however, what is posited as an underlying common-sense is the total convergence and indeed harmonious congruence of one's work and one's self, with what is understood as work expanding prodigiously in a process grounded in a Beckerian economisation of all fields of life. Fisher discerns in this epistemic expansion a fundamental shift from "the good old days of exploitation…work then meant the annihilation of subjectivity…now…work is not opposed to subjectivity. All time is entrepreneurial time" (Fisher 2018, p.536). A subject who is their own capital and producer thus appears.

Throughout Appendices 1f and 2f we find the enterprising, opportunity seeking entrepreneur as a prototypical model of subjectivity for human capital. What Dardot and Laval locate as "the generalisation of competition as a behavioural norm, and of the enterprise as a model of subjectivation" (Dardot & Laval 2014, p.4) means in practice that every situation should be understood as a competitive opportunity, a chance to boost or diversify one's human capital. There is nothing to prohibit the accumulation of human capital by actions that involve altruism, and indeed Becker contends that "altruistic behaviour can be selected as a consequence of individual rationality" (Becker, 1976, p.818). From a very different political position, Jameson presciently noted that "altruism can very much be…a commodity or pleasure" (Jameson 1990, p.102). As such, earnest involvement in social justice or progressive political causes can still reveal an underpinning neoliberalised subjectivity, and in Appendix 2f activist athletes appear as figures that can empower ordinary subjects to maximise and deploy their own embodied resources in the fight against oppression. EF echo this position throughout their discourse. Beyond the injunction that "representation matters" (Valoy 2014), we can detect a valorisation of the entrepreneur of the self in the contention that "seeing people similar to oneself succeed by sustained effort raises observers' beliefs that they too

possess the capabilities to master comparable activities required to succeed" (Schakelford 2014).

The shift from "careerist" to "activist" athlete (Arangure Jr. 2014), or the integration of Richards's "core emotional and moral values in the fibre of the business we run" (Richards 2014b), exactly superimposes the progressive subject and their individual self-realisation, interlocking subjects and all their actions in the entrepreneurial production of the self. For progressive entrepreneurs, every action taken can and should consolidate one's identity/identities and enhance one's potential for future capital accumulation. In Appendix 1f Richards acknowledges the dialectic of accumulation and subjectivation that reproduces progressive entrepreneurs of the self: "we crave ownership, not just of a business license and a title, but of our authentic, fully-expressed voice" (Richards 2014b). In the dissolution of the distinction between the subject and their work, we can locate the instrumentalisation of a key neoliberal insight: as Foucault writes, echoing Schultz and Becker, "the man of consumption…is a producer…he produces his own satisfaction" (Foucault 2004, p.226). The rise of the activist athlete who can sell shoes and fight inequality at the same time, or the feminine entrepreneur who enjoys "a deeper connection to the feminine-centred principles of flexibility, emotional management, and the…*'people'* aspect of doing business" (Richards 2014b), are progressive iterations of *homo economicus*, for whom a number of ideological effects of human capital theory, such as the collapse of the category of labour into capital and the binding together of production and consumption, are structural determinants.

As "the holder of capital to be valorised" (Dardot & Laval 2014, p.156), even the most ordinary subject can and should exhibit an entrepreneurial spirit: such an understanding is echoed in Arangure Jr.'s (2014) claim that "political movements can begin with one simple tweet sent from one unaffiliated individual on the spur of the moment that can then roil into a revolution". The transposition of a fundamentally entrepreneurial orientation into progressive political and cultural discourse results in some incongruities and disharmonies, however the competitive injunctions to constantly better oneself and one's social justice work – if you don't do it, who will? – and to invest in one's own human capital to better enable others to invest in theirs have ultimately settled comfortably into many varieties of progressive discourse. Progressive *homo economicus* often makes an unobtrusive appearance: for progressive entrepreneurs, the

ruthlessness and competition that exist between enterprises are likely to be turned inwards, however subjects are still assumed to "maximise welfare as they conceive it" (Becker 1996, p.139) at every opportunity. For activist entrepreneurs, internal competition and the constant injunction to produce a more 'woke' iteration of the self manifests as an on-going refinement and deepening of 'the work', with a celebrated corollary being the development of the self into an enhanced embodiment of one's identity position: the ally listening ever better, taking up less and less space, educating others who share their identity marker ever more, and the oppressed exploring and expressing ever more fully the truth and wholeness of their identity, delving further and further into their personal experience and affective attunements to comprehend the self's truth at an ever deeper level. Competition is also normalised between individuals, of course, and indeed the above mentioned incongruities in progressive discourse often arise with the interpellation of progressive subjects into entrepreneurs of the self. EF's discourse is exemplary here, as responsibility for the inequality created by systemic oppression is laid at the feet of individuals, and entrepreneurial progressive subjects are urged to maximise their resources of human capital in order to fight oppression:

> If you claim to be allies dedicated to fighting systematic and individual racism, you need to do better. Remind yourself on how to be an actual ally!...check your privilege…It's about evaluating what's in your toolbox or resources, access and opportunity (Stephens 2018).

This demand is explicitly underpinned by a competitive goading, as if contesting oppression could be conflated with meeting monthly sales targets.

For human capital all work, especially what EF calls social justice work or 'the work', contributes to the realisation of self-hood (see also Appendix 1a). In making no distinction between the self and 'the work', contemporary progressive entrepreneurship mirrors the shift from apolitical irony to millennial earnestness in VICE's discursive development (see Chapter Five). Such irony remained possible in the assumption of "a political exterior and subjective interior…disharmonious with capitalism" (Brown 2015, p.111). VICE's 'transgressive' and apolitical early discourse, which for a time appeared to many as a thrilling postmodern hybrid, a (faux) avant-garde bricolage of hipster-gonzo journalism and incisive, sardonic cultural commentary, thrived in the relative stability of

turn of the century neoliberal societies in the Global North. These conditions tacitly barred epistemic opposition to capitalism whilst endorsing and rewarding the playful appropriation of anti-capitalist signifiers: such a process legitimised an all-pervading irony that ostensibly disdained the structures that enabled it. Post-2008, however, even VICE's profoundly superficial brand of disharmony between subjective interiors and capital has evaporated.[27] The concomitant shift to discursive earnestness (visible particularly starkly in VICE, but widespread throughout progressive discourse) evinces a paradox that Mirowski has identified: as the financial crisis demonstrated that subjects face an "intrinsically unknowable future", and with risk thus produced as normative,

> …participation in neoliberal life necessitates acting as an entrepreneur of the self: unreserved embrace of…risk is postulated to be the primary method of changing your identity to live life to the fullest (Mirowski 2013, p.119).

The subject who must embrace risk is ubiquitous across many discourses, especially those aimed at the poor, the unemployed, young people or those who have social grievances of various kinds. Mainstream media outlets play a crucial role here, as members of marginalised identity groups are often only represented positively in discourse when they display an entrepreneurial orientation. When this figure is deployed in governmental or corporate discourse, or appears in centrist, liberal or centre-right news and culture reportage, the implication is that opportunity is always available, and that the self and the self's social position can be transformed and uplifted by putting in some hard work. Prime Minister Scott Morrison's banal axiom "if you have a go, you get

[27] Writing for Reuters, Jack Shafer points out that "as with the success of the flash press in the 1840s, the Vice triumph reveals a class battle, but one separated not by socio-economics but by age and sex" (Shafer 2014). Shafer's analysis gets to the heart of how VICE presented a subjectivity that appeared to many young subjects as oppositional to capital whilst remaining absolutely ensconced in a neoliberal logic. The social conditions for the emergence of such subjects were ripe during the early 2000s hegemony of progressive neoliberalism, as collectivist political projects and epistemologies were definitively usurped by identitarian projects, first on the left but increasingly – and alarmingly – on the right, the consequences of which continue to unfold today. Chapter Five develops this argument in more detail.

a go" conceals exactly this ideological formation, and indeed, a great number of clichés and platitudes are underpinned by the subject as *homo economicus*.[28] In Appendix 2f, Arangure Jr. (2014) advances that thanks to social media, "everybody has a voice, and many have begun to use it": all subjects are empowered to embody their investments and assets in all their diversity, to navigate the world as opportunity-seeking and utility maximising entrepreneurs regardless of social marker. Becker's theoretical approach, where "economic behaviour is the grid of intelligibility one will adopt on the behaviour of a new individual" (Foucault 2004, p.252), is a background ideological truism in a neoliberal episteme, and in noting that "impact-driven entrepreneurs want to take the idea of happiness off of the hard to reach 'top shelf' and in to the fully accessible space of everyday living" (Richards 2014b), Richards in Appendix 1f posits the self in its totality as precisely what one produces as an entrepreneur. Altruism and a genuine desire for social change often propels progressive entrepreneurs of the self, however such entrepreneurs, whether famous athletes or ordinary, everyday subjects, remain human capital.

Blurring Public and Private (Appendix 1g, 2g, 2d)

Neoliberalism initiates a blurring of boundaries between public and private realms: materially, decades of privatisation throughout the Global North has radically shrunk the amount of resources held in common. The large-scale privatisation of what we can broadly denote the public sphere, and the concomitant dissolution of civil society institutions, can be advanced as explaining in part the mass bloating of public subjectivity that can be witnessed on social media. With the withering away of common spaces and institutions, privately owned platforms for connection step into the breach, and perhaps encourage a bottleneck of highly subjective discourse. Like the ideal user of a social media platform, human capital perceives no real distinction between public and private, and the understanding of our self-hood as a personal brand arises from the

[28] Clichés that circulate on social media regarding 'virtue signalling' and 'performative allyship' often serve as a lazy way to discredit the activism of those committed to social justice, however these phenomena can be divested of their trite discursive encumbrances and revealed as sensible practices of a progressive entrepreneur of the self when understood as investments in human capital.

neoliberal insight that "the self should provide no obstacle to success because it is supple, modular and plastic" (Mirowski 2013, p.108). This subjective flexibility subtly reinforces the risk society that neoliberalism reifies, and in progressive discourse, much like the reversal of the entrepreneur of the self's external competition into an internal spur, we find a related reification of fragility, weakness and suffering: against the demand that human capital be flexible, malleable and resilient, progressive subjects often point to the injustice and inequality of a neoliberal society by espousing and performing their inherent fragility. An obvious example is the contemporary evolution of safe spaces: as Sparrow notes, although these often cannot be materially provided, their practicality "mattered less than the argument underpinning them" (Sparrow 2018, p.175). Safe spaces developed as places that could keep "marginalised groups free from violence and harassment" (Collective 2014, p.1346), and thus continue to serve an important purpose despite the complexities involved in establishing and maintaining them. The Roestone Collective emphasise that safe spaces as physical places are distinct (micro)geographic locations that "are intrinsically tied to conceptions of safety that are continually socially and materially produced" (Collective 2014, p.1361), and thus safety emerges as contextually-variable and grounded in a material analysis of prevailing social conditions. Additionally, safe spaces are understood as providing "a certain license to speak and act freely, form collective strength, and generate strategies for resistance" (Collective 2014, p.1346). By contrast, in her EF article '6 Reasons Why We Need Safe Spaces' (Appendix 1g) Sian Ferguson emphatically emphasises that "healing is more important than debate" (Ferguson 2014). Ferguson also abstracts the material, contextually-variable nature of safety and thus oppression in asserting that "institutions all form part of one huge echo chamber that maintains the oppressive status quo" (Ferguson 2014).

For EF safe spaces provide discursive rather than material safety, although of course discourse and materiality are not always easily demarcated. The spaces in which oppressed subjects can find refuge exist online, and a blurring of public and private occurs in shifting the locus of oppression to online interactions, where the risk of trauma posed by privileged to oppressed subjects necessitates the creation of spaces for "healing, networking and developing a community" (Ferguson 2014). Although online safe spaces can provide respite, connection and discussion for marginalised individuals, such "controlled zones" (Ferguson 2014) have a fuzzy geography that both consolidates

the privatising impetus of neoliberalism as a progressive political strategy and abstracts the structural nature of oppression. Without much conception or indeed concrete operation of 'the public' other than via the sharing of online platforms, it is not surprising that other private individuals rather than unjust social structures are perceived as the primary bearers of risk to fragile subjects. As such, with the blurring of the public and private comes also a misrecognition of discrimination's structural location: as Melinda Cooper (2017, p.255) has noted, harms that were once conceived as structural issues resulting from embedded practices of social discrimination "are now more readily perceived as private wrongs embedded in offensive words or images". In the quasi-public realm of social media, those deemed to put fragile subjects at risk with offensive words or images can be publicly denounced or excluded, however ultimately all subjects bear the costs of their subjectivity themselves.

The inherent risk of injury posed to subjects by the interaction of many individuals in quasi-public online arenas – with such interactions affectively underpinned by a political project of mass privatisation – demonstrates a great deal of uncertainty about where boundaries can be drawn between the self and the world. In Appendix 1g the abstract signifiers "society" and "the world" (Ferguson 2014) are posited as oppressive, however "the world" can include literally anything: as there is therefore no limit to oppression's capacity to harm there is no contradiction in a progressive discourse that demands the proliferation of private space and encourages a suspicion of collectivity. Ferguson's article concludes with the claim that:

> I see the current feminist movement – and social justice activism of all kinds – as people focussed activism. More specifically, it centres on the healing of those of us who are hurt by the kyriarchy (Ferguson 2014).

Here the discourse exhibits an anti-political thrust that is distinctly Beckerian: compare Becker's declaration that

> …human capital says you can't ignore people…it's a very much uplifting theory, where again, we're putting the individual…at the centre, rather than as the instruments of what others are doing (Becker, Ewald & Harcourt 2012, p.11-18).

The apolitical analysis throughout Appendix 1g positions the subject who needs a safe space as wounded human capital: to enable essentially fragile individuals to heal is to uplift those whose lack of embodied investment conditions their instrumentalisation by the abstract social forces that manifest in the actions of privileged individuals. “People focussed activism” (Ferguson 2014) definitively places the individual rather than the collective at the centre, just as Becker celebrates human capital theory for doing: whether on-line or off-line, in progressive discourse blurry boundaries between public and private tendentially reinforce human capital theory by problematising the very notion of the public, not least as this last will inevitably contain privileged individuals who threaten the oppressed. Indeed, Ferguson (2014) further claims that “the world caters to privileged people at the expense of the oppressed. It is therefore revolutionary to have a space that focuses entirely on an oppressed group”. This is revolutionary action that reifies the suffering, fragility and weakness that vulnerable subjects experience under neoliberal conditions, however, and the almost exclusive focus on healing that such spaces promote evinces the confusion of self-help and self-care with politics so prevalent throughout EF’s discourse: as Donna Haraway (2016, p.44) bluntly reminds us in *The Cyborg Manifesto*, “self-help is not enough”.

Of course, a great many subjects *are* deeply at risk and profoundly vulnerable – refugees, sex workers, transgender men and women and poor people of colour for example – however this thesis argues that blanket depictions of such subjects as amorphous masses of precarious individuals stifles the potential for movements of solidarity and collectivity to emerge that challenge the conditions that produce normative risk and fragile subjects. Rather, the discourse of subjective fragility produces political programs that foreground cultural recognition: indeed, the continued circulation of such discourse rests upon the production and redress of injury, and thus fragility is never overcome, as political action focuses on establishing moments wherein “one can ‘feel empowered’ without being so” (Brown 1995, p.23). It is difficult to think of a more pertinent example than an online safe space.

Further examples can be located in Appendix 2g, ‘2014: The Year Feminism Reclaimed Pop’, in which Kat George uncritically lauds the achievements and power of female celebrities as a counterbalance to the inherent fragility of female subjects: “when women in the public eye begin to demand more for themselves, us normals might just be

motivated to do the same" (George 2014). An empowered celebrity subject transforming a fragile femininity into a strength that will inspire vulnerable "normal" subjects is typical of VICE's valorisation of a top down model of social change:

> Beyoncé's spent the year grappling with the line between her public and private life, allowed herself to be ultimately flawed and vulnerable…It's difficult not to see Beyoncé as a feminist role model (George 2014).

Throughout Appendix 2g, the explicit connection between feminist traces in popular music and the empowerment of everyday women is posited as common-sense – "everything looks absolutely fabulous for female pop stars…One can only hope this trend towards female empowerment continues" (George 2014). One wishes this were satire. Rather, we find a cultural trickle-down effect (see also Appendix 2d) that is evidence of both a shallow politics of representation and a fundamental confusion of public and private space in the premise that serious political change might result from "pop feminists…manipulating their image" (George 2014). George (2014) goes on to note that "feminism isn't the sole purview of pop icons", but in positing the public actions of private individuals as the apotheosis of female power and representation, the capacity of ordinary subjects to act politically is attenuated. Indeed, "normals'" inherent fragility means that perhaps it is better that celebrities mobilise on their behalf: "gender equality can only be reached through education. And…so much of our education, for better or worse, comes from pop culture" (George 2014).

Jeff Sparrow has pointed out the political limitations of this representationalist approach, where "a political achievement by a leading individual entailed that person doing what others couldn't and wouldn't" (Sparrow 2018, p.142). With the discursive proliferation of wounded identities what Sparrow further identifies as the gulf between "the history-making leader and his passive, impotent constituency" (Sparrow 2018, p.142) consolidates politics as something both too dangerous for ordinary fragile subjects, and something that anyway goes on without the possibility of their participation. While on the mainstream left this has entrenched a neoliberal politics of representation, on the right the same tendency has led to an alarming rise in nativist and indeed in some cases proto-fascist political movements: Modi, Bolsonaro, Duterte, Trump, Johnson and Morrison all hold power at the time of writing. For producers of right wing discourse, the

sense that the power to shape the world is out of the hands of the public has not promoted a fetishisation where celebrity 'feminists' are uncritically celebrated for penning odes to their "earning potential" (George 2014). Rather, this notion has enabled racist, sexist and homophobic discourses to function as structural-ontological heuristics that in turn have mobilised social blocs often affected by economic precarity. A subjective fragility is also discernible on the right, but the pioneering discourses of representation arguably emerged as a progressive response to hegemonic neoliberalism, and in foregrounding "recognition, not distribution" (Fraser 2019, p.17), progressive discourse forecloses the potential for a collective transformation of oppressive social conditions: precisely the misrecognition – the blurring – of public and private spaces obscures the political potential of ordinary people acting as a public and in public spaces. This of course is in harmony with neoliberalism's depoliticising tendency, and "when the demos is discursively disintegrated" (Brown 2015, p.44) we find both VICE's lauding of celebrity culture as a realm of meaningful political action that conditions a radical contraction of material political possibility – "this year women have given us so much we've become greedy for feminist perfection" (George 2014) – and an elision of the capacity of subjects to dialectically overcome their fragility via collective political action.

Telling Your Story (All Appendices)

Both VICE and EF's particular house style is fairly consistent across all the articles analysed above. A certain voice speaks and a certain listener is assumed: a first-person, youthful but savvy insider who dispenses common-sense is both the discourse's producer and receiver, although each platform evinces a distinct ratio of irony to earnestness. However, in a period of history where the self-determination of the subject is supported ideologically by a dialectic between subjects as human capital and neoliberalised institutions, the transhistorical desire of human beings to tell stories that explain why things are the way they are is also generative of human capital theory as a modality of subjectivity, regardless of whether stories are told with VICE's irony or EF's wounded sincerity. Indeed, it can be advanced that 'telling your story' has never been a more prominent injunction, as social media platforms compel us to enhance our personal brand, thus economising our inner lives. Mirowski's discussion of Facebook highlights both the perpetual dialectic of human capital accumulation referred to throughout this thesis as well as how the very human need to narrativise has become

entangled with processes of capital accumulation, both for individuals and for corporations who control online space. Mirowski writes that Facebook:

> Is the neoliberal technology par excellence…it is a wildly successful business that teaches its participants how to turn themselves into a flexible entrepreneurial identity. It distils the persona down to a jumble of unexplained tastes and alliances…Facebook profiles then feed back into 'real life' (Mirowski 2013, p.112-113).

Mirowski expresses quite clearly the subtle ideological compulsion to narrativise and construct identities, and in online progressive discourse the legitimation of marginalised identities often manifests as a plea to be able to tell one's story, for others to make space for such stories and to listen. There is nothing particularly neoliberal here at first blush, however the proliferation of personal narratives and the taken for granted political value of these tend to amplify demands for recognition that can ultimately be accommodated within the logic of capital accumulation: as Shoshanna Zuboff (2015, p.79) notes, "individual needs for self-expression, voice, influence, information, learning empowerment and connection summoned all sorts of new capabilities into existence". Zuboff goes on to posit that these "subjectivities of self-determination found expression in a new *networked individual sphere* characterized by…non market forms of 'social production'" (Zuboff 2015, p.79), however it is disputable that "non market forms" of production ever characterised the "networked individual sphere" that Zuboff refers to. The early emancipatory promise of the internet, its anarchic horizontality, was arguably chimeric, as "the design of the internet…bore the imprint of military objectives" (Curran 2012, p.36). Despite the presence of strong counter-cultural elements in the internet's early development, wherein academics, scientists, military and counter-cultural figures all contributed to its evolution

> …the American state 'shepherded' the internet to market. In 1991, the ban on commercial use of the public internet was lifted, and in 1995 the public internet was privatised (Curran 2012, p.37).

We can therefore posit that the forms of self-expression, connection and empowerment that Zuboff describes were always situated within a logic of capital accumulation, albeit

one that expanded the frontiers of what might be considered capital. It is also true that – especially in its early years – certain influential figures in the development of the internet and the world wide web did intend it to offer forms of connection, knowledge sharing and social organisation definitively outside of the market.[29] There are different ways to trace the internet's historical development, and emphasis can fall more strongly on military, academic or counter-cultural contributions, but today what Zuboff (2015, p.79) designates "social production" relentlessly undergirds the operation of financial markets by providing the data that fuels big tech, and the ostensibly free public space of social media has been revealed as thoroughly saturated with a neoliberal logic. One can perform against type in this arena – the ideal type is human capital – however regardless of one's performance the theatre operates to produce subjectivity as a commodity, and in stepping onto the stage we always already surrender to this logic, much like Hayek demands we submit to the market. It is not so much that 'telling your story' is neoliberal, but that as human capital we are supported both ideologically and materially by structures – social media platforms, discourses of individualism and self-determination – that compel us to constantly narrativise our individual lives. Each subject on social media can now quite literally be the headline star of the movie of their life, and indeed is encouraged to perform thus. Compatible with human capital as a paradigmatic subjective model, however, is a tendency to polarisation, as we perform our subjectivities "either in…subjection to forces beyond the subject's control…or with an unrealistic sense of control over one's fate that minimize or negates structural constraints" (Gimenez 2006, p.430).

Regardless, there are significant barriers to the articulation of narratives that centre subjects who belong to oppressed identity groups, and agitating for increased cultural recognition and representation opens space for narratives that can shift broader discursive currents and legitimise marginalised identities. In the clamour to narrativise, however, what is often not considered is the ground upon which the hero of the narrative stands. Moreover, the epistemological framework that demands that individual stories be

[29] For more on the early development of the internet, and the unique interrelations of military, scientific and counter-cultural figures as well as the contributions from explicitly anti-market individuals grounded in a Northern European social democratic tradition, see Curran's *Rethinking Internet History.*

told – that telling one's story is an individual's right and that the self-determination that inheres in narrativisation is the apotheosis of subjective development – remains uninterrogated when progressive subjects demand that those with the privilege to tell their stories (and experience stories told about others who share their identity markers) make space for those without such privilege to be heard. Increasing the range of cultural representation *is* important, and can have effects that lead to real improvements in the lives of oppressed individuals. With achieving cultural representation and claiming cultural space as the main goals of political action, however, we find the competitive individualism of human capital theory reconfigured as an emancipation that inheres in expression: the domains in which individual narratives unfold are completely economised, and to claim that the dominant order only values certain stories (whilst undoubtedly true) leaves unchallenged the dominant order's position as arbiter of both what is important or valuable but also what *can* be spoken. Neoliberalism as epistemological framework delineates a horizon of possibility, and whilst of course subjects can and must demand more space within these confines – to say that lives are at stake is by no means to exaggerate – to demand the inclusion of more diverse narratives within the dominant discourse amounts finally to the acceptance of that discourse as anointing the true. In short, we remain on neoliberalism's terms, and narrative demands boil down to having the same opportunities as other human capital, for temporary discursive emancipation from one's status as a "human noncapital entity" (Brown 2015, p.104).

Chapter Five

VICE and EF: Reflection and Analysis

This is the first time young people have had a revolution that involves them getting paid.
Gavin McInnes, VICE co-founder

The VICE Guide to Progressive Subjectivity

VICE is a media company that has evolved from a fashionable magazine to a vast and "vertically integrated" (Moore 2014) platform for news and cultural content. VICE produces serious current affairs journalism, documentary films, reviews and commentary on fashion, food, music, films and television, video games, travel and myriad obscure or esoteric practices and cultural forms, as well as a fair amount of 'erotic' or NSFW (not safe for work) content. There is a record label as well as 'indie' and electronic music platforms (Noisey, Thump and Motherboard), and also recently VICE Impact, which aims to further progressive social goals by assisting different brands to strategize their corporate social responsibility (CSR). Active since 2017, VICE Impact exists as "a place to take action, doing something on the issues people care about – now" (*VICE Impact A Place to Take Action* 2018). Impact is VICE's contribution to commodity activism, "a place for brands to host their sustainability and CSR drives" (McCarthy 2018). Despite the protestations of neoliberal luminary Milton Friedman, who argued that "the social responsibility of business is to increase its profits" (Friedman 2007), CSR measures are now ubiquitous in the corporate world: indeed, they represent precisely the proliferation of neoliberal commodity activism. The earnestness implied by CSR is a departure for VICE, as their initial success and subsequent expansion was always at least partly contingent on the ineffable: a degree of cool, an 'edgy' cachet, an ironic and properly postmodern 'are they serious or not?' playfulness across an assemblage of surfaces that when deconstructed revealed nothing. As such, VICE's early magazine-based content aligns with Baudrillard's diagnosis of meaning's evaporation in *Simulacra and Simulation,* where "information…exhausts itself in the act of staging communication…information dissolves meaning and dissolves the social" (1994, p.80-81). Even as various modes of culturally and socially progressive 'insider' subjectivity were posited by the reception of VICE's discourse, any real congregation of subjects into a meaningful social formation was foreclosed: this was an apolitical "accommodation of radicalism and the market" (Gordon 2018, p.53) *par excellence.*

The subject implied as receiver of VICE's early discourse, and the subject now implied, has undergone a shift: indeed, "the most significant shift in Vice's attitude has been from trying to appear trendy…to trying to seem genuine" (Ip 2015). In its formative years (the late 1990s and early to mid 2000s), VICE defined a certain mode – white, mostly male, heterosexual, 'transgressive', anarchic and apolitical – of fashionable underground or 'indie' culture. As the free but advertising heavy magazine (invariably available at vogueish retailers and bars) has morphed into a global media behemoth, there has been a distinct change in the company's political position, and indeed their positionality in general *vis a vis* 'serious' social issues. VICE as magazine exemplified the process by which "signs and symbols of ostensible dissent are joyfully inscribed into capitalism itself" (McGuigan 2014, p.229-230). Bluntly, it succeeded as a means of quasi-covert advertising, presenting a certain lifestyle or ideal subjectivity to a young, wealthy and fashionable demographic that perhaps thought themselves too savvy to fall for old media advertising tricks. Indeed, a complex social positionality whereby subjects' imperviousness to traditional injunctions to consumerism grounds their hip status and allows for the boundless 'ironic' consumption of (sub)culturally approved items, was a recurrent modality of the subject positioned by VICE at its underground apotheosis. This late 90's – early 2000's heyday broadly coincided with hegemonic social democratic neoliberalism in much of the west: this was a time of what Nancy Fraser calls "progressive neoliberalism", whereby

> …the progressive-neoliberal program for a just social order did not aim to abolish social hierarchy but to 'diversify' it, 'empowering' 'talented' women, people of colour and sexual minorities to rise to the top (Fraser 2019, p.13-14).

Simultaneously, the cultural landscape was dominated by retro and revivals. Simon Reynolds has noted how

> …instead of being the threshold to the future, the first ten years of the twenty-first century turned out to be the 'Re' Decade. The 2000s were dominated by the 're-'prefix: *re*vivals, *re*issues, *re*makes, *re*-enactments. Endless *re*trospection" (Reynolds 2011, p.xi).

This stasis of both politics and culture reveals in hindsight an attenuation of the political as this last is swamped and dominated by a thoroughly economised and economising 'culture': this same neoliberalised culture produces the flattening that is necessary for depthless and disaffected ironic surface play. For many theorists of the postmodern this play may be all that is possible, or at least all that is epistemically accessible without history renewing.[30] Baudrillard presciently described the convergence of "the commodity and the mark", which makes all cultural production always already commodified, and how under these conditions "there is no longer any difference between the economic and the political" (Baudrillard 1994, p.88). As the political, the economic and the cultural intertwine, condense and are evacuated of solid meaning – an archetypal mark of postmodernism – the circulation of discourses like VICE's through these exenterated spheres serves to reinforce a paradigm where "everywhere socialisation is measured by the exposure to media messages" (Baudrillard 1994, p.80), and yet the flow of such messages communicates only the fact of their communication. As Anne Moore notes in her (scathing) profile of the company, "Vice is about Vice" (Moore 2014). Receiving VICE's discourse positions subjects as already 'in-the-know', as savvy insiders who can understand themselves as such precisely because they receive VICE as content: the brand *is* the content, which is why VICE can easily cover serious news and cultural oddities, avant-garde electronic music and African warlords, Islamic extremism and internet sex fetish subcultures.

The irony heavy post-modern play that VICE (re)made fashionable was decidedly apolitical, even *anti*-political, and the fact of capitalist exploitation and the struggles of the oppressed were only ever acknowledged in order to be dismissed: actually *caring* about such things, or believing that they might be important or could be changed, was always a 'Don't'.[31] Indeed, one's cultural capital in VICE magazine's world was allied to

[30] With Trump, Brexit, Bolsonaro etc. – even Morrison's recent authoritarian populist turn – we can safely conclude that history is once again underway.

[31] "Do's and Don'ts's" were VICE's ironic take on tabloid celebrity fashion reporting. At times quite funny, they focussed mostly on fashionable young people, critiquing not only their outfits but the world view and cultural awareness that personal fashion choices implied. You had to be 'one of us' to be in on the joke: only if you could potentially be featured in Do's and Don't's could you fully access all the layers of critique.

consumption choices above all else: 'ironic' racism, sexism and homophobia abounded, and the disaffected cool aesthetic that the magazine monetised had primacy over any political or even moral standpoint.

VICE Media now presents progressivism as common sense across the full range of their content, which highlights that there is certainly money to be made from adopting left-wing cultural positions. Initially, the magazine's founders Gavin McInnes, Suroosh Alvi and Shane Smith espoused a sort of nihilistic anarcho-capitalism. Now, McInnes, the "godfather of hipsterdom" (Moore 2014), is better known as founder of the Proud Boys, a prominent alt-right figure who has swapped "irony for earnestness" (*Proud Boys* n.d). When McInnes speaks these days, the 'transgressive' racism, sexism and homophobia integral to VICE's early aesthetics are no longer veiled in irony or presented with the disaffected distance that faintly legitimised these modes of alleged 'cultural critique' in the magazine. Smith and Alvi dispensed with "postmodern race irony" (*Tidbits* 2004) and the like when McInnes was ousted in 2008, although a real irony appears in the parallel transitions to left and right-wing earnestness that VICE and McInnes have made: a fashionable magazine whose street cred was founded upon 'transgressive' hipster-bigotry pivots left to secure market-share, whilst the bigot junks any pretence at being otherwise and inspires neo-fascist street gangs.

It is hard not to draw the conclusion that VICE's current 'wokeness' is more of a financial decision than anything else: to position yourself as *the* source of news and cultural content for a millennial generation, the progressive political tendencies of the era must be taken into account. As VICE's Kevin Sutcliffe said: "we were pretty sure there was a big audience with a thirst for knowledge about the world…they just weren't being spoken to in a language that meant anything to them" (Ip 2015). Co-founder Smith is blunter, and perhaps illuminates more clearly the rationale behind VICE's decision to 'grow up', abandon the more *outré* of its 'transgressive' aesthetics and present as a largely serious, centrist-progressive platform: "there was a time when we were a trustafarian commune. Now, the thing is, it's a market. Life is a market" (Valinsky 2016).
Whether latently or manifestly neoliberal, however, the magazine rode the zeitgeist for a reason, and with the decisive shift in mainstream progressivism towards cultural representation and identitarian epistemologies came a concomitant extension of VICE's range, and the development of its serious political coverage. It now exemplifies bland,

mainstream progressivism – precisely Nancy Fraser's progressive neoliberalism – yet there have been consistent reports about underpaying staff and freelancers, and whilst workers in the United States have been able to unionise, in the UK the establishment of a union was rejected by management. Multiple accusations of sexual harassment have also been made and sustained. VICE exemplifies how progressive neoliberalism could "exude…an aura of emancipation" that "charged neoliberal economic activity with a frisson of excitement" (Fraser 2019, p.14). Nancy Fraser could be speaking directly about VICE when she highlights the hegemony of progressive neoliberalism: "now associated with the forward-thinking and the liberatory, the cosmopolitan and the morally advanced, the dismal suddenly became thrilling" (Fraser 2019, p.14-15).

As such, VICE serves as an agent of a certain type of socialisation: an ideal agent, in fact, for modes of progressive socialisation when there is no such thing as society. Discussing CSR, Friedman mused that

> …there are not values, no 'social' responsibilities in any sense other than the shared values and responsibilities of individuals. Society is a collection of individuals and of the various groups they voluntarily form (Friedman 2007).

This sentiment was tacitly endorsed – in mid-2000's hipster-speak, of course – in VICE magazine, where the putatively radical 'transgression' of articles like 'Hot Muslim Twat' (below) conceals an adoring valorisation of neoliberal capitalism and US imperialism, as well as racism, sexism and Islamophobia, gleefully mixing tropes into a postmodern and nihilistic paean to the pleasures of hedonistic consumption and transgression for its own sake. The 'playful', transgressive abandon of collective values and social accountability, the figuring of freedom as access to unfettered consumption, a wilfully dehistoricising and depoliticising bent and a hyper-competitive individualism (expressed particularly blatantly in Dos and Don'ts, where cultural worth is deduced from fashion choices) are all evidence of VICE's early neoliberalism. The hipster subject the magazine addressed was precisely a deracinated, superficially cosmopolitan individual outside of 'society', forming groups according to a cultural discernment bolstered by VICE's discourse. The article below is fairly representative of VICE as magazine, and is worth quoting at length:

> There is no pooty-tang on earth more repressed than Islamic pooty-tang, and thus there is no pooty-tang that's sexier. Almost everywhere that the Star 'n' Crescent holds sway, you'll find Muslim vaginas squashed under a hairy Quranic thumb. From Malaysia to Bahrain, the hapless babes of Islam get blamed for any sexual savagery that befalls them…In Saudi Arabia, you're allowed to kill your bitch merely for talking to another man.
>
> And if you star in a porno in Iran, honey, they'll stone you to death.
>
> Not an angry mob. The *government* will do it…The hot Iranian twat was arrested, found guilty of 'corruption on earth', and murdered by rocks carefully selected according to government guidelines. No word on what happened to any of the film's male actors. They were probably among the rock-throwers. Like I said, it sucks being a Muslim woman…I am not one to condemn our fine boys and girls over there doing a good job civilizin' the sand nigras. As Salman Rushdie said, pornography is a sign of civilization. A pox upon those who call us savage imperialists. We have liberated the Evil Bearded Caveman Middle East. We have brought them freedom and pornography, and more importantly, the freedom to *view* pornography (Goad 2005b).

Progressive neoliberalism is woven through the fabric of this text, which is explicitly postmodern: witness the heady, freewheeling style which recycles and combines 'high' and 'low' cultural tropes, the frenetic ping-ponging between (adolescent) Islamophobia and (adolescent) smutty sniggering, porn and literature, and the aim at transgression via combining and contaminating established discursive conventions. More than any of these stylistic markers, however, we find VICE 'subverting' power and authority at the same time as they appeal to these for legitimation. Now that VICE is part of the media establishment, such early content can help us see the extent to which they always represented a neoliberal rationality, and also how easily neoliberalism adjusts to and melds with ostensibly 'radical' discourses. We can locate Reynold's diagnosis of cultural malaise, Baudrillard's destruction of meaning and Fraser's faux-progressive politics in operation here, as well as a style that foreshadows elements of contemporary alt-right and neo-fascist online discourse. As Nagle has noted, transgression is "ideologically flexible, politically fungible [and] morally neutral" (2017, p.37): although VICE's 2005

style holds up rather poorly today (it seems to prefigure the kind of writing featured on the Daily Stormer), at the time the 'transgressive' deployment of racism, sexism and the like were intended to signify and delineate a liberated cultural vanguard beyond the need for such categories. Indeed, such categories' transcendence by a cosmopolitan hipster elite was precisely what was conveyed by their ironic invocation. Subjects receiving VICE's discourse knew it was both 'playful' and serious: that real racism and sexism were beyond the epistemic horizon and not attitudes shared by subjects like themselves, and that the truth of capital's ascendency and cultural dominance was both inevitable and – squeamishly, illicitly, subversively – desirable. In short, the message was that history is over: we're all equal but only some of us are cool; let those of us who are cool party.

In this sense, VICE as magazine was merely another symptom of the neoliberal turn, and their discourse at the height of their early trendiness aligns with what Jameson has identified as:

> A prodigious expansion of culture throughout the social realm…the prodigious expansion of multinational capital ends up penetrating and colonizing those very pre-capitalist enclaves…which offered…footholds for critical effectivity…even overtly political interventions…are all somehow secretly disarmed and reabsorbed by a system of which they themselves might well be considered a part, since they can achieve no distance from it (Jameson 2000, p.227).

Of course, VICE never pretended to exhibit any distance from capital, let alone constituted a pre-capitalist enclave. Both VICE's original apolitical irony – the anomie of 'TINA' saw their discourse saturated with signifiers of 'ironic' distance from capital's encroachments, and a nihilistic irony constantly goaded readers: how can you sell out when everything is always already sold? – and their current 'woke' turn exemplify a cynical comportment with the progressivism most resonant among wealthy (and mostly white[32]) young hipsters of the era. Last year, for example, VICE offered internships in

[32] The whiteness of the typical VICE reader was assumed early on. A 2005 piece on *Dumb Myths and Smart Facts About Slavery* addresses its audience thus: "There are a lot of bad people in the American educational system who are being forced by a lot of

partnership with the University of Melbourne to students from culturally diverse backgrounds: one wonders what McInnes would make of this, and indeed it is easy to imagine a 2005 VICE article mocking similar measures. Such a move is a change of direction from VICE's original ethos, however the model remains a human capital boosting form of commodity activism that aligns with neoliberal progressivism's understanding of the function of activism as either investing in those with little human capital, or creating conditions that allow for capital accumulation. Indeed, with the rise of online activism on the left (and the attendant rise and political power of the alt-right, among whom McInnes is prominent and early VICE contributor Jim Goad is revered), a disinterested, apolitical stance on social issues is no longer an option for a media platform aimed primarily at millennials. VICE's tentative forays into on-line and commodity activism, and the gradual shift in both politics and tone post-2008 (the contemporary contrast with the 2005 piece cited above is immense in some areas and relatively marginal in others) are ultimately responses to a new kind of progressive subjectivity: one that enacts activism that "collapses the binary between the online and the offline to the extent that the online and the offline are not…separate spheres" (Zimmerman 2017, p.56). VICE, as always, is uniquely well positioned to market itself – and help strategise, popularise and monetise the 'wokeness' of other brands – on contemporary platforms for activism.

In his book *Platform Capitalism*, Nick Srnicek describes platforms as "digital infrastructures that enable two or more groups to interact" and also as "intermediaries

bad people in the financial world to tell you a lot of bad facts about history that are designed to make you feel bad about yourself. This is especially true if you're a WHITE schoolchild. If you're white like Uncle Jim, your teachers will try to convince you that you're responsible…for a bunch of bad, bad things that happened a long, long time ago. If you're a black schoolchild, I'm sure your parents will have plenty of excuses for why your ancestors were enslaved. But chances are that you're white–at least for the next generation or two, those are the chances…" (Goad 2005a). Jim Goad, a white supremacist whose 'transgressive' writing extended to advocating rape, was courted by McInnes to write for VICE. The white supremacist tendency of VICE around 2005 is very evident: couched as "postmodern race irony" (*Tidbits* 2004), racist and white supremacist memes are discernible in much of the magazine's content.

that bring together different users: customers, advertisers, service providers, producers, supplies, and even physical objects" (2017, p.43). VICE is a media platform that allows users to interact primarily with VICE, and as a platform that aims at something like hegemony within a certain market, a subject could feasibly inform themselves about the world, politics, art and culture by engaging only with VICE and its verticals. A "post-material subjectivity that easily glides along the shimmering surfaces of capital" (Gordon 2018, p.53) is implicit in the model of consumption offered by media platforms with vertical integration like VICE, and in weighing politics and current affairs, cultural criticism and comment, erotica and celebrity gossip as well as esoteric or bizarre reportage relatively equally, VICE Media tends to flatten and dehierarchise. As of Tuesday 12th November 2019, VICE's Australian home page features stories like "Australia Is Battling Some of the Worst Wildfires It's Ever Seen" and "Here's What the Hell is Happening In Bolivia" – and largely superfluous cultural curiosities, like "I Was Kim Jong-Il's Private Sushi Chef", or "Very Relatable Woman Sues Waiter for Spilling Wine on Her $30,000 Hermes Handbag" (*Vice* 2019). This shows how skilfully VICE has positioned themselves: a delicate balance is struck to appear "both rebellious and dependable", with "the credibility of the *New York Times* and the posture of a drinking buddy" (Ip 2015). As far as is possible when partly owned by Rupert Murdoch, VICE retain an 'edgy' reputation that is crucial to their serious reporting, deploying what is known internally as "immersionism…an ostensibly raw aesthetic that resonates with world-weary audiences distrustful of shiny, formulaic programming" (Ip 2015).

Newspapers of course feature(d) a comparable array of the 'serious' and the 'trivial' (news, sport, comment, reviews, comics, quizzes etc.) however the crucial difference is the implied subject who interacts with the platform. This subject is deeply enmeshed in the platform's verticality in a way impossible for the reader of a newspaper. Srnicek (2017, p.110) argues that "the aim for Facebook is to make it so that users never have to leave their enclosed ecosystem": the same aim could be posited for VICE, who explicitly intended to shape a certain sensibility in its early years (curating gigs and parties where hipsters could live the brand), but now offers millennials much more than merely an ironic take on fashionable culture. Rather, VICE is a paradigmatic platform, and Srnicek (2017, p.46) notes how "while often presenting themselves as empty spaces for others to interact on, [platforms] often embody a politics". Despite its progressive turn, VICE as platform remains an empty space that attracts users by its own ineffable presence (or

indeed lack thereof), and its reputation as transgressive, cool and edgy combines with its more serious content to present as a left of centre media outlet that both tells the truth (like a media outlet should) and to which you can relate (like you can to a wise and savvy friend). The end result for subjects positioned and interpellated, however, is that the sheen of progressive content is just another surface on a platform built explicitly to monetise coolness and youth. Gawker pointed out the obvious in 2013:

> *VICE* is a trick pulled on its own audience: lured by the promise of not giving a fuck, cool kids are assembled into a space where their desirable not-give-a-fuckness can be sold to corporate sponsors for hefty fees, which go into the pockets of VICE's owners (Nolan 2013).

Despite Gawker's untimely demise the point remains pertinent.

Material Conditions for Immaterial Labour

In tracing the effects of neoliberal human capital theory on subject formation, this thesis recognises that discourses both help produce subjects and are in turn produced by them, that subjectivity and discourse exist in a perpetual dialectic. As Marx stressed, in the act of reproduction – and in a neoliberal capitalist mode of production, this includes crucially the labour necessary to produce one's subjectivity as an entrepreneur of the self –

> …the producers change…in that they bring out new qualities in themselves, develop themselves in production, transform themselves, develop new powers and ideas, new modes of intercourse, new needs and new language (Marx 2005, p.494).

If we accept that VICE's discursive evolution exemplifies a shift in subjectivity under specific historical and material conditions, then the same imperatives that VICE communicates via the reception of its content (or its brand: the two are synonymous) should also be locatable in explicitly activist platforms that aim at changing these same social conditions. Not all progressive subjectivities are neoliberal, of course, and although even subjects who aim explicitly at enacting a progressive politics often unwittingly reinforce neoliberal ideology in the discourse surrounding and grounding

such action, the action itself may be collective or have moments of collective irruption. There has been much conjecture about the concrete value of online activism, however it is worth examining the rise of the figure of the 'activist' briefly. Astra Taylor (2016) notes that many contemporary activists occupy a social position much like members of any other subculture, "each inhabiting a particular niche" in a "heterogeneous cultural ecosystem…Many strands of contemporary activism risk emphasising the self over the collective" (Taylor 2016). There has not been as much scholarly work on online activism and platform-based activist communities as perhaps there should, however in her thesis "The Millennial Politics of Tumblr Feminism", Kyrstin Felts describes how certain online feminists

> …show their dissent against neoliberalism in the only ways they know how…they offer advice to individual girls to improve themselves…they do their best in a world that prohibits them not only from changing it, but from even seeing through it to imagine a better possible future (Felts 2017, p.43).

Felts acknowledges some tangible value in neoliberal activism, or the activism that seems epistemically viable when there is no alternative: such activism "does work that is micropolitical…it 'strengthens individual subjectivities'" (Felts 2017, p.43). Subjects who participate in such activism online cannot be blamed or judged for the lack of a more ambitious emancipatory horizon, or their activism's entanglement with neoliberal normativity: a neoliberal episteme exactly conditions their subjective possibilities. As Xenofeminism reminds us, "digital technologies are not separable from the material realities that underwrite them" (Cuboniks 2018, p.75), and thus the "desire of individuals to self-brand as 'activist'" (Hearn 2012, p.30) reflects a thoroughly marketised and commodified social reality, and ideal conditions for producing activist entrepreneurs of the self and progressive subjects as human capital.

Porous political boundaries between the online and the offline mean that in online arenas it is not so much that there is nothing outside the text as that what constitutes materiality is unclear. Here, it is imperative for progressive subjects to both brand themselves and to align with certain brands of progressivism. Alison Hearn (2012, p.28) discusses how self-branding as "a form of affective, immaterial labour" is used "as a way to establish some form of security" in a neoliberal world where risk is normative and

flexibility is valorised and demanded. In her thesis "An Everyday Feminist: A Corpus-based Critical Discourse Analysis of Digital Feminist News Media", Sarah Batkin (2018, p.116) claims that digital feminist news has been colonised by neoliberal self-branding, although it might be closer to the mark to say that EF and similar platforms are emblematic of a cultural trend that encourages the understanding of 'feminism', 'intersectionality' and other activist labels as a brand towards which one should align the self. Full subjectivation occurs when one's inner truth intertwines with an idealised intersectional feminist subjectivity. Writing for EF, Akilah S. Richards locates the almost transcendent moment when

> …I began happening to feminism instead of it happening to me…to be able to define and express feminism through my own soul…I wanted my personal struggles and revolutions to be echoed in the sentiments of the feminist outcries instead of my just amplifying the collective existing voices. Feminism today must be more personal (Richards 2014a, see also Appendix 1a).

This is precisely feminism as brand and political consciousness as brand-alignment, where self-determination and self-expression supports "a shift from a working self to a self *as* work in the form of a brand" (Hearn 2012, p.27). As Batkin notes, EF and similar platforms can be effective to a degree at producing counter-hegemonic discourses, but these are "sometimes obscured by the neoliberal cultural production of the internet, which prizes individualism over collective action" (Batkin 2018, p.2). Discourses that emphasise everyone's everyday responsibility for individual action against injustice foreground what Jodi Dean (2012, p.174) calls "the branching, fragmented practices of micropolitics, self-care and issue awareness", and configure contesting political claims online as inherently part of any struggle. This labour *is* material political action: EF's Alaina Leary declares that "being radically vulnerable and real online is a form of revolution, especially if you're marginalized" (Leary 2017). There are tangible gains that can be made by online activism and digital political struggle, however without a transformation of platforms themselves – the material conditions of online politics – a subject as human capital will continue to be reproduced.

For progressive human capital, the immaterial, affective labour that produces subjectivity is not typically understood as exploitative, however Cvejic and Vujanovic argue that

> …the core of capitalist production today, based as it is on immaterial labour, is not the production of commodities but of their cultural-informational content – standards, norms, tastes…by means of cooperation and communication as the basic work activities (Puar et al. 2012, p.175).

The subject in this way is their own oppressor: as capitalist and labourer in one, there is a constant demand for labour-power to produce subjectivity, yet this is presented by activist platforms as self-determination or even emancipation; to again underline Xenofeminism's diagnosis, "memes like…ethics, social justice and privilege checking host social dynamisms at odds with the often-commendable intentions with which they're taken up" (Cuboniks 2018, p.49). With Brown, we can see how "when everything is capital, labour disappears as a category, as does its collective form, class" (Brown 2015, p.38), and this bars the subject from conceiving of subjectivation – even if based only on mutual suffering – as a collective or social process. We are no longer a species-being, as Marx insisted, but those individuals for whom there is no such thing as society. Marx's (1963, p.56) insight that "for one class to be the liberating class...it is necessary that another class should be openly the oppressing class" can ring as somewhat reductionist today – Cooper notes that "the assertion of foundation is never merely 'economic' in character since it must ultimately incorporate the 'social and cultural' conditions under which value is to be reproduced" (Cooper 2017, p.17) – but still valuably highlights an indistinctness that neoliberal economic conditions have produced in progressive discourse.

Intersectional Feminism Meets Self-Help

EF is one of the most popular feminist websites in the world. A platform to support activism and provide education, in 2016 it was receiving 2 million unique visitors from 150 countries monthly (Majumdar 2016). As a progressive 'one-stop-shop', EF covers a range of issues: similar to VICE, a progressive young person wishing to inform themselves about social justice issues and how to take action on them could do so by engaging only with content from EF, and content the website provides links to. EF carries articles on "Fem101 (feminism basics), Privilege, Trans and GNC (Gender Non-Conforming), Race, LGBTQIA, Class, Religion, Sex, Love, Body and Disability, Videos, Comics", and their signature mixture of "self-help meets intersectional feminism"

(Majumdar 2016) is a potent and popular way of thinking about politics, social justice and subjectivity. This platform aims to equip progressive subjects with the resources to carry out activism that should redress inequalities and oppressions that neoliberalism in practice has exacerbated. Informed by intersectionality as an analytical framework, the platform's laudable mission is

> …to help people dismantle everyday violence, discrimination, and marginalization through applied intersectional feminism and to create a world where self-determination and loving communities are social norms through compassionate activism (*About Everday Feminism* n.d).

We are obviously a long way from VICE's early 'irony' here, and whilst the two platforms are now much closer in tone the house style of each exhibits clear differences. VICE still deploys an 'edgy' take on whatever they cover, however this has at times "resembled poverty tourism, where hipsters romp drunkenly around the third world" (Ip 2015).

EF take a far more sober approach, addressing readers like a concerned older sibling eager to protect fragile subjects from the "everyday violence, dominance, and silencing used against individual people and communities that leaves them struggling with fear, pain, and shame" (*Our Vision* 2018). This mixture of emotional woundedness, individualised oppression and abstract political framing is typical of EF, where feminism needs to be inclusive enough to function structurally-ontologically,

> …a very empowering framework to understand the world and your place in it…Feminism supports you in questioning the boxes you've been put in. It supports you in finding your own truth and bucking social norms (*Our Vision* 2018).

This fairly generic affirmation of individual worth, and the promise of self-development and realisation through political practice highlights both an interpellative intent – feminism is to function as a framework through which subjects can understand the world and themselves – and the individualist tendency of EF's style of progressivism. The content on the website ranges from stridently political or activist – "5 Valuable Ways to Use Your White Privilege to Fight Anti-Black Racism" – to advice on self-love, self-care,

body positivity, friendships and intimate relationships – "9 Toxic Relationship Habits We Mistake As Healthy" (*EF* 2019). The most characteristic articles are a combination of the two, with 'the political is personal' appearing in an extremely literal and highly individualist guise, as subjects are implored to examine their behaviour, thoughts and actions for oppressive content and to continually work towards cleansing themselves of such unconscious intent. A lot of EF's discourse is geared towards workers in NGOs and the non-profit activist sector: 'those of us who do social justice work' is a ubiquitous trope that signifies inclusion and group-constitution, helping to more precisely position progressive subjects "within the relatively small circles of remaining progressive influence" (Sparrow 2018, p.163). Like VICE, there is an insider posited as the receiver of EF's discourse, and the site hosts many guides and listicles aimed at those already identifying as allies or oppressed to further improve their social justice work, inculcating the vanguard of woke practices and techniques in both introspection and interlocution.

Accompanying guides to activism and discussion of political techniques – a guide to deciding whether "your politics are radical enough to make real change" (Nelson 2015) lists intersectionality, visibility, expansion and accessibility as foundational – are explanations, often in the form of listicles, of how many taken for granted or common-sense behaviours and attitudes are discriminatory and oppressive. The fragility of subjects engaging with EF underpins all the platform's content, and for subjects who are persistently triggered, micro-aggressed and 'doing the work' of educating others, any level of care of the self is a political act. Audre Lorde's famous line that "caring for myself is not indulgence. It is an act of political warfare" is frequently cited across a range of EF's content, and for EF practices as varied as taking selfies, establishing safe spaces, self-expression, introspection, ethical consumption and displays of affection are political – indeed radical – in and of themselves: "practically every decision you make has political ramifications. Pretty much everything is political" (Greenberg 2016). By contrast, Dean argues that

> …specific or singular acts of resistance, statements of opinion or instances of transgression are not political in and of themselves: rather they have to be politicised (Dean 2005, p.57).

For EF, however, the political is effectively whatever individuals decide that it is. Nina Power has pointed out a similar tendency in forms of contemporary feminism, where both "almost everything turns out to be feminist", and "the personal is no longer just political, it's economic through and through" (Power 2009, p.26). Constant quotidian personal/political intervention initiates a dialectic of self-actualisation and activism that produces EF's brand of progressive subject, for whom "everyday radical activism means taking…steps to achieve justice in our daily lives" (Feng 2017), however this thesis argues that it is precisely via a 'radical' micropolitics of the everyday that human capital theory operates ideologically in EF's discourse. An 'everyday' logic encourages "neoliberal reflexive projects of the self…characterised by introspection and narratives of self-actualisation" (Phipps 2016, p.308): through the same everydayness, "in place of politics, popular culture and debate have been saturated with feeling" (Phipps 2016, p.308). This saturation floods discourse with what we have identified as markers of the subject conceived as human capital; hyper-individualism, political situationalism, essentialism, the epistemology of provenance etc.

It is also in the 'everyday' of a 'feminism for everybody' that a slippage out of the realm of the political occurs. Whereas for VICE the colonisation of discourse by a transgressive postmodern culture foreclosed the possibility of the political – indeed in VICE's discourse "communication functions symptomatically to produce its own negation" (Dean 2005, p.58) – for EF the personal swamps the political entirely. In "the very privileging of 'inner' subjective states over the public" we can discern "the depoliticisation…of everyday life" (Fisher & Gilbert 2013, p.91), and an exact reversal of EF's putative ambitions. Indeed, Dean (2005, p.56) states quite bluntly that "all this tolerance and attunement to difference and emphasis on hearing another's pain prevents politicisation". Dean's concept of "post-politics" is useful here, as it accurately names the underlying neoliberalism of a politics where

> …divisions between friends and enemies are replaced by emphases on all of us…politics is understood as not confined to specific institutional fields but as a characteristic of all life (Dean 2005, p.57).

This describes very accurately both EF's epistemological structure and its grounding political ontology.

EF makes little distinction between online and offline social justice work, and activists experience "constant exposure to oppression over the internet" (*From Burnout to Radical Self Care How to Ground Your Social Justice Work in Love* n.d). However, "through social media and the use of hashtags" it is possible to bolster

> …a movement that calls for radical, intersectional transformation…We use social media to enhance our protests, publicize our activism, and connect with other students (Ferguson 2015).

The *Xenofeminist Manifesto* highlights the potential of platforms and online activism for radical feminists and the left in general, but sounds a cautionary note:

> …contemporary social media…has become a theatre where prostrations to identity are performed…valuable platforms for connection, organisation and skill-sharing become clogged with obstacles to productive debate positioned as if they are debate (Cuboniks 2018, p.47).

Whilst it is true that "the act of entering an online political realm…pushes people into the subjectivation process" (Smith 2017, p.47), the affirmation of the hard-won individuality and political identity of each progressive subject, and the need to legitimatise and defend such subjectivity, can replace strategic manoeuvres towards solidarity and collectivity. These last are precisely what are required to build groups and movements that might challenge conditions wherein certain subjectivities are produced and reproduced as oppressed and vulnerable.

The Marxist insight that "there is no society in which every element fully occupies a place…society is incomplete, ruptured, contested" (Dean 2012, p.82) is elided by reorienting political action to establishing and defending certain subject positions. Platforms' structural tendency to produce atomisation under capitalism is mirrored in a politics where intersectionality reifies difference, and an essentialised fragility – coinciding with "powerlessness as political virtue" (Shi 2018), and "social capital…based on the ability to articulate one's own suffering" (Freedman 2018) – establishes ontological truth. Self-care tends to stand in for solidarity, therefore, as communal

support will always fall short of providing what an individual requires: indeed, attempting to understand another individual's particular assemblage of oppressions is often to further oppress that individual; subjects are firmly instructed not to "go to them and expect them to explain their oppression to you" (Utt, 2013). The resulting suspicion of collectivity and universal political goals, and their replacement with the proliferation of anodyne 'communities', is coterminous with an understanding of self-care and consumption as politically radical.

The competitive individualism that structures the subject as human capital necessarily idealises "interior life" as the "privileged site of authentic selfhood", and as such much of what is understood as 'radical' subjectivity "accords all value and intensity to an entirely private domain of personal consumption" (Fisher & Gilbert 2013, p.93). Although for EF oppression *is* socially produced, it tends regardless to be embodied by everyday individuals in everyday situations, which further solidifies a conception of self-care as a vital element of a regime of everyday radical politics. Brown has described

> …the contemporary tendency to personify oppression in the figure of individuals and to reify it in particular acts and utterances, the tendency to render individuals and acts intensely culpable–indeed prosecutable–for history and for social relations (Brown 2018, p.21).

This tendency also contributes to subjective fragility: with collectivity foreclosed by oppression's irreducibility, and day to day existence a minefield of microaggressions, online communities may be all that can offer some relief. The oppressed individual needs a variety of communities, precisely because of their individuality, however with Fisher we can see the valorisation of 'community' on EF and similar platforms as emblematic of a neoliberal logic:

> …community is often posited as the alternative to neoliberalism, but in actuality it has functioned as part of the same political imaginary, in which we are offered an alternative between radically isolated individuals and homogeneous, stable, communities (Fisher & Gilbert 2013, p.99).

Safe spaces and exclusive zones for certain identity groups are perhaps the only conceivable means of producing stability and homogeneity – as well as resistance – under neoliberal conditions, hence "what happens within our communities is equally, if not more, important than in our broader public movements" (Jones 2015). These communities are chosen by individuals, however, rather than constituted and reinforced in struggles in which individual identity markers are transcended by work against a common and universal enemy. Instead, we are implored to make a consumer choice as to which assemblage of progressives most closely aligns with our own brand of progressivism. This is not material solidarity forged in necessary struggle, but a considered woke discernment that develops via the evolution and subtle attunement of an elite progressive micropolitical consciousness. The death of the collective and its replacement by the community is traceable throughout EF's discourse, and points subtly but surely to a subject conceived as human capital.

In the supercession of collectivity, we also find that class becomes merely another flavour of oppression, and thus another Marxist insight – that "class…is not just another identity, another 'subject position'; it is a social relation among people" (Gimenez 2006, p.431) – disappears. Indeed, the political confusion that results from conceiving of 'classism' as just one oppression amongst many is profound.[33] EF do insist upon 'classism' as part of the oppressive register: writing for the platform, Erin McKelle ventures that "we often discuss class as if it is independent from other forms of oppression", however the discussion is concluded with the question "what are some actions you are going to take to end classism?" (McKelle 2014). Again, the action of the individual is foregrounded, even within an analysis of class's intersection with patriarchy that ends with a call to action. Genuine class identifications – the political connections of individuals to each other based upon a shared understanding of their social relations – recede into the miasma of "an investment approach to human resources" (Becker 1962a, p.37) wherein only individuals embody oppression and thus only individuals can act to end it. To "end classism" (McKelle 2014) would mean the end of a capitalist mode

[33] It is worth noting in passing that Hayek uses the term 'classism' in *The Road to Serfdom*. A project tracing the development of 'classism' as what Adolph Reed Jr calls an "ascriptive hierarchy" rather than as a social relation would be worthwhile, and one suspects that neoliberal discourses would feature fairly prominently.

of production, of course, however for EF class is reduced to a series of personal challenges, injuries and insults that low income individuals may experience. With class understood as an individual propensity towards injuries of various kinds, rather than as a social relation that produces and is then reproduced by a particular historical mode of production, classism constitutes merely "a threat to an essentialised working class culture" (Cooper 2017, p.256). As Lauren Berlant (1988, p.239) notes in *The Female Complaint*, "the notion that race, class and gender…are each relatively simple, analogous categories that feminism needs to 'bring together'" is a "conceptual dead end".

Berlant's critique aside, an "applied intersectional feminism" that congeals identity categories grounds EF's vision of a world where "every person…directs their own lives, and reaches their full potential" (*Our Vision* 2018). Throughout EF 'intersectionality' does an enormous amount of conceptual work. Sandra Kim describes EF as "a new way of being in the world where our intentions are aligned with our impact" (Majumdar 2016), and this focus on the everyday, the ontological, necessitates a positioning of the self that is quite exacting. Each individual is located at their own unique point in a sort of Foucauldian epistemic grid of intertwining and inextricable oppressions, which is criss-crossed with ideological currents and dotted with atomised individuals at specific yet situationally shifting and microscopically different points.

Intersectionality is about both recognising this grid's reality and working from an awareness of its totalising plurality of standpoints, as well as incorporating this insight into our self-determination: "feminism without intersectionality keeps us from fully expressing who we are" (Uwujaren & Utt 2015). However, in this conception of intersectionality, EF enacts precisely what Xenofeminism cautions against: intersectionality understood as the "morcellation of collectives into a static fuzz of cross-referenced identities" (Cuboniks 2018, p.57). EF's conception of intersectionality as the ongoing acknowledgement of the irreducible difference of individuals produces the concomitant and seemingly paradoxical necessity for an activist feminism that is so universal as to be infinitely malleable – "there is no 'real' feminist…you can be one anyway" (Uwujaren 2014) – but also so particular as to be utterly personal. In EF's discourse, intersectionality has become a "catch-all approach…that fits all feminist ontologies" (Salem 2018, p.406-408), and the radical potential of intersectional theory

becomes merely a means of enacting a politics of often narcissistic individualism, "focussing on the particular and ignoring the universal of a capitalist mode of production" (Salem 2018, p.409). Beyond this and similar Marxist critiques, however, we can also note that EF's 'intersectionality' is a term that is static, frozen and hypostatised. To use the term outside of a narrow circuit of prescribed meaning is to commit an oppressive act: "we must stop using the term unless we're being faithful to the originator's critique of power and oppression" (Utt 2017). Profoundly ahistorical, such an injunction aligns all too easily with 'TINA' in fixing social relations and conceptual apparatuses in essentialised and immutable positions. Typically for EF, in the article cited above a relatively nuanced account of intersectionality as a theory of both identity and oppression cohabitates with ontological rigidity, moralism and responsibilisation: in unveiling the subtleties of oppression individuals are revealed not as partners in a struggle for emancipation but as inevitably personally complicit, and intersectionality as praxis becomes merely the most powerful tool available for "determining what socially marked individuals say, how they are represented, and how many of each kind appear in certain institutions" (Brown 2018, p.36). Vastly expanding the horizontality of oppression (and thus also of privilege), EF's ahistorical intersectionality is ultimately as flattening as VICE's apolitical nihilism: a generative play amongst the atomised human capitals in neoliberalism's void.

The subject as human capital is of course a subject that needs investment, and a subject can be defined as oppressed if they suffer investment's lack. Those with privilege are urged to "proactively work with it to create space for people of colour to engage in opportunities that do not hurt us. *Invest* in us" (Stephens 2018), and here we see activism understood as creating conditions for investment in the oppressed's human capital. Collectivity and solidarity – surely the ontological kernel of a left political program – have been reconfigured by neoliberal ideology so that these are understood as processes of enabling and supporting individuals to boost their human capital, or to create conditions more favourable to particular individuals' or identity groups' capital accumulation. The risk of capital depreciation, or the production of a subject that is a "human noncapital entity" (Brown 2015, p.104), permanently shadows such political injunctions. The demands to "invest in us" and "check yourself" (Stephens 2018) that proliferate on EF explicitly underscore the conception of solidarity as a process of making space for those with less capital to accumulate more. The oppressed seem to

need investment from the oppressor to achieve emancipation, and thus the neoliberal subject's paradox again shines through: an inherent fragility and flexibility combines with the need for recognition of its essential truth, locking individuals into a competition for advancement that normalises risk and situates inequality as our natural condition. The need for an on-going labour of investment and divestment leads paradoxically to a stasis, however: with politics transformed into "a market, a field for advancing every kind of capital" (Brown 2015, p.163), the logic of investment, accumulation, divestment and depreciation constrains the possibility of any moves beyond the horizon of a reified privilege/oppression dichotomy, radically limiting political possibility.

With subjectivity constituted on the terms of the oppressor, we can follow Brown in understanding neoliberal ideology as structuring discourses of "ostensible emancipation". Such discourses:

> …problematically mirror the mechanisms and configurations of power…which they purport to oppose...Initial figurations of freedom are inevitably reactionary in the sense of emerging in reaction to perceived injuries or constraints of a regime from within its own terms…Ideals of freedom ordinarily emerge to vanquish their imagined immediate enemies, but in this move they frequently recycle and reinstate rather than transform the terms of domination that generated them (Brown 1995, p.3).

Indeed, for this style of politics resistance is not really to dominant oppressive structures: it is rather to the personal injuries that individuals risk in enacting processes of identitarian subjectivation. A somewhat conservative essentialism is at play here, which means that strong discourses from dominant ideologies tend not to be historicised, nor interrogated for epistemological content or ontological weight. Discourses are seen as contestable only at the level of their effects on the individual: the conditions of their generativity are elided in the act of their naturalisation, and any political response is predicated upon minimising harm and making space to articulate suffering rather than organising to contest. Shared identity positions are not the common ground for the beginnings of a struggle, but rather condition an acknowledgment of the need for individual fortification and to attend to each other's suffering. As neoliberalism has produced conditions of rampant economic inequality, progressive subjects of

neoliberalism have increasingly demanded “moral protection against an immoral capitalism” (Della Porta 2017, p.30), rather than generating discourses that might theorise neoliberal capitalism’s overthrow. Wendy Brown’s question – “how do subjects reduced to human capital reach for or even wish for popular power?” (Brown 2015, p.44) – echoes poignantly across this politically stunted and moralistic terrain, as atomised, suffering and surely exhausted individuals eternally labour for recognition.

Conclusion

Omissions, Hegemony and Neutrality

Anyone who spends a reasonable amount of time with neoliberal thinkers will recognise that the project was never merely aimed at agitating for reforms to support the free market. To return to Foucault, "the problem of neoliberalism is rather how the exercise of political power can be modelled on the principles of the market economy" (Foucault 2004, p.131). I contend that a further problem for neoliberalism is how to produce a "society" – Hayek is already scare quoting "society" in *The Road to Serfdom* (Hayek 2007, p.136) – that operates with a back-ground common-sense – a quotidian surety, an always-already configured structural-ontological orientation – that reinforces neoliberal values and mores, leading progressively and inexorably to the removal of impediments to the operation of the market, and the promulgation of market logic throughout all social fields. This involves, of course, the production of subjectivity. Competition and individualism are not only the *sine qua non* of a well-functioning free market: they are the very ontological ground of subjectivity, and the on-going diffusion of these neoliberal virtues throughout assemblages of individuals operates dialectically; subjects inculcated with these virtues support a market society which in turn produces subjects who support these virtues, and with each sublation we find a purer and 'freer' political and economic order. For an ideology that is at root idealist, neoliberalism has had a remarkable amount of programmatic success: it is utterly uncontroversial to state that neoliberalism has been hegemonic for at least 30 years. Hegemony of course is never absolute or 'finished', and indeed the power of many dominant ideologies comes precisely from their capacity for subsumption, cohabitation and mutation, and neoliberalism, whilst tending most naturally to the political right, has arguably done its most profound and subterranean work in the mouths and brains of those on the left.

Becker, the 'neutral' neoliberal *par excellence*, expresses his pleasure that "many economists want to work on social issues", and also contends that the lofty concerns of intellectuals often lead them to forget that "the rational choice approach to…behaviour is in fact often consistent with the instinctive economics of the 'common person'" (Becker 1996, p.149-156). Shaping the common person and their common sense is perhaps the key process by which neoliberalism reproduces itself, and this thesis has sought to demonstrate that in producing subjects as human capital the neoliberal project has had

profound, far-reaching and on-going effects on subjectivity and subject formation. I have attempted to demonstrate the depth, breadth and variety of these effects via the articulation and location of a set of markers of human capital theory: in the discourse of subjects ostensibly opposed or engaged in resistance to injustices and oppressions produced under neoliberal capitalism, the presence of these markers reveals neoliberal ontological underpinnings. Within the tropes and heuristics that operate in – and *as* – the progressive discourse produced by VICE and EF, genuinely emancipatory strategies and indeed epistemologies are *a priori* constrained, and a dialectical advance beyond the subject as human capital is foreclosed. As Jameson (1990, p.98) noted with characteristic prescience, "the surrender to the various forms of market ideology on the left… has been imperceptible but alarmingly universal". From this thesis's small but thoroughly analysed sample, we can thus advance such foreclosure as an explanation, at least in part, for how a subject as human capital, and a neoliberal society, continues to be produced and reproduced.

In her recently published study of neoliberalism and human rights *The Morals of the Market,* Jessica Whyte highlights one of the most salient features of the neoliberal project for my research. This is the "concern with questions of culture, politics, morality and subjectivity lurking behind the value-free positivist veneer of Chicago economics" (Whyte 2019, p.162). This thesis has treated neoliberalism and neoliberals as rather more homogenous than is actually the case: Hayek's thought and concerns are of a very different order than Becker's, for example, and both the ordoliberals and the public choice school have hardly featured. Such treatment was necessitated by the two-pronged approach required to answer my research question. Prong one involved a synthesis of existing literature that enabled prong two, the development and application of a method of reading for human capital theory in operation. As such, I hope that some condensation of the tensions between different strains of neoliberalism and among different neoliberals can be justified by the need to first adumbrate an overview of significant neoliberal ideas – examining neoliberalism as epistemological framework – before moving to the entanglement of subjectivity and capital in both Marxist and neoliberal accounts.

The reification of competition and individualism now underpins the production of discourse and subjectivity on much of the political left. This thesis's most provocative

finding – which emerges from the clash of Marxist and neoliberal thinkers – is that human capital theory is so deeply embedded that it makes progressive discourse proceed a certain way. The 'progressive subject' traced throughout this thesis embodies a number of paradoxical tendencies, although the ramifications of the shift from materialist left or broadly 'collectivist' to neoliberal or broadly 'individualist' approaches to thinking subjectivity – both as our day-to-day being-in-the-world and as a social positionality informed by political programs and the discourse or ideology that supports these – have not been exhaustively explored. Whilst in this thesis I have hopefully made a small contribution to unpacking some of the above ramifications, I must also acknowledge the vast amount of research that remains to be done.

In both traversing a sizeable conceptual terrain and positing methodological advances there will inevitably be omissions, with many avenues rendered *cul de sacs* as the simple fact of available space confronts the necessity of further exploration. Whilst this thesis has sought to demonstrate quite concretely the effects of neoliberal human capital theory on subjectivity and subject formation, employing both Marxist and poststructuralist tools and techniques, it has not been able to more than hint at an alternative to the neoliberal subject. Moreover, and relatedly, neither has it thoroughly engaged with how neoliberalism might be overcome. Finally, the focus on the discourse of undoubtedly well-meaning elements of the left may strike some as peculiar or even damaging in a context of apocalyptic ecological conditions and resurgent far-right social movements: when "the Emperor's palace has drawn the nomads here but does not know how to drive them away again" (Kafka 2012), perhaps I am breaking a butterfly on a wheel with the direction of my critique. After all, what is so wrong with self-care intersecting with a broad and micropolitical feminism, or news reportage through an ironic progressive millennial lens? To this I can only counter that to overcome neoliberalism we *must* be able to name it.

Thesis Summary

Neoliberalism developed as a project of defensive constructivism. The need to articulate strategies to counter both the socio-political trend towards central economic planning and the developing 'common-sense' of collectivist epistemologies post World War II – usually framed as defending the precarious liberty of free men, who were farther along the road to serfdom than they knew – animated the "neoliberal thought collective"

(Mirowski 2015, p.428), whose far-reaching ambitions to remake institutions and position subjects compelled them to struggle in domains far beyond what had previously been considered 'economic'. Indeed, the draft statement of aims of the Mont Pelerin Society reveals a multivalent determination: to resist socialism and social democracy, to underpin the social body with a broadly accepted moral code, to modify legal frameworks to support conditions for the free market and thus individual freedom to thrive, and for state power to be directed towards creating these conditions, by authoritarian or anti-democratic means if necessary.

This last aim highlights the contradiction inherent in neoliberal freedom: it exists only in so far as subjects submit to the market, whose ultimately unknowable ways lead to an ideal social order via mechanisms whose effectiveness is in inverse proportion to the amount of interference in them. The market not only allocates resources, services and goods but also knowledge: the market is a "feedback mechanism [that] secures the maintenance of a self-generating order" (Hayek 1979, p.10). For many neoliberals, the market resembles in some ways a supreme being: an omnipotent and omniscient transcendental mechanism that distributes and balances the tangible and intangible alike – and the *non plus ultra* of human freedom – the market is ineffable, yet dispenses and enshrines a solid twist of old-fashioned morality.

Indeed, the decidedly moralistic tenor of neoliberal discourse points further to the project's aims to produce certain truths and certain subjects, epistemologies and ontologies. Dialectical relationships produce both subjects and discourse, and human capital as what Ulrich Beck calls an "ideal type" of subjectivity is itself produced via the dialectical interrelations between production and consumption and self-actualisation and capital accumulation, with neoliberal ideology and material conditions the universal dialectic under which these particular processes occur and recur. Hegel notes "the fact that both extremes are from the start and in their very nature transcended and disintegrated produce their unity" (Hegel 2003, p.299), and this contradictory, unstable but nonetheless persistent unity enables human capital theory to operate as ideologically neutral: this neutrality is precisely why it remains 'common-sense'.

After establishing human capital as a common-sense conception of subjectivity, this thesis traced human capital's divergence from Marx's social concept of capital, and in

turn how Marx's capital on one hand and human capital on the other might shape the subject engaged in capital production or accumulation. It must be acknowledged that a simple binary between 'individualist' and 'collectivist' is not sufficient to capture the full range of the effects of human capital on subjectivity, and that the subject as inherently *anything* must be subjected to a historical and materialist critique, in which the relative arbitrariness, instability and historically specific character of subjectivity, along with the heuristics and categories that constitute structural-ontological orientations, are probed. Marx's "species-being" is not an essential or ideal subject that has been lost in the neoliberal turn. Rather, the term points to our inter-dependence and sociality, our inherent co-production, just as for Hegel subjects "recognise themselves as mutually recognising one another" (Hegel 2003, p.106). Neoliberalism seeks to elide such mutuality so as to encourage 'free' submission to the impersonal market – which is the sum of all human energies and yet also always more – and to reinforce the self's ultimate responsibility for themselves. The corollaries are competition and individualism, as neoliberal freedom forces subjects "to engage in a particular form of self-sustenance that meshes with the morality of the state and the health of the economy" (Brown 2015, p.84) At root, I would argue that the fundamental subjective shift that allows human capital to flourish (and which this thesis has detected in progressive discourse) is that from a socially conceived to a radically individual subject.

The individual is the subject of neoliberalism *par excellence,* and in focussing on the individual I have attempted to reveal some lesser explored depths at which neoliberalism – via its interpellative arm, human capital theory – does its work. Thus, on the left even more than the right, to genuinely contest neoliberalism we need what Judith Butler (2006, p.33) calls "an insurrection at the level of ontology": of course, this would need to be dialectically related to a universalising political movement that could set the conditions for insurrection. The dialectical production of neoliberalised progressive discourse and a progressive subject as human capital might then be annulled, but I must reiterate that we cannot overcome what we do not know, as one can imagine Hayek musing about the market. It is precisely the common-sense reification of neoliberal categories, values and norms that must be addressed. Crucially, if it is currently easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism, this speaks to a deficit in the left's production of alternative political imaginaries. A vital step towards constructing such imaginaries – which might open an aperture for a subject who is *not* human capital

to occupy – is to reveal how certain progressive discourses stifle or foreclose them via their reiteration of markers of human capital theory.

Human capital theory also elides labour, collapsing labourer and capitalist into one category, and as such provides both ideological support for capitalist social relations and potentially mitigates problems – crises of accumulation, the formation of anti-capitalist movements – that a capitalist mode of production tendentially generates. The neoliberal account engenders stunted subjective possibilities, and it also elides class as a concept by denying it as a social relation, obliterating the dialectic between labour and capital that produces value in a capitalist mode of production. With the Althusserian break of human capital theory the object of economics shifted its focus to the capital-bearing individual, with this subject able to be analysed as accumulating capital, or maximising utility, in heretofore non-economic domains. This stuntedness could therefore be conceived as a "vision of man [that] is rich…an uplifting point of view" (Becker, Ewald & Harcourt 2012, p.18) as it seemed to extend the range and variety of individual choices. Other modes of subjective understanding, such as Hegel's notion of recognition, in which subjects both limit and exceed each other in their mutual comprehension of the other's subjectivity, or Butler's notion of an inherent sociality that leaves us fundamentally vulnerable to the other, can be counterposed to the socially disembedded subject as human capital, and this thesis has urged thinking beyond the subject as human capital as both an epistemological and strategic necessity. Much progressive discourse unwittingly reinforces neoliberal normativity and thus contributes to producing neoliberal subjects.

The production of neoliberal subjects was concretely demonstrated by the development and application of a reading method based on critical discourse analysis: seven markers of human capital theory were posited, and then each marker was located in discourse from 2014 in both VICE and EF. Although these platforms differ, they both exemplify how progressive discourse and the subjects such discourse positions can be underpinned by neoliberalism, with both transgression and moralism cohabiting with human capital theory. There is emancipatory potential in the platforms for hosting, producing and exchanging discourse, yet neither VICE nor EF instrumentalise such potential. Although the activism espoused can provide respite for marginalised individuals and perhaps encourage critical thinking and ethical consumption, ultimately

platforms must be seized so that the immaterial labour performed on them can be diverted from support for the vanguard of capital accumulation to genuinely emancipatory ends.

In a radically insecure world of normative risk, and with universal emancipation foreclosed by the very ideal subjectivity of neoliberalism, it is logical that discourses of identitarian quasi-collectivity proliferated on the left, achieving a degree of hegemony. With the contest for recognition emerging as the goal of progressive politics, and with oppression understood as ahistorical, subjects are indelibly shaped by their oppression, which denies them the opportunity to make fair and just investments in themselves. As oppressive discourses seem to float free within individuals who do not share oppressed identity positions, oppressed subjects are inherently subjugated. Their agency is limited at the outset, and they can only define themselves in response to a hegemonic oppression, which further cements cultural representation as a political end in itself, as emancipation from a human noncapital entity and into a legitimate subject. By reproducing the competitive individual even in discourses and subjects resistant to neoliberalism or oppressed by its operation, the scope for actually contesting the project continually narrows: a dialectic of progressive subjectivation and the reproduction of human capital at a structural-ontological level means that whilst neoliberal economics has been revealed as incompatible with anything approaching a just distribution of resources, or even a stable capitalist economy, credible alternatives are yet to emerge.

The apolitical and ahistorical tendencies of neoliberalism, its putative ideological neutrality, lead to a political stasis when transposed into progressive registers, and in the response of much mainstream progressivism to the upsurge in the power and popularity of the far-right we can clearly discern the political efficacy of progressivism informed by neoliberal logic. With a weakening of neoliberal hegemony, contemporary breach-stepping has occurred with tangible political gain overwhelmingly on the right: nativist and racist appeals to ‘community’, which can resonate with genuine ontological force for subjects made to feel precarious and dispensable due to economic and cultural neoliberalisation, have proliferated. It is a political salient of our times that the left has been unable to articulate, claim or defend discourses of inclusive collectivity and solidarity in response to neoliberal atomisation, or even to the inequality neoliberalism produces. This is not a nostalgic yearning for a return to Fordism or hetero-normative,

white, patriarchal social democracy, nor a valorisation of a mythical and politically neglected 'white working class'. The left has precisely failed to use the advanced tools available for discourse's production and reception "to shape a new common-sense", to platform and counterpose a contemporary species-being to the shrunken and stunted neoliberal *homo economicus.* Nor has it offered "an authoritative picture of social reality, a narrative in which a broad spectrum of social actors can find themselves" (Fraser 2019, p.28-29).

More work must be done to explicitly trace the connections between a resurgent right and neoliberal social conditions. This thesis has pointed to discursive similarities between the 'progressive' discourse of VICE in its early years and current alt-right discourses, as well as the transposition of the apolitical and ahistorical tendencies of neoliberalism into certain modes of identitarian progressivism. Indeed, the moralism that is a corollary of neoliberalism's apolitical 'neutrality' is easily discernible on the left, and with advancing protections for immutably fragile individuals within the confines of a neoliberal capitalist mode of production understood as progressivism's *telos,* it is unsurprising that social democratic parties seem particularly adrift. As radical free market policies and normative competition have eroded the collectivity and solidarity that secured and mobilised their base, they have been unable to delineate a contemporary collective subjectivity, or sustain a narrative that responds appropriately to our particular social and economic conditions. Instead, the radical right has stepped in with nativist and racist appeals to community and collectivity. With Tony Blair and Bill Clinton blazing the trail, the subject as human capital was thoroughly embraced by many progressives, and thus despite the utter inadequacy of neoliberalism to provide a decent life for the majority of people, progressive movements have lost ground to reactionary forces the world over.

Coda

In a VICE interview with EF's founder Sandra Kim, Kim discusses the EF seminar "Healing From Toxic Whiteness". She describes how:

> I wanted my financial bottom line to be aligned with my mission bottom line, although mission will ultimately trump the financial. And, if I'm delivering something that doesn't get interest, that tells us something (Majumdar 2016).

This aligns so purely with a fundamental Hayekian insight as to be palimpsestic:

> It is more than a metaphor to describe the price system as a kind of machinery for registering change (Hayek 1945, p.527).

No clearer example of the neoliberal colonisation of certain modes of progressivism, of a subject as human capital at the heart of progressive discourse, could be articulated. We can see in the easy cohabitation of VICE, EF and a neoliberal discursive master the extent to which neoliberal human capital theory has influenced subjectivity and subject formation. The socially embedded subject at the heart of traditional left discourses, a species-being who would and indeed *could* only realise their full potential in simultaneous collectivity with their brothers and sisters, are here replaced by the enterprising competitive individual, who abjures "grandiose schemes for organisation" in favour of the "opportunity peacefully and in freedom to build up once more their own little worlds" (Hayek 2007, p.221). In order to overcome the effects of human capital theory, and the neoliberalism that is accelerating our collective extinction, such grandiose schemes must again be dreamt, and our species-being must once more propel us into the future as radically socially constituted subjects.

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Appendices

Appendix 1a

Why I Love That Beyoncé 'Sexed Up' Feminism and Radical Self-Expression, *Everyday Feminism*

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Appendix 2a

How to Be Less Stupidly Poor In 2014, *VICE Media*

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Appendix 1b

Selfies and Misogyny: The Importance of Selfies as Self-Love, *Everyday Feminism*

https://everydayfeminism.com/2014/04/selfies-as-self-love/

Appendix 2b

NATO 2014: 100 Protesters Fight Against Britain's 'Biggest Ever Security Operation, *VICE Media*

https://www.vice.com/en_au/article/exmqbw/anti-nato-summit-2014-protest-camp-373

Appendix 1c

Breaking Down the Problem with Mansplaining (And Other Forms of Privileged Explaining), *Everyday Feminism*

https://everydayfeminism.com/2014/12/the-problem-with-privilege-explaining/

Appendix 2c

What We Learned About Trans Culture in 2014, *VICE Media*

https://www.vice.com/en_au/article/qbe9j5/what-we-learned-about-being-trans-in-2014-004

Appendix 1d

True Solidarity: Moving Past Privilege Guilt, *Everyday Feminism*

https://everydayfeminism.com/2014/03/moving-past-privilege-guilt/

Appendix 2d

Human Capital Contracts Could Revolutionise the Way We Borrow Money, *VICE Media*

https://www.vice.com/en_au/article/vdpagm/rumpelstiltskin-loans-0000466-v21n10

Appendix 1e

Why Your Disbelief In My Queer Identity Doesn't Negate Its Existence, *Everyday Feminism*

https://everydayfeminism.com/2014/07/my-queer-identity/

Appendix 2e

VICE: The Style Guide, *VICE Media*

https://www.scribd.com/doc/240864422/Vice-Style-Guide

Appendix 1f

Embracing Feminine Energy in Entrepreneurship, *Everyday Feminism*

https://everydayfeminism.com/2014/03/feminine-energy-entrepreneurship/

Appendix 2f

2014: The Year of the Activist Athlete, *VICE Media*

https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/wn3adm/2014-the-year-of-the-activist-athlete

Appendix 1g

6 Reasons Why We Need Safe Spaces, *Everyday Feminism*

https://everydayfeminism.com/2014/08/we-need-safe-spaces/

Appendix 2g

2014: The Year Feminism Reclaimed Pop, *VICE Media*

https://www.vice.com/en_au/article/rq44w7/2014-the-year-feminism-reclaimed-pop

Appendix 3

Statement of Aims, *Mont Pelerin Society*

https://www.montpelerin.org/statement-of-aims/

Draft Statement of Aims, *Mont Pelerin Society*

1. Individual freedom can be preserved only in a society in which an effective competitive market is the main agency for the direction of economic activity. Only the decentralization of control through private property in the means of production can prevent those concentrations of power which threaten individual freedom.

2. The freedom of the consumer in choosing what he shall buy, the freedom of the producer in choosing what he shall make, and the freedom of the worker in choosing his occupation and his place of employment, are essential not merely for the sake of freedom itself, but for efficiency in production. Such a system of freedom is essential if we are to maximize output in terms of individual satisfactions. Departure from these individual liberties leads to the production not only of fewer goods and services but of the wrong goods and services. We cannot enrich ourselves merely by consenting to be slaves.

3. All rational men believe in planning for the future. But this involves the right of each individual to plan his own life. He is deprived of this right when he is forced to surrender his own initiative, will and liberty to the requirements of a central direction of the use of economic resources.

4.The decline of competitive markets and the movement toward totalitarian control of society are not inevitable. They are the result mainly of mistaken beliefs about the appropriate means for securing a free and prosperous society and the policies based on these beliefs.

5. The preservation of an effective competitive order depends upon a proper legal and institutional framework. The existing framework must be considerably modified to make the operation of competition more efficient and beneficial. The precise character of the legal and institutional framework within which competition will work most effectively and which will supplement the working of competition is an urgent problem on which continued exchange of views is required.

6. As far as possible government activity should be limited by the rule of law. Government action can be made predictable only when it is bound by fixed rules. Tasks which require that authorities be given discretionary powers should therefore be reduced to the indispensable minimum. But it must be recognized that each extension of the power of the state gradually erodes the minimum basis for the maintenance of a free society. In general an automatic mechanism of adjustment, even where it functions

imperfectly, is preferable to any which depends on “conscious” direction by government agencies introduction

7. The changes in current opinion which are responsible for the general trend toward totalitarianism are not confined to economic doctrines. They are part of a movement of ideas which find expression also in the field of morals and philosophy and in the interpretation of history. Those who wish to resist the encroachments on individual liberty must direct their attention to these wider ideas as well as to those in the strictly economic field.

8. Any free society presupposes, in particular, a widely accepted moral code. The principles of this moral code should govern collective no less than private action.

9. Among the most dangerous of intellectual errors which lead to the destruction of a free society is the historical fatalism which believes in outpower to discover laws of historical development which we must obey, and the historical relativism which denies all absolute moral standards and tends to justify any political means by the purposes at which it aims.

10. Political pressures have brought new and serious threats to the freedom of thought and science. Complete intellectual freedom is so essential to the fulfillment of our aims that no consideration of social expediency must ever be allowed to impair it.

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