



# WHITHER THE RIGHTS OF THE DIGITAL SUBJECT?

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## WHITHER THE RIGHTS OF THE DIGITAL SUBJECT?

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Imagine a world in which every expression of personal joy, grief, or accomplishment, every utterance of moral outrage, political dissent, or claim of triumph, every beautiful view contemplated and special moment experienced, and every personal emotion, intimate memory and philosophical inquiry, were all to be mediated by a private company. Moreover, the only interest this company has in such a vast array of human experience is for it to be harvested to generate advertising revenue. What might the scope of democratic citizenship be in such a world?

In what follows I argue that the paradigm of the individual self that is promoted by social media platforms lays bare contemporary liberalism's subservience to capital accumulation purposes. This is evident in the emergence of a model of commoditised selfhood, in which the only agency afforded to subjects is through rendering oneself an object, in this case a commodity.<sup>1</sup> Within this paradigm, the individual –the cornerstone of Western free market liberalism– is reduced to a lucrative data source to be sold on to advertisers. The technological companies at the helm of the modern phase of capitalism have thus produced their ideal subject: simultaneously consumer and company product, and therefore lacking the structural antagonism to which the proletarian labourer is predisposed. Our willing and enthusiastic embrace of this role signifies a marked departure from the rights traditionally assumed to accompany membership in a democratic polity.

### SOCIAL MEDIA SUBJECTS AND DEMOCRATIC PROSPECTS

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There has already been much discussion of the manner in which individuals are conditioned to reflect the ethos and needs of late capitalist society.<sup>2</sup> In her book, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*, Wendy Brown expands on the implications of this conditioning for the practice of democracy.<sup>3</sup> She does so by charting the manner in which neoliberal rationality has succeeded in remaking both the state and the individual in its own image. This has occurred through the expansion of economic metrics to all aspects of existence, including what were previously non-monetised spheres. She argues that the subjection of all things public and private to the model of the market has profoundly

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this paper, terms such as agency, subjectivity, and selfhood are loosely informed by Paul Kockelman's (2006) typology, in which agency refers to the degree of causal control exercised over certain conditions, or the wielding of means towards ends, subjectivity refers to the holding of conscious, intentional mental states like belief and desire, and selfhood refers to the way in which such actions and mental states belong to one, or how they collectively make up one's identity. See: Paul Kockelman, 'Agent, person, subject, self' in *semiotica* 162-1/4 (2006), 1-18.

<sup>2</sup> For one prominent example, see: Mark Fisher, *Capitalist realism* (London: Zero Books, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> Wendy Brown, *Undoing the demos: Neoliberalism's stealth revolution* (New York: Zone Books, 2015).

negative implications for the prospects of collective self-rule. This is because the institutional forms and modes of citizenship necessary to sustain any meaningful form of democracy are completely undercut when all individual and state activity is cast in terms of rankings, credit ratings and return on investment.

The social media phenomenon provides a pertinent illustration of how this occurs at the individual level of *homo oeconomicus*, who thinks and behaves ‘as human capital seeking to strengthen its competitive positioning and appreciate its value’.<sup>4</sup> Brown makes this point by asserting that the social media enumeration of ‘likes’ and ‘shares’ represents an infusion of market metrics into our individual psychology and personal relationships. She offers this as an example of how neoliberal rationality manifests within more and more areas of life, and juxtaposes it with ‘more directly monetized practices’.<sup>5</sup> However, this placing of social media within the non-monetary sphere overlooks the fact that each of these ‘likes’ and ‘shares’ also provide the algorithmic raw material of the companies’ revenue streams. This framing, therefore, risks understating the importance of social media, and technology firms more broadly, to the mechanism by which liberal democracy is collapsing beneath the weight of neoliberal rationality. What might a closer inquiry into society’s relationship to digital capitalism reveal about this trend?

## TERMS, CONDITIONS AND STAKES

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Although it is difficult to predict the role that Facebook will play as social media become steadily more integrated into our lives, the company’s business model seems to have set a general standard for our relationship to social media platforms.<sup>6</sup> At present, the terms of this relationship are such that the more information users hand over -the more that we disclose about ourselves- the greater the advertising revenue generated for the company. In return, users are granted free access to the service. The trade-off in this equation is that we are afforded less and less input into how our relationship to the platform evolves. How many of us recall consenting to the merging of our YouTube and Google profiles?<sup>7</sup> Or to having the details of our Gmail accounts used to create a Google profile for us in the first place? This conspicuous absence of choice and user input stems from the oft-quoted observation that users of free online services are not consumers, but products. As such, we are theoretically no more vested with agency and rights than is any other commodity.

According to the market ethos of the digital era, then, the individual is a product whose profitability depends upon the level of detail that one broadcasts about oneself. Of course, the exhibitionism demanded of us by financial imperatives requires a euphemistically

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p. 33.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. p. 34.

<sup>6</sup> For an insight into Facebook’s advertising model, see: Robert Hof, “Facebook’s new advertising model: You”, *Forbes*, 5 December 2011 <https://www.forbes.com/sites/roberthof/2011/11/16/facebooks-new-advertising-model-you/#49d4352dac7c>. It also appears that the company is intensifying this core aspect of its business model. According to *Fortune*, the company now depends upon advertising for 98% of its quarterly revenue, up from 97% last year (“Facebook now has an almost advertising-only business model”, *Fortune*, May 2017; available at <http://fortune.com/2017/05/05/facebook-digital-advertising-business-model/>).

<sup>7</sup> User profiles for the two sites were merged following Google’s acquisition of YouTube in 2006.

legitimising narrative. We are hence encouraged to publish and distribute personal information under a guise of 'sharing'. The paradoxical reality, however, is that the more details we make public about ourselves, the more we privatise our own personal and social space. And given the depth and diversity of the relationship that ties the average citizen to their electronic device, this intrusion can be said to extend into our psychic as well as social structures. Mark Fisher may have touched upon one of the most salient aspects of the social media phenomenon when he observed that at no time in history has capital been as deeply integrated into our everyday existence, into our very psyches, as it has now become through the ubiquity of smartphones.<sup>8</sup> Following Facebook's acquisition of VR technology platform Oculus Rift, there is strong reason to assume that private capital will move toward more immersive and holistic psychosocial mediation in the future.

This increasing overlap between psychic, social and digital spheres serves to explain how individuals have become such willing participants in what is a discreet but lucrative form of exploitation. An example provided by Jamie Hakim may shed some light on this.<sup>9</sup> He discusses a marked and quantifiable increase since 2008 in the time and effort that young men from a variety of class backgrounds in the UK have been devoting to the attainment of an 'ideal' body, and he highlights in particular their meticulous Instagram documentation of this pursuit. This phenomenon has arisen, he argues, as a compensation mechanism for the divergence between expectations and outcomes that has become ever more pronounced under the UK austerity regime. The adoption of 'body-work' –hitherto the domain of modernity's others– by this demographic serves as indication of how power is being reconfigured in the era of neoliberal austerity. However, like Brown, he neglects another important element of this story, namely that these young men are all voluntarily, if unconsciously, engaging in the generation of unremunerated economic value. This becomes apparent once we take into consideration Sam Lavigne's observation that in contemporary conditions, digital data provision of any kind can lay a foundation for wealth creation. In his words, 'data itself is labour'.<sup>10</sup> This is clear from the above example, in which young men hone and project a particular data self that happens to be tailored to companies which, on the basis of this projection, can market men's health magazines, protein supplements, gym membership discounts, etc., back to them.

## THE SLIP OF THE MASK

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The circular dynamic on display here encapsulates the paradigmatic individual self which is envisioned for us by Silicon Valley culture. A binary consumer-product subjectivity has been forged, and it is a reflection of a further expansion of capital's area of return. We have now moved beyond the manufacturing of desire, to include broader and more fundamental modes of selfhood. Clearly, the subjects of this process are afforded no input into the manner in which it develops, much less into whether or not it should be occurring in the first place.

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<sup>8</sup> Mark Fisher, author of *Capitalist realism*, (Zero Books), speaking at the CCI Collective Conference in London, 2016 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=deZgzW0YHQI>.

<sup>9</sup> Jamie Hakim, "'Fit is the new rich': male embodiment in the age of austerity" in *Soundings*, 61(2015), 84-94.

<sup>10</sup> Sam Lavigne, "The networked assembly line" in *The New Inquiry*, 20 December 2016. <https://thenewinquiry.com/essays/the-networked-assembly-line/>.

They are instead expected to embrace it with open arms on grounds of novelty and convenience. There is thus no scope for making demands and claiming rights within the ontological framework of this new sphere of production.<sup>11</sup>

What we are witnessing, then, is not just the discarding of the liberal archetype of the free individual. Rather, this archetype has been inverted and its binary opposite laid out as the fertile ground upon which profits are to be reaped in the digital era.<sup>12</sup> The notion of consumer rights may have helped in reframing the citizen to fit within the liberal democratic marriage of capitalism and democracy. However the 21<sup>st</sup> century degradation of consumer-citizens into consumer-products represents the abandonment of all attempts at reconciling these two antagonistic poles of modernity. Wendy Brown is correct in her observation that democracy need not be violently overthrown; it can just as easily, and with far more subtlety, be hollowed out from within.<sup>13</sup> The sacrifice of the mythological individual by the harbingers of contemporary capitalism may come to be regarded as a significant milestone in this process.

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<sup>11</sup> Needless to say, this observation does not preclude the prospect of organising around progressive politics within these platforms. As Angela Nagle has observed, the hegemonic status of digital era market ideology means that 'it happily accommodates transgression, gender fluidity, self-expression, and an abundant choice of niche online subcultural identities' (Angela Nagle, "The New Man of 4chan", *The Baffler*, 2016). In this light, however, the reason that it is possible to disseminate and discuss radical alternatives within corporate-controlled online space may have less to do with freedom of speech, and more to do with the fact that such content ultimately does not pose any threat to the structure in which it is distributed. In any case, it cannot be denied that social media platforms have facilitated new spheres of political possibility and radical debate. The point here has rather been to highlight the latent tension between the emancipatory potential of horizontal information-sharing and the mode of commoditised selfhood espoused by its most prominent mediums.

<sup>12</sup> This may also shed light on the regressive labour policies pursued by other industries within the tech sector. Once the denial of rights and agency inherent to the 'individual as product' business model becomes synonymous with societal progress, a powerful normative framework is created in which other regressive business models can be pursued. Thus for Uber and Deliveroo, the worker is no longer an employee, but a freelance consultant, bereft of the rights that labour struggles have succeeded in conferring upon the former status. See: Andrew Leonard, "Why uber must be stopped" in *The Salon*, 31 August 2014. [http://www.salon.com/2014/08/31/why\\_uber\\_must\\_be\\_stopped/](http://www.salon.com/2014/08/31/why_uber_must_be_stopped/); Jamie Goldrick, "A taste of the future" in *Rabble*, 20 July 2016 <http://www.rabble.ie/2016/07/20/a-taste-of-the-future/>.

<sup>13</sup> Wendy Brown, *Undoing the demos: Neoliberalism's stealth Revolution* (New York: Zone Books, 2015).

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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I am a 1st year PhD candidate at the Department of Development Studies, SOAS, University of London, researching how EU border control policies have reshaped nation-state boundaries in Mauritania. I was awarded a Travelling Studentship by the National University of Ireland in 2016 to research this topic. I also hold an MSc in Migration and Ethnic Studies, which I obtained with distinction (*cum laude*) from the University of Amsterdam in 2015.