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Pastorate Digitalized: Social Media and (De)Subjectification

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Abstract

Taking its cue from Michel Foucault's analyses of the pastoral 'conduct of conduct', this paper considers social media as a specific *dispositif* that derives its mode of operation from the religious techniques of individualization. It argues that today's preoccupation with digital performances, far from exorcizing the pastoral logic, in fact manifests its secular intensification. By examining social media practices through the lens of the sacramental paradigm of confession, the article shows how the digitalization of the pastoral directive culminates in the production of spectral subjects. These spectral subjects, it contends, function as the conduits of the dominant power, guaranteeing the persistence of capitalism by embodying the imperative to complete economization.

Keywords

confession, Michel Foucault, pastoral power, social media, subjectification

Introduction

Foucault (2009) identifies the Christian pastorate as 'one of the decisive moments in the history of power in Western societies' (p. 185). What warrants this standing, he posits, is the pastoral co-articulation of the processes of subjection and subjectification, which fundamentally altered the key characteristics of previous formulations, and practices, of 'the government of self and others', thus birthing a new formation of power (see Foucault, 2005, 2009, 2011b). To be more specific, according to Foucault (2009), the uniqueness of the pastoral project rests upon its ability to constitute a particular subject 'whose merits are analytically identified, who is subjected in continuous networks of obedience, and who is subjectified (*subjectivé*) through the compulsory extraction of truth' (pp. 184–5). It is precisely the implementation of these 'specific modes of individualization', he argues, that rendered the pastorate both a prelude to, and the basis of, the *problem of governmentality* (see Foucault, 2009: 184, 193).

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Taking its cue from Foucault's analyses of the pastoral 'conduct of conduct' (Foucault, 2014b: 24; see also Foucault, 2005, 2009, 2011a, 2011b, 2014a, 2021), this paper considers social media as a specific apparatus that largely – albeit not exclusively – derives its rationale, and mode of operation, from the aforementioned religious procedures of individualization. Its focus on the pastoral – rather than disciplinary, or biopolitical – *dispositif* is inspired by the following interpretation of Foucault's (2009) reflection on the advent of 'the age of forms of conducting, directing, and government' in the 16th century (p. 231). Notably, Foucault (2009) argues that the proliferation of the arts of governing (of self, others, and the world) did not signal 'a transition from the religious pastorate to other forms of conduct, conduction, or directing' (p. 231). That is to say, secularization should not be misconstrued as a mere passing on of pastoral functions from Church to state. Something far more complex is at stake here. When faced with its own crisis, Foucault (2009) contends, 'the pastorate burst open, broke up, and *assumed* the dimension of governmentality' (p. 193; emphasis added).

It follows that the contemporary 'governmental matrix', to borrow Rossi's (2015) expression, of which social media is a part, is the outcome of 'intensification, increase, and general proliferation' of the pastoral techniques of conduct (Foucault, 2009: 231). In other words, by *assuming* the dimension of governmentality, the pastoral paradigm colonized other, non-religious, spheres, fundamentally reconstituting their *modi operandi*. What is at issue here, then, is not a mere transfer of responsibility *for* governing, but a contagion. Thus, the decisiveness of the pastorate for the history of Western forms of power can be situated within a series of mutations undergone by different domains of human activity upon their contamination with the religious nexus of analytical identification, subjection and subjectification.

In line with this interpretation, we ought to re-consider the very significance of the pastorate's status as the *beginning* of governmentality. As Agamben (2019) asserts, 'the beginning is not a simple preamble, which then disappears into what follows'. Tracing the notion of 'origin' to the Greek verb *archō*, he shows that it means both to 'begin, to be prior to something' and 'to command, to be the leader' (Agamben, 2019). As such, the pastorate is far more than a historical formation. Rather, it should be considered, first and foremost, as an imperative, that is, as something that never ceases 'to command and govern what it has put into being' (Agamben, 2019).

Simply put, my reason for the return to the pastorate is that, as an imperative, it is still with us and, as I will argue, we can only attempt to rid ourselves of it if we recognize it as such. Notably, Foucault (1982) referred to the entire 'modern matrix of individualization' as 'a new form of pastoral power' (p. 783). What this suggests is that all governmental 'series of powers' ought to be approached as the recastings of the pastorate and, thus, the renditions of its tactics (Foucault, 1982: 784). My privileging of the pastoral model is therefore a means of both rethinking governmentality – in the sense of 'refocusing and extending the governmentality perspective' (see Martin and Waring, 2018: 1304) – and supplementing the existing approaches that adopt more specific analytical frameworks of power, such as the sovereign (see Amoore, 2013; Zuboff, 2015), disciplinary (see Bucher, 2012; Han, 2015), or biopolitical one (see Beer, 2016; Cheney-Lippold, 2011, 2017). It is my hope that, by drawing analogies between the pastoral and the digital, this paper can go some way towards illuminating the ways in which social media

practices not only feature as an object of multiple (post)political investments, but also, by extension, guarantee the persistence of ‘capitalism as a religion’ (cf. Benjamin, 1996) through the employment of secularized (de)individualizing techniques.

As the key thread of my analysis, the *problématique* of the digitalization of the pastoral imperative will be unpacked by means of a reflection on some contemporary practices of ‘conduct of conduct’ (see, for instance, Foucault, 2014b: 24). In this, following Foucault (2009), conduct is taken to designate both ‘the action of conducting and of conduction’ (p. 193), that is, the complex of activities that includes self-conduction, being conducted, and conducting others. It is my intention to demonstrate that, in the context of social media, these supposedly distinct activities become so closely interrelated that they ultimately collapse into one another, leading to the constitution of a subject who simultaneously self-conducts, is conducted, and, as the end result, becomes a conduit of power.

Taking Foucault’s (2021) claim that ‘the pastorate is a nexus for the formation and transmission of truth’ (p. 314) as the point of entry, my foray into the digital will centre on the exploration of the hyper-real practices of ‘the manifestation of truth in the form of subjectivity’ (Foucault, 2014a: 80) through the lens of the pastoral confessional procedures. In this, I will focus specifically on social media ‘influencing’, approaching confession as a sacrament of power (cf. Agamben, 2013; see also Stypinska, 2020, 2022) and reflecting upon the significance of its secular digitalization vis-à-vis (de)subjectification. In focusing on sacramentalization, I will draw on Heron’s (2018) account of liturgical power, which, utilizing the ministerial model of instrumental cause, defines liturgy as ‘a form of power that cannot be possessed but only enacted’ (p. 8). By means of this, I will come to argue that digitalization intensifies the religious imperative to the point of engendering ‘(neo)despotism’ (see Diken, 2021).

Before we can delve into the digital, however, it is important to recount some central features of the pastoral nexus. Therefore, this paper will firstly tease out some of the key characteristics of ‘conduct of conduct’ vis-à-vis the notion of conversion. Specifically, it will contrast the pastoral paradigm with the Hellenistic model, emphasizing the importance of the sacralization of the philosophical imperatives. This, in turn, will enable me to explore the effects of the secularized religious directive within the domain of social media.

Converting Desire

[I]f we understand by governmentality a strategic field of power relations in their mobility, transformability, and reversibility, then I do not think that reflection on this notion of governmentality can avoid passing through, theoretically and practically, the element of a subject defined by the relationship of self to self. (Foucault, 2005: 252)

In Foucault’s studies of the pre-Christian art of conduct, there appears a common theme, namely, that of the ‘conversion to oneself’ (Foucault, 2005: 248; see also Foucault, 1986, 2009, 2014a). Indeed, the question of ‘how to arrive at the self?’ is presented as central to the wide range of practices encompassed by the notion of *epimeleia heautou*, which Foucault (2005) notably translates as the ‘care of oneself’. An engagement with different

philosophical conceptions of ‘care of the self’, and their respective views on self-conversion, is, of course, well beyond the scope of this paper. Whilst acknowledging the great variations in the uptake of this theme, and not intending to circumscribe the principles of self-constitution to just one of its paradigms, nevertheless, for the purpose of what is to come, I shall limit my overview to the ‘Hellenistic model’ (Foucault, 2005: 258).

Foucault (2005) shows how the Hellenistic model of care of the self emerges at the time of the general uptake of this practice in the first two centuries AD (p. 115). The pursuit of *conversio ad se* is of such great importance in the context of conduct of conduct for, if accomplished, it is said to enable an exercise of an authority over oneself ‘that nothing limits or threatens’ (Foucault, 1986: 65). In other words, developing ‘a full, perfect, and complete relationship of oneself to oneself’ (Foucault, 2005: 320) is a matter of spiritual sovereignty. Turning to oneself is seen as a means of countering subjection, and, thus, of reversing the relations of power. In this sense, engaging in care of the self is indicative of embracing the imperative to self-government (see Stypinska, 2020).

This strife for self-mastery presupposes, first of all, the acquisition of knowledge of the self (see Foucault, 1986, 2005). Simply put, conversion involves self-examination. For Stoics, this implies ‘measuring and confirming the independence one is capable of with regard to everything that is not indispensable and essential’ (Foucault, 1986: 59). The objective here is ‘to assess the relationship between oneself and that which is represented, so as to accept in the relation to the self only that which can depend on the subject’s free and rational choice’ (Foucault, 1986: 64). Similarly, Cynics emphasize the necessity of breaking with habits and conventions (see Foucault, 2011b: 242), of rejecting the commonsense understanding of oneself and substituting it with self-knowledge derived from *physis* rather than *nomos* (see Rankin, 1983: 229). The pursuit of self-government is essentially ‘the work of discrimination, of *diakrisis*’ (Foucault, 1986: 64). It necessitates ‘a judgment that the individual’s sovereign conscience brought to bear itself’ and it hinges upon one’s ability to determine ‘the value of things in relation to the subject’ (Foucault, 2014a: 297). The self-governing self is, in a nutshell, a critical self (see Stypinska, 2020: 27–43).

During the Hellenistic period, the preoccupation with the cultivation of oneself was nothing short of a mainstream cultural phenomenon and came to be increasingly considered as a social practice (see Foucault, 1986: 51; 2005: 115). Indeed, the care of oneself and ‘the attention one devotes to the care that others should take of themselves’ soon acquired the form of ‘an intensification of social relations’ (Foucault, 1986: 53). It progressively involved a ‘soul service’, including ‘the possibility of a round of exchanges with the other and a system of reciprocal obligations’ (Foucault, 1986: 54). This is perhaps most manifest in the Cynic conceptions, where diacritical (*diakritikos*) existence is presented as a mission of ‘the government of the universe’ (Foucault, 2011b: 303). Conversion here is synonymous with care that culminates in governing oneself, others, and the world.

Crucially, ‘the self-finalization of the relationship to self and conversion to self’ upon which the Hellenistic model was centred (Foucault, 2005: 258) does not only imply juridical and political self-mastery, but also, as Foucault shows drawing on Seneca, a very specific relation to one’s desire (see Foucault, 1986: 65). Successful self-care hinges upon ‘distinguishing between good and evil in the confusion of the passions’ (Foucault,

2014a: 297). Subsequently, ‘gaining access’ to self is presented as ‘an object of pleasure’ (Foucault, 1986: 66). Self-governance implies enjoyment, the freeing of one’s desire from the violent conditionality of the world of custom. Notably, this is not exclusive to the Stoic practices. Cynics, albeit in an expectedly extreme fashion, also embraced this perspective. By conducting themselves in a shameless (*anaideia*) and indifferent (*apatheia*) manner (see Rankin, 1983), they resisted the appropriation of their desire by the dominant apparatus of capture (cf. Deleuze and Guattari, 2012).

In providing access to a satisfaction ‘that comes, in serenity and without fail, of the experience of oneself’ (Foucault, 1986: 66), the cultivation of the self *qua* conversion to self could equip one with the ability to remain unaffected by external temptations and agitations. As such, it spurred the interest of the general public, with many seeking out philosophers ‘so that they might be shown the way to happiness’ (Foucault, 1986: 49). Further, as demonstrated by the Cynic model, the accomplishment of a total self-command across the legal, political and libidinal domains extended the project of self-governance to encompass the governance of others and the world (see Foucault, 2011b: 303). This positioned the practices of conversion to self as an ethico-political project pivotal to transforming the dominant relations of power.

Converting Subjects

Although the model of pastoral care exhibits many continuities with the Hellenistic one, the above schematic overview is intended to highlight some of the key differences, which will inform my analysis of the digital in the next section.

Let us begin with the notion of desire. As shown, the Hellenistic model of self-care presupposes that happiness could be found within oneself. One of the key shifts implemented by the pastoral apparatus consisted of capturing the desire for happiness and removing it from the common use of men, by placing it in a separate, religious sphere (see Agamben, 2007, 2009; Diken, 2016). Through sacralization, a ‘contentment of mind’ becomes re-conceptualized as conditional upon glory (Diken, 2016: 48). This, in turn, ‘renders human happiness dependent upon interaction with, and submission to, the deity’ (Stypinska, 2020: 58). Simply put, what was a natural human quality is now seen as something that can arise only through subjection – and the subjectification that follows it.

The notion of conversion thus acquires a new meaning. It is no longer a matter of escaping subjection by converting *to* self through examination and critique. Indeed, the religious scheme positions the replacement of one mode of subjection with another as the condition of possibility of happiness. In this paradigm, one refuses the order of the actual, only to submit to the illusory one (cf. Stypinska, 2020: 46). Hence, the self is not to be embraced but converted *into* another subject. Markedly, it is precisely this rejection of the theme of the return to the self that is presented by Foucault (2005) as ‘the principal axis of Christian spirituality’ (p. 250).

What follows is that the main preoccupation of the pastoral apparatus is the production of its own subjects, that is, subjectification (cf. Agamben, 2009: 11). As Foucault (2005) shows, the Christian paradigm that animates the pastorate ‘turns on self-exegesis and self-renunciation’ (p. 258). What we encounter here, therefore, is a fundamental

reversal of the Hellenistic model. If, argues Foucault (2005), ‘we turn around on the self, it is essentially and fundamentally in order to renounce the self’ (p. 256). Crucially, however, we should not mistake self-renunciation for a simple omission. It is an active and intentional dismissal that functions ‘as a technique of the self, as a new kind of relation to the self’ (Macmillan, 2011: 12). The detachment with regard to oneself is intended to pave the way to ‘the constitution of a relation to self that strives for the destruction of the form of the self’ (Foucault, 2014a: 325).

This obliteration of the self, in turn, engenders the need to produce a new subject. Hence, it is not merely a question of ‘the *mode of subjection*’, that is, ‘the way in which the individual establishes his relation to the rule and recognizes himself as obliged to put it into practice’ (Foucault, 1990: 27). Rather, with the advent of the pastorate, a new paradigm arises, where the subject becomes responsible for realizing its own subjectification. What is at stake here is thus the *problematique* of co-articulation of the processes of subjection and subjectification. The pastoral imperative calls for one to not only relate to the external rule, but to their very self, in a novel – and very specific – way, namely, by first destroying it, and then fashioning a new subjectivity in accordance with the religious logic.

Self-exegesis takes centre stage in this process. As with every sacralizing procedure, the pastoral mode of self-examination hinges upon the stipulation of the necessity of mediation. As pointed out above, the religious paradigm holds that humans are incapable of experiencing happiness without a union with the divine – union that can only be achieved when one assumes the required subjective state. Self-exegesis is the condition of this necessary subjectification. But it also requires mediation. Why? Quite simply, as Foucault (2014a) shows drawing on Cassian, because Christian theology posits that ‘there is no natural *discretio* immanent to man’ (p. 294).

Discretio, as the approximate Latin translation of the abovementioned Greek term *diakrisis*, refers to the capacity for discernment and judgement. Unlike *diakrisis*, however, *discretio* concerns not the value of things but ‘focuses on the subject himself, on the subject insofar as he is inhabited by another principle, by a foreign principle that is at the same time a source of illusion’ (Foucault, 2014a: 297). This ‘foreign principle’ preventing one from being able to arrive at *discretio* is, of course, the devil. The mediatory power of the examination-confession apparatus thus features as a necessary means of deciphering – and thus liberating oneself from – the illusions that the self cannot be trusted to oust. As such, then, sacralization rests upon creating an ‘uncertainty in relation to oneself’ (Foucault, 2014a: 297) – uncertainty that engenders the imperative to turn away from the self and seek the guidance of ‘the master of truth’ in the process of one’s reconstitution (Foucault, 1978: 67).

In contrast to the Hellenistic methods of self-examination, therefore, the Christian striving for self-knowledge necessitates the shifting of ‘the agency of domination’ (Foucault, 1998: 62), whereat confession becomes utilized not with a view to self-governance but for the purpose of subordination (see Foucault, 2009: 183). In this way, veridiction of oneself becomes an instrument of obedience (see Foucault, 2014a: 308). By situating the self as something that is not to be returned to, but constantly exposed to another, confession engenders ‘individualization by subjection’ (see Foucault, 2009: 184). This is why, for Foucault, what is interesting in the exegetical procedures is not ‘the

meaning of sin', but 'the truth of oneself with regard to sin' (Foucault, 2014b: 117). This truth is, of course, that the subject cannot avoid sin or, indeed, even trust itself to discern it. There is no way for one to internalize the mechanism of direction. Rather, they must work towards a subjective state whereat they can allow themselves to be conducted by another without resistance 'throughout their life and at every moment of their existence' (Foucault, 2009: 165).

Crucially in this context, obedience comes to assume 'a form of relationship with oneself', that is, 'a general and permanent structure of existence' (Foucault, 2021: 93). The imperative engendered by the pastoral nexus thus pertains to the production of a subjective, embodied state (see Foucault, 2021: 93; Rossi, 2015: 47). Contrary to the Hellenistic model, however, what is at stake here is not ethical self-constitution but self-mortification that renders one 'ductile and transparent' to power (Foucault, 2021: 92). Indeed, the specificity of the pastoral apparatus rests within its ability to incite complete exposure, capture the revealed desire by means of putting it into discourse, and instigate the formation of a docile subject.

Self-exposure is of such great importance here for two reasons. Firstly, it provides raw material, as it were, for discourse. That is to say, discourse does not only capture desire, but also appropriates it; it takes hold of it and manipulates it. The revealed desire is thus *transformed into discourse* (see Foucault, 1978: 23). Secondly, as 'a ritual of discourse' (Foucault, 1978: 61), the key concern of confession lies within its effects (cf. Agamben, 2013). To be more specific, confession is a sacrament, that is, an oath technicalized by religion (see Agamben, 2013) and, as such, its key function is to operationalize the pastoral *dispositif*. To do this, it must produce its subjects (cf. Agamben, 2009: 11). Hence, the meaning of the said discourse is of little significance. What counts is the truth of the subject with regard to this discourse, that is, the subjective state generated by active participation in the sacrament.

What does this tell us, then, about 'the element' that Foucault (2005) is so preoccupied with in the context of governmentality, namely, 'a subject defined by the relationship of self to self' (p. 252)? Let us briefly consider three points here, before moving on to explore the analogies with the digital mode. Firstly, the subject produced by the pastoral formation is characterized by ethical indeterminacy, and therefore incapable of self-governing. Secondly, its happiness is conditional upon the attainment of a specific subjective state of docility, whereat it becomes completely open to being directed. And finally, this docility is maintained through perpetual sacramental exposure, whereat its truth is revealed in its relation to discourse.

Conversional Exposure

Foucault (1978) argues that 'the confession became one of the West's most highly valued techniques for producing truth', describing ours as 'a singularly confessing society' (p. 59). Notably, with the advent of biopower in the 18th century, pastoral confessional techniques were transformed through 'an interference between two modes of production of truth: procedures of confession, and scientific discursivity' (Foucault, 1978: 64–5). As the rituals of confession started 'to function within the norms of scientific regularity' (Foucault, 1978: 65) and began to be assiduously 'registered, codified and systematized'

(Whitebook, 2002: 59), they took on a pivotal role in the biopolitical regime of security (see, for instance, Foucault, 2014b).

Correspondingly, today the securitization perspective features as the most obvious point of entry for governmental analyses of social media. As Tiziana Terranova expounds:

social network sites can be seen to emerge out of a longer history of biopolitical techniques, framed within the larger political rationality of liberalism and neoliberalism, as a new and specific application of mechanisms of security to the social as fabric of asymmetrical and processual relations of mutual affection. (Terranova, 2015: 124)

Yet, as I intend to demonstrate, the retracing of the pastoral imperative within these techniques offers a crucial vantage point for extending the existing social media scholarship through a fuller appreciation of the governmental role of the relationship of self to self.

From a veridictional perspective, schematically speaking, it could be argued that the contemporary studies of digital governmentality are pursued along two interrelated lines. The first one is informed by the ‘objectivation’ enabled by the scientification of confession, whereat:

the discourse produced by the individual no longer has to tell the truth about himself or herself: instead, it forms a series of confused raw data that his or her interlocutor [. . .] has to interpret in order to extract the truth. (Lorenzini and Tazzioli, 2018: 75)

This focus on the extraction – rather than self-exegesis – of truth is apparent in an array of accounts that consider the status and operation of ‘surveillance knowledge’ (Lyon, 2010), ‘surveillance capitalism’ (Zuboff, 2015, 2019), ‘data politics’ (Bigo et al., 2019), and ‘algorithmic governmentality’ (Rouvroy and Berns, 2013), to name but a few. In general terms, here the issue of exposure pertains to visibility which, as in Foucault’s (1995) explication of disciplinary power, ‘assures the automatic functioning of power’ (p. 201). Hence, the studies within this strand, as it were, attend to the subjectivizing effects of surveillance processes (see Matzner, 2016), the expansion of surveillance through ‘metric power’ (Beer, 2016) and ‘data gaze’ (Beer, 2019), the operation of the ‘algorithmic imaginary’ (Bucher, 2017), as well as issues such as the algorithmic production of memories (see Jacobsen and Beer, 2021).

Simply put, this perspective conceives subjectivity as primarily constituted and conducted through extraction, manipulation, as well as experience, of data. Thus, for instance, we encounter approaches emphasizing the importance of understanding the ways ‘in which online behaviours are directed, constrained and framed by resources such as algorithms, content management systems (CMS) and operating systems (OS)’ (Badouard et al., 2016: 2), as well as those stressing how subjectivity of social media users is increasingly determined ‘by the ways that advertisers, political bots or other agents anticipate and influence their behavior’ (Hull, 2018: 267). Be it in the studies that consider the ontological manufacture of consumers via databases (Zwick and Denegri-Knott, 2009), or the transformation of ‘opaque consumers to transparent consumers’ (Coll, 2013: 215), the primacy of objectivation takes the *problematique* of confessional self-exposure as a given. Yet, somewhat paradoxically, at the same time, in a reversal of

the Foucauldian account (see Foucault, 1995), governance of the subjects is said to increasingly take place by means of a ‘threat of invisibility’ (Bucher, 2012).

In contrast to these accounts, the second – and arguably more pertinent to my argument – approach apparent in digital governmentality studies focuses on the self-fashioning of subjectivity through the engagement with social media. Broadly speaking, in relation to self-exposure, this takes two forms. Firstly, we encounter a wide range of analyses that focus on self-conduction as self-care, whereat social media appears as yet another incarnation of, to borrow Rose’s (1996) formulation, the ‘therapeutic systems of spiritual direction’ (p. 159). Thereat, just as in therapeutics examined by Rose,

the conduct of everyday existence is recast as a series of manageable problems to be understood and resolved by technical adjustment in relation to the norm of the autonomous self aspiring to self-possession and happiness. (Rose, 1996: 158)

Thus, for instance, focus is granted to how social media users ‘employ the sites as confessional self-management tools’, where they ‘manifest themselves to a public readership to seek ways of substantiating themselves, of being recognized and of obtaining help and advice’ (Sauter, 2014: 833–4). In this frame, practices such as digital content curation are positioned as ‘self-exploration, self-cultivation, and self-care, which nourish offline identity and which ultimately work to shape the offline, corporeal self’ (Weisgerber and Butler, 2016: 1340). Echoing Rose’s (1996) account of ‘instrumentalization of autonomy’ (p. 162), critical studies demonstrate how such techniques of the self are underpinned by the notion of neoliberal responsabilization whereat developing healthy habits (Docherty, 2020), or even social media well-being (Docherty, 2021), represents but a disciplinary governance through habit (cf. Foucault, 1995), which supports the capitalist value extraction.

Secondly, self-exposure on social media is considered as a potential means of profit-making, whereat digital ‘avowals turn into self-promotion’, an activity suffused with entrepreneurial logic (Harcourt, 2015: 100). Here, social media practices are considered not so much as a means of self-improvement, but as characteristic of ‘invested’ selves who enact ‘enterprising, resourceful and self-directed labour’ (Khamis et al., 2017: 10) through ‘carefully controlled performance[s] through which self presentation is achieved under optimal conditions’ (Papacharissi, 2002: 644). With self-exposure ‘strategically managed and limited’ (Marwick and boyd, 2010: 127), practices such as self-branding are said to represent ‘a seminal turning point in how subjectivity itself is understood and articulated’ (Khamis et al., 2017: 10).

As such, digital governmentality studies paint a picture of a self striving to express, optimize and master itself and its environment, whilst navigating and negotiating the algorithmic terrain designed to conduct and take possession of both. Here, however, we encounter a curious predicament: whilst it is acknowledged that algorithmic governmentality is an expression of secularized pastoralism (see Cooper, 2020), the digital practices of the subject tend to be considered as something unaffected by the pastoral imperative, and even interpreted through the lens of the ancient practices of care of the self (see, for instance, Kien, 2020). Admittedly, at first sight, both digital therapeutics and self-enterprise appear to be in no uncertain way underpinned by the desire for recognition, rather

than renunciation, of the self (cf. de Beistegui, 2018). Yet, as I will argue, far from contradicting the pastoral directive, the drive for affirmation of the self through permanent exposure is, in fact, an expression of its secular apex.

As de Beistegui's (2018) work on 'the government of desire' elucidates, what we encounter today is a 'new normative framework', where the imperative to self-love effectuates 'a distinctively modern technology of the self' (p. 166). de Beistegui (2018) emphasizes the distinctiveness of this model vis-à-vis the Christian pastorate, showing that the latter was based on a fundamental rejection of *amor sui*, along with its presentation as 'the cause of all sins' (p. 166). 'It is now a matter of being *recognized*, through self-esteem and self-respect', he argues, explaining that the religious notion of 'self-hatred' no longer holds sway (de Beistegui, 2018: 166). Here, however, a crucial question arises: does this new discourse of desire imply a true break with the pastoral logic of sacralization? That is to say, does the modern conduct of self based on the concept of self-love mark a return to conversion to self?

Pastoral individualization techniques engender humility, that is, 'a permanent state of obedience' that necessitates 'a renunciation of all of one's wishes' (Foucault, 2021: 95). As such, they starkly contrast with today's imperative to self-actualization, which relies on 'the free expression of individuals' ends and desires' (de Beistegui, 2018: 66). Let us, however, reflect on two points here. Firstly, the Christian state of obedience does not actually imply the rejection of desire as such. Rather, and as demonstrated earlier, religion captures the desire for happiness, positioning docility as the condition of its satisfaction. This means that the obedient subject does indeed wish (for) something, and it is precisely this wishing that engenders its subjection and subjectification. Humility is nothing but the means for the fulfilment of desire.

Secondly, what is the aforementioned 'free expression of individuals' ends and desires', if not an intensification of the pastoral 'compulsory extraction of truth' (Foucault, 2009: 185)? After all, the 'freedom' at stake here is not a subjective state, a self-government in the classical sense of self-care, but, rather, 'the necessary condition for the satisfaction' of socially constructed desires (de Beistegui, 2018: 67) and, therefore, 'the very instrument through which individuals are directed' (Lorenzini, 2018: 158). It is a 'compulsory freedom' (Rossi, 2015: 177), freedom that one *must* be permanently available to enact. As such, then, the performance of this 'freedom' is, in itself, a form of submission. Furthermore, since this 'freedom' 'can be realized only in and through the market' (de Beistegui, 2018: 67), what we encounter here is the continuation of the mediatory logic. Humility towards God is now replaced with humility towards the market. In this sense, what capitalist subjectification produces is, in fact, the very same relation of obedience that marked the pastoral structure of existence. All that is altered is its discursive framing.

Indeed, as Diken (2016) shows, religion and capitalism rely on the same appropriating mechanism. What changes is the domain where the desire is inscribed, with a utilitarian sphere coming to substitute for the religious one (see Diken, 2016). The self is, therefore, not embraced through self-love but turned into a subject who operationalizes the logic of the market. In a way, then, the applied terminology does not really matter. Whether the discourse is framed through the notion of obedience or of freedom is beside the point.

What is at issue is the way that the subject *relates to* the discourse and how this produces a specific ‘unending relation of oneself to oneself’ (Foucault, 2021: 93).

The character of this self-relation becomes apparent upon a return to Foucault’s (2014b) account of the two, essentially intertwined, ‘modes of obligation of truth’ that constituted ‘an absolutely fundamental aspect of Christianity’: the regime of confession and the regime of faith (pp. 165–6). The pastoral duty of truth, he contends, is a matter of both confession *and* belief (see Foucault, 2021). That is to say, confessing cannot be reduced to sheer exposure – or, indeed, extraction – of truth. Its ‘illocutionary force’ rests within a *profession* of truth (Büttgen, 2021: 18). Confession, in short, is a sacrament of power that both operationalizes the consecration (of truth and desire) and transforms its participants into ‘*beings of command*’ (Stypinska, 2020: 61). Therefore, although digital confessions are performed by the subjects who perpetually strive for recognition, they do not facilitate self-conversion. Rather, they maintain the belief that both happiness and self-possession are conditional upon the fulfilment of the imperatives of the market, glorifying the latter in this process (cf. Agamben, 2011: 232).

It is precisely this belief in the market that assures the latter’s functioning as ‘a site of veridiction’ (Foucault, 2008: 32), legitimating ‘competitive uncertainty’, that is, ‘uncertainty that arises within the arranged economic ‘game’ as a result of multiple actors, all pursuing conflicting and distributed agendas’ (Davies, 2014: 149). This competitive uncertainty, in turn, leads subjects to relate to themselves through the constantly reinscribed ‘value’ of their economic efficacy. Hence, as Lorenzini (2018) points out, they come to enjoy their ‘human capital only in the form of an endless, precarizing self-evaluation’ (p. 162). As the mediator of this self-evaluation, the neoliberal market produces ethical indeterminacy in its subjects, exorcizing ‘political uncertainty’ – that is, ‘uncertainty that challenges the very terms on which doubt and judgement are to be performed’ (Davies, 2014: 149) – and substituting it with a permanent self-uncertainty.

To explore these points a bit more concretely, I will now turn to a specific example. Instead of treating it as a standard empirical case, however, I will use what was reported by the media in a paradigmatic manner, for the purpose of modelling the workings of the digital sphere.

Digital Confessions

In November 2019, online news outlets erupted with yet another social media ‘scandal’ (see, for instance, Kleinman, 2019; Rach, 2019a). The story itself did not seem particularly newsworthy: a social media ‘influencer’ using a fake account to post comments that meant to manipulate the views of their ‘followers’. Nevertheless, its reporting was instantaneously justified by the high levels of indignation it generated. Much of it had to do with the public image of the protagonist and the extent of their actions. The ‘influencer’ in question, a 34-year-old part-time midwife, aka ‘Mother of Daughters’, amassed over 660,000 Instagram ‘followers’ by ‘documenting her life as a mum-of-four’ (Rach, 2019b) and sharing the insights she acquired in her professional career. The author of two ‘self-help’ publications (see Hooper, 2017, 2018) and a podcast series (see Off Script, 2019), she held the status of a ‘queen “of mumfluencers”’ (Wright, 2019). ‘Mother of Daughters’ was no stranger to public criticism and had previously suspended her

Instagram account following the accusation of exploiting her children ‘for money’ by a user of the online forum Mumsnet (see Bakar, 2018).

The story in question here, however, pertains to her actions in response to criticisms of her posted on Tattle Life, a discussion forum devoted to ‘commentary and critiques of people that choose to monetise their personal life as a business and release it into the public domain’ (Tattle Life). What transpired is that ‘Mother of Daughters’ engaged in sustained ‘trolling’ of other ‘influencers’, including her own husband, for eight months, using the ‘AliceInWanderLust’ account on Tattle Life (see Llewellyn, 2019; Rach, 2019b). Throughout this period, she posted a range of comments in support of herself as well as a series of derogatory remarks on others (see Rach, 2019a). Most notably, she described a fellow blogger as ‘a chav version of herself’ (Rach, 2019b), accused an author and ‘influencer’ who featured on her podcast series of being ‘really aggressive’ and using her race ‘as a weapon to silence people’s opinions’, and called her own husband ‘a twat’ (Tattle Life, 2022).

‘Mother of Daughters’ initially rebutted the accusations of posting as ‘AliceInWanderLust’, but eventually, as speculation mounted, ‘exposed herself’ (see Fitzsimons, 2019). Her public admission of guilt was accompanied by a justification and an apology. She argued that her actions were driven by a desire to change other people’s ‘opinions from the inside’ and ‘to defend’ herself and her family, but, as she continued to engage in the process, the situation ‘became all consuming’ and she ‘got lost in this online world’ (see Fitzsimons, 2019). It was reported that, after this statement, she lost 30,000 ‘followers’ (see Rach, 2019a) and closed her Instagram account (see Dunbar, 2021).

Rather than analyzing these events per se, let us briefly consider their significance vis-à-vis the confessional paradigm. What interests me here is not the public statement of ‘Mother of Daughters’ as such. After all, as Foucault (2014a) demonstrates, confessional examination focuses ‘on the present reality of thought and not retrospectively on what has been done’ (p. 301). Therefore, confession should not be treated as a simple admission of guilt and remorse. Rather, as previously shown, it is performed to make up for the absence of *discretio* (see Foucault, 2014a: 294). In other words, individuals engage in the exposure-examination ritual because they are not capable of determining ‘what is too much or not enough’ (Foucault, 2014a: 290). ‘They are unable to know exactly what they must do, for they do not really know what they can do and they do not know what they can do because basically they do not know what they are’ (Foucault, 2014a: 294). Here we return, yet again, to the pastoral theme of self-uncertainty.

Importantly, confession does not only rely on self-uncertainty as its condition of possibility, but also maintains it, internalizing the need for permanent external (e)valuation. As such, it renders self-relation conditional upon mediation. Tellingly, ‘Mother of Daughters’ recounted how reading negative comments made her feel ‘extremely paranoid’ (quoted in Rach, 2019a). Whilst, with the utility of her digital persona in question, a heightened sense of ‘competitive uncertainty’ (cf. Davies, 2014) and, thus, psychological discomfort, could be expected, the reference to paranoia indicates a much deeper emotional investment in the digital regime of veridiction. This, I posit, is fundamentally linked to the protagonist’s (self)recognition as an ‘influencer’, rather than a personality trait such as narcissism (cf. Bergman et al., 2011).

Essentially, an ‘influencer’ is someone defined by their function: ‘influencing’. Or, rather, to be more specific, by performing this function ‘effectively enough for it to be recognized as such’ (Stypinska, 2022: 23). As such, ‘influencing’ is a prime example of the ministerial model of the instrumental cause which, according to Heron (2018), designates ‘the fulfilment of a function and not the expression of a substance’ (p. 12). This means that the very existence of ‘influencers’ rests upon their efficacy; when they can no longer produce the desired results, they cease to *be* ‘influencers’. Hence, ‘alike the liturgical power exercised by the priest, the power of an “influencer” is not its own’ (Stypinska, 2022: 26) – it is a form of power that is administered ‘only accidentally’, only insofar as one operates as its executor (Heron, 2018: 8). For ‘influencers’ the waning of efficacy is thus not only synonymous with the waning of ‘their’ power but also, by extension, with the ‘threat of invisibility’ (cf. Bucher, 2012) and, therefore, the loss of the relation to themselves maintained through digital exposure.

Indeed, it is rather unsurprising that the more ‘Mother of Daughters’ – described by others as ‘a woman who wished – admirably – to be entirely in control of her destiny’ (Rach, 2019a) – tried to manage others’ perceptions of her, the more she tried to *conduct* them, the more ‘lost’ she became in the world of digital interactions. With each attempt at exercising the ‘influencing’ power in accordance with her wishes – that is, as if it essentially *belonged* to her – she increasingly moved away from her own ‘substance’, as it were, disregarding ethical self-conduct for the sake of self-branding. With each attempt at maintaining her digital efficacy, she became more uncertain of herself, eschewing *discretio*. As such, her digital activities made liturgy manifest in the form of her subjectivity, reducing it to a mere conduit of power. With her very sense of selfhood contingent upon the visibility and affirmation of her brand, the relationship of ‘Mother of Daughters’ to herself and the world became subsumed under the digital regime of veridiction.

Capitalism as a religion, Walter Benjamin points out, does not strive to reform the self but to obliterate it (see Benjamin, 1996). Desire for recognition or, to be more specific, desire *qua* recognition (see de Beistegui, 2018: 166), intensifies the pastoral directive, culminating in a self-destructive non-relation. Not only is the subject no longer capable of self-conversion but, in its purely instrumental pursuit of digital recognition, it ends up rendering true recognition impossible. In other words, what Sennett (1998) refers to as ‘character’, that is, ‘the ethical value we place on our own desires and on our relations to others’ (p. 10), is essentially eliminated. The relational process of valuation of personal traits is substituted with the externalized evaluation of digital performances *in relation to* the utilitarian discourse. Here, at last, in the sphere of digital *dispositifs*, we encounter the fundamental paradox of the secularized pastoral directive.

These apparatuses are defined by the fact that the subjects who use them believe themselves to command them (and in fact push buttons defined as ‘commands’), but in truth do nothing but obey a command inscribed in the very structure of the apparatus. The free citizens of democratic technological societies are beings who incessantly obey in the very gesture with which they impart a command. (Agamben, 2019)

For all the talk of self-expression, self-actualization, and freedom, what we actually confront is a total economization of power, that is, ‘a form of power that cannot be possessed but only enacted’ (Heron, 2018: 8).

Becoming Transparent

In the nontruth of the subject, its own truth is no longer at stake. (Agamben, 2009: 21)

Arguably, the peculiarity of social media resides in the fact that it is an apparatus chiefly operationalized by the belief that its users possess the power of (self)exposure simply by means of enacting it. According to Foucault, confession is animated by ‘a double impetus: pleasure and power’, as such, constituting a ‘mechanism of attraction’ (Foucault, 1978: 45).

Doctors, like priests, become objects of desire through their interrogations into the desires and pleasures of their patients, and the whispering subject produces a desire for herself in her listener, and in herself pursues a desire for this desire of the other in her speech. (Taylor, 2009: 75)

Likewise, social media incites and multiplies desires, offering innumerable opportunities to indulge in *performing* self-exposure. Presenting itself as a realm of endless possibilities – a ‘fun house’ where one can playfully ‘add colors’, distort, ‘double and curve the mirror’ (Harcourt, 2015: 119) – it internalizes the compulsion to confess by imbuing digital transparency with a revelatory promise.

What virtual transparency claims is an even deeper penetration into the ‘authentic’ self. The ambition is to excavate a genuine self, a self that is not just the artifice of advertising and consumerism, that is not just molded by the digital devices – or so we tell ourselves. We want these devices to mine our soul, to excavate deep into the biological, to peel away the psychological. (Harcourt, 2015: 127)

Although, just as in the pastoral model, transparency today is conceptualized ‘as that which eradicates the difference between the secret and the revealed’ (Docherty, 2018: 284), our digital play of distortions leads to a fundamental collapse of the categories upon which the revealed is based. To recall, in confession, truth is not opposed to error, but to illusion (see Foucault, 2014b: 148). It follows that the objective of the pastoral exposure-examination mechanism is to draw out the elements of truth or illusion ‘within the thought itself’ (Foucault, 2014b: 148). Religion conceives illusion as a sign of an influence of the devil and, therefore, as an obstacle to reaching the required state of docility. By bringing illusions to light, the confessional ritual deprives them of any hold on the individual, facilitating subjectification.

In today’s digital dreamworld, however, illusion progressively eclipses truth, to the point of the two becoming indistinguishable. Hence, we find ourselves in a strange predicament. Illusion, after all, in its non-religious form, denotes ‘a challenge to the “real” – the attempt to put the real, quite simply, on the spot’ (Baudrillard, 1993a: 140). This is

why, whilst advocating for the destruction of nihilist illusions, Friedrich Nietzsche cautioned against the dissipation of illusion as such (see Nietzsche, 1969: 41). With hyper-reality progressively blurring the division between illusion and truth, the contemporary reign of the ‘mediatizing principle’ of the screen (Baudrillard, 1993b: 146) comes to deprive us of this radical antagonism. By rendering all ‘visible and transparent’, the ‘unlimited operational project’ of ‘integral reality’ (Baudrillard, 2005: 17) flattens it out, engendering one-dimensionality (cf. Marcuse, 2007).

The consequences of this are severe. As Kaufmann (2018) argues, the upshot of digital transparency is ‘the absence or the destruction of subjectivity’ (p. 318). We hence witness ‘two apparently contradictory faces of transparency’: psychosis and perversion (Kaufmann, 2018: 318). On the one hand, there is ‘an empty subject, a subject without subjectivity’ (Kaufmann, 2018: 315), a psychotic disconnected from itself and the world. On the other, we have a pervert, a subject transformed into ‘the instrument of the real’, completely ‘at the service of the real’ (Kaufmann, 2018: 318). Both are, of course, essentially what the pastorate was after: a blank slate to be inscribed with another’s will and a divine minister. Or, put differently, a power vessel and a power conduit.

Transparency, argues Alloa (2018), is never given ‘but is the result of a specific operation, which comes at a price’ (pp. 36–7). In our desire to self-expose to the point of becoming totally transparent, we have ended up transforming ourselves into the very *dispositif* that captured us in the first place. We have become that very instrument of medium *through* which the one-dimensional neoliberal logic enacts itself. As Alloa points out,

the aspect of generativity is significantly dependent on the aspect of translucidity: in order to let something (else) come to the fore, a diaphanous medium must deflect the attention from itself, anesthetize itself and recede into the background. (Alloa, 2018: 36)

At last, then, the pastoral directive is brought to completion. The self has been fully eradicated and substituted with an efficient performance, a liturgy of power (cf. Heron, 2018: 132). All that matters is that ‘the medium continues to roll’ (Baudrillard, 1993a: 144). The functionality of the circuits of power, so aptly mirrored by the functionality of the digital networks, here marks what, to borrow Agamben’s (2009) expression, is unquestionably ‘the triumph of the *oikonomia*, that is to say, of a pure activity of government that aims at nothing other than its own replication’ (p. 22). As subjectification and de-subjectification become ‘reciprocally indifferent’, all we are left with is a spectre of a subject (see Agamben, 2009: 21). Or, rather, a digital image of a spectre.

Despotic Liturgy

As creatures of ‘pure mediality’, contemporary spectral subjects hence personify ‘absolute instrumentality’ (cf. Heron, 2018: 109). In strict alignment with the key principles of liturgical power, their humanity ‘has been indexed to a kind of performance’ whereat all that defines them is their efficiency (Heron, 2018: 132). In this sense, then, just like angels and divine ministers, spectral subjects are ciphers of ‘the essential insubstantiality of being’ (see Heron, 2018: 130). All their actions are characterized by ‘constitutive vicariousness’

and ‘necessary industriousness’ (see Heron, 2018: 131). Perpetually messaging and messengering, spectral subjects turn into both adverts for, and instruments of, the economic command. The pastoral ‘bounty’ is precisely this substitution of subjectivity with pure functionality.

Therefore, what we encounter here is complete *economicization* (cf. Gorz, 1989). Everything is appropriated – that is, removed from common use – and captured in the utilitarian sphere (cf. Diken, 2016). This also means that politics becomes perverted (cf. Diken, 2016, 2021). To be sure, spectral subjects are essentially post-political. Their conception of conduct becomes circumscribed within the horizon of what Žižek (2002) describes as ‘the art of expert administration’ of economic affairs (p. 11). This, in turn, marks the point of impossibility of ethical self-constitution as a ‘form-of-life’ (cf. Agamben, 2016). Without ‘free use’, without ‘impotentiality’, that is ‘potential not to pass into actuality’ (see Agamben, 1999: 179–80), everything becomes converted into hierarchy. Importantly,

hierarchy is never the simple expression of the inherent superiority of one living being with respect to another, but nor is it the mere reflection of their objective social organization. It is not an ontological fact; it is a form of *practice*. (Heron, 2018: 78)

As ‘a practice of ordering’ and ‘its *manifestation*’ (Heron, 2018: 85), hierarchy designates the very pastoral technology of conduct that this paper has sought to explore. It is, after all, as Heron (2018) shows, both the form and the medium of the pastorate (p. 73). Spectral subjects are the beings of hierarchy. They signify and sanctify the paradigm of instrumental use by means of coinciding with it. As such, therefore, they are automated beings who fully embrace voluntary servitude (see Diken, 2021: 66).

Having brought the notions of governing and being governed into a zone of indistinction (cf. Agamben, 2009; Heron, 2018), the contemporary power apparatus actualizes the paradigm of instrumental use in the form of a despotic relation, mobilizing ‘an articulation of the despotic will to capture with depoliticization (economy) and with a technology of deception that aims at manufacturing consent (voluntary servitude)’ (Diken, 2021: 48). What follows is that the despotic imperative is ‘normalized as a cult(ure)’ (Diken, 2021: 48). Spectral subjects, in becoming the conduits of dominant power, give the impression that the status quo is simultaneously the reflection of, and the answer to, their inner nature and uttermost needs. In short, they disguise despotism under the democratic emblem by turning into despots themselves.

Admittedly, this paper presents a rather monolithic reading of social media by privileging the case of ‘influencing’ and failing to account for a vast array of digital practices, interests and uses – most notably, those employed as a means of counter-conduct. After all, we are not short of scholarship that examines practices of resistance in the digital context. ‘Black Twitter’, for instance, has been analysed as a response to bias in mainstream media (Latoya, 2017), a means of reorganizing relations of surveillance (Hill, 2018), and a ‘counterpublic’ (Graham and Smith, 2016; Hill, 2018). Similarly, numerous studies have considered the use of TikTok as ‘a platform for media criticism’ (Literat et al., 2023), ‘a space for political expression, mobilization, and online activism’ (Abbas et al., 2022), as well as ‘social reclamation’ (Schlosser and Feldman, 2022).

Here, however, a crucial question arises: can digital resistance actually rid us of the pastoral imperative?

As Lorenzini (2016) asserts, following Foucault: ‘in order to break the (governmental) relationship of obedience, the individual must withdraw his/her consent to be conducted *like that*’ (p. 17). What is at stake, therefore, is ‘an ethico-political task essentially centered on the effort by the individual to practice and experiment with different modes of subjectivation’ (Lorenzini, 2016: 19). By engendering ‘an individualistic mode of engagement’ (Schradié, 2019: 59), social media may appear as a milieu well-suited to the re-fashioning of the forms of subjectivity. Yet, as I intended to demonstrate, in their reliance on the confessional, social networking sites reemploy the pastoral imperative, rendering digital transparency – and thus our malleability to, and conductivity of, economic power – the very condition of possibility of their use. To be sure, as studies demonstrate, the primacy of visibility and attention underpins, in equal measure, both practices of self-branding and those of digital activism (cf. Khamis et al., 2017; Stypinska, 2022; Tufekci, 2013). Crucially, this means that efficacy constitutes the condition of possibility of both (de)subjectification and resistance.

As such, I would contend, today’s most pressing concern pertains not to the possibilities of digital resistance but, rather, to those of self-constitution that defies the digitalized pastoral imperative. As an analytical tool, the pastoral paradigm reveals that the peculiarity of, to borrow Tom Boland’s expression (see Boland, 2019), ‘social media’, is that it functions as a means of both guaranteeing *and* concealing the persistence of the despotic character of the current power formation. In intensifying the pastoral directive, the digital apparatus seduces us into foregoing the possibility of radically reconstituting our relation to ourselves, others and the status quo, by positioning it as dependent on (digital) efficacy. Captured by the despotic command to *animadvert*, to turn our concern, and ourselves, over to the integral reality, we perpetually profess our belief in the system, *even if* we critique it in this process (cf. Stypinska, 2022). This predicament may seem hopeless. Yet it is far from irresolvable. What if, rather than converting to the economy of power, we made an effort to convert our very form of subjectivity? What if we ceased to resort to digital transparency and instead embraced the imperatives to opacity and uselessness as a foundation for a new technology of the self?

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