

Knowledge Work Compulsion: The Neoliberal Mediation of Working Existence in the Network Society

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Abstract

This contribution seeks to come to a critical understanding of the pervasive phenomenon of work compulsion among knowledge workers in our present network society. Knowledge workers not only have to and can work all the time from anywhere, but they also appear to want to. I argue that this curious phenomenon may be accounted for by the fact that knowledge work generates thumotic satisfaction. What is more, the neoliberal theory of human capital has found a way to harness this thumotic satisfaction to the profit incentive to create arguably the most productive working subject to date. I unpack my argument in four parts: first, I analyse the government(-ality) of control operative in the network society by specifying what I understand as “neoliberalism”. I then turn to Foucault’s analyses of the German and American neoliberalism of the 20th C as forms of governmentality to determine if it can justifiably be used to critically engage contemporary neoliberalism, and, if so, what critical insights might be gleaned by reading neoliberalism through a governmentality lens. Second, I address the “spiritedness” of knowledge workers under the conditions of stealth control that typify the neoliberal network society. Curiously, while these highly engaged workers have been reported to experience increased overall well-being, the overinvestment in work appears to be disproportionate to absolute necessity or correlative gain whether in terms

of increased earnings or improved overall quality of life. I contend that work compulsion generates and is fuelled in turn by thumotic satisfaction. Third, I try to ascertain what is the connection between neoliberal governmentality and thumos. What becomes evident is that neoliberal governmentality has found a way to appropriate thumotic satisfaction to produce and sustain the competitive entrepreneurial spirit. In the fourth and final instance, I conclude with a brief consideration of how the knowledge worker might resist the compulsion to work incessantly.

Keywords

Foucault; neoliberalism; governmentality; control; knowledge workers, network society; work; thumos

Introducing the Problem: Whence the Knowledge Work Compulsion?

The knowledge economy in the internetnetworked-techno era has become a decisive force in determining the human condition in the developed as well as in growing parts of the developing world. Knowledge workers are the fuel of today's economy. These highly engaged workers have been reported to experience increased overall well-being, much more so than actively disengaged workers who work far less (Saad 2014) —with the exception of those cases for whom living-to-work has resulted in burnout and stress-related illnesses that confront the worker with the limits of his/her capacities. The living-to-work phenomenon among knowledge workers has seen a concomitant rise in physical and psychological illnesses, which has in turn elicited organisational responses in the form of extensive wellness programmes to mitigate the potentially ruinous knock-on effects of too much work. What

animates this study is a desire to get to the heart of *what motivates knowledge workers to work almost all the time*. This undertaking might be understood in terms of what Foucault called a “critical ontology of ourselves” (Foucault 1984: 125), which entails both a historico-critical attitude and an experimental one: “this work done at the limits of ourselves must, on the one hand, open up a realm of historical inquiry and, on the other, put itself to the test of reality, of contemporary reality, both to grasp the points where change is possible and desirable, and to determine the precise form this change should take” (ibid., p. 126). The assumption of a “limit-attitude” requires one to identify what is singular, contingent, and the product of arbitrary constraint in that what is presented to us as universal, necessary and obligatory.

The “critical ontology of ourselves” as compulsively working knowledge workers will be unpacked in four parts. The first part analyses the government(-ality) of control in our present network society by first specifying what I understand as “neoliberalism”, which presents itself as a universal, necessary and obligatory politico-economic programme that is generally met by virtually unanimous consent. I then turn to Foucault’s analyses of the German and American neoliberalisms of the 20th C as forms of governmentality to ascertain if it can justifiably be used to critically engage contemporary neoliberalisms. What critical insights might be gleaned by reading neoliberalism through a governmentality lens? The notion of “governmentality” conjoins the 16th C conceptualization of “government”, which was not limited to political structures, to a certain *mentalité* or economic rationality. The second part turns to the “culture”, “ethos” or “spiritedness” of work under and in relation to conditions of control within the sphere of knowledge work in the age of the neoliberal network society. I contend that the knowledge worker is overinvested in work, an overinvestment that appears to be disproportionate to absolute necessity or correlative gain in terms of wealth (increased

financial incentives or material gain), mental, emotional and physical well-being or overall quality of life. This part concludes by attributing this overinvestment to an ambiguous ‘ambition’, which I conceive as thumotic satisfaction. The third part attempts to come to a critical understanding of the ‘hinge’ conjoining neoliberal governmentality to the ancient spiritedness of thumotic satisfaction. In other words, I ask how neoliberal governmentality succeeds in laying claim to the ancient spiritedness of thumotic satisfaction to generate and sustain the competitive entrepreneurial spirit. I conclude with a brief consideration of how the knowledge worker might resist the work compulsion.

A diagnostics of our present has to account for the knowledge worker’s situatedness in what Manuel Castells (1996, 2000) famously dubbed the “network society”. The argument presented here is thus set against the backdrop of the “Information Technology Revolution” that inaugurated what Castells describes as based on “informationalism, globalization and networking”. Such a “network enterprise”, he shows, radically transformed the world of work and restructured capital-labour relations. The genealogy of Foucault, for its part, provides a way of thinking about the ontology of “power” and subject-formation that is not based on a hierarchy or closed totality. Castells’s definition of a network as “a set of interconnected nodes” (1996: 470) offers valuable insights in this context. What matters is that the identity of these nodal points takes shape based on their position and role within the larger system. Consequently, the intersections within a network lack any inherently privileged or distinct meaning; their significance arises solely from their function within the network’s structure. Because these nodal points are interconnected, they continuously adapt in response to the surrounding force field, which, in turn, consistently reconfigures the entire network. In a conceptual sense, the network of neoliberal governmentality, comprising its interconnected nodes, is an ever-evolving configuration subject to transformative forces akin to creative

destruction. These forces respond to dynamics of resistance that are not external to the network but rather an inherent aspect of its essence and operation. Importantly, because the network is not based on a hierarchy or closed totality, control, as we shall see, poses as freedom.

Government(-ality) of Control

The present-day knowledge worker's subjection to constant control, which has, at least in part, turned him/her into a subject that lives to work rather than working to earn a living¹, is inextricably linked to the pervasive neoliberalization of our private, public and professional lives. The rise of neoliberalism in the late 1970s aligned with the emergence and growth of the Internet throughout the final thirty years of the 20th C, as noted by Castells (1996: 45).

The subsequent explosive expansion of the Internet, driven by continually advancing technology infrastructure, and its widespread integration into various aspects of human life (with roughly 5.16 billion people actively using the Internet in January 2023, representing 64.4% of the world's population)², has played a pivotal role in advancing the globalization of neoliberalism. Importantly, as I have explained elsewhere (Hofmeyr 1921c: 35), Castells (1996: 101) distinguishes between a *global* economy and a *world* economy. The latter, he states, is not a new phenomenon. A world economy is an economy in which capital accumulation proceeds throughout the world and has existed in the West at least since the 16th

¹ It might be noted here that the COVID-19 pandemic and the consequent lockdown measures that were put in place to varying degrees in countries across the globe have resulted in knowledge workers not merely working from home, but 'sleeping at work', which was *possible* precisely by the availability of the interconnected technological means to continue working and collaborating in real time with colleagues and employers both locally and globally across time zones with little or no regard for 'office hours'. This enforced utilization of this *possibility*, I would venture, will change the way knowledge workers work, and become the *probable* or perhaps even the obvious, if not the only, way of working (cf. Hofmeyr 2022b).

² Of this total, 92.6 percent (4.32 billion) accessed the Internet via mobile devices. Source: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/617136/digital-population-worldwide/#:~:text=As%20of%20January%202021%20there,the%20internet%20via%20mobile%20devices.>

Century. A *global* economy is something different, he explains: “an economy whose core components have the institutional, organizational, and technological capacity to work as a unit in real time, or in a chosen time, on a planetary scale” (Castells 1996: 102). Thus,

“[w]hile capitalism is characterized by its relentless expansion, always trying to overcome limits of time and space, it was only in the late twentieth century that the world economy was able to become truly global on the basis of the new infrastructure provided by information and communication technologies, and with the decisive help of deregulation and liberalization policies implemented by governments and international institutions” (ibid., p. 101).

Castells describes the “new economy” as having three interconnected characteristics: it is *networked*, enabling its global nature, but it is also *informational*. According to him, it is informational because the productivity and competitiveness of entities within this economy, whether they are firms, regions, or nations, primarily on their ability to efficiently create, process, and utilize knowledge-based information (ibid., p. 77). This aspect of the “new economy” clarifies the significant role of knowledge-based and its close association with information technologies. As we will explore further, this plays a vital role in the development where work becomes a central part of life (Hofmeyr 2021c: 35). First, however, I must provide a concise explanation of what I intend when I refer to neoliberalism. Frequently, this term is employed broadly as a vague and all-encompassing label for the current economic landscape in developed and, to some extent, developing nations. Such a usage lacks the necessary depth for meaningful analysis and critique. Second and more to the point, what does it mean to conceive of neoliberalism as a “governmentality”?

What is Neoliberalism?

Neoliberalism is a progressively globalized political agenda that advocates for economic liberalism or ‘laissez faire economics’ as the sole approach to stimulate economic progress and ensure political freedom. As the dominant mode of contemporary discourse and thought, which has also expanded its influence in many developing regions due to the spread of mobile technologies and the Internet, neoliberalism has penetrated not only political and economic spheres but has also become ingrained in our innate ways of perceiving, understanding, and engaging with the world. As a result, this influence extends even to the personal realm, which was previously distinct from political and economic governance (Hofmeyr 2021a: 591).

While widely divergent incarnations, interpretations and hybrid forms of neoliberalism are found across the globe, what may be said about neoliberalism in general is that its core principle revolves around *individual freedom* – an admirable ideal that resonates with our instincts, values, and aspirations. Consequently, it easily integrates into our conventional wisdom, often taken for granted and immune to scrutiny (Harvey 2005: 5). This ideology maintains that individual freedom is safeguarded through the freedom of the market and of trade. In contrast to classical liberals who emphasized a strict separation between the state and society, neoliberals subordinate the state to the ostensibly ‘free’ market, which operates without constraint through legislative intervention. The freedoms associated with profitable capital accumulation primarily serve the interests of capital itself, including private property owners, businesses, multinational corporations, and financial capital. Meanwhile, the interest of the majority – the broader population are left to the mercy of the so-called ‘trickle-down-effect’. While the overall wealth of the system might increase, neoliberalism lacks a built-in

mechanism to secure the equitable distribution across the system. In reality, as the total wealth increases, the gap between the affluent and the underprivileged also widens (Hofmeyr 2021a: 594).

A second general feature of neoliberalism is the fact that it considers *competition* as the primary factor shaping human relationships. Whereas freedom is essential for enabling competition, heightened competition is expected to enhance market efficiency, thereby fostering greater freedom, in turn. In reality, however, cutthroat competition more often than not leads to the monopolization of the market by one or two corporate global giants ruthlessly eliminating smaller locally owned businesses. Under neoliberalism, the market shifts the social responsibility of the state onto the shoulders of individuals themselves: individuals are portrayed as rational, self-reliant, and enterprising consumers who compete against each other for financial stability and achievement. Their decisions in democratic processes ought to be the rational assessments of costs and benefits. Hence, failure on their part to attain or sustain financial security is attributed solely to citizens themselves due to their ‘irrational’ and consequently imprudent choices. What this leaves out of the equation is that the more wealth has already been accrued, the more profit it is likely to generate, resulting in the rich becoming richer and the poor increasingly impoverished (ibid.).

To promote liberty and rivalry, key elements of neoliberal strategy encompass reducing state intervention in the market (deregulation), except for preserving market freedom and encouraging unrestrained competition. This involves reducing taxes and social benefits (referred to as the ‘social safety net’), privatizing public services, and constraining labour organization and trade union negotiations. The neoliberal drive to amass wealth for its own sake, which subsequently results in the acquisition of political influence, can be characterized

a politico-economic means of social control, which operates by inculcating an instrumental rationality coupled to self-responsibilization.

Governmentality as Critique of Neoliberalism?

The degree to which Foucault's analyses of neoliberal governmentality can justifiably serve as basis for critically assessing contemporary neoliberalism has sparked intense debate among Foucault scholars (cf. Dean 2015; Zamora 2014; Behrent 2009; Audier 2015a; 2015b).

The debate revolves around two key aspects: first, the perception of Foucault's value-neutral normative standpoint, and second, his atypical methodology, which is often seen as defying categorization. It is suggested that the insights derived from these lectures are not unambiguous and thus cannot be employed without encountering significant challenges.

I argue, in line with Foucault's contemporaneous 1978 lecture, "What is Critique?", that his governmentality lectures may be read methodologically as a strategics of power/ knowledge configurations imbued with what he calls the "critical attitude" (Foucault 1978). In other words, methodologically I consider them in the spirit of Foucault's analyses as "problematizations" that seek to interrogate phenomena critically; that is, they seek to unearth the conditions of possibility for discursive formations or 'truths' that legitimise techniques of power, which in turn constitute the 'might' that determines what counts as 'right'. Such "problematizations" further seek to unearth the weaknesses or fissures in power/knowledge constellations where resistance to power relations which pose an imminent threat of domination becomes possible. If this is indeed the spirit that animates Foucault's analyses of various forms of neoliberalisms as governmentalities, then what some scholars (for example, Zamora and Behrent 2016) have dubbed his "intrigue with neoliberalism" should not be read simplistically as an uncritical fascination with these phenomena. Rather, I suggest that these

“problematizations” should be recognised as a critical interrogation of a new formation of liberal governmentality that Foucault sensed could become extremely dangerous to human freedom, given that this governmentality relies on the maintenance of various liberties by way of an ever-increasing array of subtle controls of aspects of human existence that previously fell beyond the powers of governmental jurisdiction. It is in this spirit that I bring Foucault’s understanding of neoliberal governmentality to bear on the phenomenon of the compulsively working knowledge worker.

Critics eschew the “presentist temptation” to develop a Foucauldian critique of contemporary neoliberalism out of his 1979 lectures, which would conflate or ignore the difference between the 1979 context and the (recent) present. Foucault distanced himself from Marxism, and I want to make it clear that Foucault’s lectures on neoliberalism should not be interpreted as a Marxist critique of neoliberalism in any manner. Indeed, the neoliberalisms of the post-war German *Ordoliberal* School and of the ‘Chicago School’ that Foucault analysed in 1979 were distinctly different from the version of neoliberalism Harvey elucidated in 2005.

Nevertheless, Foucault’s insightful analyses highlight certain structural aspects of neoliberal governmentality that are readily discernible in contemporary forms of neoliberalism. Hence, employing a governmentality lens does not, in fact, project an anachronistic critique of the neoliberalism of the 21st C onto Foucault’s 1979 lectures (Hofmeyr 2021a: 597).

Numerous criticisms of neoliberalism exist, and these critiques can be broadly categorized into three main lines of argumentation: (1) neoliberalism as ideology, which presents a distorted portrayal of society and the economy, necessitating a scientifically grounded corrective for emancipation; (2) neoliberalism as an economic-political reality, characterized by the expansion of economic influence into the political sphere, the subordination of the

state to capitalism, and globalization that evade the regulatory control of the nation-state; and (3)neoliberalism as “practical anti-humanism”, causing disruption in individuals’ lives, devaluing traditional experiences, encouraging processes of individualization that jeopardize collective bonds, and posing a threat to family values and personal relationships through demands for flexibility, mobility and risk-taking (Lemke 2000: 6). While these lines of critique indeed capture essential aspects of neoliberalism’s impact, analysing it as a form of governmentality add a crucial dimension. Instead of relying solely on the conceptual dualisms it aims to criticize – such as knowledge and power, state and economy, subject and power – this perspective of understanding neoliberalism as a form of governmentality links forms of knowledge, strategies of power, and technologies of the self to offer a more comprehensive understanding of contemporary political and social transformations. This approach goes beyond the limitations of dualistic thinking, providing deeper insights into processes of domination and exploitation (ibid., p. 7) (Hofmeyr 2021a: 598).

Prominent governmentality scholar Mitchell Dean (1999: 210) explains this in the following way: “as a form of governmentality, neoliberalism promotes a particular contemporary governing rationale, which effects the calculated and rational shaping of our conduct by a multiplicity of authorities and agencies”. Hence, politics and knowledge are not juxtaposed but conjoined as “political knowledge”. The focus is on which kind of rationality informs practices or how the pragmatics of guidance are ‘rationalized’. Here, rationality does not refer to transcendental reason but to historical practices; it does not imply a normative judgement since it refers to social relations (cf. Lemke 2000: 7) Specifically, it is a governing rationale that

“effects the problematization of the welfare state, and that encourages the reform of individual and institutional conduct so that it becomes more competitive and efficient.

This reform is sought to be effected by extending the market rationality to all spheres,

and by establishing a culture of enterprise and responsible autonomy” (Dean 1999: 210).

As a form of power [an actively implemented political intervention], neoliberal governmentality extends an economic rationality, i.e., a cost-benefit analysis to every sphere of human existence including the family, religious institutions, schools, the health sector, universities, science, and the media. Every institution is subject to an economic rationality and as such conceived of as a business operating according to the profit incentive. Lemke (2000: 8) explains that the concept of governmentality implies that it is crucial not only to assess whether neoliberal rationality accurately reflects society but also to understand how it operates as a “politics of truth”, “producing new forms of knowledge ... that contribute to the ‘government’ of new domains of regulation and intervention”.

As a “politics of truth”, this economic rationality dictates that more must be accomplished with less, which effectively means that everything has to become more efficient. Efficiency is measured by way of quantification and calculation – even if what is to be measured is strictly speaking not measurable. The process of creative problem-solving – so central to what knowledge workers do – cannot be quantified, yet we are forced to quantify it all the time. Intellectual work, for example, cannot easily if at all be measured but much of what academics must do to satisfy neoliberal criteria is designed to create this impression because knowledge has become a source of revenue (e.g., output, impact, rating, ranking, and benchmarking). Revenue is by its very definition something that has to be measurable. In the neoliberal meritocracy³, the assessment of ‘merit’ is based on quantifiable achievements. In such a meritocracy, recognition of achievement is not bestowed but applied for and granted depending on one’s capacity to appear more efficient and productive than your competitors.

³ See, for example, <https://discoversociety.org/2018/10/02/meritocracy-as-neoliberal-mantra/>

Efficiency is something that needs to be actively managed, hence, the entrepreneurial/enterprising subject finds his/her creativity and productivity subject to over-regulation and constant control. Consequently, more time is being devoted to proving their results by way of the requirement of compulsive reporting of output than to work itself. As a result of the pressure brought to bear on the neoliberal worker, intrinsic motivation wanes, especially when pressure starts to take its toll in the form of the empirically increased prevalence of burnout, depression, and other mental disorders (cf. Bombardelli 2016: 87-89). Verhaeghe (2014: 195) cites two pioneering studies undertaken by Richard Wilkinson, a British social epidemiologist (one with Kate Pickett) that attempted to establish if any correlation exists between the neoliberalization of a society and the increase or decrease of psychosocial well-being in that society:

“The gauge they used was eminently quantifiable: the extent of income inequality within individual countries. This is indeed a good yardstick, as neoliberal policy is known to cause a spectacular rise in such inequality. Their findings were unequivocal: an increase of this kind has far-reaching consequences for nearly *all* health criteria”.

Four of the five factors that are commonly considered to be decisive for our health are especially detrimentally affected: the fears and cares we experience; the quality of our social relationships; the extent to which we have control over our lives; and, in the final instance, our social status. Wilkinson concludes that where there is high-income inequality, the quality of social relationships is noticeably diminished. Trust makes way for aggression, and fear causes withdrawal from community life. In addition, neoliberalization is causally connected to the increase in an individual’s levels of stress and feelings of powerlessness and helplessness, which are commonly considered to be among the most toxic emotions (ibid., p. 196). Additionally, neoliberalism capitalizes on the havoc that constant work under conditions of relentless pressure and ubiquitous control wreak upon its subjects’ physical and

psychological health by responding with the provision of self-management workshops and extensive corporate wellness programmes. The latter features telling topics such as ‘How to recognize symptoms of burnout’, ‘Stress management’ and ‘How to create work-life balance’. This response demonstrates what Foucault calls the “strategic character of government”, which suggests that unintended side-effects, such as the prison system producing repeat delinquency or recidivism (cf. *Discipline and Punish* (1975)) or the economic rationality producing psychic and physical incapacitation of workers are not signs of failure but rather serve as the very condition of existence of a particular governmentality by providing opportunities for its expansion into previously external domains. ‘Compromises’, ‘fissures’ and ‘incoherencies’, then, are always already part of the programmes themselves and the condition of possibility of their constant rejuvenation (cf. Lemke 2000: 9).

To understand this domino effect of parasitic causes and cures, let us consider what it means to work in the age of control.

Work in the Age of Control

Neoliberal Knowledge Worker⁴

Without revisiting the coinage of the term and its conceptualization by Peter Drucker in his 1959 book, *The Landmarks of Tomorrow*, a knowledge worker is simply a white-collar worker whose main capital is knowledge – the worker that thinks for a living – and as such the most important driver of the knowledge economy. In 2012, it was estimated that there

⁴ For a more detailed discussion of the knowledge worker, see Hofmeyr (2022a: 48-52).

were 250 million knowledge workers in the world. The exponential rate of technological innovation coupled to the profit incentive of a constantly self-reinventing market that fuels an insatiable consumer culture of its own making according to the logic of endless needs and must-haves have resulted in a staggering one billion knowledge workers in the world today.⁵ Given that the neoliberal worker operates within an economic framework where efficiency demands greater output with fewer resources, they are compelled to work constantly. This heightened commitment to work is further influenced by another concurrent development: the evolution of information technology and the advent of the Internet have given rise to a flexible, location-independent (or “agile”), always-accessible, and consequently continuously-working subject. S/he is isolated even as team member, task-oriented and depoliticized. They are immersed in endless feeds constantly being updated.

It is among this segment of the workforce that we find the strange phenomenon of living-for-sake-of-work instead of working to live. The fact that people work increasingly longer hours has been documented and theorized by several authors, including Hunnicut (1988), Robin and Dominquez (2008), and Schulte (2014). This development stands in stark contrast to economist John Maynard Keynes’s prediction in his 1930 essay, “Economic Possibilities for Our Grandchildren”⁶ that in the span of two generations, people might be working just fifteen hours a week. His argument for a 15-hour week was that with the efficiency of new technology and new ideas, people would become more productive. As our labouring efforts became increasingly more efficient, fewer hours were to render the same results, and people would work less. Reality testifies to the opposite. Harvard economist Richard Freeman

⁵ Source: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbestechcouncil/2020/12/10/the-year-of-the-knowledge-worker/?sh=2032be757fbb>

⁶ Available online: <http://www.econ.yale.edu/smith/econ116a/keynes1.pdf>

theorizes that one of the things that Keynes underestimated was the human desire to compete.⁷

According to the 2014 Gallup Poll, a significant number of full-time employed adults in the United States were already reporting an average workweek of 47 hours, which is almost an entire additional workday beyond the traditional five-day 9-to5 schedule (Saad 2014).

Interestingly, the poll also found that highly engaged workers who worked well over 40 hours had a better overall sense of well-being compared to actively disengaged workers who adhered strictly to a 40-hour workweek (cf. Hofmeyr 2021c: 34). With the advent of the COVID pandemic, the Gig Economy and teleworking, reports have been flooding the Internet over the past two years of the alarming increase in overworking in advanced societies across the globe (see, for example, Maurer 2020, Guy 2021, Kost 2020 and Hart 2021). In the Nobel Prize Dialogue on the Future of Work hosted by the University of Pretoria on 18 May 2021, the panellists stressed the importance of work as a source of both income and meaning in life. Panellists predicted that flexible teleworking, hybrid models of working, and working from home will be an increasingly important part of how we will work in the post-pandemic world. The gig economy is also predicted to play an increasingly important part in the future of work, which foregrounds the need for continuous upskilling of the workforce, the need for micro-credentialing and bespoke reskilling. One persistent concern is that this development signals an increase in precarious contracts and temporary employment for many, and there was a call to dignify the “side hustle” as an important form of entrepreneurialism. These developments do not signal shorter working weeks but longer, more intensive and informally structured working hours. The emphasis will shift decisively from hours of work to

⁷ Source: <https://www.npr.org/2015/08/13/432122637/keynes-predicted-we-would-be-working-15-hour-weeks-why-was-he-so-wrong>

deliverables, irrespective of how long it takes to complete the work. These scenarios of the future of work are already inculcated in the techno-capitalist conditions of possibility of the present world of work.

The Present World of Work

The contemporary labour landscape is undeniably shaped by the network society. The emergence of electronic and nuclear technologies from the 1940s onwards coincided with the expansion of international corporation beyond their national confines, encompassing previously uncommercialized domains. This, combined with globalized markets and the influence of computer technologies, has metamorphosed the world of work into a deterritorialized network of nodal interfaces, extensive consumption, and the fluid movement of multinational capital (Castells 1996).

As far back as 1990, before the Internet gained widespread dominance, Deleuze foresaw a shift from a disciplinary society to a society characterized by control. In societies of control, individuals are reduced to what he terms “dividuals”, treated as elements of “masses, samples, data, markets, or ‘banks’”. A person under control or a “dividual” is described as being in a constant state of flux, connected in a continuous network. Deleuze draws a parallel between this control and the technological revolution, with the computer serving as the apparatus of control. This technological transformation is intrinsically tied to changes in capitalism.

In the realm of capitalism, the primary objective is to acquire stocks. These stocks are essentially “encoded figures” that are malleable and can change form. The fluctuations in

these figures ensnare profit-seekers, compelling them to always be aware of when to buy and when to sell. As Deleuze (1992: 4) elucidates, market operations have become a tool of societal control. This form of control is characterized by its short-term nature, subject to rapid turnovers, yet it is also incessant and boundless (Hofmeyr 2021a: 43).

Today, the heavily committed worker finds themselves entrenched in fully developed societies of control, which are chilling realizations and refinements of Deleuze's earlier prediction. A significant aspect of this society of "free-floating" control, which has supplanted the disciplinary society characterized by enclosed environments within institutions ranging from families to schools, is that individuals are led to believe they have the freedom to "do as they please" (as long as the job gets done). Control masquerades as a form of freedom, or rather, an "excess of freedom". In this context, the digital panopticon diverges significantly from the Orwellian scenario of perpetual paranoia induced by Big Brother, as described by Han (2017: 69). Contrarily, continuous surveillance is supposedly not a cause for concern; it is something to embrace, knowing that everything is being taken care of. Surveillance, we are assured, serves the noble pursuit of our best interests, epitomized in the safety and security of each and all. In Han's words, "Big Brother now wears a *friendly face*. His *friendliness* is what makes surveillance so efficient". Han wonders if "surveillance state" is not perhaps a misnomer since today no one truly feels as if they are being watched or threatened. It is precisely this *feeling of freedom* that has become the problem (ibid., p. 71) (Hofmeyr 2022a: 59).

This sense of freedom that comes with control often conceals from us the fact that control spreads responsibility across every aspect of life. An extensive network of information-gathering algorithms continuously tracks, codes, and interprets various aspects of our

existence into discernible patterns. These patterns are consistently analysed and assessed. Thanks to mobile devices with GPS capabilities linked to the Internet, nearly everything, from our sleep patterns to our online activities, can be monitored. In societies of control, there exists a compulsion for self-policing and self-accountability, fuelled by the notion that if you have nothing to hide, you have nothing to fear. As a result, we willingly engage in 'sharing'. On social media platforms, we voluntarily disclose highly personal details about ourselves in pursuit of gaining 'friends', 'followers', 'reads' and 'likes', all of which trigger a satisfying rush of endorphins in our bloodstream. Constant surveillance is welcomed since it serves our 'best' interests after all – our social 'bonds', safety, security, well-being and health. This unwitting embrace of control explains the relative ease with which neoliberalism has succeeded in abandoning social security. As Lemke (2000: 10) notes, the relinquishing of social securities (e.g., welfare provisions against social risks such as illness, unemployment, poverty, etc.) and political rights (e.g., the citizen's right to privacy and protection of personal information) are not symptoms of the failure of neoliberal governmentality but may well be its *raison d'être* (cf. Lemke 2000: 10).

Tripartite Rationale for the Overinvestment in Work

I propose a tripartite rationale for knowledge workers' overinvestment in work: first, the neoliberal knowledge worker works all the time because s/he quite simply HAS TO. The technology of power is coercion, i.e., externally applied force that achieves some compliance but never conviction. S/he is compelled to be overinvested in work given the ever-increasing need to become more efficient. Such pressure becomes internalized and results in self-exploitation. Bourdieu (1998) refers to techniques of rational domination. Examples include

fixed-term contracts, competition, and performance (self-) evaluations. This technology of power targets *reason*.

Secondly, working is constant, because in the network society it has *become possible* to work all the time from anywhere on account of advances in IT and the Internet revolution. This has granted workers the ability to work from any location at all times, while management retains control over this capacity. I CAN, which operates through “control” (Deleuze (1990)) and “smart power” (Han (2017)) is not seen as a limitation of freedom, but as empowering, benevolent and beneficial: serving my best interest. This technology is internalized as what is good for me; it becomes self-control & self-responsibilization. As it is experienced as gratifying it becomes voluntary. Doing more than what is required feels good and right. This technology therefore targets *desire*.

Whereas HAVE TO and CAN are necessary requirements, it is the third pillar of the triangle, WANT TO that makes work motivation into compulsion. I propose this technology operates by tapping into our *thumotic* selves.

Explaining Knowledge Work Compulsion: Thumos

Can we ascribe a thumotic origin to the ambiguous ‘ambition’ or irrational work-drivenness that neoliberal capitalism feeds off of? Thumos is a concept that does not have a direct English equivalent, encompassing a range of attributes like anger, bravery, resolve, spirit, initiative, and aspiration. It is a self-oriented instinct that spans from asserting oneself to self-esteem and our interactions with others. It involves our concern for our reputation and good

name (McKay & McKay 2011). The thumotic drive, as we shall see, needs to be guided or steered, though, since excess causes hubris and deficiency results in shame.

Socrates's allegory of the chariot in the *Phaedrus* (Plato c. 370 BC), which he employed to explain the tripartite nature of the soul, is well known. In the allegory, a chariot (representing the soul) is pulled by a rebellious dark horse (symbolizing man's appetites or desires) and a spirited white horse (symbolizing thumos). The charioteer, representing Reason, must effectively control the energy of both horses, bringing these divergent steeds into harmony. Only then can the charioteer skilfully guide the chariot towards the heavens, where he can attain a vision of Truth and aspire to god-like qualities (cf. Plato 2008: 148-149).⁸

A number of well-known thinkers have theorized labour and the motivation to work. It was Fukuyama in *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992) who argued that labour has its origin in the ancient spiritedness, and he attributes this thumotic origin of labour to Kojève's reading of Hegel. It is not, however, evident that Hegel's theorization of the significance of labour in *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807) has any relation to thumos as such. What we find in Hegel is that labour is supremely significant because it is the means through which the bondsman's self-consciousness comes to itself: "his labour is his being".

In his 1905 *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber famously connected the spiritedness of work to the Protestant work ethic arguing that the Calvinist doctrine of predestination led to deep insecurity. Hard work coupled to a frugal lifestyle was considered an indication of being chosen; not a means but a *sign* of God's recognition. Weber further contends that the original spiritual impulse that buttressed capitalism subsequently atrophied

⁸ For a more exhaustive account of Plato's conceptualization of thumos, see Hofmeyr (2021b: 252-253).

leading to the reinsertion of the quest for material wealth into capitalism. Fukuyama (1992: 225) does indeed connect the motivation to work to work ethic, which, as a culturally conditioned phenomenon, he then ascribes to thumos. However, as I have argued elsewhere (Hofmeyr 2021b: 253), from a Platonic perspective, thumos might indeed play a role in shaping a person's work ethic. However, it is important to note that work ethic is a culturally conditioned phenomenon, and therefore, attributing it directly to thumos as a cause is not a sufficient description. In contrast, thumos is considered a universal and intrinsic element of the soul.

Fukuyama (1992: 225) highlights that conventional liberal economic theory, as epitomized by Adam Smith, argues that work is essentially an unpleasant task undertaken to reap the benefits of the goods and services it produces. These benefits are typically enjoyed during one's leisure time. According to this theory, individuals are primarily driven to work by the expectation of the opportunities it provides for not working, namely leisure. This motivation to work, as posited, is determined by a rational assessment of costs and benefits: the satisfaction derived from the material rewards of work and the leisure it allows must compensate for the negative aspects of work, such as long hours and the loss of family time. Traditional liberal economic theory, then, posits that reason and desire are sufficient to explain variations in work propensity. Yet, this rationale proves inadequate when it comes to compulsively working knowledge workers, as their drive to work does not align with their patterns of leisure consumption or a proportionate increase in utility (Hofmeyr 2021b: 253). On the contrary, what has become evident is a troubling surge in mental and physical issues (Verhaeghe 2012; Han 2017). Social theorists like Bourdieu (1998), Boltanski and Chiapello (2007) as well as Sennett (2006) have observed the erosion of communal connections due to the emergence of a self-centred self-promotion mindset under neoliberal governmentality that

values competition even within collaborative efforts and emphasizes individualism even within team dynamics (Hofmeyr 2021b: 254). More recently, Han (2017) defined the neoliberal worker as an “achievement subject” or “project” as opposed to “subjugated subject”, who embraces the freedom of the “I can”, which itself becomes a source of compulsion or coercion. As a project in the making, the achievement-subject is characterized by an insatiable desire for recognition. Work, then, appeases not the dark horse of desire, but the white stallion of thumos – that part of the soul that seeks recognition and honour over sustainable self-regard (Hofmeyr 2021b: 255).

Neoliberal Governmentality’s Usurpation of Thumos

In what specific way does neoliberal governmentality draw upon the age-old spiritedness of thumotic satisfaction to cultivate the competitive entrepreneurial drive that fuels it?

In his Collège de France lectures of 1978-1979, *The Birth of Biopolitics* Foucault finds the answer in the work of US economists Schultz and Becker and specifically in Gary Becker’s *The Economic Approach to Human Behaviour*. Foucault observes that neoliberal thinkers were swift to recognize that enhancing one’s entrepreneurial or enterprising abilities demands investment. In contrast to earlier economic theories that reduced labour to mere considerations of time or wages paid, disregarding its qualitative human aspects, neoliberalism approached it differently. They did not reduce labour to a commodity or merely the outcomes of value produced. Instead, they identified a crucial element in economics that defies easy quantification and measurement: human behaviour, or the internal ‘rational’ or ‘strategic’ planning of individuals’ actions.

Classical liberals, up until the early 20th C, primarily concentrated on understanding (1) how production functions, (2) the dynamics of exchange, and (3) the consumption patterns within a given societal framework, along with the interplay among these three aspects. The neoliberals, however, shifted their attention to investigating how and why limited resources, such as human labour considered as human capital, get allocated to competing objectives (ibid., p. 222). They delved into questions like: Why do individuals choose to invest their labour in one task over another? What prompts a worker to dedicate a significant amount of time to a particular aspect of their job instead of to other tasks? What factors drive a worker to become more engaged, committed, or motivated to work? The neoliberals recognized in order to analyse labour from an economic perspective, one must place oneself in the position of the worker.

The fundamental question at hand is: what does the act of working signify to the individual who engages in it? (Foucault 2008: 223). Foucault explains that according to American economists Schultz and Becker, people work primarily to secure an income. However, when viewed from the worker's perspective, the wage received is not merely compensation for selling their labour power but it is seen as an income. This income is the result or yield derived from a form of capital. This capital, referred to as human capital, encompasses all the physical and psychological factors that enable an individual to earn a particular wage. In Foucault's view (2008: 225), this is not a conception of labour power but rather a concept of "capital-ability", effectively transforming the worker into a self-contained entity resembling an enterprise. Consequently, the worker assumes the role of enterprise-unit.

Within the framework of neoliberalism, a reimagined concept of *homo economicus* assumes a central role. The classical notion of *homo economicus* pertains to the exchange partner,

someone who evaluates needs (demand) to determine which utilities can be obtained for exchange. In the context of neoliberalism, the worker, viewed as an enterprise-unit, operates as an entrepreneur of him-/herself. They become their own capital, their own producer, and their own sources of income. As Foucault notes, drawing from Becker's ideas in "On the New Theory of Consumer Behaviour" (1973), the consumer, in the act of consumption, also acts as a producer. What is being produced? The individual generates his/her own satisfaction (utility; use-value) – *they produce the satisfaction (use-value) that they consume* (ibid., p. 226).

How can we interpret the fulfilment experienced and pursued by knowledge workers? They are not burdened with monotonous and mind-numbing routine tasks; instead, they are constantly challenged to be more creative and innovative with each assignment, capable of generating thumotic satisfaction. This is a form of existential fulfilment that cannot be reduced to mere economic utility since it is vital to the well-being of the soul. It is also distinct from what is commonly referred to as 'job satisfaction', which typically relates to how well one's personality aligns with one's job, empirical aspects of the nature of the work and the workplace, as well as relationships with colleagues and management.

The craving for this satisfaction is insatiable. This intense desire drives ongoing engagement in work, resulting in an unending and self-sustaining cycle of work consumption and satisfaction production. Thus, the perpetually working knowledge worker acts an enterprise-unit, their compulsive entrepreneurial endeavours fuelled by a particular form of inner drive (thumos), while simultaneously generating a corresponding form of satisfaction (thumotic satisfaction). This satisfaction is then reinvested as an 'invisible profit', sustaining their enduring preference for work.

The covert control mechanisms of neoliberal governmentality actively cultivate an irrational obsession with work, not by appealing to workers' rational or desiring selves, but by tapping into their thumotic selves, channelling the inherent vigour of the soul away from its original purpose of reacting to injustices with anger. Neoliberal human capital theory accesses thumotic satisfaction by recognizing that consumption simultaneously involves production and necessitates investment. This investment extends not only to one's own human capital but also to the broader environment of the individual enterprise-unit. In this context, Foucault employs the notion of *Vitalpolitik*, which involves applying economic principles to what was previously defined in contrast to the economy – social phenomena (Foucault 2008: 240). This approach directly links the neoliberal economy to the realm of biopolitics.

“Although the achievement-subject deems itself free, in reality it is a slave. In so far as it willingly exploits itself without a master, it is an *absolute slave*” – as Han (2017: 14, emphasis in the original) rightly points out. To sustain this inherently exploitative cycle of production, a finely calibrated balance needs to be struck between destructive exploitation and constructive gratification to keep the pendulum in virtually perpetual motion. Hence the critical need to constantly invest in human capital. Only a critical awareness on the part of the knowledge worker of the exploitative machinations of the techno-capitalist order in which it is inscribed, can enable the worker to extricate him/herself to some extent from the ultimately ruinous cycle of self-exploitation and re-establish some semblance of that elusive work-life balance.

Conclusion: the Possibility of Resistance?

The “critical ontology of ourselves” undertaken in this study has uncovered that the growing knowledge economy in the network society has become a decisive force in determining working subjectivity. Knowledge workers are generally highly engaged workers to the point of work compulsion, which curiously lead to increased overall well-being until, finally, too much work result in burnout and stress-related illnesses. The critical question, then, is what accounts for this work compulsion among knowledge workers, which in the end prove unsustainable because it is self-destructive. I have offered a three-part explanation for the excessive dedication of knowledge workers to their jobs. Apart from *having to* work on account of externally imposed pressure and the ever-growing demand for increased efficiency, knowledge workers *can* work from anywhere at any time due to advances in information technology and the Internet. While the necessity of “have to” and the capability of “can” are essential components, it is the third element in this framework, “want to” that transforms motivation into compulsion. Volitional work compulsion is fuelled by the thumotic satisfaction it generates. Through the theory of human capital, neoliberal governmentality has managed to lay claim to the thumotic satisfaction produced *and* consumed by the knowledge worker thereby creating perhaps the most productive working subject to date since it harnesses thumotic satisfaction towards profit generation.

Foucault’s contention that there is no power without resistance attests to the resilience and agency of the knowledge worker – against all odds – even as node in the network of neoliberal governmentality in which the dynamics of resistance is inscribed in the network as intrinsic feature of its ontology and functionality. A critical ontology of ourselves requires the assumption of a “limit-attitude” that critically interrogates the limits that are (self-)imposed –

in the case of neoliberal governmentality, the imperative to be increasingly competitive and efficient. This imperative is presented as necessary and obligatory but is in actual fact open to question because free markets do not make free men, contrary to Milton Friedman's insistence. How does Foucault theorize resistance? In the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* Foucault argues that resistance first and foremost requires a reactive stance. Here resistance takes the form of *tactical reversal*, that is, local clashes are re-inscribed into the existing order strategically altering the topology of the network. In the second and third volumes of *The History of Sexuality*, care of the self offers the subject the possibility of *creative* resistance. Disempowering subjectification or the heteronomous production of the subject makes way for liberating subjectivization in which the subject seizes the opportunity to create his/her own subject identity amidst constraining forces. The challenge that the knowledge worker faces is that in the era of neoliberal biopolitical control, resistance has become *normalized* through indirect intervention. Becker's approach relies on a normalizing power that operates precisely by means of statistical inclusion. This economic approach can tolerate the non-normalizable precisely because it absorbs deviation. Eccentricity is irrelevant at the level of generality. While it tolerates outliers, it introduces changes to the environment that disincentivizes "irrational" behaviour. Self-assertive resistance, then, will not go unpunished.

How to reclaim the thumotic satisfaction derived from knowledge work from the neoliberal governmentality that has tethered it to profit generation regardless of the cost? The topology of the neoliberal network can only be challenged through the collective reclamation of self-care as a political space of self-preservation. Audre Lorde (1988) and Sara Ahmed (2014) propose a feminist ethics of care as a political act of warfare that reasserts the critical attitude as virtue and obligation not only for self-care but also for the care of others. The dismissal of

care as something other than work and as self-indulgent “furthers the myth that our successes are achieved as autonomous individuals and, as such, we have no responsibility to share the fruits of our success with others or dedicate public resources to the work of care” (Larson (2007: 5) quoted in Mountz et al. 2015: 1238).

Within the context of the neoliberal university, one possible means of practicing care is through “slow scholarship” that revalorizes the process, quality and time over the product, quantity, and efficiency. Slowness is not a matter of making more time but of changing or repurposing time (Mountz et al. 2015: 1247). To make time “count” in this way is to create the conditions in which individual and collective (care) work can become transgressive in an apparent paradoxical move that re-asserts boundaries. When power operates by demanding ever-increasing productivity in compressed timeframes, Foucault’s limit-attitude translates into a decisive refusal on the part of the self to continue to buy into the neoliberal “common-sense” that dictates cutthroat competition to get ahead. To be sure, Foucault theorized individual resistance and one might wonder how it relates to collective resistance capable of bringing about real life change. As a node in the network of power relations, the individual’s action has the potential of causing a ripple effect through the social fabric. What might be a vulnerability-generating act at the individual scale, becomes a culture-shifting activity within the network society when the critical counter-action of one node translates into a consciousness-raising in adjacent nodes and hence in collective counter-action.

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