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► **To cite this version:**

Benda Hofmeyr. Neoliberal governmentality, knowledge work, and thumos. *Journal of Philosophical Economics*, In press. hal-03374876v1

HAL Id: hal-03374876

<https://hal.science/hal-03374876v1>

Submitted on 12 Oct 2021 (v1), last revised 4 Nov 2021 (v2)

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THE JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHICAL ECONOMICS: REFLECTIONS ON ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL ISSUES

Volume XIV Issues 1-2
Spring-Autumn 2021

ISSN 1843-2298

EISSN: 1844-8208

Publication date:

20 November 2021

Paper format: 16.5x23.5 cm

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Neoliberal governmentality, knowledge work, and thumos

A B (Benda) Hofmeyr



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Abstract: Research has shown that the knowledge worker, the decisive driver of the knowledge economy, works increasingly longer hours. In fact, it would appear that instead of working to live, they live to work. There appears to be three reasons for this living-to-work development. First, the knowledge worker ‘has to’ on account of the pressure to become ever more efficient. Such pressure translates into internalized coercion in the case of the self-responsible knowledge worker. Secondly, working is constant, because the Internet and smart technologies and mobile devices have made it ‘possible’. It gives the worker the capacity and management omnipotent control. In the final instance, the neoliberal knowledge worker works all the time because s/he paradoxically ‘wants to’. It is a curious phenomenon, because this compulsive working is concomitant with a rise of a host of physical, emotional, and psychological disorders as well as the erosion of social bonds. The paradox is exacerbated by the fact that the knowledge worker does not derive any of the usual utilities or satisfactions associated with hard work. Elsewhere I have ascribed this apparent contradiction at the heart of the living-to-work phenomenon to the invisible thumotic satisfaction generated by knowledge work. In the present article, I argue that neoliberal governmentality has found a way to tether thumos directly to the profit incentive. I draw on Foucault’s 1978-1979 Collège de France lecture course in which he analysed neoliberal governmentality with specific emphasis on the work of the neoliberal theorist of human capital, Gary Becker.

Keywords: Neoliberalism; governmentality; human capital; biopolitics; control; Foucault; Becker; thumos; labour; knowledge worker

Introduction: The living-to-work phenomenon

Several authors (e.g., Hunnicut 1988; Robin & Dominquez 2008; Schulte 2014) have documented and theorized the intriguing phenomenon among certain working populations – specifically knowledge workers in neoliberal economies – of constant or compulsive work, what I call the living-to-work-phenomenon.

Received: 5 April 2021

The Gallup Poll of 2014 reported that ‘adults employed full-time in the U.S. report working an average of 47 hours per week, almost a full workday longer than what a standard five-day, 9-to-5 schedule entails’ (Saad 2014, n.p.). ‘In fact, half of all full-time workers indicate they typically work more than 40 hours, and nearly four in ten say they work at least 50 hours.’ (Saad 2014, n.p.) Interestingly, the poll further reports that ‘[h]ighly engaged workers who log well over 40 hours still have better overall well-being than actively disengaged workers who clock out at 40 hours’ (Saad 2014, n.p.). My focus in this paper is on the neoliberal knowledge worker working all the time not only because s/he ‘has to’ and is ‘enabled to do so’, but also because s/he ‘wants to’. I call this the ‘has to-can-want to triad’ the golden triangle of the living-to-work phenomenon, where the ‘opium of the working masses’ reside. Why does the knowledge worker want to work all the time, and what, if any, is the connection between neoliberal governmentality and this wanting-to-work-constantly phenomenon? The inquiry is set against the backdrop of an overarching diagnostics of the present that takes as its focus the subject formation of an increasingly decisive, if not the definitive part of the workforce in fully-fledged neoliberal economies, the knowledge worker. Following Foucault’s theorization of neoliberalism as governmentality that entails exhaustive biopolitical controls, I seek to make sense of the culture, ethos, or spiritedness of work under these conditions of control and specifically as it pertains to knowledge work.

Given the fact that knowledge work is situated within neoliberal economies, in which competition is lauded as a necessary condition for optimal efficiency and ever-increasing profit generation, the self-responsible neoliberal worker works all the time quite simply because s/he has to meet the demands of knowledge work, the nature of which is subject to the alarming rate of technological and informational innovation. So, in order to stay in the game and preferably ahead of the pack, the knowledge worker has to work incessantly. The second side of the golden triangle is the fact that the worker is enabled to work all the time on account of being situated in the ‘network society’. Castells (1996, p. 3) defines the network society as ‘a society whose social structure is made of networks powered by microelectronics-based information and communication technologies.’ The idea of a network itself is understood as a programme made of individual nodes, which communicate and cooperate with one another (ibid.).

The creation and development of the Internet in the last three decades of the 20th c., its subsequent exponential growth on account of the ongoing expansive and increasingly sophisticated technological infrastructure, and the utilization thereof in all areas of human activity - in 'January 2021, there were 4.66 billion people active internet users', encompassing '59.5 percent of the global population' (Statista 2021) has been a decisive facilitator of the increasing globalization of neoliberalism. The Internet has created a 'global' economy, i.e., '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, p. 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).

What Castells calls the 'new economy' has three distinctive and intertwined features: it is 'networked', which made possible its being 'global', but it is also what he terms 'informational': 'It is informational because the productivity and competitiveness of units or agents in this economy (be it firms, regions, or nations) fundamentally depend upon their capacity to efficiently generate, process, and apply knowledge-based information' (ibid., p. 77). This feature of the 'new economy' explains the central role of knowledge work and the fact that it has become inextricably tethered to information technologies. This is one of the key enabling features of the living-to-work development, since it created what Castells calls 'space of flows' and 'timeless time' (ibid., p. 36) that effectively overcome traditional geographical and temporal boundaries. A global and networked economy is not hampered by different locations and time zones. 'Space of flows' refers to 'the technological and organizational possibility of practicing simultaneity (or chosen time in time-sharing) without contiguity.' (ibid., p. 36). 'Timeless time' refers to the fact it is now possible to either compress time (as in split-second global financial transactions) and, on the other, to scramble the sequence of social practices, including past, present, and future, in a random

order.’ (ibid., p. 7). In short, if knowledge work is situated in the network society, and the network society has obliterated the limitations imposed by time and space, knowledge work ‘can’ be performed at any time irrespective of place.

Against the backdrop of these other two sides of the golden triangle, we may proceed to focus on third side, the curious phenomenon amongst knowledge workers that appear to ‘want to’ work all the time. The reported increase in overall well-being of workers that are logging far more than 40 hours per week, mentioned earlier, stands in stark contrast to the rise in physical, emotional and psychological disorders as a result of compulsive working (cf. Verhaeghe 2012; Han 2017). In an attempt to critically interrogate this paradoxical living-to-work phenomenon of highly engaged knowledge workers, elsewhere I revisited Fukuyama’s contention in his *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992) that work has a thumotic origin. His argument in short is that adopting the right market-oriented policy is a necessary condition, but not sufficient to guarantee the success of liberal economies. Decisive for economic success, he contends, is the persistence of ‘irrational’ forms of thumos that continue to influence economic behaviour in countless ways that contribute to the wealth of the nation. Some examples that he cites of such ‘irrational’ forms of thumos include religion, nationalism, and the ability of craft occupations and the professions to maintain standards and pride in work for its own sake (Fukuyama 1992, p. 234). The notion of thumos has its origin in the writings of the ancient Greeks. For Plato, thumos is an innate component part of the psyche along with reason and desire. There is no English translation for thumos that covers the scope of what it represented for the Greeks. If a term does not exist in a certain culture, it may be said that what it signifies does not exist in that culture, or even that that particular culture actively suppresses it. Here I would like to suggest a different interpretation. Thumos is alive and ‘well’ amongst compulsive knowledge workers in neoliberal societies because the neoliberal economic theory of human capital has inadvertently found a way to harness it to the profit incentive.

How should thumos be understood? McKay and McKay (2011; 2013) contend that thumos accounts for the stimulus or drive to action, as well as the determination to stay in the ring. It is ignited in the face of injustice; it is at the heart of the ambition to ever increasing self-improvement and success and sparked when one’s reputation or honour is on the line. If the knowledge worker’s drive does

indeed emanate from a thumotic source, then it would account for the paradox of the engaged compulsive worker both wanting to work all the time even if at the expense of his/her physical and mental health. The increase in ‘overall well-being’ of the engaged worker, then, would not be a reflection of the state of his/his physical or mental health, but rather of a fundamental form of psychic satisfaction.

It would appear that neoliberal economics found a way to tap into this gratifying spiritedness to generate the competitive entrepreneurial spirit, which is neoliberalism’s driving force. In what follows, I draw on Foucault’s lecture course at the Collège de France of 1978-1979 published in English as *The Birth of Biopolitics* to unearth the hinge that connects neoliberal economic governmentality to the innate human spiritedness, thumos.

Foucault on the Chicago School of neoliberalism

In this lecture course, Foucault shows a particular interest in the American brand of neoliberalism, or Anarcho-liberalism, associated with Milton Freedman and the Chicago School. What they found odd was that although classical political economy maintained that the production of goods depends on three factors – land, capital, and labour – it left the third, that of labour as human capital, almost completely unexplored (Foucault 2008, p. 219). On the contrary, they sought to neutralize labour by reducing it exclusively to the factor of time, i.e., an increase in the labour factor would be nothing other than the presence of an additional number of workers on the market, that is to say, the possibility of employing more hours of labour. Hence labour is reduced to a mere quantitative analysis devoid of any qualitative dimension (ibid., p. 220). Even for Marx, Foucault points out, who made labour the linchpin of this analysis, labour was not conceived as concrete, but as entirely abstract, i.e., labour is divorced from all its qualitative variables and ‘transformed into labour power, measured by time, deployed on the market and paid by wages’ (2008, p. 221). Here labour is nothing but a commodity that is reduced to the effects of value produced. By the neoliberals’ account, this abstraction is not the product of capitalism itself, but of the way in which economic theory has conceptualized capitalist production. The challenge for the neoliberals, then, was how to introduce labour – understood

qualitatively as concrete variable – into the field of economic analysis, which, since Adam Smith, focused exclusively on the interconnections between three mechanisms: ‘the mechanisms of production, of exchange, and of consumption in a given social structure’ (Foucault 2008, p. 221).

The neoliberals discovered that key to the science of economics is something that precisely cannot neatly be quantified and accounted for, i.e., human behaviour or the internal ‘rationality’ or ‘strategic’ programming of individuals’ activities. If economics ‘is the science of human behaviour as a relationship between ends and scarce means, which have mutually exclusive [or alternative] ends’, then the key focus of economic science, according to the neoliberals, is the analysis of a form of human behaviour. What takes centre stage now is the nature and consequences of ‘substitutable choices, i.e., the study of the way in which and the reasons why scarce resources (labour as human capital) are allocated to competing ends (ibid., p. 222). Why does the worker choose to invest his/her labour in one particular job rather than another? Why does the worker spend so much time on this task as opposed to other component tasks of the job, or to other demands of daily life? What makes the worker more invested, committed, and motivated to work? To bring labour into the field of economic analysis, the neoliberals realized, one has to put oneself into the position of the one that works. ‘*What*’, in short, ‘*does working mean for the person who works?*’ (ibid., p. 223, my emphasis).

Here Foucault turns to the theory of human capital, whose most famous exponents are the US economists Theodore Schultz and Gary Becker. Their key move was to remove the worker from economic analysis as mere object – the object of supply and demand in the form of labour power – and to insert him/her as an active economic subject. Human capitalist theorists like Schultz (1961) and Mincer (1958) maintained that it is precisely because the individual competences and knowledge of the worker expanded during the post-war period that productivity increased, and consequently, the value of working time and of salaries have increased as well and in turn stimulated increased consumption. The theory of human capital relies on self-regulation through the market, modelling individuals as entrepreneurs, and conceiving of their actions as investments or disinvestments in their own lifespans and quality of life. For Schultz (1961) and Mincer (1958), this virtuous circle was to usher in the society

of knowledge. It was specifically from Becker's work that Foucault in his lectures deciphers the rationale of neoliberal governmentality in its clearest form, distilling its nucleus as the figure of the enterprising self. Foucault notes what the neoliberals came to realize is that the optimization of the self's entrepreneurial or enterprising capacities requires investment. Hence the now familiar economic injunction: invest in human capital.

For Schultz and Becker, people simply work to earn a wage, i.e., an income. From the point of view of the worker, a wage is not the price at which his/her labour power is sold, but an income. An income is the product or return on a capital. Inversely, capital is everything that in one way or another can be a source of future income. This capital – human capital – is therefore 'all those physical and psychological factors which make someone able to earn this or that wage' (Foucault 2008, p. 224). For the worker, his/her labour is capital, 'an income stream', as Schultz (1971, p. 75) calls it. According to Foucault, this is not a conception of labour power, but a conception of 'capital-ability', which turns the worker himself into a sort of enterprise for himself. The worker thus becomes an enterprise-unit (Foucault 2008, p. 225).

In neoliberalism, a reconceived notion of homo oeconomicus takes centre stage: homo oeconomicus as an entrepreneur of him-/herself. The 'classical conception of homo oeconomicus is the partner of exchange' (Foucault 2008, p. 225), who assesses needs (demand) based on which utilities might be supplied for exchange. In neoliberalism, the worker as enterprise-unit is an entrepreneur of him-/herself – being his/her own capital, his/her own producer, and his/her own source of earnings. The man of consumption, Foucault says, referring to Becker's postulates in 'A Theory of the Allocation of Time' (1965) insofar as he consumes, is also a 'producer'. What does he produce? He produces his own satisfaction, understood as utility or use-value; 'he produces the satisfaction that he consumes' (ibid., p. 226). What intrigues Foucault here is Becker's 'analysis of the production functions of consumption activities' (ibid., p. 226). [1]

Becker (1976, p. 134) contends that what consumers consume are commodities from which utility is obtained. In economics, utility refers to the advantage, pleasure, or fulfilment a person gains from obtaining or consuming a good or service. 'These commodities are produced by the consumer unit itself through the productive activity of combining purchased market goods and services with some

of the household's own time' (ibid.). For Becker, the consumer produces satisfactions, and these satisfactions are equated with utilities or that which have use-value for the consumer. My own contention, which I would like to critically assess here by way of Becker's own theory and Foucault's engagement with it, is that the 'satisfaction' produced and consumed by the knowledge worker is the use-value derived from thumotic satisfaction.

Michael and Becker (1973) contend that consumption should not be interpreted to mean both (1) 'the exchange of money for market goods and services'; and (2) 'the acquisition of utility (or satisfaction) from these goods and services' (Michael and Becker 1973, p. 385). Such an interpretation 'sheds no light on whether the utility is derived from the acquisition, possession, or utilization of the purchased item' (ibidem). In fact, 'the demand for a product might be derived from a desire for some more basic aims that are produced using characteristics of the product' (ibidem).

Goods are usually desired not 'for their own sake, but for some specific service which they perform' (ibid.). By 'consuming' tertiary education, for example, the utility of higher erudition is produced. Consumption of education is not for its own sake, but for the utility it produces. This utility, the expertise gained, in turn, is then consumed to produce higher income, for example. Higher income, in turn, is consumed to finance a more lavish lifestyle or leisure time, for example. In the case of the compulsive knowledge worker, however, compulsive work and the higher income it produces appear not to be consumed for most of the usual utilities or satisfactions, since constant work makes no allowances for leisure time for one. However, the perseverance of the preference for work, what Becker and George Stigler call the 'stability of this preference' (Becker and Stigler 1995) and the ability to sustain it in the form of a stabilized 'way of life' suggest the production of another more basic, invisible satisfaction. This satisfaction, I suggest, in line with Fukuyama (1992), is thumotic in origin, and hence compensates for other thumotic utilities such as the satisfactions derived from our relations with others, which include a sense of belonging, of being acknowledged and loved.

It could therefore be postulated that the knowledge worker 'consumes' his/her creative problem-solving work and in the process s/he directly produces his/her own thumotic satisfaction. The ever-working knowledge worker is an enterprise-

unit whose compulsive entrepreneurial activity is fuelled by thumos while it also produces thumotic satisfaction. How can knowledge work produce something that it an inherent part of the human psyche? Production, here, should be understood as igniting and putting to work that which can just as easily go underutilized and hence atrophy, i.e., wither away on account lack of use, much like a muscle.

What is meant here by the thumotic satisfaction produced by the knowledge worker? Knowledge work in the network society is nothing like the plodding, soul-destroying kind of work that fuelled preceding incarnations of capitalist economies. Bell (1973) depicts pre-industrial labour as a game against nature, in which men wrest their living from the soil, waters and forests, and industrial labour as a game against fabricated nature, in which men were reduced to mechanical machine operates. What sets the creative problem-solving work of the knowledge economy apart from previous forms of work is its exemplary ability to engage the worker, who, in the process, willingly foregoes on other traditional sources of thumotic satisfaction. As an existential form of satisfaction, thumotic satisfaction cannot be reduced to mere economic use-value since it is essential to the well-being of the soul. Nor should this 'satisfaction' be understood as mere 'job satisfaction', which is commonly attributed to personality-job 'fit'/alignment and empirical facts about the nature of the job, the workplace and relationships with colleagues and management. To be sure, all these factors can potentially negatively impact the production of thumos if not conducive to worker welfare, such as a toxic workplace culture, the lack of collaborative collegiality, or an overly top-down autocratic management style. However, knowledge work is engaging not merely because it is challenging and creative, but because it produces thumotic satisfaction. The aforementioned factors may be necessary conditions, but they serve as means to the end, which is the production of thumotic satisfaction. Much like the desire for happiness, for example, thumos cannot be pursued as an end in itself, but is produced as the side-effect of a host of other contributing factors. The desire for thumotic satisfaction is insatiable because it is the object of consumption. This voracious desire propels further consumption, i.e., work. It is therefore an endless and self-generating cycle of work consumption and satisfaction production that fuels compulsive work. In order to assess the credibility of this line of argumentation,

we have to more closely interrogate Foucault's engagement with Gary Becker, which sheds light on the underlying economic rationale of this cycle of consumption and production of the knowledge worker.

Biopolitical control

A critical and persistent dimension of Foucault's philosophical project as a whole may be described as a 'diagnostics of the present' (Foucault 1984, p. 43). He sought to undertake 'a historical investigation into the events that have led us to constitute ourselves and to recognize ourselves as subjects of what we are doing, thinking, saying' (ibid.). His consideration of neoliberal governmentality, too, may be conceived as a 'historical and critical ontology of ourselves' (ibid., p. 44) that endeavours to come to a critical understanding of the limits imposed upon us as subjects historically in order to interrogate our contemporary reality and to grasp the points where change is possible and desirable (ibid.). In the same vein, my overarching project here is an attempt to understand what we are – as knowledge workers – in relation to our present understood as the globalizing neoliberal governmentality in which life is reduced to constant work under conditions of comprehensive control. To fully comprehend the phenomenon of the constantly working knowledge worker, we have to interrogate the nature of what I call conditions of comprehensive control, as applied in a neoliberal economy.

A salient feature of neoliberal governmentality is exhaustive but inconspicuous control. Becker's approach exemplifies what Foucault theorizes in terms of biopolitical control – power exercised not over individuals, but over entire populations through the 'normalizing use of statistics' (Newheiser 2016, p. 3). While Becker's 'preference for indirect intervention' might appear 'to preserve the independence and freedom of individuals, under biopolitics individual liberty is itself the means by which populations are governed indirectly' (Newheiser 2016, p. 3). Neoliberal economics mobilizes individual liberty while manipulating the range of choices at the individual's disposal. This is encapsulated in Becker's definition of homo oeconomicus, which Foucault (2008, pp. 270-271) outlines as follows: 'the person who must be let alone ... he is the subject or object of laissez-faire'. According to Becker, he must be let alone, because he 'responds systematically to ... systematic modifications artificially introduced in the

environment' (ibid, p. 270). As such, '[h]omo oeconomicus is someone who is eminently governable', and hence the very subject that has made possible the restriction, self-limitation, and frugality of government' (ibid., p. 271). Becker makes this claim on the basis of his contention that practically all social phenomena, which include rational and non-rational conduct, operate according to market processes, which makes them calculable, predictable and hence subject to indirect manipulation (cf. Becker and Stiegler 1995, p. 7). Becker, Foucault contends, displaces an 'exhaustively disciplinary society' in favour of 'a society in which the mechanism of general normalization and the exclusion of the non-normalizable' are no longer needed (Foucault 2008, p. 259). Becker's approach exemplifies a normalizing power that operates precisely by means of 'inclusion' (ibid.). What counts as the norm here is determined through the statistical analysis of a given population, 'a plotting of the normal and the abnormal, of different curves of normality' (Foucault 2007, p. 63). This economic approach can tolerate the non-normalizable precisely because it absorbs deviation. Becker's claim that every aspect of human behaviour is rational concerns patterns of behaviour across a population, not every individual case (here Foucault refers to Becker and Stiegler 1995, p. 650). Eccentricity is irrelevant at the level of generality. Importantly, however, 'the certainties produced by statistical normalization hold profound implications for individuals' (Newheiser 2016, p. 8). While Becker 'tolerates' the existence of irrational individuals not falling within the range of the extrapolated norm, he argues that 'changes to the environment would constrain the possibilities for impulsive behaviour to the extent that even the irrational would act as if they were rational' (Newheiser 2016, p. 8). For example, expenditure on non-essential goods will decrease as the price of essential goods is increased. Becker (1994, p. 400) realizes that this form of indirect control is 'the most effective way to obtain commitment' (Newheiser 2016, p. 8).

Becker's theorization of economic normalization corresponds to Foucault's theorization of biopolitics in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* (1976). In that volume, Foucault (1976) explains that 'biopolitics positively fosters and sustains the life of a population through the application of technical expertise' (Newheiser 2016, p. 8). This expertise relies on 'the action of the norm ... Such a power has to qualify, measure, appraise, and hierarchize, rather than display

itself in its murderous splendour ... it effects distributions around the norm' (Foucault 1976, p. 144). Foucault explains that 'a power whose task it is to take charge of life needs continuous regulatory and corrective mechanisms' (ibid.). The purpose of such controls is to distribute 'the living in the domain of value and utility' (ibid.). This historical outcome of a technology of power centred on life, that is, biopower, is a 'normalizing society' (ibid.). Power as control in a 'normalizing society' (ibid.) operates by subjecting every facet of life to 'infinitesimal surveillances, permanent controls (...) to an entire micro-power concerned with the (individual) body' (ibid.). In addition to the individual body, the object is the entire social body, which is subjected to a range of interventions, comprehensive measures, and statistical assessments (ibid., pp. 145-146).

This form of power that establishes its dominion over life, throughout its unfolding, then, is a bi(o)polar technology of power. The two poles work in consort. On the one hand, it centres on the body as machine: 'its disciplining, the optimization of its capabilities, the extortion of its forces, the parallel increase of its usefulness and its docility, its integration into systems of efficient and economic controls' Foucault 1976, p. 139). Foucault calls this 'an anatomopolitics of the human body' (ibid.). 'A biopolitics of the population' is the other side of the biopower coin, which takes the species body as its object (ibid.). What we glimpse here in Foucault's thinking is a departure from disciplinary power as theorized in *Discipline and Punish* (1975), while not yet being concerned with the ethics of the self and processes of subjectivization, which he develops in the subsequent volumes of *The History of Sexuality*.

It is in this period that his thinking reveals remarkable similarities with that of Becker's. Both theorize a technology of power that is focused on the individual body without being concerned with the individual as such. Its real object is the normalization of the population as a whole in order to distribute the living in the domain of value and utility. While statistics 'tolerates' individual outliers, statistical normalization has far-reaching consequences for the individual therein that it mobilizes sophisticated controls to either condone or penalize forms of being and behaviour that do not conform to the presiding economic rationality that dictates the application of a cost-benefit calculus to life in its finest details.

In *Society Must be Defended*, his Collège de France lectures from the same year (1976) in which the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* was published, Foucault explains that biopolitics deals with the population as a scientific, political, and biological problem, which makes it power's problem (Foucault 2003, p. 245). When dealing with the 'population', power is dealing with 'collective phenomena' that have 'economic and political effects' that only become pertinent on the 'mass level' (ibid., p. 246). 'They are phenomena that are aleatory and unpredictable when taken in themselves or individually, but, which at the collective level, display constants that are easy, or at least possible, to establish' (ibid.). Here Foucault states that as a technology of power biopolitics is different from disciplinary mechanisms. It 'works through scientific techniques ("forecasts, statistical estimates") in order to affect collective behaviour at the general level', i.e., at the level of the population (ibid.). Their purpose is not to modify any given individual insofar as he is an individual, but to intervene at the level at which these general phenomena are determined, i.e., 'to intervene at the level of their generality' (ibid.). Regulatory mechanisms must be deployed, he continues, 'to establish an equilibrium, maintain an average, establish a sort of homeostasis, and compensate for variations within the general population and its aleatory field' (ibid.). Within the context of these lectures, he calls the controls that have to be installed around the random element inherent in a population of living beings so as to optimize a state of life, 'security mechanisms'. Like disciplinary mechanisms, they are designed to maximize and extract forces, but security mechanisms do not work on the level of the body itself but act in such a way so as to achieve overall states of equilibration or regularity. In short, it is a matter of 'taking control of life and the biological processes of man-as-species and of ensuring that they are not disciplined, but regularized' (Foucault 2003, pp. 246-247). Foucault takes up these problematics in greater detail in the subsequent lecture course, *Security, Territory, Population* (1977-1978), in which he traces the emergence of the political problem of the population, which is conceived as 'a variable dependent on a number of factors', which are 'by no means all natural (the tax system, the activity of circulation, and the distribution of profit are essential determinants of the population rate)'. As such, the population is the object of and provides 'a hold for concerted interventions' (Foucault 2007, pp. 366). Although the term 'biopolitics' is mentioned only twice in his lecture course of the following year, titled *The Birth*

of Biopolitics, Becker's theory enables him to understand how it functions within the context of neoliberal governmentality. At the outset of these lectures, Foucault explains that the necessary condition of possibility for a thoroughgoing analysis of biopolitics is understanding the economic truth informing (neo)liberal governmental reason.

Liberalism, of which neoliberalism is a species, is 'a governmental practice that is not satisfied with respecting or guaranteeing this or that freedom; rather it is a consumer of freedom. It can only function insofar as a number of freedoms actually exist: freedom of the market, freedom to buy and sell, the freedom to exercise property rights, freedom of discussion, etcetera. If it needs or consumes freedom, it must produce it' (Foucault 2008, p. 33). It must produce it; it must organize it. This art of government, Foucault (2008, p. 33) avers, appears as the 'management of freedom, producing what its subjects need to be free' (ibid.) to act rationally and freely, i.e., according to a cost-benefit rationale that is rewarded by the market. Foucault explains that the market constitutes 'a site of veridiction' (2008, p. 33), i.e., 'not a law (loi) of truth, but the set of rules enabling one to establish which statements in a given discourse can be described as true or false' (ibid., p. 35). Liberalism is intent on ensuring 'the freedom necessary for freedom, i.e., the management and organization of the conditions in which one can be free' (ibid., p. 33), which necessarily requires the imposition of limitations. Because individual and collective interests can potentially threaten each other, liberalism cannot simply let freedom operate freely; it must actively manage the subjectivity of its subjects. 'At the heart of this liberal practice then', Foucault (ibid.) contends, 'is the tension between the imperative to produce freedoms and the fact that this very act entails the establishment of limitations, controls, forms of coercion, and obligations relying on threats.' In this way, the very act of producing freedom risks limiting and destroying it. Here Foucault cites the example of 'a free labour market' that relies on 'a large enough number of sufficiently competent, qualified, and politically disarmed workers to prevent them exerting pressure on the labour market' (Foucault 2008, pp. 63, 68). The 'free' labour market, then, necessitate controls to ensure the adequate training of workers, while imposing visible limits on the scope of political actions available to them by way of the regulation of the operation of unions within organizations, for example, as well as invisible limits that effectively depoliticize

workers. One of the ways in which such depoliticization is effected is by way of the generalization or ‘democratization’ of an artificially imposed economic rationality of competition to every aspect of human existence. In the process of generalization, the economic rationality becomes normalized or mistaken as the natural order of things, which dissolves resistance to it and actively engenders compliance.

Another tactic of depoliticization is self-responsibilization. If the worker is responsible for itself as entrepreneurial ‘project’ (Han 2017, p. 15), s/he is no longer subject to an externally imposed system of constraints, which may invoke opposition. On the contrary, as Han explains, ‘[a] sense of freedom attends passing from the state of subject to that of project’, which masks the accompanying constraints (ibid.). ‘As a project deeming itself free of external and alien limitations, the I is now subjugating itself to internal limitations and self-constraints, which are taking the form of compulsive achievement and optimization’ (ibid.).

This logic is extended in Becker’s neoliberal conception of the subject, who, as we have seen, is entirely governable. Foucault accordingly suggests that ‘Becker’s subject is nothing but the correlate of governmental power’ (Newheiser 2016, p. 14). On Foucault’s account, ‘biopolitics offers liberty but only to subjects whose freedom it has formed in advance’ (ibid., p. 15). It ‘freely’ offers employment opportunities but only to those who are sufficiently qualified, competent, and especially politically disarmed so as to play according to the rules of the game of freedom without questioning the impingements of freedom and injustices to which it gives rise. Neoliberalism accommodates opposition or recalcitrance in the form of diversity or deviations from the norm, but ‘it comes at the cost of a sophisticated normalization. Since neoliberal biopolitics forms the very freedom, it claims to protect, it allows for the extension of power in the name of liberty’ (Newheiser 2016, p. 16).

Foucault’s critical consideration of Becker’s neoliberalism is informed by a notion of critique akin to Kant’s. This critique does not condemn or derive its power from hyperbole but seeks to lay bare the contingency of systems of power that is taken for granted. On Foucault’s account, biopolitics works from the inside and as a result we may feel ourselves to be free, but the conditions of possibility of freedom are pre-determined by the very order to which ‘free’ subjects are subjected.

Becker on ‘stable preferences’

Vatter (2018) seeks to come to a more precise understanding of the structure of the neoliberal, economic conception of freedom, which would explain the connection between neoliberal economic theory and biopower. A closer interrogation of Beckerian microeconomic analysis, leads Vatter (2018, p. 67) to contend that the neoliberal economic conception of freedom is crystallized around Becker’s approach to the notion of ‘revealed preference’. This is the idea that choices reveal preferences. Becker goes further and insists on the ‘stability of preferences’. Preferences, understood as subjective freedom, here function as the medium for a process of subjectivation that is internally related to the exercise of biopower, i.e., the power to conduct or govern populations or aggregates of individuals (ibid.).

Becker himself generally does not establish the conditions of possibility of a comprehensive economic approach applicable to all human behaviour apart from referring to rational choice methodology (Becker and Stiegler 1995, p. 7), Becker’s economic approach functions, as I have explicated, along the lines of ‘the conduct of conduct’, which is how Foucault defines power relations, i.e., orchestrating the way in which individuals conduct themselves. As such Becker’s microeconomics, as Vatter (2018, p. 67) points out, is much more than merely an ‘economic’ theory. Rather, it is inherently instrumental to the constitution of neoliberal governmentality.

Becker’s approach hinges on three determinants: ‘assumptions of maximizing behaviour, market equilibrium, and stable preference’ (Becker 1976, p. 5). Economists of the Austrian School have questioned these assumptions as purely ‘theoretical’ or ‘abstract’ as they have no real purchase on how human beings ‘really’ act (Vatter 2018, p. 68). Taken from a purely economic point of view, Vatter (ibid.) points out, this may or may not be true, but from a biopolitical perspective, which focuses on how human conduct is actively governed, this objection entirely misses the point. In Foucault’s two lectures dedicated to the Chicago School of neoliberalism of 14 March 1979 (Foucault 2008, pp. 216-33) and 21 March 1979 (Foucault 2008, p. 239-65), his treatment of Becker mainly focuses on the revolutionary consequences for the traditional idea of homo

economicus when s/he becomes conceived as an enterprising human being characterized by maximizing the utilities derived from his/her human capital.

As we have seen in the preceding section, Foucault's analysis of neoliberal governmentality leads him away from 'an exhaustively disciplinary society' in which external laws are extended internally by normative mechanisms (Foucault 2007, p. 63; 2008, p. 259). 'Nor is it a society in which a mechanism of general normalization and the exclusion of those who cannot be normalized is needed' Foucault 2008, p. 259). Rather, neoliberal governmentality leads him toward an image of society in which minorities and deviation from the norm are tolerated, 'in which the action is brought to bear on the rules of the game rather than on the players, and finally in which there is an environmental type of intervention instead of the internal subjugation of individuals' (Foucault 2008, p. 259-260). The technology of power that is 'brought to bear on the rules of the game rather than the players' (ibid.) is biopolitics, i.e., a style of government that regulates populations through biopower. Biopolitics, on Foucault's account, is exemplified in Becker's (1964) concept of human capital.

On a biopolitical understanding, human capital is oriented towards making the individual's life and labour into an enterprise that generates utilities. To encapsulate the entire scope of life, provision has to be made also for minoritarian forms of life to generate a surplus of utility. To achieve this, what has to be regulated are the 'environmental' factors open to the opportunities and to the liberties in supply and demand. Becker (1976) postulates that what had prevented certain territories and behaviours from becoming objects of rational utility calculus was the belief that changes in behaviour are due to arbitrary changes in the preferences or tastes of economic actors. If one assumes instead that preferences are 'stable over time' and relatively similar across cultures, genders and classes, then it is in principle possible to analyse changes in behaviour as a function of changes in costs and benefits, i.e., as changes in restrictions rather than in preferences (Vatter 2018, p. 75). Preferences, then, can be 'optimized' by properly regulating incentives (ibid.). To clarify, 'Becker is not making a substantial or empirical claim about tastes, but rather a methodological one' (ibid.). He argues that 'changes in the observed behaviour of an agent are to be explained in terms of changes in the factors determining her expectations of utility – information, stocks of personal and social capital, time,

prices, etc.’ (ibid.) – relative to fixed tastes or preferences. The advantage of the methodological assumption of fixed preferences ‘disciplines the manner in which expected utility theory is applied to the explanation of behaviour’ (Bradley 2008, p. 2 referred to by Vatter (ibid.)).

Becker’s concept of human capital allowed neoclassical economics to depart from the priority assigned by Smith, Ricardo and Marx to production and exchange within the economic cycle and shift the emphasis instead to labour and consumption. As Vatter (2018, p. 76) explains, ‘Becker’s concept of “human capital” attempts to account for what happens in markets as a function of what has happened outside markets and before the economic actor enters into the market’. This brings us to Foucault’s discussion of Becker’s notion of human capital, which opens with the question regarding why individuals work at all: ‘What does working mean for the person which works?’ (Foucault 2008, p. 223). Becker maintains that one works not because one wants to produce a good that is to be exchanged on a market.

Importantly, for Becker, labour is not ‘work’, just as consumption is not ‘production’. Here Arendt’s analytical distinction between labour and work allows us to be more conceptually specific, although in the literature, generally, work and labour are used interchangeably, as I have for the most part too.

On Arendt’s (1958) account, one labours as part of a ‘cycle’ of consumption (not of production), whose end result is the increase of pleasure (utility) and the decrease of pain. Labour for Arendt (1958) includes any activity aimed towards maintaining or reproducing life. The products of our labour are used up in consumption and thus our labours leave nothing permanent behind – labour ‘never “produces” anything but life’ (Arendt 1958, p. 88). As animals we are subject to biological necessity and the natural processes of an earthbound biological life. This constraint on human life takes the form of necessity, which, for Arendt, is directly opposed to freedom. Insofar as we are embodied creatures tethered to our biological needs, we cannot be free. Thus, for Arendt, ‘the cycle of consumption is negatively connoted because it keeps the subject tied to the sphere of animal life, *zoe*’ (Vatter 2018, p. 76). For Arendt, human lives require a world to inhabit that labour alone cannot produce, since it ‘feeds’ consumption and, as a result, it leaves nothing behind. Arendt continues that ‘[t]his destructive, devouring aspect of the laboring activity [...] is visible only from the

standpoint of the world and in distinction from work, which does not prepare matter for incorporation but changes it into material in order to work upon it and use the finished product' (ibid., p. 100). 'Work then elevates us beyond the repetitious and mute cycle of nature and gathers us into a common reality and shared objective space' (Hayden 2014, p. 37). Work creates a world in common in which the subject is able to distinguish itself through a proper or autonomous bios (ibid., pp. 37-40). For Arendt, then, labour is associated with consumption, and work is associated with production.

What Becker is concerned with is labour/consumption, not work/production. According to him, the cycle of labour and consumption reaches an equilibrium and stabilizes into a 'form of life' – what Foucault calls an 'enterprise' – that maximizes utility. In turn, it is this 'form of life' that actually explains the preferences of the individual, and not the "existential choices" that are traditionally associated with the idea of a free and autonomous bios' (Vatter 2018, p. 76).

From the perspectives of Arendt and Becker, classical economics wrongfully conceives of labour in a teleological fashion, starting from what it took its end-product to be, the commodity that is produced. As a result, classical economics confuses labour with production, collapsing labour into work. Whereas 'work' (labour force in Marx) is exchanged ('alienated' in Marx, the Latin sense of alienare, to estrange, make another person's) for a salary, this is not the case of labour as a biopolitical capacity or capability, as the output of human capital.

Becker suspects that one cannot 'live' merely for a salary. He conceives of labour starting from the consumption of goods that (re)produces 'living' labour in a certain 'form' (which reveals the real preferences of the labourers). For him, 'animal-like' consumption is in reality 'productive' of utility at the species-life level. My bios (the kinds of roles that I 'choose') may create the impression that I am 'alienated' from my labour, but if I persevere in my preferences as expressed in my form of life (zoe) that is because I am making a profit that may be invisible to others. From the perspective of human capital theory, for example, the gender wage gap is not a consequence of wage discrimination between men and women in the marketplace. Rather, it is a function of the different 'life-choices' made by women and men before they have even entered the market. Women are said to choose professions with lower risk/reward disparity. While being part-time or

pay less, these professions are chosen based on women's utility calculus that factored in having and caring for children (Becker 1993, p. 94).

In contradiction of this position, feminist critiques of human capital point out that the asymmetry in procreative and care duties between women and men is not something that is 'chosen' but rather expresses a relation of domination (Vatter 2018, p. 78). As Vatter (*ibid.*) reminds us, Brown (2015, p. 105) explains this as follows:

'As provisioners of care for others in households ... women disproportionately remain the invisible infrastructure for all developing, mature, and worn-out human capital – children, adults, disabled, and elderly. Generally, uncoerced, yet essential, this provision and responsibility get theoretically and ideologically tucked into what are assumed as preferences issuing naturally from sexual difference ... It is formulated, in short, as an effect of nature, not of power'.

If it is a relation of domination, then, that 'conducts' or orchestrates the 'free' rational choices of the members of the family enterprise, then, as Vatter (2018, p. 78) suggests, 'the concept of human capital, although it factors species-life into its economics, it remains an 'alienated' conception of species-life.

For Becker, Vatter (2018, p. 78) explains, labour-power does not 'flow' from the living and labouring subject to the product where it 'dies' as it is transformed into 'dead' capital, as Marx would have it. Becker contends that the choice for this or that product, and so its consumption, is a function of labour-power 'producing' itself as a form of life that is preferred over another (*ibid.*). For him, consumption always already contains production. In its consumption, living labour 'flows back' from the products into living labour as an 'income stream' generated by human capital (*ibid.*).

Foucault explains that the breakdown of labour into capital has some important consequences. If capital is that which makes possible a future income, this income being a wage, the capital is inseparable from the person who possesses it. The worker, then, is 'a machine that produces an earnings stream' (Foucault 2008, p. 224). This earnings stream is not an income precisely because the machine constituted by the worker's ability is not sold from time to time on the

labour market against a certain wage. As a result, the worker is not alienated in the process.

This human 'machine' is the aggregate of innate abilities and capabilities acquired by way of investment or nurture, e.g., education, training, etc. By its very definition, the worker has no disposable capital. As such this machine needs to be bolstered. It is bolstered by operating as an enterprise-unit engaging in entrepreneurial economic activity consisting of investments, which optimizes its ability to consume its labour capability, which, in turn, precisely produces satisfaction. According to Foucault (2008), for Becker, income streams are generated from the cycle of consumption that begins and ends with the form of life that lies outside the market. This living-labour, while it has a lifespan, an obsolescence, and an ageing (Foucault 2008, p. 224-225), is practically always at the disposal of the labourer. Human capital can be 'put to work' all the time and in every place. For Becker, living-labour as consumption-cycle has to secure itself as a stable self-reinforcing cycle otherwise the individual will not sustain the labour activity for very long since its life process has not yet attained a form of life (Vatter 2018, p. 80).

If we take these insights from Becker's theories of human capital and the allocation of time and apply them to the knowledge worker, the working subject appears as an enterprise-unit, which is a stabilized 'form of life' comprised of the cycle of labour and consumption that is in equilibrium. Understandably, this cycle of production of utilities or satisfactions and the consumption thereof has to reach an equilibrium to be sustainable. What the 'form of life' reveals are the worker's preferences. The compulsive worker's preference, then, is work as opposed to competing satisfactions or utilities such as leisure or family time. If s/he perseveres in this preference for compulsive work, it is because s/he is making a profit that may be invisible to others. What I argue here is that the invisible profit that spurs on the ever-working worker is the thumotic satisfaction produced and consumed by way of creative, problem-solving knowledge work. What should be remembered is that this 'form of life' of the worker is situated within the context of neoliberal control that pre-organizes the free choices at the disposal of the worker, conducting the conduct of the enterprise-unit according to a cost-benefit calculus that serves the objective of neoliberal economics that includes all areas of life. What this form of control,

then, actively harnesses are not mere productive output, but the very thumotic satisfaction that propels it. To return to Plato's allegory of the soul comprising of the charioteer, Reason steering the dark horse of Desire and the noble white steed, Thumos towards the heavens, it appears that the neoliberal knowledge worker's Reason is subject to an economic rationality that is only rational insofar as its choices is made based on cost-benefit calculus that renders optimal returns. The steed that serves this objective is Thumos associated with 'the fire in the belly', a courageous spiritedness. The dark horse of Desire usually associated with conspicuous consumption, then, is not the definitive force here since the satisfactions or utilities produced by the knowledge worker is not conspicuous or visible. Hard work here does not serve the purpose of making and spending money and enjoying leisure time.

The question then arises how this 'form of life' can be sustainable for any length of time since it is bound to negatively impact the worker's mental and physical health as well as his/her family ties and social bonds. One finds the answer in the last aspect of Foucault's reading of human capital, which is the requirement not only of investment in human capital itself, but in the 'environment' of the enterprise-unit. Here Foucault employs the idea of Vitalpolitik, which entails 'the application of the economic grid' to that which was formerly defined in opposition to the economy, i.e., social phenomena (Foucault 2008, p. 240). This directly connects neoliberal economy to biopolitics: '[t]he enterprise schema involves acting so that the individual [...] is not alienated from his work environment, from the time of his life, from his household, his family, and from his natural environment' (ibid., p. 242). This entails 'the economization of the entire social field'. At the same time, it is this Vitalpolitik that has to compensate for the detrimental effects of the market in the realm of values and existence.

In American neoliberalism, the application of this German Ordoliberal principle becomes absolute and generalized without limit. The production of a 'healthy' environment in which the labourer can conduct his/her enterprise entails access to wellness programmes, the regulation of work/life balance, etc. that is, the entire scope of issues known as 'human resources' (Vatter 2018, p. 81). Becker recognizes that these kinds of environmental regulations that generate the maximum return of human capital are all reducible to a logic of addiction (cf. Becker & Stigler 1995). From the perspective of classical economics, addicts

exemplify irrational behaviour because they are literally willing to pay ‘any price’ for the satisfaction brought by their addictive substance of choice. For Becker, on the other hand, addictions are not ‘positive’ or ‘negative’ based on the qualities of the commodities that are consumed, but solely based on whether or not the consumption patterns stabilize themselves into a form of life that generates a surplus. As Vatter (2018, p. 80) puts it, ‘Becker’s economic theory reveals neoliberal or biopolitical society as one ruled by the “addictive personality”’.

From the standpoint of Becker, control, the conduct of the labourer’s conduct, starts before and outside the market to ensure that populations enter into the market with sufficient human capital to start off their self-enterprise. Neoliberal economic rationality is concerned with ‘[w]hat type of stimuli, form of life, and relationship with parents, adults, and others can be crystallized into human capital’ (Foucault 2008, p. 230). In the same way, Foucault explains, all activities that concern the health of individuals serve to improve human capital, and to preserve and employ it for as long as possible (*ibid.*).

Foucault concludes his analysis of Becker by situating the theory of human capital in relation to Schumpeter’s explanation of why Marx’s fundamental ‘law of capital’, which postulates the diminishing rate of profit is wrong. According to Foucault (2008, p. 231), Schumpeter maintains that ‘the tendency of the rate of profit to fall actually turned out to be continually corrected’ on account of ‘innovation, that is to say, the discovery of new techniques, sources, and forms of productivity, and also the discovery of new markets or new resources of manpower’ (*ibid.*). The neoliberals are not content to trust ‘the permanent stimulation of competition to explain the phenomenon of innovation’ (*ibid.*). If there is innovation, they contend, it is on account of ‘the income of a certain capital, of human capital, that is to say, of the set of [privatized] investments we have made on the level of man himself’ (*ibid.*, p. 230). It may be the case that the rate of profit decreases in the production of market goods, but it does not decrease in the creation of utilities or satisfactions, i.e., that ‘surplus’ of life due to the consumption of ‘invisible’ non-market commodities like love, friendship, personal empowerment, a healthy lifestyle, and so forth (Vatter 2018, p. 82). It is this imperceptible surplus that accounts for the equilibrium reached in the cycle of labour and consumption that crystallizes as a ‘form of life’, i.e., as a sustainable – at least for some time – ‘enterprise’. So, the consumption of these

‘invisible’ non-market commodities serves as the imperceptible support network helping to sustain the entrepreneurial life that keeps the knowledge worker captivated because of the thumotic satisfaction it generates.

Conclusion

Whereas the Chicago School of neoliberalism first defined human capital as the knowledge and set of competences that individuals can make into objects of deliberate investment like education and training, in the network society the human has since grown to be understood as a miraculous resource, one able to generate itself continuously. Innovation has become the product of investment in the human, or in human capital, which fundamentally transformed organizational and managerial cultures and ushered in an era of the ever-expanding field of human resources. Beyond the workplace, as Foucault points out, neoliberal governmentality generalizes or ‘democratizes’ this economic rationality by turning the self into an entrepreneur of him-/herself. This generalization of the economic rationality delegates the responsibility to improve the self to individuals themselves in the form of free and rational choice. The more rational the choice, the more the economic reward in the playing field of biopolitical control. As a result, the theory of human capital succeeds in reducing the economic game to the pursuit of purely individual and atomistic interests that are subject to normalization and the continuous regulatory and corrective mechanisms that it entails.

In addition, as Paltrinieri (2019, p. 160) points out, since the notion of human capital concerns the ‘quality’ of the population, it implicitly extends the eugenicist logic into political economy and into the scientific measurement of human differences, contradicting the egalitarian principles allegedly at the basis of our democratic societies. Neoliberal control, then, operates both on the micro- and macro-level. Apart from the biopolitics of the population or the ‘species body’, the delegation of the responsibility of self-improvement to the individual self results in a kind of private eugenics, Paltrinieri (*ibid.*) adds, which Foucault touches upon in passing by suggesting that when the problem of the improvement of its human capital becomes paramount in a society, the implications at the level of actuality include the deliberate choice of a spouse or

‘co-producer of [...] future human capital’ – a co-producer that should be endowed with significant human capital (Foucault 2008, p. 229). Historically, as the ‘quality’ of the active population improved, i.e., its stock of competences and knowledge, productivity increased and, as a consequence, the value of working time and of salaries increased as well, which stimulated increased consumption. As early as the mid-20th c. already, Schultz (1971) and Mincer (1958) predicted that this virtuous circle would usher in the society of knowledge (Paltrinieri 2019, pp. 158-160).

Today the knowledge worker is unequivocally the definitive propellant of the economy. What makes these workers so valuable is their expert skill or knowledge in a particular field, but also their seemingly vocational devotion to their work. Knowledge workers in neoliberal economies have been documented to work all the time. Moreover, these ‘highly engaged’ workers who work much more than what is strictly required have better overall well-being than actively disengaged workers that work only the requisite 40 hours. The compulsively working knowledge worker works all the time not only because s/he has to on account of the imperative of ever-increasing efficiency and is enabled to do so on account of networked technological innovations, but also because s/he wants to. The overarching argument that I have pursued here is that the theory of human capital at the heart of the neoliberal governmentality of control actively engenders an irrational work-drivenness amongst knowledge workers by tapping – not primarily into their rational or desiring selves – but into their thumotic selves.

The line of argumentation may be recapitulated as follows: according to the neoliberals, the central focus of economic science is the analysis of human behaviour, that is, the study of the way in which and reasons why scarce resources (labour as human capital) are allocated to competing ends. What is the rationale and motivation for work if the worker is conceived as an active economic subject rather than a mere object in economic analysis? Human capital, Foucault (2008, p. 224) explains, refers to the array of physical and psychological factors that qualifies a worker to earn a certain wage. It is that ‘ability machine’ or ‘income ‘stream’ that cannot be separated from the human individual who is its bearer and embodiment. As enterprise-unit, the worker is an entrepreneur of him-/herself, his/her own capital, his/her own producer. The present-day

knowledge worker produces his/her own human capital by way of investment in continuous learning and upskilling to keep up with the pace of technological and informational developments in the network society. Interestingly, knowledge workers work all the time not only because they have to and can, but also because they want to. The worker's stable preference for constant work is after all an expression of his/her subjective freedom. Work, or more precisely, labour, as theorized by Becker, is concerned with consumption.

Of particular interest to Foucault in Becker's theory of human capital is the production functions of consumption activities. Insofar as the 'labourer' consumes, s/he is also a producer. What s/he produces is precisely the satisfaction that s/he consumes. For Becker, the labourer-consumer produces satisfactions, and these satisfactions are equated with utilities or that which have use-value to the consumer. My contention is that the 'satisfaction' produced and consumed by the knowledge worker is the use-value derived from thumotic satisfaction. The ever-working knowledge worker is an enterprise-unit whose compulsive entrepreneurial activity is fuelled by thumos while it also produces thumotic satisfaction. It is this thumotic satisfaction that is the 'invisible profit' that sustains the knowledge worker's perseverance in the preference for compulsive 'labour'. As a result of this invisible profit, the knowledge worker's cycle of labour and consumption settles into a state of homeostasis or a 'form of life' that is sustainable for a certain period of time.

How does thumotic satisfaction factor into the satisfactions or utilities produced by the consumer? Goods, according to Becker's theory, are desired not for their own sake, but for some specific service, which they perform. By 'consuming' continuous learning, for example, the utility of up-to-date expertise is produced. Continuous learning is pursued not for its own sake, but for the utility of keeping up with the latest developments it produces. This utility, in turn, is then consumed to secure a better job, which produces higher income, for example. Higher income, in turn, is consumed to finance a more lavish lifestyle or leisure time, for example. However, in the case of the compulsive knowledge worker, compulsive work appears not to be consumed for most of the usual utilities or satisfactions, such as more spending power, for example, which affords the worker a better lifestyle. Constant work makes no allowances for the proportionate enjoyment of the fruits that the worker's labours can afford.

However, the perseverance of the preference for work, the ‘stability of this preference’ and the ability to sustain it in the form of a stabilized ‘way of life’ suggest the production of another more basic, invisible satisfaction. This satisfaction, I suggest, is thumotic in origin, and hence compensates for the lack of other thumotic utilities such as the satisfactions derived from our relations with others, which include a sense of belonging, of being acknowledged and loved.

Apart from the primary or first order circuit of consumption of commodities and production of utilities, there are secondary, tertiary etc. orders or circuits of production and consumption. What these surplus orders succeed in accessing is the circuit of thumotic satisfaction. It is this soul-seated, foundational circuit that sustains the primary circuit. In the case of the knowledge worker, it is work itself that directly produces thumotic satisfaction. In Becker’s parlance, in its consumption, living labour ‘flows back’ from the product – thumotic satisfaction in the case of the knowledge worker – as an ‘income stream’ generated by human capital. As such, neoliberal governmentality has forged a source of labour in the form of the knowledge worker that wastes no time on the production of thumotic satisfactions that takes it away from the job itself, such as recreational activities. In this way, it has engineered the most ‘productive machine’ to date.

End notes

[1] Foucault refers to Michael & Becker’s 1973 article, ‘On the new theory of consumer behavior’ in which they argue for a reformulation of the theory of consumer behaviour based on the household production function suggested in Gary Becker’s 1965 article, ‘A Theory of the Allocation of Time’.

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