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Technologies of Individualism: Remaking Subjectivity in an Age of Crises

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Abstract

This article addresses the contrast between collective and individualistic responses to crises. While liberal individualism was instrumental in an environment of capitalist competition and free trade between states, it is dysfunctional in a world where global threats require cooperation and mutual consideration. To address this problem, the article investigates the forces that shape individualist subjectivity. These began in ideas, developed into ideologies through law and economics, and then shaped the infrastructure of everyday life: finance, debt, transport, urban form, and communications media. The key technological revolutions of the past one hundred years or so have shaped detached individualism. The mass-produced automobile, and the associated suburban development that it facilitated, contributed to physical dispersion of people and groups, splitting them off from each other. Digital communications have further split people from real, physical groups, instead aggregating them into virtual communities of big data. This has fragmented social contacts and attachments, by separating people off from the known communities within which decisions can be made and actions framed. These separations cumulatively lead to splits within the person, of cognition from intention, of deeds from consequences. Subjectivity is splintered. The conclusion turns to existing and possible future counter-tendencies that enhance more collaborative forms of being together. These include the critique of liberal ideology; building an ethics and politics of conviviality; resisting privatisation and debt, while promoting the common and cooperative; reasserting access and equity in housing and urban space; and re-embodying subjectivity.

***Keywords**:* Individualism; urbanism; ideology; technology; subjectivity; privatisation.

1 Introduction: The Problem and Outline of the Inquiry

New social challenges have upset political, social and legal assumptions reaching back centuries in the Western tradition. Notions of individual responsibility and personhood that arose in the early Christian era have been amplified, beyond theology, through philosophy and politics to law and economics. From the laissez-faire liberalism of the nineteenth century, to the neoliberalism of the late twentieth, individualism became a pervasive ideology. It has influenced aspects of life from legal decision-making to the construction of our subjectivity: who we are.

While this ideology and its real-life ramifications were well suited to the development of capitalism and the liberal state, they are manifestly inadequate to the crises of the twenty-first century: climate change, mass extinctions, environmental pollution and pandemics. Responses to twenty-first century crises have sought answers from climate science and medicine, as well as from conspiracy theories and fundamentalist religions. Among these various responses, we can identify two broadly distinct approaches to social and political responses to crises. This division is between collective responses, based on a sense of social solidarity, and responses that repudiate a broader sense of social wellbeing, and are based on narrow individualism.

This article attempts to see how ideological assumptions—whether individualist or collective—manifest in social activity, through the lens of conceptions of the self: are we individual or communal beings? The research presented here enquires into the construction of subjectivity, different forms of which affect how we see ourselves and how we relate to others, between the poles of individualist and collectivist orientations. It asks, what accounts for this subjectivity? Or put another way, what *produces* it?

Subjectivity is produced in parallel with other social structures, including technology and ideology; infrastructure and superstructure.[1] That is to say, who we are, and the ways we see ourselves, derive from deeply ingrained traditions and patterns of social thought, as well as from the structures and devices that mediate between us. These include legal and financial institutions and the settings and opportunities for socialisation, whether physical or communicative. In this context, the technologies of our social lives include the infrastructure of law, courts and banks; of communications media; and of urban and domestic gathering places and transport options to move between them.

'We're all in this together' was one of the great clichés of the coronavirus pandemic. While this slogan was useful in emphasising the need for collective responsibility, it was empirically untrue. In reality some social groups were far safer than others. Both between and within nations there have been vastly different levels of risk, disease and death between rich and poor: those with access to vaccines and good health care and those without; those who can isolate comfortably and those in precarious work and crowded or inadequate housing. Such inequalities are familiar from the outcomes of natural disasters, which are increasing in frequency and severity under the impact of climate change.

Many of the world's most disadvantaged are always at greater risk of death from famine or civil conflicts, and disasters bring this inequality into particularly sharp focus.[2] Not only are the vulnerable more likely to suffer from disasters, whether caused by extreme weather or new diseases, but also the rich and powerful are able to exploit this suffering, financially or politically. 'One man's disaster is another man's marketing opportunity' was a slogan adopted by the Prefabricated Building Manufacturers Association for their exhibition after the southern Italian earthquake of 1980, which killed 4,000 people.[3] Hurricane Katrina was exploited mercilessly by developers, politicians and economists with a range of motivations, from the 'ethnic cleansing' of New Orleans to the privatisation of school education.[4] Leaving aside vaccine manufacturers (to which I will return), many pharmaceutical and medical supply companies saw the Covid pandemic as a market opportunity. On the other hand, self-help, neighbourhood assistance and impromptu or ephemeral benevolent organisations and actions spring up in adversity.[5] These different sorts of response may derive from the nature of people's relationships: neighbours are more likely to help spontaneously; remote corporations are more likely to seek profit.

Responses to the Covid-19 pandemic ranged from selfless and collective to selfish and individualist. This divergence was seen at the level of government policies and the reactions of political movements. Most nations of the western Pacific, whether liberal or authoritarian, pursued public health strategies that relied on community solidarity, restraint and social responsibility: Taiwan, Korea, Japan, China, Vietnam, Singapore and Australia, as well as New Zealand. This was often accompanied by restrictions on movement and border controls and, at least in the early stages, lesser reliance on vaccination. An emphasis on 'personal freedoms' against mutual protection was typically found among authoritarian and populist leaders, such as Bolsonaro's Brazil and Trump's United States. Falling between the extremes of the western Pacific and the Americas, Sweden and the United Kingdom were the European countries that most explicitly shunned public health preventive measures. In these two countries, ineffective collective approaches were accompanied by heavy emphasis on vaccination.

Reliance on sophisticated and expensive vaccines is another illustration of the power of market opportunities in the face of disaster. Boris Johnson made this explicit when he said, in March 2021, 'the reason we have the vaccine success is because of capitalism, because of greed, my friends'.[6] Three months later the United Kingdom declared 'Freedom Day', abolishing public health regulation in favour of 'personal responsibility'. Social psychologist Stephen Reicher responded that, 'it is frightening to have a "health" secretary who wants to make all protections a matter of personal choice when the key message of the pandemic is this isn't an "I" thing, it's a "we" thing'.[7]

Contrasting approaches of collective mutual protection versus personal responsibility and minimal interference in behaviour and commercial activity have also been seen in opposing political forces within nations. In contrast to widespread support for public health measures, we saw concerted campaigns of disobedience to and demonstrations against public health orders, such as mandated masks, or limits on public gatherings. Participants in these protests, and their supporters in social and mainstream

[1] Lazzarato, Signs and Machines, 50–51.
[2] Blaikie, At Risk, 3–4.
[3] Blaikie, At Risk, 207; Lanzara, "Ephemeral Organizations," 73.
[4] Klein, Shock Doctrine, 410.
[5] Lanzara, "Ephemeral Organizations."
[6] Allegretti, "Covid: 'Greed' and Capitalism." Naturally this was opposed by public health workers and advocates, who felt that their motives ('greed') had been impugned and their roles neglected. The economist Mariana Mazzucato, in "Capitalism," pointed to the massive role of public research institutions and government money in developing the vaccines. The vaccine developed by Oxford University and manufactured by AstraZeneca at least recognised this debt by limiting profits.
[7] Geddes, "UK Scientists Caution."

media, represented a disturbingly wide range of beliefs, from anti-5G groups opposing mobile data networks to QAnon conspiracists. Neo-Nazis marched alongside hippie anti-vaxxers. Mélenchon's La France Insoumise lined up with Marine Le Pen to oppose Macron's vaccination pass as a precondition of participating in many public activities.[8] Out of such diverse movements and paradoxes, can we identify a basis for these divisions between collective, society-wide approaches, and a more individualist, even selfish, approach?

This paper explores strategies for problematising this duality to understand a social ontology of different ways of being in the world. It assumes not an opposition or even a dialectical relationship between the material and the symbolic but, rather, a continuity of social operations. That is to say, it enquires into the mutual interactions of material, cognitive and above all social factors that make us, and our communities, what we are.

After tracing the rise and increasing influence of individualist ideology, in the following section, this inquiry turns to various technologies of self that operationalise it in subjectivity. The ideological structures of law, economics and politics that emphasise individualism in the most theoretical terms also give rise to institutional technologies, social mechanisms with bite. Through property law, privatisation policies and financial instruments, a population can effectively be fragmented into a matrix of indebted individual owners. Since our debts, like our possessions, accrue to us as individuals, and as these take over more and more of our life-world, individualism gains the power to reign as the default mode of subjectivity. In contrast to deepening financial debt, data-driven individualism encourages a quest for limitless personal credit, in the form of 'likes' and 'friends'. The striving for narcissistic credit goes hand in hand with permanent financial debt.

The rise of motor vehicles, suburbia and information technology has been built on legal and financial instruments promoted by the primacy of individual rights and private property at the expense of all other social and political values. In turn, these tangible technologies of transport, urban development and communications media reinforce the ideological basis of individualist subjectivity. The connections between these technological, legal and ideological forces are not random historical correlations, but are entangled in webs of causality and agency.

Having analysed the factors leading to dysfunctional responses to collective crises, the conclusion turns to existing and possible future counter-tendencies that enhance more collaborative forms of subjectivity. These include the critique of liberal ideology; building an ethics and politics of conviviality; resisting privatisation and debt, while promoting the common and cooperative; reasserting access and equity in housing and urban space; and re-embodying subjectivity.

2 Ideology of Individualism

Individualism has a long and powerful hold on Western thought. In this section I will briefly sketch the long path of individualist hegemony, from its origins in Christian theology, through Enlightenment philosophy, to political and economic liberalism and finally to its culmination in law and in economics in the United States in the late twentieth century.

Early Christian thinking understood the individual to be merely the substance that housed the rational nature of man: '*naturae rationalis individua substantia*', in the fifth century formulation of Boethius.[9] Yet by the time of Descartes' '*cogito ergo sum*', the knowing subject is the foundation of individuality. In identifying the knowing subject as mind adrift from body, experience, or any collective, Descartes' 'new subject of science' became '*esprit*', the new metaphysical subject: the fundamental building block of humanity. 'In its fundamental purity, the Cartesian subject is nothing but the subject of the verb, a purely linguistic-functional entity.'[10] In Edmund Burke's rhetorical critique of the French Revolution, Descartes leads directly to the 'unconnected individuals' of the Encyclopaedists and Jacobins.[11]

The subject of law would, over time, also follow the path of individualism. In the mid-seventeenth century, Hobbes invoked the supra- and super-individual Leviathan as a legal guarantee of order in a world that would otherwise be locked in a 'war of each against all'. In contrast to Hobbes's authoritarian solution to the legal problem of taming individual self-interest, Locke's nascent liberalism saw laws as a condition of freedom, consistent with the shared interests of citizens. In this early modern political philosophy and jurisprudence, social order had itself been problematised by the new centrality of the individual. Order was to be justified first by a super-individual sovereign, and then by a legal order relying on common interests.

[8] Henley, "France Achieves Record Covid Jabs."
[9] Bettetini, Figure di verità, 113.
[10] Agamben, Infanzia e storia, 16.
[11] Urbinati, Liberi e uguali, 46.

It was not until a hundred years later that theorists such as Bentham conceived freedom in negative terms, so that any law impinges on individual freedom.[12] At this turning point, from positive to negative notions of freedom, the individual becomes the sole repository of rights and freedoms. No longer are common interests to be defended, nor is the broader scope of the legal subject, as a being worthy of respect and capable of development. The focus shifts from the subject to the 'object of law. … The particularity of an individual as developed by the exercise of his or her subjectivity is left out of account.'[13]

In economics, the classical notion of the economic actor as a self-interested individual developed out of Adam Smith's more nuanced work. Like Hobbes and Locke a century before him, Smith was trying to reconcile the obvious social facts of collective life and the common good with the newly conceived individual.[14] Smith imagined a background state of lawlessness ('savage and barbarous nations'[15]), rather like Hobbes's primordial war. The individual, wrote Smith, continually works 'to his own advantage … and not that of society'. Even so, by introducing the fiction of the 'invisible hand', the individual's self-interest is turned to the advantage of society.[16] The notion of self-interest was significantly amplified by the late twentieth century. Milton Friedman's neoliberalism emphasised only the constraints of law, and sought to cast them off: 'Rather than journeying through Smith's "savage and barbarous nations" where there was no Western law (no longer a practical option [by the 1950s]), [Friedman's] movement set out to systematically dismantle existing laws and regulations to recreate that earlier lawlessness.'[17]

The 'law and economics' movement, as exemplified in the Chicago school, completes the development of individualism as an ideology. This movement can be traced back to the origin of the term 'individualism' in the political and ideological ferment of post-revolutionary France. Tocqueville found this new term a good fit with his observations of *Democracy in America*, whose first English translator found it necessary to explain that he had to use the French term *individualism* for want of any English equivalent.[18] The term was first applied pejoratively to mental habits and modes of social relations—roughly equivalent to the ways of being-in-the-world described in this article as forms of 'subjectivity'. It became an 'ideology' through the work of Hayek and its influence during the Cold War, 'when … individualism came to be proposed as a doctrine in support of liberalism'.[19] Neoclassical economics aligned with neoliberal legal and political philosophy to promote radical libertarianism in the United States, and the 'Washington Consensus' on unrestrained capitalism abroad. Politically, individualism gained traction through Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, key proponents of unrestrained political individualism in their respective countries. Recall Thatcher's famous denial that there was even such a thing as 'society'.

Ideological individualism found its full expression and power in the triumph of the market as a political and legal (and not merely an economic) force. Underpinning this shift was the ideological move from seeing the free market as a scientific description of particular economies, to an existential imperative.[20] Brown shows how the US Supreme Court, from the 1970s to 2010, took up the struggle to bring market forces into the polity as fully fledged legal operators, overwhelming the power of real, individual citizens. In this 'legal assault on social solidarities and identities … neoliberal law [is] erasing democratic subjects and their instruments of power'.[21]

The expressions of individualism in philosophy and economics have been hugely influential as ideas, ultimately translated into case law with the conversion of the US Supreme Court. The path of individualism, from pejorative to affirmative, and of market forces, from economic description to political force and legal power, ends in the remaking of subjectivity. In economics, as in law, the late twentieth century individual becomes a hollow caricature, a bundle of rights in their own self-interest. No longer a member of a commonwealth or community, but an object of oppression, or a buccaneer who breaks free of all constraints. We are left with the problem of how we might think, deliberate and decide collectively, rather than as an aggregation of atomised individuals.

To explain the visceral grip of individualism as a way of being, a practice of subjectivity, we must move from ideology to technology, from superstructure to infrastructure. Stimulated by feminist critiques of liberalism and the masculinist subject of

[12] Pettit, "Freedom with Honor," 63–70.
[13] Kerruish, "Persons and Available Identities," 169.
[14] Williams (Keywords, 163) identifies Smith as one of the first writers in English to use 'individual' in its contemporary sense as a single member of a human social group.
[15] Quoted in Klein, Shock Doctrine, 241.
[16] Quoted in Mazzucato, Value of Everything, 36ff.
[17] Klein, Shock Doctrine, 241.
[18] Tocqueville commented that the United States was a country where they studied Descartes less but followed him more (than in France). Urbinati, Liberi e uguali, 38–39.
[19] Urbinati, Liberi e uguali, 53.
[20] Urbinati, Liberi e uguali, 83.
[21] Brown, Undoing the Demos, 154.

law, this task is approached through analysis of intervening technologies of power and the self. Real alternatives exist in affect, creativity, connectivity and embodiment as sources of subjectivity, to which the conclusion returns.[22]

The studies above show how individualism, beginning from loose theological and philosophical notions, ultimately permeated economics, law and politics to achieve unprecedented power in the West. The following section shows how economic and legal individualism, when embedded in institutions and social practices, has combined social and material technologies of everyday life to shape subjectivity.

3 Technologies of Individualisation I: Debt, Mobility and Urban Form

This section and the next explore two complex assemblages of legal, material and social arrangements that have been instrumental in promoting individualism by moulding personality. The first of these involves the legal and financial arrangements of debt, mass production and housing finance that promote individualised forms of property, mobility and gathering. The second technological complex traces the evolving story of communications media from print to electronics, with their profound implications for individualised subjectivity.

The capacity of urban life to shape our personalities was first explored by Simmel in 1903. His 'Metropolis and Mental Life' contrasts the slow pace and intimate affective relationships of small town life with the over-stimulation and impersonal financial and rational demands of life in a big city. Another century on, rationalism, quantification and financial imperatives continue to dominate urban life and have penetrated deeper into the non-metropolitan hinterland.

How does twenty-first century urban life compare with the affective and sociable elements of earlier ways of living? A central technology in Simmel's analysis was the ubiquity of the pocket watch as a universal means of coordinating social and economic life, entrenching quantification and punctuality.[23] If today's functional equivalent is the mobile phone (to be considered in the following section), the impact of private transport on physical mobility and the structure of cities is even more central to the following analysis. Forms of mobility and opportunities for face-to-face encounters have been revolutionised since the dawn of the twentieth century. Private cars and scattered suburban form are the physical manifestations of these technologies; private property, finance and debt are their legal and financial drivers.

The right to property is fundamental to liberal law. More and more things have passed from the status of commons, to state ownership and operation, to individual private property. Two examples are seen in land and in transport systems. The struggles for the commons, particularly in the eighteenth century in Britain, saw land pass directly from informal common ownership to titles of exclusive rights. In Australia, land held in care for tens of thousands of years by a network of First Nations was first appropriated by the Crown of the colonisers, and then divided up as grants among the settlers. Urbanisation and the demand for housing has seen these estates successively subdivided into smaller and smaller parcels, for individual family homes and then into rights to cubic metres of space in multistorey dwellings, with the passage of laws allowing 'strata title' (in the Australian terminology). Mobility, originally on public roads and pathways and predominantly by foot, was subsequently collectivised onto privately or publicly owned rail networks, and then into individually owned motor cars. Developments in each of these cases—land and transport—were facilitated and stimulated by legal mechanisms of land title, vehicle ownership and registration, and mortgage and debt.

The financial mechanisms of home mortgages and consumer credit supercharged these property relations and their social impact, leading to increased sums of money being spent on cars and housing. This has led to cheaper cars and more expensive houses. Mass production, economies of scale and consumer credit have put car ownership within reach of the majority in the rich countries. Applied to the finite resource of land, increasing credit ('financial stimulus') poured into housing has massively inflated the cost of dwellings, to the extent that they are getting beyond the reach of the majority in many countries. Let us see now how urban form, property in cars and housing, and debt have impacted on ways of being in the world.

Until the rapid development of telecommunications (subject of the following section), the technologies with the greatest influence on conviviality and social relations were the structures of towns and cities, and the communications that circulated within them. Relationships were largely face-to-face, and encounters depended upon public and private spaces, and the means to access them. Hence they depended on buildings—the church, mosque or other religious or civic buildings, relationships between private spaces in neighbourhoods (which may have been more or less intimate or dispersed, diverse or homogeneous), and the streets, squares and marketplaces.

[22] Hunter, "Contesting"; Weir, Identities and Freedom, 134; Nedelsky, "Embodied Diversity," 93, 106.
[23] Simmel, "Metropolis."

Beyond the significance of places, we must recognise the importance of mobility.[24] The motor car and suburbia form another important intermediate socio-technological assemblage, between the 'classical' public sphere and the fragmented individualist society. From the late nineteenth century until the diffusion of mass-produced private vehicles in the mid-twentieth century, cities were delimited by rail and tram links. These technologies extended urban social networks beyond a single limited walking distance, through collective modes of transport. These rail lines connected networks of walking neighbourhoods that encompassed living, working and commercial activities. All of these social functions had to take place within walking distance of a limited public transport network. Railway lines allowed development remote from traditional city centres, based on shopping streets and meeting places: pubs, coffee shops or churches. These satellite centres created a new face-to-face network, which was less extensive and more fragmented than the old town centre. In the early suburbs of this era people still clustered in networks of face-to-face communities for work and social communications. The era of tram- and rail-line construction promoted rapid urban development, and most cities have large consolidated areas that can still function in this way.

The subsequent mass uptake of private vehicles led to the rapid increase of dispersed and far-flung suburbs. In this model of urban development, public transport gave way to road networks requiring private vehicles. Dwellings on individual plots of land promoted an ideological attachment to 'private home ownership … and … the creation of a spatial form maximising private and minimising public space'.[25] The individualising effect of this urban form was clear to Mumford: as 'the trees and gardens vanish under further pressure of population, … the sprawling, open, individualistic structure, almost anti-social in its dispersal and its random pattern, remains'.[26] Its antithesis to social contact was remarked by Lefebvre, who wrote as early as 1974 that new suburbs provided the 'lowest possible *threshold of sociability*—the point beyond which survival would be impossible because all social life would have disappeared'.[27] Butler notes the applicability of this observation to Australian suburbia.[28]

In contemporary cities space is 'shattered into images, into signs, into connected-yet-disconnected data directed at a "subject" itself doomed to abstraction'. Space becomes the mirror through which 'the "subject" passes … and becomes a lived abstraction'.[29] Lefebvre's insistent quotation marks around this subject-that-is-not-a-subject point to the need to reinvent and remake ourselves as beings, up from the ground of the abstracted space of the city. This imperative is addressed in the conclusion to this inquiry.

The antisocial and individualist forces that are fostered in dispersed suburbs have driven and, particularly since the global financial crisis, been driven by social inequality. While the middle and creative classes gentrify the central areas of cities, the working classes are relegated to the periphery.[30] Debt ties individuals ever more firmly to the dictates of finance capital. Between Bourdieu's observation that capital is the accumulation of (past) labour,[31] and Marx's that it is a claim on future labour,[32] debt decisively tips the balance. Continually renewed debt, from student loans to massive mortgages, lays claim to the productive working life of practically every individual. We are now defined not just by our rights, to liberty or property, but by our debts. This gives others (financial corporations or governments) rights over our time, our earning capacity, and our most essential assets, such as housing.

These claims arising from financial capital, and specifically from debt, lead to a new, hybrid form of governmentality. While loans are generally made by private corporations, the currency in which they are written is only meaningful if it is guaranteed by government. This is a twofold role, of issuing sovereign funds, and guaranteeing their solvency—the latter most starkly seen in the global financial crisis of 2008, when governments rushed to bail out banks.[33]

[24] Sheller and Urry criticise the 'sedentarist' bias of much sociology for 'its failure to examine the significance of the car': "New Mobilities," 209.
[25] Butler, "Reading the Production of Suburbia," 20.
[26] Mumford, Highway and the City, 234.
[27] Lefebvre, Production of Space, 316.
[28] Butler, "Reading the Production of Suburbia," 20.
[29] Lefebvre, Production of Space, 313–314.
[30] In the period of public health 'lockdowns' and distancing to avoid infection, this centralising tendency went centrifugal. The privileged, who earn good money working from home, leapfrogged the isolated outer suburbs, straight from accessible inner-city locations to attractive rural and coastal areas. This has driven up house prices to the detriment of the 'locals' who already lived in those areas without access to well-paid urban jobs. There is ample evidence of this across Australia, most starkly seen in the Byron Shire of the New South Wales north coast.
[31] Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital," 241.
[32] Marx, Grundrisse, 326
[33] Lazzarato, Governing by Debt, 127.

Cheap cars, expensive houses, and the dispersed suburban city have fragmented the collective subjects of neighbourhoods and political gathering. Related financial arrangements have entrenched geographical inequality, which readily becomes persistent and intergenerational. This has implications for political options, as illustrated in France. 'Pushed out to the geographical margins of the urban spaces, the workers can no longer demonstrate in the heart of town.'[34] Todd links this displacement to former French President Hollande's exclusion of the Front National from the 'neo-republican pact' highlighted in the '*Je suis Charlie*' demonstrations.[35] This exclusion might be seen as a precursor to the *gilets jaunes* and anti-vaccine protests which, as noted above, appeared to unite supporters of both Le Pen and Mélenchon. Excluded from the polity, these neglected classes find little sense of reciprocal care with society at large.

In the early stages of the Covid-19 crisis, citizens were subject to strict laws of movement and assembly modelled on the 'calculative exactness', which Simmel attributes to money's dominance of urban life, 'transform[ing] the world into an arithmetic problem, to fix every part of the world by mathematical formulas'.[36] Rates of infection within populations became part of an epidemiological formula translated into restrictive health orders. The already fragmented individuals, particularly in the most disadvantaged zones of cities, were ravaged by a little-understood disease and subject to intensive policing.[37] Affective social bonds, already weakened by the mathematics of the money economy, were severed from any broader community and turned back behind closed doors. Physical separation, begun in suburbia and ending in lockdown, compounded political exclusion. Those groups already deprived of a legitimate place in the polity veered towards pariah political movements (as in France or the United States) or unpredictable individualism, seen in Australia and the Netherlands.

4 Technologies of Individualisation II: Media

We have been considering subjectivity as it is formed out of the social structures and relationships that exist and develop within the infrastructure of everyday life. Traditional forms were the natural phenomena that guide conduct and survival (the stars, or the contours and features of country); the feudal manor, church, mosque or temple; or the ceremonial ground, public square or other gathering places, and other built forms of a city. Technologies of mobility and communication are central to characteristic forms of sociability. They influence who we communicate with, and how we communicate. Face-to-face communication and art—paintings, dance, monuments—have dominated for most of human history. We have just seen how mobility and urban form influence social interactions. Now we turn to the development of communications media.

Written orders, manuscripts and messages expanded communication to remote places and across generations. Printing and postal services diffused and sped up this communication. Some shifts in social communications have been studied more intensively than others by the social sciences. Consequently we can identify a couple of high-profile turning points. Two in particular have been in dialogue with each other since the late twentieth century: the 'public sphere' as identified by Habermas, and the 'information society',[38] more recently and critically referred to as 'surveillance capitalism'[39] or 'computational capitalism'.[40] Habermas's new bourgeois public sphere grew out of the social assemblage of newspapers and coffee houses of eighteenth century Europe.[41] As workshops became factories, and guilds gave way to industrial unions, political, social and economic life was transformed. These structures were overtaken by the technological revolutions of the twentieth century, which reach into the twenty-first. The new dominance of individualism, traced to the material foundations of the mass-produced motor car and the suburbs it spawned, was compounded by electronic communications, the internet and social media.

The context in which we communicate—a newspaper in a coffee house, a discussion in a public square, a family discussion or telephone conversation, a social media thread—informs the impact of the information as well as the community we identify with. Whether we are addressed as an individual or as part of a crowd or a community affects how we react and how we experience our being in the world. The intervening politics and economics of the media are also important, signalling our degrees of choice, and the extent to which we are, in turn, under surveillance. Laws determining access and rights to our own records, whether census data or intelligence and security files, profoundly influence our sense of autonomy and privacy.[42] Our opportunities, intentions and decisions play out on the field of social relations inscribed in communications.

[34] Todd, Qui est Charlie? 100.
[35] 'La catégorie bien réelle des ouvriers n'est la bienvenue à l'heure du pacte néo-républicain.' Todd, Qui est Charlie? 101.
[36] Simmel, "Metropolis," 412.
[37] Examples were seen in the selective restrictions applied to public housing blocks and municipalities in Melbourne and Sydney, respectively.
[38] Splichal, "Civil Society."
[39] Zuboff, Age of Surveillance Capitalism.
[40] Stiegler, Age of Disruption.
[41] Habermas, Structural Transformation, 20, 32–33.
[42] Vismann, Files, 149–150.

In contrast to the sparse, but rewarding, literature on the role of suburbia in the production of individualised subjectivity, there is a deluge on the information society, information and communication technology, and social media. Much of this research and commentary discusses the information content and reliability of social media. This is not my focus here; instead it is on the impact of digital communications and social media on subjectivity and belonging, following a path from the notion of computational capitalism to that of algorithmic governmentality.[43]

It is possible to find precursors of these developments in the increasing importance of information between the classical age of the public sphere from the eighteenth century onwards, and the digital revolution at the end of the twentieth century. As literacy increased, newspapers and affordable books spread more widely throughout society. Advertising and efforts to influence opinion reached an industrial scale, bringing together the interests of capital (industrial as well as publishing) and politicians,[44] those of the political class as well as the representatives of various subaltern and emerging classes. No longer the exclusive domain of scribblers and bourgeois dilettantes, diffused information became power. As advertising progressed from the nineteenth to the twentieth centuries, the commercial value of information increasingly overlapped with its political value.

The power of print media to disseminate information, some of it directed to encouraging various forms of action (whether as consumers or political actors), increased and dispersed throughout this period. In the process it built audiences, as reliable sources of revenue and as socio-political formations. Particular newspapers, then radio stations and television networks, had their followings, their editorial policies and their political agendas. Those agendas aligned with and moulded those of their audience, having the potential to form blocs. This has traditionally been most explicit in a country like Italy, with its array of newspapers aligned with political parties, workers' unions, employer organisations or the Church. Blocs of audience affiliation and loyalty are still evident in the mass media of the English-speaking world, from Fox News to *The Guardian*. Their centralised organs of collection and dissemination of news play to the expectations, politics and identity formation of their audience, who know who they are, and what they expect of their preferred media or news source.

Digital communications and social media have disrupted this socio-political structure through their new modes of dissemination of information. This is more horizontal than the centralised media of newspapers or television. It is structured in deep and opaque ways. The appearance of horizontality derives from the ability of all users to post, link and paste information from a multitude of sources. Yet the information is also packaged by algorithms in the hands of leading social media companies and search engines. This is a two-way but asymmetrical process. The power of Meta/Facebook, Alphabet/Google or Microsoft/OpenAI to direct targeted information to particular audiences derives from their incessant surveillance of their users' accounts. If, in the twentieth century, you chose to pay a few coins to a newspaper vendor, you knew where your money went and what to expect in return. Each purchase was a conscious reaffirmation of affiliation or trust. The political messages were packaged to be recognisable, as editorials or as news from a known perspective, and the advertising was also clearly identifiable. Any action you took as a consequence—what to buy, or how to vote—was mediated through a process of conscious intention and more-or-less informed choice.

The new forms of social media are fluid with regard to identity formation: we only know that we align with certain individuals or avatars, not an identifiable or institutional bloc. Nor are our actions mediated through an intentional process. Indeed the whole passage, from material need to information to intention to action, is initiated in a digitally curated dream world of phantomatic desires: we do not know where they come from, or even whose they are. This can be seen in Instagram posts of desirable experiences. The desire lies in the image, not in the experience, neither of the one taking the photo, nor the one receiving/viewing it. Hence, people are propelled to emulate the image, whether through relationships, gastronomy, or location. To place oneself in the location where the same selfie can be taken—or perhaps an even more desirable one—leads people into dangerous and even life-threatening situations: the edges of cliffs, or flooding tidal pools.[45] They follow the Pied Piper of the image into these situations with no comprehension of consequences, because those were not in the picture.

Stimulated by these curated image-desires, reflex individual actions prompted by algorithms are called 'automatic protentions'.[46] Automatic protention entails the human execution of a project based on an algorithm. In traditional thinking-acting, memories (or 'retentions') and desires come together with intentions to form 'protentions connecting … what just now happened … with what may be expected to happen immediately'.[47] A project is executed with conscious will in the immediate

[43] So, beyond the passing references above to Splichal and Zuboff, this analysis limits itself to elucidating arguments that run from Stiegler through Rouvroy.
[44] Habermas, Structural Transformation, 190–195.
[45] Tullis, "Overcrowded Death Trap," 3.
[46] Stiegler, Age of Disruption, 25.
[47] Schutz, Collected Papers, 109.

time of acting. The *automatic* protention, on the other hand, derives not from our own internal 'database' of memories, but from that of the algorithm (i.e., the sum of data that has been entered by all previous users, including ourselves). This experience is familiar from a streaming service, that which automatically plays the next film or the next song based on our previous clicks, and those of countless others. Protention is automated across other spheres of action and experience when the consequence follows from the algorithm, and not from our own conscious program of action mediated through memory and desire. These new pathways of information to action are able to short-circuit autonomous concept- and project-formation. We are prompted to actions based on algorithms and digital devices, not on our conscious weighing-up of need or desire, cause or effect. We lose connection to our own past, intention and volition. Thus we lose touch with these connections to collective experiences, of learning, relating to others and taking account of their reactions. With our actions and projects cut off from the broad context of knowledge, experience and milieu, we become detached from ecological, biological and human reality.

All those connections are collapsed into a process that Rouvroy calls 'algorithmic governmentality', which is 'a mode of governing behaviour which feeds on raw digital data in massive quantities. … Its devices work on humans by provoking reflexes, rather than by promoting their capacities of understanding and free will.'[48] She concludes that this liquidation of the 'forms through which we govern ourselves [threatens] the possibility of the *political* "project" and survival of *subjects*'.[49] Subjectivity is deprived of autonomy and fails to recognise its agency, including the possibility of collective projects. It is hard to identify, or to identify with a collective of anonymous online entities, or even to recognise them as human.

5 Conclusions: Remaking Subjectivity

This inquiry into the links between technologies and the production of subjectivity has shown the influence of various spatial and communication technologies. In communications, this ranges from documents to newspapers to social media. Direct face-to-face communication is mediated by the spatial context where it occurs: ceremonial spaces, coffee shops, suburbs and homes are all relevant elements of the built technologies that frame communications. My thesis here is that the key technological revolutions of the past one hundred years or so have contributed to forms of detached individualism. The mass-produced automobile, and the associated suburban development that it facilitated, contributed to physical dispersion of people and groups, splitting them off from each other. Digital communications have further split people from real, physical groups, instead aggregating them into virtual communities of big data. This has fragmented social contacts and attachments, by separating people off from the known communities within which decisions can be made and actions framed. It has physical as well as social effects, mediating contact with reality so that the human body is separated from its physical and natural as well as its social environment. These separations cumulatively lead to splits within the person, of cognition from intention, of action from protention, of deeds from consequences. Subjectivity is splintered.

This analysis could be taken to suggest the inevitability of the rise of hyper-individualism. That is always a risk in seeking origins and causes, not to say 'determinants', of political phenomena. Yet forces may be resisted, and understanding them is a necessary step to doing so. My concluding remarks, then, will focus on ways to break out of determinism, and to find alternative strategies to resist and even reverse increasing individualism. This is both an intellectual and a political imperative.

This inquiry has identified the following forces that need to be resisted:

- Persistent and persuasive ideological (disguised political) arguments, notably in law and economics, backed by well-resourced and powerful interests
- Financial and legal arrangements that promote privatisation, the fetishisation of property, and debt
- Privatisation of transport and dispersal of urban form, with consequent loss of opportunities for gathering and organising
- Fragmentation of social relationships and masking of personal decisions and responsibility
- Material alienation of bodies and practices from ecological, biological and human reality

First, then, it is important to muster and disseminate arguments against ideologies promoting individualism. This includes the classic move of calling out ideologies by unmasking them as self-interested and deceptive. The present paper is offered as a contribution to this critical project. It has shown the origins of individualist ideologies in time and place. By showing how those ideologies were developed to serve specific interests, at the expense of the common good, it continues a project of intellectual and political critique.

[48] Rouvroy, "Vie n'est pas donnée."
[49] Rouvroy, "Governing without Norms," 101.

Rouvroy urges the necessity of 'building a critique not from the past but from the future that has not arisen'.[50] So, in addition to criticism, it is important to elaborate and invent an ethics and politics of connection and conviviality. Further research and practical action are required on the ethical foundations of collective solidarity, which could draw on religious, philosophical and feminist sources.

The critique of legal and economic ideologies of individualism can help the recognition of the dangers of privatisation and debt. A twenty-first century struggle to defend and extend what remains of the commons is imperative. Dardot and Laval have argued for the place of subjectivity in this 'revolution of the twenty-first century':

> Only the practical activity of people … can make things common. Likewise, it is only this practical activity which can produce a new collective subject, who is very different from the subject who could exist before this activity, the [individual] subject seen as [just] a bearer of rights.[51]

We need to develop the myriad ways our communities are strengthened by and rely on sharing and cooperation. We find security, support and pleasure in public space and in the structures of civil society. We can be so much more than passive owners, mere shareholders in the state. These changes in experience and in activity open the possibility of a new subjectivity: indeed they demand it.[52] Practical ways to advance these aims include favouring collective organisations over private capital—for example cooperative non-profit banks, and enhancing the options for gatherings in public, communal space. The critique of debt can be sharpened in particular campaigns, such as housing affordability, or student debt and the costs of education. Lazzarato has demonstrated the soul-destroying impact of continuing debt, beginning with education costs and student loans: 'we must change the sense of the unpayable by quite simply *not paying*.'[53]

Our physical connectedness in public space has been challenged by the persistence of the individualistic urban form of suburbia, shopping malls and motor vehicle dependence. Calls for 'social' distancing to limit airborne viral infection suggest limits to enhancing conviviality. However, given the advantages of open air, good public health practices can work towards re-establishing social connections in public spaces. 'Opening up' as we emerged from the pandemic was vocally urged by narrow commercial interests: they meant shops and bars. We can urge *opening up* to fresh air and public space. Campaigns for active transport and walkable cities also promote collective sociability hand in hand with better public health. The broad perspective of urban form continues to be vitally important, so that public space is preserved and protected from the most anti-convivial forces of roads, car parks and private motor transport (however it is fuelled). Housing equity was brought into sharp focus first through public health 'stay at home' orders and then through the rapid inflation of housing costs. Affordability and equity continue to be central to a program of collective wellbeing if the poor are not to be increasingly pushed into overcrowded housing on the periphery of cities. As we have seen, this dispersal deprives people of the means and places to gather, deliberate and organise. Those should not be a privilege of the rich in the inner cities.

At the opposite extreme to this isolation there are gatherings in public—whether protests, festivals or carnivals—which contribute to our happiness and sense of belonging.[54] This belonging works both ways, as we were reminded by the veteran Australian unionist Fred Moore: 'when the workers take to the streets, the streets belong to the workers.'[55] Likewise, during a street festival, we can walk freely and together in public, without fear of cars or unknown threats. We belong to a place, we belong together, we walk and talk together, the place belongs to us. While building communal celebration, we also learn to look out for those experiencing fear, insecurity and isolation.

The hollowed-out rights-bearing individual of liberal law and the avatar of digital data can be overcome by being re-embodied in public, as suggested here, or dialogically, as Rouvroy puts it, 'becoming subject through enunciation, identity performances [and] self-overcoming'.[56] In reconnecting with each other, we need to reconnect with our bodies and the natural systems that sustain us. The hyper-individualism of avatar armies is not the self-centredness of a biological individual. It is the delusion of a mob that can only connect through the false solidarity of algorithms which, as we have seen, short-circuit any links between desire, deliberation and action. Subjectivity can only be remade through realising our biological needs and desires, understanding how they can be nourished by the planet's finite resources, and working together sustainably.

[50] Rouvroy, "Reimagining a 'We'," 127.
[51] Dardot, Commun, 49.
[52] Mohr, "Public, Private, Common."
[53] Lazzarato, Governing by Debt, 90 (emphasis in the original).
[54] Segal, Radical Happiness, 69.
[55] Mohr, "Public, Private, Common."
[56] Rouvroy, "Reimagining a 'We'," 130.

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