

SOCIAL NETWORKS AS DISPOSITIVES OF NEOLIBERAL GOVERNMENTALITY

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ABSTRACT

This article of theoretical reflection investigates the social networks that emerge in the context of Web 2.0, such as Facebook, as dispositives of neoliberal governmentality in the sense proposed by Foucault. From the standpoint of government of self, the design of social networks establishes a competition for attention that tends to favor the neoliberal culture of performance. In terms of social organization, the way in which users intertwine their connections is paralleled by the neoliberal paradigm of spontaneous market order. Furthermore, the use of personal information on these users, encompassing all their activities within the networks, in order to set up databases to attract advertisers reflects the neoliberal tendency of colonization of the different realms of existence by economic forces. However, the tensions that accompany neoliberal governmentality in social networks reveal its limitations, opening the possibility for these networks to also act as instruments of resistance to neoliberalism.

Keywords: Social networks, governmentality, neoliberalism, Foucault.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of neoliberalism, especially when considered from a Foucauldian perspective, as a governmentality scheme that unfolds as government of self and others, is a theoretical tool that gives a comprehensive account of many aspects of contemporaneity. On the other hand, the relatively recent ascent, in the context of the commonly named "Web 2.0", of social networking dispositives such as Facebook is a phenomenon that condenses in an exemplary manner subjective, social, economic and political dimensions of our time. This paper proposes to use this theoretical tool to understand these dispositives, an approach that constitutes an intersection between studies of neoliberalism and studies of social networks.

The crisis of 1929 and the subsequent adoption of interventional solutions, from the New Deal in the United States to Nazism in Germany, signals the collapse of liberalism. Coming together in 1938 at the Walter Lippmann Colloquium in Paris, a group of intellectuals, including those associated with the Austrian School, such as Mises and

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Hayek, and with German ordoliberalism, such as Röpke and Rustow, organize around the banner of a then so-called “neoliberalism.” Albeit an heir of the classical liberalism of Locke and Smith, the utilitarianism of Bentham and Mill, and the marginalism of Jevons, Menger, Walras and Marshall, this movement is one of renewal. After World War II, neoliberal theorists discard this label while at the same time organizing around think tanks funded by corporations, entering a long period of accumulation of forces at the margins of the then prevalent Fordist/Keynesian model.

In the late 1960s, the signs of exhaustion of this model coincide with the decline of the Protestant ethic (Weber, 2016), the disciplinary society (Foucault, 1993) and the great narratives of modernity (Lyotard, 1979). The combination of these various phenomena paves the way, in principle, for major changes. Since revolutionary processes that crystallize around 1968 fail, this offers the opportunity for the upsurge of the neoliberal model.

The abandonment of the Bretton Woods Agreement in 1971 gives rise to the liberalization of capital flows and the flexibility of national regulatory frameworks. In Latin America, the military dictatorships of Pinochet in Chile and Videla in Argentina serve as laboratories for neoliberal experiments of economists nicknamed “Chicago Boys.” The coming into power of Thatcher in the United Kingdom, in 1979, and of Reagan in the United States, in 1981, heralds the beginning of the international predominance of neoliberalism. Its spread rests, from 1989 onward, upon the programmatic platform known as the Washington Consensus, which has the endorsement of the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the US Treasury Department, all three located in this city. With Clinton and Blair’s Third Way, in the 1990s, parties that formerly led the Fordist/Keynesian model place themselves at the forefront of neoliberalism, and resistance to it seems to fade away.

Transformative impulses of the 1960s are channeled into the enterprise (Boltanski, Chiapello, 1999), the consumer world (Frank, 1997), and the Internet (Rheingold, 1994; Dery, 1998). More than a political and economic model, neoliberalism is, ponders Couldry (2010), a culture with its own contours. Hall (2011, p. 722) acknowledges that this culture vies against others, but points out that, “in ambition, depth, degree of break with the past, variety of sites being colonized, impact on common sense and everyday behaviour, restructuring of the social architecture, neoliberalism does constitute a *hegemonic project*” (ibid., p. 728, emphasis in the original).

This does not mean that neoliberalism is monolithic or homogeneous. In fact, it does not exist anywhere in pure form. Apart from the fact that it splits into several theoretical strands, none of its empirical manifestations (the so-called “actually existing neoliberalism”) lives up to the theory, invariably calling for some kind of compromise. As Harvey (2005, p. 19) remarks, the utopian reorganization of capitalism preached by neoliberal ideologues goes hand in hand with the design of further concentrating power among the elite, and in practice the latter takes precedence. Moreover, hegemony does not mean the absence of opposition. In a letter to Hayek, Thatcher (1982) readily admits that: “I am sure you will agree that, in Britain with our

democratic institutions and the need for a high degree of consent, some of the measures adopted in Chile are quite unacceptable." Owing to the gap between theory and practice, the neoliberal project is a work perpetually in progress; there are always territories left to be conquered, in the form, for instance, of austerity measures to be reiterated or interventionist traits to be fought over and over again. Ultimately, it is a project necessarily incomplete, impossible to be fully consummated. And with its flexible protean nature, neoliberalism continually evolves in response to contradictions in which it is entangled, resistances it arouses, crises it elicits, and changing conditions in general.

It is true that signs of a possible decline in its hegemony have begun to emerge in recent years. Economically, the crisis of 2008, the most severe the capitalist world has experienced since 1929, which was only partially squelched, lays bare the contradictions of the model. Politically, the performance of the Trump and Sanders campaigns in the US presidential primaries in 2016 and the referendum in June 2016 in which the majority of UK voters opted to exit the European Union underscore the increasing predicaments of the neoliberal establishment, which struggles to maintain popular support. However, in the absence of alternatives to neoliberalism with enough weight and scope, its hegemony tends to linger.

At this point, it is helpful to resort to the concept of governmentality, conceived in broad terms by Foucault (2004a, p. 92) in his 1977-1978 course at the Collège de France: "How to govern oneself, how to be governed, how to govern others, by whom one must agree to be governed, what to do to be the best possible governor?" In the next course, delivered in 1978-1979, on *The birth of biopolitics* (Foucault, 2004b), this notion is employed to specifically investigate neoliberalism, which therefore encompasses both the government of self and the government of others. What characterizes neoliberal governmentality, according to his diagnosis, is the extension to all spheres of life of a business rationality founded on competition.

Governmentality coheres with another of Foucault's notions, the dispositive (from the French "*dispositif*," also translated as "apparatus"). This is a particular arrangement (disposition) of elements that conditions (disposes to) certain practices. In principle, the term is used in a very general sense: the dispositives of law, or discipline, or security. It may, however, designate particular mechanisms, such as specific disciplinary dispositives. Thus, Agamben (2006, p. 23), working with this notion in line with Foucault, takes the Internet, among other examples, as a dispositive. In the same vein, mechanisms developed within the Internet, such as social networks, can also be considered dispositives.

Since its origin in 1969, under the name Arpanet, the Internet has been established as a horizontal network in terms of its physical structure. In pioneering studies prior to its creation, Paul Baran even draws attention to the advantages of decentralization in the event of a nuclear war. Its decentralized nature also marks the Internet as a medium that relies on services such as e-mail (1971), mailing lists (1975), Usenet (1980) and Internet Relay Chat (1988). In contrast to the distribution from one to many (broadcasting) of mass media such as radio and television, computer-mediated

communication – including other networks alongside the Internet, such as bulletin board systems (BBSes) and online services like CompuServe, AOL and Prodigy – tends to be interactive, enabling each user to be both a sender and a receiver.

The World Wide Web, which goes into operation in 1991, quickly becomes the main service of the Internet, boosting its popularity. In its early years, although it has some interactive features, the Web consists mainly of hypertext pages with static content. This state of affairs changes with the emergence of blogs (in the late 1990s), sites like Wikipedia (2001) and YouTube (2005), and social networks like Friendster (2002), LinkedIn (2003), MySpace (2003), Orkut (2004), Facebook (2004), Twitter (2006), and Instagram (2010). They make up the Web 2.0, characterized by the active participation of users in content creation, magnified by the enormity of the user base: in March 2016, Facebook, the largest social network, has 1.65 billion active users (Facebook, 2016), i.e., nearly a quarter of the world's population.

The historical coincidence between the advances of the Internet and of neoliberalism involves a common technological substrate, since the intensification of international capital flows starting in the 1970s, which undermines national economic policies and paves the way for the success of neoliberalism, is supported not only by deregulation but also by information and communication technologies. In addition, Internet progress requires strong ingredients of innovation and entrepreneurship, which bring exponents of this industry closer to neoliberalism, a bond synthesized by the “Californian Ideology” (Barbrook, Cameron, 1996) and explored in the documentary *All watched over by machines of loving grace* (directed by Adam Curtis, 2011). The expansion of dot com companies also contributes to the financial speculation typical of neoliberalism, creating a bubble in the late 1990s, when their shares show a strong hike, followed by a sharp decline in 2000-2001.

This paper, however, undertakes a bolder connection. Based on certain of their characteristics, the intention is to demonstrate how social networks operate as typical dispositives of neoliberal governmentality. This is obviously no coincidence, because both managers and users of these networks are immersed in neoliberal culture and therefore tend to reproduce it. The parallel between the functioning of social networks and neoliberal governmentality is investigated in four parts. First, I examine how social networks represent an environment conducive to a culture of performance that distinguishes neoliberal subjectivity as government of self. I then show how the horizontal and decentralized structure of networks is in line with the neoliberal mechanisms of government of others. Furthermore, I analyze the economic dimension of governmentality embedded in these networks, since their content is the object of commercial exploitation. Finally, I consider points of tension between social networks and neoliberal governmentality, and the possibility that they also represent spaces of resistance.

SUBJECTIVE DIMENSION OF GOVERNMENTALITY

Although its germ is already present in the theoretical antecedents of neoliberalism, it is in neoliberalism itself (especially in the Chicago School) that the concept of human

capital appears explicitly and assumes crucial importance. Theodore Schultz (1961, p. 3), who receives the Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences in 1979, states that “laborers have become capitalists [...] from the acquisition of knowledge and skill that have economic value.” And the point is not simply to hold that capital, but to invest it with a view to endlessly enlarging it. “Activities that influence future monetary and psychic income by increasing the resources in people,” explains Gary Becker (1993, p. 11), Nobel winner in 1992, “are called investments in human capital.” For him, these investments partake in the incessant calculation that underlies our choices (in terms of ethics, health, business, etc.) and involves comparing costs and benefits and evaluating probabilities.

Based on the tenet of investment in human capital, Foucault (2004b, p. 232) conceives the neoliberal subject as “an entrepreneur of himself.” In other words, the neoliberal government of self is basically equivalent to an entrepreneurship of self. In the same way as neoliberalism in general is a work in progress, always promoting, for instance, less interventionism or greater austerity, the neoliberal subject continually strives to optimize his performance in all sectors. This amounts to a true “cult of performance” (Ehrenberg, 1991). Being an entrepreneur of oneself means to see oneself as a business. And “a society made up of enterprise-units” (Foucault, 2004b, p. 231) results from the sum of the individual efforts.

Social networks provide a showcase for the entrepreneurial self in other areas of life. Moreover, they are themselves a microcosm of neoliberal society, representing, by dint of their design, a specific arena for the exercise of entrepreneurship. Networks establish among their members a market of attention and spur competition within that market. In the case of Facebook, this feature is present since its inception, when founder Mark Zuckerberg, a student at Harvard, creates a precursor site, Facemash, which displays side-by-side photos of two students chosen at random for the visitor to select the more attractive of the two. But competing for attention in Facebook’s *modus operandi* goes beyond simply drawing more attention on the news feeds of others; the very presence of posts from a user on the news feeds of others is contingent upon a number of factors that are not entirely clear, but can be influenced by his level of engagement.

The culture of performance in social networks assumes many forms, unfolding into injunctions of connectivity, visibility, agency, plasticity, accomplishment, enjoyment, measurability, and normativity.

The injunction of connectivity refers to the social pressure not only to be registered on and to log in to networks, but also actively participate in them. Given that certain types of interactions occur only in that space, whoever remains on the outside is condemned to certain isolation. Being permanently connected is the necessary condition both to monitor what happens to others and to report one’s own experiences from one moment to the next. Connectivity also refers to one’s popularity, or social capital, which is reflected in the number of contacts and interactions. As it is associated with the entrepreneurial self, connectivity does not imply the strengthening of community ties, but has rather the opposite effect (Castro, 2016b).

Connectivity teams up with visibility. This means to have a conspicuous presence, which can be related to the “conspicuous consumption” in Veblen (1918). To stand out amid the cacophony of information in networks, one must resort to frequent and impactful manifestations, which consolidate a personal brand. Therefore, each user will gradually build a lifestream, i.e., a temporal succession of biographical material that works as a summary of one’s life. A phenomenon linked to the search for visibility is the proliferation of self-portraits, or selfies, which is simultaneous to the vogue of social networks, where many of them end up being exposed. In good measure, visibility means self-promotion and therefore has a component of narcissism (Castro, 2009).

The injunction of agency is manifested by way of interactivity, which, albeit a feature of the Internet since its inception, is generalized through the ease of access and use enabled by social networks. In contrast to the typical passivity of television audiences, the network user is called upon to respond in different ways to the multiplication of stimuli, either because other users expect feedback from him or because the very architecture of networks induces this response. He thus becomes an entrepreneur of his online image.

Even if someone assumes his true identity in social networks, as it is usual and stimulated by them, an injunction of plasticity is imposed on him. On the one hand, he blends into the same profile contacts from different circles that pertain to various types of external identifications. On the other hand, the wish to assert his presence prompts him to reveal different and sometimes unusual aspects of himself.

The injunction of accomplishment is an aspect of the other injunctions, to which it refers. For the subject, the point is not only to follow the other injunctions but to stand out while doing so, by engaging in these tasks and taking each injunction as if it were a means of competition. In other words, this is a more general injunction which is at the heart of the idea of performance, alluding to the intensity of this performance.

Also more general is the injunction of enjoyment, which corresponds to the “imperative of enjoyment” noted by Lacan (1975, p. 10). In the case of social networks, this consists in exhibiting an image of achievement, of happiness. In addition, a design is used that seeks to promote a positive environment: the rapprochement of users based on criteria of affinity theoretically minimizes conflicts; in the case of Facebook, there is no disapproval button, as opposed to the “like” option, and the rejection of requests for friendships or the unmaking of friendships is not reported to the affected users and is therefore not easily perceived. However, empirical data show a recurring impression in Facebook that others are more successful and happier than we are (Chou; Edge, 2012), generating what the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) calls “Facebook depression.” The continuity between the injunctions of accomplishment and enjoyment leads Dardot and Laval (2014) to coin the expression “performance/pleasure apparatus.”

The injunction of measurability is also linked to the others. Ultimately, the neoliberal concept of human capital involves the idea of calculability of human actions and attributes. In the case of social networks, this appears in the form of reputation

metrics encompassing the number of friends, likes, shares, comments, etc. By the simple expedient of providing these numbers, networks encourage users to follow them, pursue them and compete with others for them.

Finally, the injunction of normativity indicates that network users are subject to the normativity expressed in the entire series of injunctions. This is a generic normativity, in some ways a normativity without norms. There is no blueprint of identity to be followed, and normativity here simply refers to the pursuit of performance in terms of connectivity, visibility, agency, etc., allied to a search for validation that is anchored in this performance.

SOCIAL DIMENSION OF GOVERNMENTALITY

Neoliberalism celebrates the entrepreneurial self while simultaneously regarding society with reservations. Hayek (1988, p. 114) criticizes this term and especially the adjective “social,” which he considers “has probably become the most confusing expression in our entire moral and political vocabulary.” This is not a purely theoretical issue but has concrete policy implications in that, in principle, it invalidates the concern for the social in general and therefore the discussion about social change. In this regard, Thatcher’s famous statement that “there is no such thing as society, there are only individuals and families” is telling. However, there is a kind of social organization that entices the attention of neoliberal thinkers, which they see as a paragon of government of others: the market. This is why Milton Friedman (cited by Postrel, 2004) considers Hayek “the most important social thinker of the 20th century.”

A market feature highlighted by Mises is the measurability of value. He notes, based on Pareto that the preference for one thing may be manifested as greater, equal to or less than the preference for another, but cannot be pinpointed by any absolute measure. Furthermore, he argues, relying on Menger, that the subjective use value of a good for one person cannot be compared with the subjective use value of the same good for others, since these are individual phenomena. According to Mises (1990, p. 10), the relativity of value can only be overcome through the measurement inscribed as exchange value, “which arises out of the interplay of the subjective valuations of all who take part in exchange.”

Hayek, in turn, stresses the limits of human knowledge, deducing from it another feature of the market, the distribution of information. For him, the mental apparatus of man evolves in continuous interaction with his surrounding environment, but his ability to perceive this environment only reaches a certain extent. Much of our knowledge, including that which we take advantage of in the market, is tacit and circumstantial – we know something, but are unable to formulate exactly what we know. The market benefits from the possibility of using such widespread tacit knowledge and also from the fact that its changing circumstances impose a steady adaptation and thus a constant improvement of knowledge. “The knowledge of the circumstances of which we must make use never exists in concentrated or integrated form but solely as the dispersed bits of incomplete and frequently contradictory knowledge which all the

separate individuals possess" (Hayek, 1948, p. 77). For him, therefore, the level of information of an authority responsible for a centralized economic planning does not equal the sum of the information of all the individual agents.

Making use of this information depends on the coordination of dispersed arrangements. For Mises and Hayek, following a tradition that goes back to Adam Smith and passes by Menger, such coordination tends to spring relatively spontaneously from the agents of action, but not from their planning. Only "what is required is some apparatus of registration which automatically records all the relevant effects of individual actions and whose indications are at the same time the result of, and the guide for, all the individual decisions. This is precisely what the price system does under competition" (Hayek, 2007, p. 95). Due to the system's capillarity and interconnectedness, a change in economic conditions at some point tends to be quickly captured and transmitted to others. Thus, the anarchy that many critics attribute to the market is only apparent, because the price mechanism serves as a beacon for the emergence of a rational order that has the potential to significantly overcome any attempt at deliberately engendering order.

The idea of a spontaneous market order, however, does not imply the passivity of the state, which for different neoliberal currents, with some variations, accomplishes an important task in creating the conditions for the establishment of this order. German ordoliberalism enshrines competition as a core principle, but believe it does not come naturally and therefore needs to be induced. "The free market requires an active and extremely vigilant economic policy" (Röpke, 1962, p. 261). Writing about government's ideal scope, Friedman (2002, p. 2) asserts that "its major function must be to protect our freedom both from the enemies outside our gates and from our fellow-citizens: to preserve law and order, to enforce private contracts, to foster competitive markets." Hayek also wants to restrain the state, at the same time that, under the influence of Schmitt (with whom his thinking maintains an ambiguous relationship), he opens the door to its authoritarian role (Cristi, 1984; Scheuerman, 1997).

The neoliberal conception of government of others is related to a change in scientific paradigms. In Adam Smith, who wrote a history of astronomy, the idea of an "invisible hand" is associated with the Newtonian cosmological model. Marginalism, in the intermediate position between classical liberalism and neoliberalism, reflects the changes in 19th century physics (Mirowski, 1989). Neoliberalism, in turn, emerges in connection with scientific developments in the mid-20th century, which provide it with tools to think about market and society. The first book on game theory, *Theory of games and economic behavior*, published in 1944, was a collaboration between mathematician John von Neumann and economist Oskar Morgenstern, who, while in Austria, had been a student of Mises and had succeeded Hayek as the director of the Institute for Business Cycle Research. In 1947-48, another former Mises student, Bert Hoselitz, taught the only economics course that John Nash attended and influenced the latter's work on the Nash equilibrium, which earned him the Nobel Prize (Kelly, 2009). In 1955, Hayek (2014, p. 211) relates his own work to the fact that "the advance of the sciences penetrates further and further into more complex

phenomena,” referring to “cybernetics, the theory of automata or machines, general system theory, and perhaps also communication theory.”

There are in Hayek some elements that allow one to draw a parallel between the functioning of the market and the Internet. He sees the market as a “communication system” (Hayek, 1990, p. 34) and more specifically as a “communication machine” (ibid., p. 303), and associates the spontaneous order of the market to “self-regulating systems” designed “200 years before cybernetics” (ibid., p. 11). His defense of the advantages of the dispersion of knowledge among multiple agents exerts a direct influence on the design of Wikipedia, whose founder Jimmy Wales (cited by Mangu-Ward, 2007, p. 21) states that “Hayek’s work on price theory is central to my own thinking about how to manage the Wikipedia project.” But the prototype of the neoliberal ideal of governmentality embodied in the market is provided by social networks.

If market players, in competition for gains, generate records in the form of prices, social network users, vying for attention, generate records in the form of statistics on their activities. Like prices, these statistics are the result of individual decisions and at the same time serve as guidelines for them. Therefore, a kind of pricing of the interests of each user takes place in networks. Like the state vis-à-vis the market, managers in social networks seek to streamline their operation, stimulating competition and thus empowering the spontaneous order established among agents. In the case of networks, their managers, through algorithms, bring together people and issues based on relationships of affinity. This operation enables the contents displayed to each user to be directed, thereby increasing the user’s propensity to value them. If contents are exposed to those with the greatest potential to take an interest in them, this means that efforts, translated into these contents, to attract the attention of others tend to be more successful. That is, to compete for attention becomes more interesting.

If the subjective dimension of neoliberal governmentality in social networks involves a normativity without substance – what matters is a measure of performance, not its content –, its social dimension also does not apply to exactly determined individuals. Neoliberalism coincides with the passage of the disciplinary society, associated with the fixity of identity, to control society, in which identity is more flexible; one results from molds applied through institutions, the other is built through modulations (Deleuze, 2003, p. 242). In social networks, this is done through the injunction of plasticity of identity and also by way of management of the extracted data, which is abstracted from each individual. The individual is fragmented into data parcels, “dividuals” (ibid., p. 244), which are then rearticulated with fragments of other individuals in multiple combinations.

The comprehensive capture of data from each user through social networks is a step within a control strategy. “One does not need science fiction to conceive a control mechanism which gives, at any instant, the position of any element within an open environment” (ibid., p. 242). This step is complemented by algorithmic data management. Making inferences from the past accumulation of data, algorithms

modulate future behavior, in line with a Foucauldian formulation (2001, p. 1056): "To govern, in this sense, is to structure the possible field of action of others." If I have several friends in common with another user, it is likely that I know him or have an interest in adding him as a friend; if I enjoyed several posts of someone before, it is likely that I will do it again. The vectorization of knowledge, which departs from something given in order to anticipate trends, constitutes an individual probabilistic logic that is part of a collective probabilistic logic. In this respect social networks, with their algorithmic structuring of the social, resemble the dynamics of speculative financial markets, particularly the dynamics of derivatives (Amoore, 2011).

Articulating a large volume of data over time, network algorithms are able to capture facets of the subject of which he himself is unaware of. And while some neoliberal theorists, such as Hayek, are critical of psychoanalysis, the fact is that, in a way, Lacan anticipates this trend in the 1950s, a period of his teaching marked by the strong influence of game theory and cybernetics. Inspired by a passage from Poe's short story "The purloined letter," he discusses strategies that may be used in the odds and evens game. We can, for example, follow the order of the letters in the verses of a poem, assigning evens to consonants and odds to vowels. But even if we do not stick to a deliberate order, our unconscious tends to follow certain patterns – as Freud (1941) shows in *Psychopathology of everyday life*, if someone asks us to say any number within a certain range, this number is not chosen randomly but results from a number of associations. Thus, states Lacan (1966, p. 59), "it is not unthinkable that a modern calculating machine, by deducing the phrase that, unbeknown to him and in the long term, modulates a subject's choices, is able to win beyond any usual proportion in the odds and evens game." However, his view about this theme is rather bleak, for example when he mentions "the most modern of machines, far more dangerous for man than the atomic bomb, the calculating machine" (Lacan, 1978, p. 111).

ECONOMIC DIMENSION OF GOVERNMENTALITY

If human capital founds the subjective dimension of neoliberal governmentality and the market underlies the social dimension of neoliberal governmentality, it is because neoliberalism involves the colonization of everyday life by the economy, its subsumption to the capital circuit. "It is [...] above all in economics that we encounter the universally valid science of human action," states Mises (2003, p. 18). Describing his own path, Becker (1976, p. 8) states that, in view of his work and the work of others, he eventually concluded that "the economic approach was applicable to all human behavior." In other words, neoliberalism resumes the concept of *homo oeconomicus* of the 19th century, with the difference, pinpointed by Foucault (2004b, p. 232), that he was then a trade partner and is now an entrepreneur of himself.

The rise of neoliberalism coincides with the promotion of workers' agency, exemplified by Toyotism (Ohno, 1988), Theory Y (McGregor, 1960) and the "new spirit of capitalism" (Boltanski, Chiapello, 1999). Technological developments, including the Internet, further enable flexible working processes. Consumer agency is promoted as

well, through an advertising rhetoric that emphasizes complicity with the consumer, technologies through which he acts as an entrepreneur of himself, and the call to social responsibility in his attitudes, besides interactive mechanisms (deployed in e-commerce) that suggest an increase in his participation (Castro, 2015). The business flexibility championed by neoliberalism finds a parallel in the flexibility of the Internet, which, for Microsoft's Bill Gates (1996), would allow a "frictionless capitalism," a quintessentially efficient market according to Adam Smith's standards. The neoliberal colonization of life by the economy is illustrated by online devices such as dating sites, whose users are arranged as commodities in a shop window and draw on marketing resources to hype themselves (Castro, 2014).

All these elements – user agency, flexibility, and commodification – have to do with the economic dimension of governmentality in social networks. The point here is to show how the neoliberal scheme of government of self and others operative in the networks lends itself to economic exploitation. If, in social networks, statistics play a role similar to that of prices in the market, ultimately they can literally turn into prices. To the extent that values, even those in principle non-monetary, are associated with activities and connections within the network, translating them into monetary values requires just one more step. The typical social networking business strategy is to convert users and their productions into data streams, inserting them into different packages and selling them as targets of advertising. This means an expropriation of the content freely produced by the users (Fuchs, 2012).

In the early days of the Internet there is already a vast production of content by users, via services such as e-mail, mailing lists and newsgroups, but this is hardly suitable for commercial use, apart from spamming. Economic exploitation thus occurs through BBSes and online services, which charge customers for access. With the advent of the Web in the early 1990s, content production concentrates on it, under the umbrella of large corporations. Storage services for personal pages such as Geocities (1994) and search engines such as Yahoo! (1995), Altavista (1995) and Google (1998) earn revenue from advertising. In the following decade, social networks somehow privatize the Web, each one creating its own boundaries and granting access only to registered users. According to Berners-Lee (2010), inventor of the Web and advocate of its openness and interconnectedness, a site like Facebook works as a "closed silo of content." This enables much greater corporate control over user-generated content, formalized in terms of service that must be accepted upon registering, and facilitates the monetization of that content. In the "battle of the new enclosures," to use the expression coined by Boutang (2012, p. 98), theorist of cognitive capitalism, the situation of corporations that control social networks tends to be more fortunate than that of the owners of certain copyright protected materials, such as movies, songs and books, which are often distributed illegally at no cost. The social networks themselves, in fact, are enriched with external material provided by users through links and shares, a practice which creates friction with news organizations.

It is worth noting that the huge mass of data collected about users can be used not only to attract advertisers but also in other businesses. Google, for example, which

provides maps, satellite images and data on the location of its users, takes advantage of this to invest in the transport sector. The diversification of investments fulfills a strategic mission, as a counterpart to the possible decline of the main activity – a possibility that, as the history of technology, and particularly of digital technology, shows, is quite plausible. And to the extent that the possession of a large volume of data can be economically exploited in various ways, another important strategic move is to expand this volume through acquisitions, as Facebook has done with WhatsApp.

TENSIONS AND RESISTANCE

Although neoliberal governmentality is a key to the interpretation of many aspects of the functioning of social networks, it does not suffice to explain this functioning. There is a remainder in the form of tensions and resistance, which may become very important and must be borne in mind.

Since the dawn of the Internet, attempts to build social spaces have inevitably given rise to seeds of conflict, appearing, for example, in the form of flame wars. The typical design of social networks theoretically minimizes the chance of quarrels, inasmuch as it directs interactions by grouping them according to affinity criteria. “Filter bubbles” (Pariser, 2011) are thus created, leading to a Balkanization of the online experience. It’s the same logic of fragmentation as that found in today’s consumer tribes. This separation sometimes works quite effectively. The day after the referendum in the UK approved the exit from the European Union, British activist Tom Steinberg (2016, emphases in the original) posted: “I am actively searching through Facebook for people celebrating the Brexit leave victory, but the filter bubble is SO strong, and extends SO far into things like Facebook’s custom search that I can’t find anyone who is happy *despite the fact that over half the country is clearly jubilant today* and despite the fact that I’m *actively* looking to hear what they are saying.”

This, however, is not a guarantee of harmony, because the environment in the groups that isolate themselves becomes more conducive to intolerance and hatred against outsiders. On the other hand, the separation does not always work, due to some heterogeneity in ties from various walks of life (family, work, etc.), and conflicts then become explicit. So, in one way or another, the lesson of psychoanalysis applies here: what is repressed somehow simply returns. As Mouffe (2005) argues with respect to more general institutional arrangements, the neoliberal attempt to impose a technocratic consensus of a post-political nature ultimately results in more violent antagonisms, like the police-state backlash against terrorism, precisely because of the lack of an adequate political structure of mediation.

But there is also a dimension of resistance to neoliberal governmentality, which in Foucault (2001, p. 1061) is intertwined with it, because “there is no power relationship without resistance, without a loophole or escape, without a possible turnaround.” Operating simultaneously in multiple fronts, through advances and retreats, it is something more consistent than the simple antagonism: “Rather than an essential ‘antagonism,’ it would be better to speak of an ‘agonistic’” (ibid., 2001, p. 1057). In the case of social networks, even if their design favors the culture of performance,

they can be used for collaborative activities, which have a long tradition on the Internet. And among the various possible ways of collaboration is mobilization around a cause. If in modernity society was structured in masses and today is structured in networks, the latter also started being fundamental tools of political mobilization (Castro, 2016a). Social networks become a central tool in the Arab Spring, the Occupy Wall Street, the Spanish "*indignados*" movement, and the Brazilian Autumn. A *Newsweek* reporter classifies events in Egypt as a "Facebook revolt" (Giglio, 2011). And an unidentified Egyptian activist, in a post intensely replicated on Twitter, stated that: "We use Facebook to schedule the protests, Twitter to coordinate, and YouTube to tell the world." Furthermore, the very organization of these movements is inspired by the horizontality and flexibility of networks. Interestingly, during a meeting of the G8, Zuckerberg (cited by Bradshaw, 2011) tries to distance Facebook from the relationship with these movements, with an eye on its own business strategies: "I think that Facebook was neither necessary nor sufficient for any of those things to happen. I do think over time the Internet is playing a role in making it so people can communicate more effectively and that probably does help to organize some of these things. If it weren't Facebook it would be something else."

Perhaps, at this point, we can use Laclau's (2005) concept of populism, which involves a relationship of equivalence among various demands, unified around an empty signifier, and of opposition to an adversary, establishing what Mouffe (2005), who relies on Schmitt's critique of liberal democracy, calls "agonistic pluralism." In the decentralized structure of movements grounded in networks, these traits are often present (see the 99% vs. 1% formula of Occupy), but unification is relatively fluid. They constitute, therefore, a kind of weak populism that can gain traction though, if a relatively horizontal movement like the "*indignados*" gives rise to a relatively vertical party like Podemos.

Antagonism and agonism, intolerance and resistance: these are precisely the main ingredients of the political opposition in general toward the current hegemony of neoliberalism. In the US election campaign primaries in 2016, these ingredients were embodied, respectively, by the anti-establishment candidates Trump and Sanders. In the European Union, nonconformity with the systematic imposition of austerity measures is manifested both in extreme right xenophobia and in the renewal of the left, for instance via Spanish Podemos and the British Corbynite Labour Party. Thus, social networks not only function as devices of neoliberal governmentality, but their mechanisms also illustrate the alternatives to it.

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