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Technologies of the Self after Foucault: Care, Desire, and Mute Compulsion in Neoliberal Subjectivation

Mariia Panasiuk

The National University of Ostroh Academy, Ukraine
panasiuk.mariia.o@gmail.com
https://ror.org/01d5fpx70

Abstract. This article reconstructs Foucault's late account of technologies of the self as a historically situated problematic of subjectivation, and not a toolkit for self-help. It confronts this problematic with Lacanian psychoanalysis – the split subject, desire, fantasy, jouissance, the object a, the Real – via Slavoj Žižek, and with Marxian theories of abstract domination, especially Søren Mau's mute compulsion and Samo Tomšič's Marx-Lacan homology. Rather than synthesis, it proposes articulation: historical practice, libidinal investment, and material compulsion remain analytically distinct yet empirically entangled. Drawing on research on therapy culture, workplace authenticity, education, and generative AI, it argues that critique of contemporary self-care must distinguish ethical practice from governmental capture, desire from preference, and formal freedom from its material conditions – reviving Foucault's late turn toward *parrēsia* and care of the city.
Keywords: Michel Foucault, technologies of the self, care of the self, desire, neoliberalism, abstract domination.

Savasties technologijos po Foucault: rūpestis, troškimas ir nebylioji prievarta neoliberaliojoje subjektyvacijoje

Santrauka. Šiame straipsnyje vėlyvoji Michelio Foucault savęs technologijų interpretacija yra rekonstruojama kaip istoriškai įkurdinta subjektyvacijos problematika, o ne kaip pagalbos sau priemonių rinkinys. Straipsnyje ši problematika supriešinama su Lacano psichoanalize – subjekto skilimu, troškimu, fantazija, perteklinių malonumu, objektu „a" ir „tikrove". Pasitelkiama Slavojaus Žižeko filosofija bei marksistinės abstraktaus dominavimo teorijos, ypač Søreno Mau nebyliosios prievartos bei Samo Tomšičiaus Marxo–Lacano homologija. Vietoje sintezės šis straipsnis siūlo artikuliaciją: istorinė praktika, libidinė investicija bei medžiagiška prievarta, nors ir empiriškai susipynusios, išlieka analitiškai skirtingos. Remiantis terapijos kultūros, autentiškumo darbo vietoje, švietimo ir generatyvinio dirbtinio intelekto tyrimais, teigiama, kad šiuolaikinio rūpinimosi savimi kritika privalo atskirti etinę praktiką nuo institucinio užvaldymo, troškimą nuo preferavimo, o formaliąją laisvę nuo jos materialiųjų sąlygų. Taip būtų atgaivintas vėlyvasis Michelio Foucault posūkis link *parrēsia* bei rūpinimosi miestu.
Pagrindiniai žodžiai: Michelis Foucault, savasties technologijos, rūpestis dėl savasties, troškimas, neoliberalizmas, abstraktus dominavimas

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Introduction

The contemporary problem of self-formation is often presented in an apparently emancipatory vocabulary: individuals are invited to become more authentic, resilient, reflective, entrepreneurial, mindful, healthy, adaptable, and capable of continuous learning. Yet the proliferation of practices through which people are asked to transform themselves has produced a conceptual paradox. The more self-fashioning is celebrated as a form of freedom, the more difficult it becomes to distinguish an ethical practice from an economically organized demand. This paradox gives Michel Foucault's late work its continuing relevance. His notion of technologies of the self does not describe merely a set of techniques for improving oneself; it belongs to a broader analysis of how subjects are constituted through historically specific relations among truth, power, and practices of freedom. In his 1988-dated formulation, technologies of the self are procedures by which individuals perform operations on bodies, conduct, thoughts, and ways of being in order to transform themselves and attain a desired mode of existence (Foucault 1988: 18). The conceptual force of this formulation lies in its ambiguity: the same operation can be a practice of freedom, a mechanism of normalization, or a mobile point at which freedom and governmentality intersect. Recent scholarship continues to emphasize this ambiguity rather than treating Foucault's late ethics as a simple doctrine of autonomy. Lorenzini (2023) situates techniques of the self within the broader problem of governmentality; Meanwhile, D'Cruz (2025) argues that Foucault's engagement with neoliberalism raises unresolved normative questions about normalization and freedom; and Villadsen (2024) shows how the Foucauldian notion of 'technology' cuts across devices, practices, institutions, and forms of conduct. The problem, then, is not whether technologies of the self are liberating or oppressive. It is how a practice becomes legible as ethical work, how that practice is attached to a regime of truth, and under what conditions it becomes governable precisely because it presents itself as self-chosen.

The article argues that this problem cannot be adequately reconstructed from the Foucauldian register alone, but neither is it solved by simply adding psychoanalysis to genealogy. The central conceptual difficulty concerns the status of the subject who performs the ethical work. Foucault's late analyses are concerned with historically formed modes of subjectivation: one becomes a subject through practices, norms, pedagogical relations, truth-telling, and forms of self-relation that are socially and historically situated. Lacanian psychoanalysis, by contrast, begins from the non-coincidence of the subject with itself. The subject is not an agent that first exists and then acquires norms; it emerges through language, through a relation to the Other, and through a constitutive division that prevents complete self-transparency. This difference is frequently flattened into the opposition between a 'historical subject' and a 'transhistorical subject'. That formulation is too crude. Joan Copjec's *Read My Desire* demonstrates why the real disagreement concerns not whether history matters, but how historicity itself is conceptualized: Lacanian structures do not function as historical universals that simply float above history, but as formal constraints whose effects are historically variable and whose articulation changes with social

formations (Copjec 1994). Simon O'Sullivan similarly reconstructs the difference between Foucault's care of the self and Lacan's ethics of desire as two diagrams of subject-production rather than as two interchangeable normative programmes (O'Sullivan 2012). The issue is therefore not whether one theory is historical and the other is not. It is whether the historical variability of subjectivation can exhaust the conditions of subjectivity, or whether historical arrangements become effective only through a subject whose relation to desire, fantasy, and enjoyment is never reducible to the explicit norm that governs it.

A second difficulty concerns the concept of the Real. In the present article, the Real is not a synonym for reality, material reality, the body, or whatever lies outside discourse. In Lacan's later elaborations, the Real designates a limit internal to symbolization: that which cannot simply be absorbed into the network of signifiers and yet returns within it as impossibility, contradiction, or an inassimilable remainder. This is why the Real matters ethically. The ethical question cannot be reduced to whether a subject obeys or disobeys a norm. It concerns the subject's relation to the impossibility that its symbolic identifications cannot finally master. In *Seminar VII*, Lacan links the moral law to the Real not because the Real supplies a positive moral substance, but because ethics begins where the subject confronts the non-guarantee of the Good and the persistence of desire beyond the service of goods (Lacan 1992). Žižek radicalizes this point by showing how enjoyment can sustain an attachment to the very structures that a subject consciously rejects: the subject does not merely believe an ideological proposition; it can enjoy the fantasy through which that proposition acquires practical force. This is the crucial point at which a Lacanian intervention can deepen the Foucauldian analysis. A technology of the self cannot be understood only by asking what norm it instantiates, or what practice it organizes. One must also ask what libidinal economy makes that practice desirable, compulsive, or difficult to abandon. The addition of psychoanalysis is therefore not the addition of an 'inner cause' to an otherwise social subject. It changes the ontology of the problem by introducing a form of non-transparency that is internal to subjectivation itself.

The third difficulty is political-economic. It is possible to explain why self-optimization is narrated as freedom and still fail to explain why refusal is materially costly. This is where recent Marxian work becomes indispensable. Søren Mau's *Mute Compulsion* (2023) reconstructs capitalist power as a form of abstract and impersonal coercion embedded in the reproduction of social life rather than merely imposed by an external sovereign. The market dependence of subjects means that they must continuously make themselves employable, competitive, creditworthy, adaptable, and productive, regardless of whether they ideologically endorse these imperatives. Samo Tomšič's work on the relation between Marx and Lacan adds a different but complementary point: the connection between capital and the unconscious is not exhausted by an analogy between economic and psychic mechanisms; Lacan's deployment of Marx permits a formal analysis of how surplus-value, surplus-enjoyment, drive, and social relation become articulated within capitalist discourse (Tomšič 2015). The material register therefore cannot be reduced to a background 'context' for subjectivity. It determines the field within which technologies of the self acquire differentiated consequences. A mindfulness practice undertaken in

a monastic setting, a workplace resilience programme, a quantified fitness regimen, an educational performance dashboard, and an AI-mediated autobiographical practice may share a formal structure of self-work while differing radically in their relations to truth, institutional power, and economic necessity. The task of critique is to make these differences explicit rather than to treat every contemporary self-practice as simply another instance of neoliberal capture.

The argument proceeds through a series of discriminations. First, the article reconstructs epimeleia heautou as a historically specific ethical matrix in which self-care, truth, pedagogy, and civic capacity are interdependent. Second, it clarifies the Foucauldian-Lacanian disagreement by reconstructing the concepts of subject, desire, fantasy, jouissance, and the Real rather than merely citing them as critical keywords. Third, it examines neoliberal subjectivation through contemporary research on therapy culture, educational transitions, workplace authenticity and competition, and the four-day workweek, showing that the contemporary technology of the self is increasingly inseparable from metrics, organizational norms, and performative accounts of 'authenticity'. Fourth, it turns to abstract domination and the Marx-Lacan relation in order to identify a form of compulsion that persists even when ideology is consciously rejected. Fifth, it develops a model of articulation in which historical form, libidinal investment, and material compulsion are distinguished analytically but connected causally. Finally, it returns to parrēsia and the care of the city to argue that the political horizon of technologies of the self cannot remain individualistic. The governing question is not how to become an optimized self, but, rather, how to create forms of collective life in which self-relation ceases to be the privatized carrier of structural necessity.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to reconstruct Foucault's late concept of technologies of the self at the level of its conceptual machinery and then to test its explanatory limits through a focused confrontation with Lacanian psychoanalysis and Marxian theories of abstract domination. The article does not attempt a general history of French theory and therefore does not treat Derrida, Deleuze, or Althusser as parallel interlocutors. Their relevance is registered only where indispensable to the central problematic: the critique of interpellation is absorbed into the question of the remainder that interpellation cannot explain; Deleuzian modulation is acknowledged only as a background to the transformation from discipline to continuous evaluation; and deconstruction remains outside the main argument because the central issue is not the textual instability of the subject but the relation between historical subjectivation, unconscious desire, and material compulsion. The conceptual core consists of four questions: *What is being transformed in a technology of the self? What kind of subject is capable of such transformation? What makes a practice ethically meaningful rather than merely norm-compliant?* And: *What conditions make the exercise of such freedom materially possible?* By answering these questions in sequence, the article seeks not to synthesize incompatible theories into a single vocabulary, but to

demonstrate where their explanatory objects overlap, where they remain irreducible, and how their differences can themselves produce a more precise account of contemporary subjectivation.

1. Epimeleia Heautou: From Self-Knowledge to an Ethics of Formation

Foucault's turn to ancient ethics must be read against the background of his earlier analyses of disciplinary power, biopolitics, and governmentality. The late work does not simply replace power with freedom. Rather, it changes the analytical question from the mechanisms through which subjects are objectified to the practices through which subjects constitute themselves in relation to truth. The notion of epimeleia heautou is central because it names a mode of ethical activity broader than introspective self-knowledge. Foucault's claim that care of the self historically precedes the Delphic imperative gnōthi seauton is not meant as a universal anthropological thesis about all antiquity; it is a genealogical thesis about a historical configuration in which knowing oneself becomes one element within a larger set of practices directed toward transforming one's mode of being (Foucault 2005; 1984). The crucial distinction is between a subject that discovers an already given essence and a subject that is formed through an ensemble of exercises. Askēsis, in this context, is not repression in the modern psychological sense. It is an exercise by which conduct is shaped, tested, remembered, and repeated. Its object is not simply behavior, because the intended transformation concerns the relation between conduct and truth. The self is therefore neither a substance nor a sovereign interiority; it is an effect and a site of ongoing ethical work.

This makes the ancient practices reconstructed by Foucault more structurally complex than a catalogue of techniques. Enkrateia concerns the regulation of pleasures and desires, but it is meaningful only within a regime in which the subject is learning to relate to itself as capable of exercising a certain form of freedom. Meletē thanatou, meditation on death, is not merely a cognitive exercise about mortality; it reorganizes the temporal horizon within which value is assigned to present attachments. Hypomnemata are not diaries in the modern confessional sense alone; they externalize memory, maxims, observations, and reading so that ethical formation becomes materially supported by writing. Parrēsia adds a political dimension because truth-telling is defined by risk: the speaker does not merely possess a true proposition but puts a relation of power at stake by speaking frankly where silence would be safer (Foucault 2001; 2010; 2011). These practices therefore disclose a conception of freedom that is neither negative nor purely voluntaristic. Freedom exists as a practice because the subject is not simply free from power; it works on a field of power, transforms its relation to norms, and develops capacities that are socially mediated. Pierre Hadot's account of ancient philosophy as a way of life converges with this point insofar as philosophy is treated as a practical transformation rather than as a purely theoretical discourse (Hadot 1995). Yet Foucault is more historically cautious than a generalized ideal of 'spiritual exercises' might suggest: his point is precisely that different ethical formations produce different ways of dividing conduct, truth, obligation, pleasure, and self-relation.

The concept of ethical substance is indispensable here because it prevents us from treating self-care as generic self-improvement. Foucault identifies ethical substance, mode of subjection, ethical work, and telos as dimensions through which moral action becomes intelligible. The same bodily behavior may have different ethical meanings depending on what part of the subject is constituted as the ethical substance, to what authority one relates in obeying a norm, what work is performed on oneself, and what form of existence is sought as an end. This fourfold structure already blocks a simple transfer from antiquity to the present. When 'mindfulness' is used to reduce stress so that an employee can return to work with greater efficiency, the practice has one ethical configuration; when contemplative attention is organized as a discipline of truthfulness or as withdrawal from an institutional demand, it has another. The form of the exercise is not enough to identify its political meaning. What matters is the articulation among the material practice, its authoritative justification, its telos, and the relation to truth in which the subject is constituted.

The late Foucauldian subject is therefore neither a liberal individual who freely chooses their identity nor a passive effect of discourse. It is a subject produced through an interplay between techniques imposed upon it and techniques through which it acts on itself. This is why technologies of the self cannot be separated from technologies of power. Villadsen (2024), in reconstructing Foucault's broader notion of technologies, emphasizes that technologicality should not be narrowed to machines: a technology is a way of organizing a field so that certain transformations become possible. The same point applies to the self. There is no 'inner technology' operating in isolation from institutions, languages, pedagogical relations, administrative categories, economic infrastructures, or regimes of visibility. Self-practice is always situated. This will become decisive when considering the contemporary neoliberal form: self-optimization is not the disappearance of power but, instead, a reorganization of its operation so that the subject becomes an operator of norms within itself. Yet even this formulation remains incomplete, because it still leaves open the question of why subjects can become attached to precisely those norms they experience as oppressive.

2. Foucault and Lacan: Historicity, the Divided Subject, and the Problem of Desire

The most consequential conceptual difference between Foucault and Lacan concerns not the opposition between history and structure, but the status of the subject's relation to itself. Foucault asks how a subject is constituted through historically specific practices; Lacan asks what kind of subject can be constituted at all once consciousness is no longer treated as the transparent center of action. The Lacanian subject is split because the subject of the enunciation cannot coincide fully with the subject represented by what is said. Language gives the subject a place in the Symbolic, but that place is never identical with the subject's being. Hence, Lacan's subject is not an inner essence hidden behind ideology. It is a structural effect of signification whose division is simultaneously the condition

of desire. Desire emerges because the subject cannot be fully identical with the image or the signifier through which it is recognized. This is why the Lacanian critique of the autonomous self is stronger than the claim that social norms influence personal choices. The problem is not merely that individuals internalize external demands; the problem is that the demand for self-identity is itself structured by a constitutive lack.

This is the point at which the Lacanian concept of the Other becomes essential. The subject's question 'Who am I?' is posed within a symbolic field that precedes it. Recognition is therefore mediated: one becomes someone by occupying positions in a field of signifiers, but the field cannot provide a complete answer to the subject's desire. The famous Lacanian distinction between the demand and the desire follows from this structure. Demand can be articulated and answered; desire persists because no empirical object can close the structural gap that generated it. Consequently, a project of self-realization can become endless without being irrational in an everyday sense. The subject is not simply dissatisfied with a particular outcome. The position of 'the self' to which it aspires is structurally displaced because the subject seeks an imaginary completion that language cannot provide. Contemporary injunctions to 'find your authentic self', 'become the best version of yourself', or 'unlock your potential' are therefore not merely ideological slogans. They can function as responses to the subject's structural non-coincidence, promising a completion that must forever be deferred. This is the psychoanalytic reason why self-optimization has a potentially infinite temporal form.

Fantasy is the mechanism that gives this structural gap a scenario. It does not simply consist in false beliefs. Fantasy stages a relation between the subject, desire, and the object that appears to explain what the subject is missing. In this sense, fantasy provides the answer to the question 'What does the Other want from me?' and simultaneously gives the subject a role within that demand. Žižek's use of fantasy therefore sharpens the analysis of neoliberal subjectivation: the subject is not persuaded merely by a proposition such as 'you should be productive'. It is captured by a scene in which productivity promises recognition, desirability, security, or the right kind of enjoyment. The injunction to improve oneself can be effective because it is attached to an imagined future in which the subject finally coincides with the image it has been asked to become. The failure of completion does not necessarily destroy the mechanism. On the contrary, the impossibility of final achievement may keep the circuit in motion. This is where jouissance becomes analytically indispensable.

Jouissance should not be reduced to pleasure. In Lacan, it designates an excessive mode of enjoyment that can exceed the subject's conscious interest and even produce suffering. The paradox is that the subject can derive satisfaction from repetition without simply finding the repeated act pleasant. Žižek's critique of ideology depends on this paradox: an ideological order endures not merely because subjects believe it, but because it organizes forms of enjoyment, fantasy, and identification. The superegoic injunction 'Enjoy!' names an obligation that is impossible to satisfy because enjoyment, once commanded, becomes another demand for performance. The contemporary demand for work-life balance, wellness, resilience, or authenticity can therefore become strangely punitive. The subject is

expected to rest correctly, manage stress correctly, exhibit emotional competence, appear authentic, and convert private practices into demonstrable capacities. Failure becomes evidence that more work on the self is required. What looks like an ethical deficit is thus converted into a new object of optimization. Here the Lacanian critique does not simply accuse neoliberalism of manipulation. It explains why the subject may participate in its own capture without reducing that participation to ignorance or deception.

The concept of the Real specifies the limit of this circuit. The Real is what resists total symbolization, and not an external positive reality standing outside language. In the ethical context of *Seminar VII*, the subject confronts the fact that there is no final Good capable of guaranteeing the right action from outside the subject's relation to desire. This is why Lacan's ethics cannot be translated into authenticity. To be faithful to desire does not mean discovering one's true self and expressing it. Desire is constituted through a symbolic loss and cannot be converted into a positive identity. The ethical act occurs where the subject assumes responsibility for its desire without securing itself through an external guarantee. Žižek's political use of this structure intensifies the difficulty: the obstacle to emancipation is not simply an external ideological lie but the libidinal investment through which the subject makes an unbearable relation tolerable. The subject may prefer a familiar form of domination because the fantasy that organizes it also provides a mode of enjoyment. Any theory of technologies of the self that omits this dimension risks interpreting resistance too quickly as a matter of conscious choice.

This does not mean that the Lacanian structure invalidates Foucault's historicity. Copjec's intervention is crucial precisely because it challenges the easy assumption that psychoanalysis must choose between transhistorical universals and historical irrelevance. The formal structures of subjectivity have no concrete political meaning outside of historical configurations. Conversely, historical difference does not exhaust the mode in which subjects become attached to their positions. A Foucauldian genealogy can tell us why 'authenticity' becomes a valued ethical substance in one historical formation rather than another; a Lacanian analysis can ask why the demand for authenticity produces an endless movement of self-verification, and why its failure can itself become gratifying. These are not rival answers to one question. They concern different levels of determination. The theoretical challenge is therefore to avoid a false synthesis while also resisting a false disjunction: history without desire risks overestimating the subject's capacity for conscious reorientation; desire without history risks turning historically specific forms into illustrations of a timeless mechanism. The more productive relation is one in which each theory functions as a limit on the other's explanatory reach.

3. Neoliberalism and the Conversion of Care into Self-Optimization

The neoliberal transformation of self-practice should not be described as a simple replacement of external discipline by internal discipline. Foucault's analyses of governmentality already suggest a more subtle mechanism: freedom itself becomes a medium through which conduct is directed. The neoliberal subject is encouraged to understand its abilities,

health, employability, education, relationships, and even affect as domains of investment. This does not abolish constraint. It redistributes constraint into the subject's own calculations. A person who is asked to become more resilient may experience the demand as empowering and coercive simultaneously. The ambiguity matters because the individual can be genuinely better at coping while the organizational conditions that generate the need for coping remain intact. D'Cruz (2025) emphasizes that Foucault's engagement with neoliberalism raises normative questions precisely at the point where freedom and normalization become difficult to distinguish. The danger, therefore, is not that every self-care practice is secretly oppressive. It is that a practice can acquire an apparently ethical vocabulary while the field of possibilities within which it operates is already structured by competition and market dependence.

Recent empirical research makes this mechanism more concrete. Landolt and Bauer (2023), studying adolescents preparing for the selective transition to Gymnasium in Zurich, show how educational systems can shift responsibility for success onto individual students, who then adopt self-disciplinary and self-caring practices to manage that responsibility. The point is not that the students are merely manipulated. Their practices can be intelligent, adaptive, and personally meaningful. What changes is the meaning of failure: structural selectivity is translated into a problem of personal regulation. Carr and Kelan (2025) demonstrate a related mechanism in organizational settings by analyzing competition as a gendered technology of the self. Whether competition is directed outward (toward other women) or inward, toward one's own performance, both modalities can individualize structural inequality and render collective dimensions less visible. Zaeemdar (2025) shows how the demand for authenticity itself becomes a postfeminist technology of the self: women are invited to construct an 'authentic' professional identity, but authenticity remains tethered to organizational interests. These studies confirm an important Foucauldian point while also complicating it: subjectivation is productive, and not merely restrictive. The subject acquires capacities and narratives through precisely those practices that may also obscure the conditions under which those capacities become necessary.

The workplace provides an especially clear site of this ambivalence. Pedersen, Muhr, and Dunne (2024) examine the four-day workweek through Foucault's care-of-the-self framework and show how rest can become part of a meaningful reconfiguration of work while remaining entangled with managerial concerns. The study is significant because it resists a binary interpretation. A shorter workweek can be genuinely liberating without becoming fully emancipatory. It can create temporal space for forms of self-care that exceed productivity, yet the same reform can be narrated as a means of maintaining performance. This is a useful test for theory because it prevents critique from becoming suspicious by default. The task is not to classify every reform as co-optation; it is to identify the mechanisms that determine what kind of freedom a reform enables. A practice becomes politically significant when it changes not merely how individuals cope with a situation but the relations that organize what they are required to cope with. This distinction will later matter for the movement from care of the self to care of the city: individual recovery

is not equivalent to collective transformation, although it can create the temporal and practical conditions for it.

Therapy culture sharpens the issue further. Urošević (2024) argues that the diffusion of therapeutic discourses into everyday institutions should be understood as a governmental technology through which neoliberal regulation integrates subjectivity into capital accumulation. Importantly, the mechanism is not that psychology is false or that therapy is inherently ideological. Rather, therapeutic vocabulary can relocate institutional contradictions into individual domains of feeling, motivation, adaptation, and self-management. The subject is invited to treat anxiety as a challenge to be regulated, burnout as a deficit in boundaries, failure as a mindset problem, or exclusion as an opportunity for resilience. This does not mean that these experiences lack subjective reality. It means that their institutional intelligibility changes. Once distress has been translated into a task for the self, the social conditions that produce it can become less visible. In Foucauldian language, the individual is not merely made an object of knowledge; it is encouraged to become an active operator of the knowledge through which it is governed.

This mechanism becomes even more explicit when self-practice is quantified. Self-tracking, workplace dashboards, wearables, and algorithmic metrics transform bodily and behavioral variation into comparable data. Gabriels and Coeckelbergh (2019) argue that technologies of the self in quantified environments also reshape relations to others, producing what they term 'quantified otherness' through comparison and visibility. The contemporary subject is therefore not simply asked to monitor itself; it is asked to monitor itself in relation to an evaluative field populated by other selves. Competition becomes internalized as a measurement architecture. The metric does not need to command: the subject learns to ask how it is performing, how it compares, and whether its present state can be improved. The crucial transformation is temporal. Instead of a telos toward which one might orient one's life, there is a series of continuously updated deltas between the current self and a moving benchmark. The ethical work becomes open-ended because the benchmark itself is dynamic. In this sense, quantification intensifies the structural logic of self-optimization: the self becomes a variable in an optimization problem whose objective function can never be finally satisfied.

The emergence of generative AI adds a further dimension. Kvietkute and Ness (2026), in a qualitative study of young adults in Norway, analyze interactions with generative AI through Foucault's technologies of the self and find tensions between efficiency and existential unease, algorithmic scaffolding and relational displacement, narrative depth and epistemic superficiality, and agency and deliberative outsourcing. The relevance to the present argument is conceptual. The digital system is not merely a tool used by an already constituted self; it can become part of the procedure through which the self narrates itself, evaluates itself, and delegates aspects of reflection. The technology therefore participates in the production of the subject's relation to truth. This creates a new version of the Foucauldian problem: what happens when the partner in self-formation is an algorithmic system that can continuously generate interpretations, recommendations, scripts, and evaluations? The question is not whether the machine has an inner subjectivity. It is

whether the user's self-relation is reorganized through an externalized, automated Other that is available on demand. This is precisely the kind of situation in which the Lacanian notion of the Other and the Foucauldian notion of technologies of the self can be placed in productive adjacency without being collapsed into one another.

4. From Ideological Capture to Mute Compulsion

The preceding analysis establishes an important limit. If self-optimization is explained through governmentality, fantasy, and enjoyment, why does it remain difficult to refuse? The answer cannot be that subjects are simply deceived. Nor can it be that they merely enjoy their own domination. The issue is that social reproduction imposes conditions on subjects that operate even when those subjects reject the ideological narratives attached to them. Mau's concept of mute compulsion names this form of domination. In capitalism, subjects who lack direct access to the means of reproducing themselves are dependent upon market-mediated participation. Competition is therefore not only an ideology preached by managers; it is a structural relation in which social reproduction is organized through economic selection. People can dislike competition and still have to compete. They can reject the language of human capital while still needing credentials, employability, income, or financial security. They can recognize the absurdity of endless optimization and still update the résumé, acquire another skill, answer after-hours messages, or monitor their performance because the material consequences of non-participation are real.

This point changes the relation between Foucault and Žižek. The Foucauldian vocabulary explains the historical techniques through which market dependence is translated into forms of self-relation; the Lacanian vocabulary explains why the subject's relation to those techniques is not exhausted by rational calculation. But neither explains the other's object. Mau adds a third dimension by refusing to treat economic compulsion as merely one more discourse. Mute compulsion is not primarily a message transmitted to the subject. It is a relation embedded in the material organization of social reproduction. This does not make ideology irrelevant. Ideology is what can make structural necessity appear as personal vocation, fairness, merit, or freely chosen competition. Nor does it make jouissance secondary in a trivial sense. The subject may derive enjoyment from achievement, status, self-mastery, or even exhaustion. But the material compulsion has explanatory priority in one specific sense: the subject's continued participation cannot be explained solely by what it believes or enjoys. Even a subject who sees through the fantasy may remain bound to the structure.

Tomšič's reconstruction of Marx and Lacan clarifies why the material and libidinal dimensions can nevertheless be connected without reduction. Marx's critique of capital identifies a social process in which value must perpetually expand itself. Lacan's engagement with Marx, particularly in the discourse of the capitalist, allows this movement to be read in relation to surplus-enjoyment and the drive. The parallel is not an identity between capital and the unconscious. Rather, both Marx and Lacan investigate circuits that reproduce themselves by organizing a relation to a surplus that cannot finally be

appropriated as a stable good. The capitalist subject is therefore not simply a greedy individual who wants more. The imperative is structural: accumulation must continue. When this form is translated into the domain of the self, the relevant unit is no longer an individual who wants to improve but, rather, this is a subject inserted into a social process in which improvement is continually required because the conditions of reproduction are themselves competitive and unstable. Self-optimization becomes a local expression of a larger process whose totality no individual controls.

This also permits a more precise reading of the superego. The neoliberal command 'be yourself' is not merely an ideological slogan. It is effective because it can connect three heterogeneous mechanisms. First, governmentality individualizes responsibility by framing conduct as a project of self-management. Second, fantasy gives this project a scene of recognition: the improved self will finally be secure, successful, desirable, or authentic. Third, market dependence makes non-participation materially costly. The result is not a single cause but a circuit: structural compulsion creates the necessity to participate; governmental techniques translate that necessity into practices of self-management; fantasy supplies the symbolic scenario in which participation appears meaningful; jouissance binds the subject to repetition even when the repetition is exhausting. The categories are analytically distinct. Their power lies precisely in their articulation. A subject does not self-optimize because 'capitalism' whispers in its ear, nor because an unconscious drive forces a purely economic behavior, nor because a government agency commands it. It self-optimizes because a historically specific social relation is made psychologically and institutionally actionable through a set of practices that can be experienced as personal projects.

The concept of 'extimacy' becomes useful here, although it must be used carefully. Lacan's notion indicates a relation in which what is most intimate is structured through what appears external. The supposedly private core of the self is shaped by the Symbolic order, by the desire of the Other, and by social relations that the subject encounters as external. This is exactly the point at which the Foucauldian problematic of external normativity versus internal libidinal structure becomes less binary. The norm does not simply remain outside and then become internalized. The subject's interiority is constituted through an exterior symbolic and social field. Conversely, the social field becomes effective through the subject's own activity. Technologies of the self are therefore 'external' and 'internal' at once. The employee's productivity dashboard, the student's ranking, the wellness app, or the AI assistant is an external apparatus. Yet the evaluative relation it establishes can become the subject's own mode of self-description. The apparatus is not simply inside the subject; it participates in producing the distinction between inside and outside. This is one reason the Lacanian vocabulary of extimacy offers a useful refinement rather than a replacement of Foucauldian genealogy.

The resulting distinction can be formulated as follows. Foucault asks: By what historically specific practices does a subject become capable of relating to itself in a given ethical way? Whereas, Lacan asks: What division prevents the subject from becoming identical with that relation, and what desire or enjoyment sustains the relation beyond conscious intention? While Mau asks: What material relations make the subject's participation in the

field necessary even when the subject rejects its normative justification? These questions do not form a hierarchy in which the third invalidates the first two. They form a sequence of explanatory constraints. A genealogy without psychoanalysis can mistake a subject's articulated reasons for the totality of its motivation. Psychoanalysis without political economy can treat materially compelled conduct as if it were primarily a matter of libidinal attachment. Political economy without genealogy and psychoanalysis can describe the structural position without explaining how it becomes an ethical experience and why subjects inhabit it through particular forms of desire. The point of the present argument is therefore not synthesis in the sense of fusion. It is controlled articulation: each register makes visible a determination that the others cannot simply absorb.

5. The Ethics of the Real as a Limit-Concept, not a Reconciliation

The phrase 'ethics of the Real' requires qualification if it is to do conceptual rather than rhetorical work. It should not be taken as a new school formed by combining Foucault, Lacan, Žižek, and Marx. Nor should it be treated as the hidden conclusion toward which all four thinkers were converging. It is more defensible to use the expression as a limit-concept for a problem that emerges when the three registers are brought into adjacency. In a Foucauldian frame, ethical practice cannot be separated from the historical conditions under which subjects become capable of acting upon themselves. In a Lacanian frame, ethical action cannot be reduced to conformity with an ideal good because the subject's desire is constitutively non-transparent, and the symbolic order offers no complete guarantee. In a Marxian frame, the exercise of freedom has to be situated within the material conditions of reproduction. An ethics of the Real, here used in the restricted sense, means an ethics that refuses three fantasies at once: the fantasy of a fully self-transparent agent, the fantasy that critique automatically produces liberation, and the fantasy that formal autonomy is meaningful independently of material conditions.

The Real, therefore, functions negatively. It marks the point where a self-description fails to coincide with what sustains the subject's practice. A subject may describe itself as freely optimizing because it values excellence, while the material conditions of employment render non-optimization dangerous. It may describe itself as authentically expressing its individuality while its fantasy depends on institutional norms of recognizability. It may consciously reject competitive values while continuing to compare itself through metrics because the metric has become the medium through which opportunities are distributed. In each case, the subject confronts a limit to self-knowledge: something in its own practice exceeds the explanation it gives of that practice. The ethical question begins precisely there. Instead of responding to the discrepancy by demanding better self-knowledge or more optimization, the subject may treat the discrepancy as a symptom of the conditions in which it lives. This is close to the critical operation already present in Foucault's method: critique does not reveal a hidden essence so much as make a contingent arrangement visible as contingent. The Lacanian addition is that the contingency of the social arrangement does not eliminate the subject's libidinal investment in it.

Such an ethics also clarifies why resistance cannot be reduced to authenticity. The instruction to 'be yourself' assumes that there is a self whose truth can be recovered and expressed. Lacanian psychoanalysis places this assumption in question, while Foucault's genealogy complicates it historically by showing that the forms through which the self becomes intelligible are themselves produced. The alternative is not to reject all self-formation but to transform the question. Instead of 'Which self is my true self?', one asks 'Through which practices, relations, and regimes of truth do I become this kind of subject, and what forms of life become possible if these relations are altered?' The ethical subject is thus not the one who discovers its essence but the one who can intervene in the practices that constitute its mode of being. Yet, the intervention remains limited by material conditions. That limitation is not a failure of ethics; it is part of what ethics must learn to articulate.

This is also where the distinction between desire and demand becomes politically important. A demand can be represented, negotiated, and institutionally answered. Desire remains structurally open because no empirical object can finally satisfy the lack constitutive of the subject. Neoliberalism can exploit this opening by converting every desired improvement into a new object of acquisition: another qualification, another body, another metric, another therapeutic insight, another productivity system. The circuit is endless because the object is always replaceable. The critical response cannot be to satisfy the subject more efficiently. It must question the social form that turns the openness of desire into a quantitative series of measurable deficits. The political task is therefore not to extinguish desire but to prevent its capture by a logic in which the only available response to lack is additional consumption, productivity, or self-investment.

The formulation becomes especially important for contemporary digital environments. When algorithms suggest how one should sleep, work, eat, exercise, communicate, or narrate one's past, they externalize functions that once belonged to pedagogues, spiritual directors, physicians, friends, or philosophical schools. This does not mean that digital systems simply replace those authorities. They rearrange the topology of authority by making recommendation continuous, personalized, and data-dependent. The subject is invited to become legible to itself through the system's categories. Kvietkute and Ness (2026) show that generative AI can become involved in autobiographical reasoning and self-formative practices. From the present perspective, the critical question is whether algorithmic assistance increases reflective agency or gradually displaces the subject's capacity to tolerate uncertainty and form judgments without externalized confirmation. The issue is not anti-technology. It is the political economy of epistemic dependence: who designs the categories through which a subject understands itself, which data are used, which objectives are optimized, and what institutional interests benefit from the resulting self-description?

Accordingly, the ethics of the Real should remain a limit-concept rather than a normative programme. It tells us where not to place our faith: not in the fantasy of transparent self-mastery, not in the belief that historical awareness automatically breaks attachment, and not in the assumption that economic transformation can be replaced by individual

coping. Its practical implication is more modest and more demanding. Ethical self-work becomes critical when it increases the subject's capacity to distinguish between what it is being asked to become, what it desires, what it materially must do, and what it can collectively change. In that sense, the central ethical capacity is not optimization but differentiation. A subject becomes more free not because it has finally achieved the correct identity, but because it can suspend the automatic equivalence between the norm, desire, necessity, and selfhood. This is precisely the kind of differentiation through which a practice of freedom may cease to reproduce the terms that initially captured it.

6. From Care of the Self to Care of the City

The political significance of the late Foucauldian project becomes clearest when care of the self is connected to parrēsia. In *The Government of Self and Others and The Courage of Truth*, Foucault shows that truth-telling is not only a private ethical exercise. Parrēsia concerns a relation among the speaker, truth, risk, and political authority. The subject who speaks frankly does not simply communicate information; it places its position at stake by challenging a relation of power. This is why the movement from care of the self to care of the city should not be treated as a late supplement to an otherwise individualist ethics. It is the condition under which self-care becomes political rather than merely therapeutic. An individual who becomes more resilient without acquiring the capacity to contest the conditions that generate exhaustion may have improved its coping capacity without changing the social relation. A collective that develops forms of truth-telling, mutual accountability, and shared control over the conditions of reproduction, by contrast, changes the field in which individual self-practice acquires meaning.

This distinction allows a more precise political criterion for evaluating contemporary technologies of the self. A practice deserves to be regarded as emancipatory not merely when it reduces subjective distress or increases a sense of agency, but when it expands the collective capacities through which persons can alter the relations that govern their lives. The criterion is therefore relational and political. The ancient example should not be romanticized: Foucault's own genealogies demonstrate that ancient ethical practices were embedded in exclusions and hierarchies and were far from universally accessible. The point of returning to antiquity is not to recover a lost golden age of self-care. It is to recover the historical contingency of the ways in which truth, conduct, pleasure, obligation, and civic responsibility have been linked. Once contingency becomes visible, the present loses some of its inevitability. Yet the Lacanian and Marxian interventions remain necessary because contingency does not imply voluntarism. Historical arrangements can be changed, but subjects may remain attached to them, and the material costs of transformation may be unequally distributed.

The political horizon therefore requires moving from individualized resistance toward collective reorganization of social reproduction. If market dependence compels subjects to treat themselves as projects of continuous investment, then a politics of care must address the conditions that make such investment necessary: employment insecurity, unequal access

to education and housing, debt, organizational cultures of constant availability, and the distribution of time. This does not abolish individual practices of care. It changes their political status. Rest can become a collective right rather than a productivity technique; education can become a social provision rather than an individual investment in human capital; therapeutic resources can become part of public infrastructures without turning every social contradiction into a personal deficit; digital systems can be governed as public or cooperative infrastructures rather than as private engines for attention and behavioral prediction. The shift is from self-management to shared conditions of possibility.

Such a politics also changes how psychoanalysis enters critical theory. Its function is not to diagnose everyone as secretly enjoying domination, which would merely reproduce the moralism of the superego in critical form. The psychoanalytic contribution is to ask how collective subjects become attached to their own forms of identity, loss, recognition, and fantasy, and why emancipatory alternatives can provoke anxiety as well as hope. Political projects fail not only because of external repression but because the subject may fear what it would mean to lose the position it occupies within the existing symbolic order. This insight is especially relevant to neoliberal subjectivation because the entrepreneurial self can become an identity through which fragility is denied. To abandon endless self-investment may therefore feel like losing not merely a strategy but a self-definition. A politics of care must consequently address the subjective forms through which structural change becomes imaginable. It must create social spaces in which dependence is not interpreted as personal failure, and where collective provision does not signify the collapse of individual agency.

The implication is a conception of care that is neither privatized nor paternalistic. Care of the self remains indispensable because political action requires subjects capable of reflection, sustained attention, truthful speech, and forms of discipline not dictated entirely by external command. But care of the self becomes politically adequate only when it is linked to the care of the conditions under which selves are produced. Foucault's parrēsia provides a bridge because it makes truth-telling a practice that transforms the relation between self and the political order. The Lacanian account of desire prevents this bridge from becoming a new moral ideal of the 'good citizen'; the Marxian account of abstract domination prevents it from becoming a politics of symbolic recognition without material redistribution. Taken together, these limits yield a demanding conception of collective autonomy: the capacity of persons to participate in changing the institutions, infrastructures, and social relations that shape what they can become.

Conclusions

The argument developed here can now be stated without the need for a grand reconciliation of Foucault and Lacan. Foucault's late philosophy demonstrates that subjectivity is not simply imposed from outside; subjects are formed through practices by which they work on their bodies, conduct, thoughts, and relations to truth. This makes technologies of the self indispensable for understanding contemporary forms of governance because neoliberal

power can operate by requiring subjects to become active managers of their own capacities. Yet, the Foucauldian account becomes more conceptually precise when confronted with Lacan. The subject who performs ethical work is not fully transparent to itself; desire is not identical with conscious preference; fantasy does not simply misrepresent reality but organizes a scenario in which the subject's desire becomes livable; jouissance can attach subjects to repetitive practices that they explicitly criticize; and the Real names the point at which the subject's symbolic self-description fails to close the structure that sustains it. These concepts do not invalidate genealogy. They mark the limit at which genealogy must confront the non-coincidence of the subject with its own account.

The turn to Marxian theory then marks a second necessary limit. Even a subject that understands its own ideological and libidinal investments may remain materially compelled to participate in the relations that structure social reproduction. Mau's mute compulsion clarifies why contemporary self-optimization cannot be treated merely as a psychological response or an ideological illusion. Market dependence, competition, debt, and institutional allocation of opportunities create conditions under which individuals are required to behave as self-investing agents whether or not they endorse the corresponding norms. Tomšič's reconstruction of Marx and Lacan shows why the material and libidinal registers can nonetheless be articulated: capitalist reproduction and the unconscious are not identical systems, but Lacan's Marxian references illuminate how surplus, drive, and social relation can be formally connected within capitalist discourse. The consequence is a tripartite model in which historical subjectivation, libidinal investment, and material compulsion remain analytically distinct.

This model is deliberately not presented as a metaphysical synthesis. It is a method of constrained articulation. Historical analysis determines which practices, norms, and truth procedures are available. Psychoanalysis determines why the subject's relation to those practices cannot be reduced to explicit belief or conscious preference. Political economy determines why the field of possible action is unevenly structured by material necessity. Each register corrects a predictable error in the others. Genealogy without desire may overestimate reflexive agency. Psychoanalysis without political economy may psychologize structural dependence. Political economy without genealogy may underestimate the historical specificity of the forms in which necessity becomes a lived identity. Their combination is therefore productive precisely because it leaves differences intact.

Recent research confirms that this problem is no longer confined to abstract theory. Educational selection can be experienced as individual self-management; workplace authenticity and competition can transform structural inequality into projects of personal development; therapeutic culture can translate institutional contradictions into tasks of emotional regulation; quantified technologies can turn self-care into continuous comparison; and generative AI can become part of autobiographical and reflective practices. These developments indicate that the contemporary technology of the self is increasingly infrastructural. It is not only a matter of individual routines. It is organized through databases, metrics, platforms, organizational performance systems, algorithmic recommendation, and market-dependent institutions. The question 'Who am I becoming?' is increasingly

mediated by systems that also ask ‘How well am I performing?’ and ‘According to which metric?’. The ethical problem is therefore inseparable from the politics of the infrastructures through which self-relation is produced.

The late Foucauldian move toward parrēsia and the care of the city provides the final corrective. Care of the self cannot remain an individualized project of resilience or optimization if the conditions of self-formation are collectively produced. A critical politics of the self must therefore move from private adaptation toward collective transformation of the relations that organize work, education, debt, health, time, and technological mediation. This does not require abandoning individual ethical practices; it requires preventing them from becoming substitutes for political change. The most promising reading of technologies of the self is thus neither celebratory nor denunciatory. It is diagnostic. A practice becomes emancipatory when it creates capacities for subjects to alter their relation to norms, truth, and one another without translating structural necessity back into personal failure. It becomes governmental when it converts the effects of structural relations into obligations for the individual self. And it becomes politically transformative when care of the self contributes to forms of collective truth-telling and collective control over the conditions of social reproduction.

The central thesis can therefore be formulated in a deliberately restrictive way: contemporary technologies of the self should be analyzed as sites where three heterogeneous determinations intersect without becoming identical – the historical production of forms of subjectivation, the libidinal organization of desire and enjoyment, and the material compulsion of capitalist social reproduction. The point is not to prove that Foucault was secretly a Lacanian, that Lacan provides a hidden theory of neoliberalism, or that Marxian compulsion reduces ethics to economics. The point is to establish the conditions under which these theories can illuminate one another while preserving their conceptual differences. Such a constrained articulation yields a more demanding conception of autonomy. Autonomy is neither a natural property nor a market capacity. It is a situated and precarious achievement whose possibility depends upon the subject’s ability to recognize the histories that formed it, the desires and fantasies through which it is attached to its position, and the material structures that delimit its choices. In this sense, the critical task is not to manufacture a better self. It is to make possible a form of collective life in which subjects are less compelled to experience the conditions of their own social reproduction as private defects of the self.

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