

Self as Enterprise: The Subjectivity in Foucault's Biopolitics

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Abstract: “Self as enterprise” is the form of existence of the individual that Foucault discussed in *The Birth of Biopolitics* under the dominance of neoliberalism, where human capital resets the economic attributes of the individual and market rationality is generalized. However, as a form of existence presented by the individual in the theory of biopolitics, this phenomenon has been little discussed compared to macro interventions, the process that how this belief is carried out and internalizes the behavior patterns that act on economies to individuals still remains to be ambiguous. Thus, starting from the phenomenon of the generalization of economic rationality led by neoliberalism, this paper will clarify the notion of “self as enterprise”, examine how the process of enterprization is internalized from society and the individual to the self, and finally discuss the relationships between this process and biopolitics, technologies of the self, and how it affects other extensional fields such as labour control.

Keywords: biopolitics, technologies of the self, self as enterprise, subjectivity

1. Introduction

Starting from the foundation and background of the notion of “self as enterprise” in Foucault’s system, researchers often take his 1979 collection of lectures, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, as a point of departure or a complement to theoretical completeness. Foucault’s writing shifted towards the subject and the technologies of the self after that collection. Second, the collection systematically revealed the ground and the conditions for the viability of governmentality (i.e., the expansion of market rationality under the auspices of ordoliberalism and neoliberalism). As for Foucault, this relationship stems from the extension of neoliberalism’s principles of the market economy to the operational processes that regulate human life and political power, and thus further to a theory and practice of political economy that have the effect of ideological dominance.

To find a link between this concept and the other macro components, it is appropriate to revisit what Foucault saw as two dimensions of governmental rationality indirectly shaping social practice: namely, the regulatory or mass technology of large-scale population management, represented by the control of mortality rates and births, and a microscopic mechanism of individualized discipline [1]. Such disciplinary mechanisms also include techniques of individuating the body as a capable organism [2], so that the ‘self as enterprise’ can discuss the relationship between subjectivity and external power or coercion in the context of social and labour control, as well as the biopolitical frameworks that are attached to economic representations. Therefore, starting from the transformation of social forms brought about by neoliberalism, this paper will retrieve the

phenomenon of the “self as enterprise” in Foucault’s discourse, and analyse the concept in order to reveal how Foucault transforms the “individual” in biopolitics into the “subject” in the technologies of the self. And by displaying the specific practice of this notion in labor control, this paper will try to expand the landscape of Foucault’s theory and fill what is omitted by existing researches.

2. Neoliberalism’s Landing: The Socialization of the Market Economy

Foucault first traced the origins of the development of ordoliberalism and neoliberalism. Unlike traditional liberalism, ordoliberalism rejects the use of social rationality to correct market failures, and instead advocates the use of economic rationality to correct social failures, which in turn uses the market economy to unpack social institutions and non-market relations, and then reorganize them around the basic notion of economic agency [3]. In the macro field, this requires that non-economic organizations, and indeed society as a whole, maintain a systemic structure capable of sustaining the dynamics of the market and allowing for the full functioning of competitive mechanisms, in order to achieve a form of economic rationality capable of eliminating the irrationality of capitalist societies [2]. Based on this, neoliberalism further generalizes the rationalized economic market. In *The Birth of Biopolitics*, Foucault divided the discourse into two main levels, the first of which is the germination of the theory of human capital and its predictable ascendancy, and the other is the change in governmental behaviour and in the functioning of legal mechanisms resulting from the incorporation of market-economy rationality in the analysis of society, which ultimately led to the disappearance of criminals in anthropological terms and the historical transition from a discipline-based society to a control-based society [4].

This paper focuses on the germination of the theory of human capital and its predictable ascendancy. For human capital, neoliberalism distinguishes itself by redefining the place of the human (the labour) in the economic system, market exchange, and the explanatory mechanisms therein. It neither considers the worker as a mere factor of production within a unidirectional economic process, as in classical political economy, nor abstracts from the worker himself as an adjunct, as in Marx. The direct impact of this starting point is twofold. Firstly, neoliberalism has placed the labour in the context of economic analysis and affirmed its subjectivity. Second, the explanation of socio-economic functioning has included a dynamic element of the labourer rather than being limited to the mechanical increase or decrease in the number of labour hours or labourers. The practical aspect of this perception is the production and accumulation of human capital, which in the case of acquired education means transforming the human being into something investable. Thus, this shift in thinking actually occurs between the “operation of capital” and the “capitalization of the operation activity”. As a result, Foucault succeeded in pointing out that the economic attributes of the human being have changed in the neoliberal framework. In political economy, man is seen as an owner of property, i.e. in the form of a mere subject of rights, or a static aggregate of property and labour elements, but in the case of man as capital, an intrinsic drive for growth is generated through self-investment and management. Later, this article will analyse how intrinsic motivation and subjectivity relate to each other.

3. From Society, Individual to Self

3.1. Metaphors and Ambiguities of Enterprise

Foucault’s “self as enterprise” has three discursive connotations. One is the generalization of the organizational form of the enterprise to the social entity. The second is the accentuation and reconstruction of the business attributes of social relations. And thirdly, the question of the embeddedness of the individual in the social environment. The “self as enterprise” refers only to the form of penetration of social organizational forms into the existence of the individual, and depicts

the behavioral and rational tendencies of the individual to manage all his or her collateral elements (including property in the material sense, social relations, and symbols, etc.). However, this analysis has to logically include a fourth dimension, namely, how the imprint of economic rationality on social life is internalized in the individual's self, or subjectivity. It is here that the ambiguity of the generalization of "enterprise" becomes apparent, for once the subjectivity of the individual is involved, it is hard to use the analogy of an entity, a system, or an organizational form. What kind of individual-self form does Foucault want to present when he considers enterprise as a metaphor or semantic expansion?

3.2. The Individual as Enterprise

One detail is that the English translation of *The Birth of Biopolitics* never places the self alongside the enterprise, but rather the "individual". This distinction derives from Foucault's discussion of the form of the individual, which can be described as an economic agent centred on an actor who, by exercising the principles of economic rationality and the market allocation of factors, operates as an asset with the subordinate factors attributed to or associated with him or her, a perspective that sees the agent and its subordinate factors as a whole. Another point that may support this is that Foucault affirms that the individual as a form of enterprise generates a 'flow of benefits' similar to the organizational entity of the enterprise, whereas the individual as his or her own entrepreneur is confronted only by competitors. Even consumption becomes an activity of the firm, through which consumers promise to produce their satisfaction or utility [5]. The implicit premise of this perspective, however, is that it does not really acknowledge that human subjectivity is included in such business organizations, merely affirming the control of other elements by humans as the generators of enactive behaviour, and does not argue whether this enaction is a form of passive shaping. And readings of Foucault's theory share this concern: under the premise that it is difficult to deny the controlling nature of the principle of external social organization, the neoliberal biopolitics, in the name of "free competition" and "free development", has in fact become a principle of coercion [6].

3.3. The Self as Entrepreneur

Another way of understanding the subjectivity of the human being is to recognize in advance that it is the "self" in the form of "entrepreneurial" activity that is the real master of agency and subjectivity. This idealized form of the subject is close to what Agamben defines as *homo sace*, as purely divine life. It is an extension of Foucault's biopolitical philosophy, as a pure form of life that is also external to society [7]. This is contrary to the definition of Foucault's theory in that it no longer recognizes the attributes of capital that all of one's own mind may possess, a subjectivity that must be divorced from the "self" of the producer, the "self" of the source of income, and all such characteristics of oneself, i.e., it can only be identified and discussed as the existence of an abstract will.

3.4. The Process of Internalization: Ethicality and Technologies of the Self

The final question regarding the process of internalization is how do individuals in the concept become entrepreneurs? This needs to be traced back to Foucault's late formulation of the technology of the self, the interrelationship between the self and the other, and the technology of the individual's self-governmentality [8-9].

What makes the tenets of neoliberalism so convincing is the ethical embellishment of the principle of competition and the values derived from it, a normalization in the guise of individual autonomy, the encroachment of private concerns into the sphere of public life, and the atomization

of the individual's understanding of society. In the reconstructed ethos, social injustices such as poverty are separated from the determining structural factors and interpreted as a matter of irresponsible self-governance. The poor are stigmatized as the 'other' of responsible, self-governing citizenship [2]. Thus, it can be seen that while the notion of individual autonomy and self-responsibility has risen to unprecedented heights, the social landscape is in a state of disintegration. This is manifested not only in terms of the prevalence of competitive mechanisms, but also in terms of the dichotomy between "warm" image-making and values of culture and morality, and "cold" image-making and values [3]. Seemingly, this contradictory structure actually suggests that this system of ideas worships the private sphere and sustains differentiation, and it is the latter that gives life to the entrepreneurial form of organization, the modern commodity economy, as distinct from traditional organizations or classical economics. Through the justification and normalization of the above cognition in the matter of personal autonomy, all individual characteristics other than this form are excluded, and in this organized relationship with the self, personal autonomy is not an obstacle or a limitation to social control, but one of its core techniques. Discipline and freedom are therefore not opposites but intrinsically linked, as biopower indirectly organizes the individual in such a way that his or her apparent autonomy is not infringed [2].

In the process of ethologising, Foucault's system of self-technique is not without instructions to present positive possibilities. In the introduction of the problem of governmentality in the 1980s, he no longer saw it as merely a strategy of power, but rather as an effect of the subject's functioning in relation to itself and to other subjects. He wanted to find out how the subject could become active and effective [6]. In the section on the technologies of the self, Foucault distinguished between the moral subject, which is dependent on others as a form of deficiency, and the ethical subject, which is relatively free to respond to the question of "how to cope with life" [8]. The latter is close to the entrepreneurial self in the dynamics of behaviour. Moreover, in terms of responding to control, McNay argues that Foucault's idea of self-ethics draws on Kant's understanding of modernity as man's use of his own reason, free from any authority, intercepting the critical spirit of Kant's ideas. In formalizing the entrepreneurial self through self-ethics, it also undeniably becomes a practice that transcends known ways of being [2]. This may suggest that while the operation of the self as enterprise does not exclude subjectivity from being an afterthought of social systems of control, it still offers a 'possibility of the subject' through the practice of the self.

4. Discussion: Extension and Production of the Entrepreneurial Self

4.1. Theories of Biopolitical Production

The theory of life-political production represented by Hart and Negri is closely associated with Foucault's notion of "self as enterprise" in biopolitics. They inherited and developed the Marxist theory of immaterial labour from Italian autonomism and examined immaterial labour within a biopolitical framework [4]. The school's definition of immaterial labour covers the categories of informational, symbolic, and affective, which basically coincide with the scope of the individual's "enterprise", as indicated by the concept. However, beyond Foucault, this school of thought, while not questioning the validity and freedom of individual subjectivity, still points out critically that contemporary capitalist accumulation is more often achieved outside the labour process, for example, in the form of the exploitation of commonality. The main measure of this is the transformation of public and socially shared wealth into private property [4], thus coinciding with Foucault's analyses of the "self as enterprise", in which private life cuts into the public sphere.

4.2. Workplace and Labour Control

In addition, Yan reflects the illuminating nature of the theory in the context of labour control theory and the workplace [10]. The competition between the economic characteristics of the individual and the subjective characteristics of the individual as a natural and sacred being in the workplace is reflected in the contest between work behaviour guided by economic rationality and the life sphere dominated by non-economic behaviors. Based on this, Kelly's work extends Foucault's framework by providing an empirical perspective on the relationship between people making choices, grasping autonomy in order to operate themselves, and resisting global market instability, in addition to analyzing labour market and cultural factors [11]. Last but not least, the positive side is reflected in the practice for people with disabilities to set their own career lives, which is reported by researchers in China, generalizing a framework of how this concept of self-enterprising acts in the process of employment [12].

5. Conclusion

As Foucault foresaw and pointed out in 1979, with the gradual acceptance of the idea of neoliberalism, the rational principles of the market economy and the mechanism of competition still permeate social life in most countries of the world today. The self as enterprise is both an individual economic being in the form of an enterprise and an entrepreneurial self and subject. In interaction with the external socio-economic system, it is accompanied by a mutually progressive process of practice in its interaction. The concept of the "self as enterprise" reveals a dynamic form of functioning of the subject in modern society, which, although it does not justify a certain political freedom or a real "personal autonomy from interference" in the game of controlling and coercive forces, suggests that in the practice of modernity, the self and the subject have to be engaged in a process of mutual and progressive practice. And it also suggests the possibility of sustaining individual life and strengthening the power of subjectivity in the practice of modernity.

Foucault's concerns and hopes have still not been fully absorbed by social mechanisms in specific schools of thought and realities, and in the fields of ethics, politics, social control, and labour relations, the question of the subjectivity of workers runs through the entirety of Foucault's theories as a summary of the phenomenon as well as a source of inspiration.

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