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Inventing our selves
Psychology, power, and personhood

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
In the summer of 1989, an advertisement began to appear regularly on the front page of one of Britain’s leading serious newspapers. It was for a private organization called Self-Helpline and offered a range of telephone numbers for people to ring for answers to some apparently troubling questions. There were “Emotional Problems” from “Dealing with infidelity” to “Overcoming shyness.” There were “Parenthood Problems” from “My child won’t sleep” to “I feel like hitting my baby.” There were “Work Problems” such as “Am I in the right job” or “Becoming a supervisor.” And there were “Sexual Problems” from “Impotence” to “Better orgasms.” For the cost of a telephone call, callers could obtain “self-help step by step answers to dealing with your problems and improving the quality of your life.” They were assured that “all messages are provided by our professionals qualified in medicine, counseling and business.” And, the calls could be made anonymously, without the fear of being traced: it appeared that the problem, and its solution, was entirely a matter for one’s self (Self-Helpline, 1989).

In the context of the major cultural shifts taking place in Britain and many other countries in the 1980s, the rise to political power of governments adopting the rationalities of the ‘new right’ and espousing the logics of neoliberalism in their reforms of macroeconomic policy, organizational cultural, social welfare, and the responsibilities of citizens, this little advertisement may seem trivial. Its concerns may appear hardly germane to something as weighty as the ‘enterprise culture’ associated in particular with the regimes of Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom and Ronald Reagan in the United States, and now proving so attractive to politicians in the many former welfarist polities in Scandinavia, Australia, New Zealand, and elsewhere. Certainly most of the political and sociological analyses of these shifts focus their attention elsewhere: on postmodernization, globalization, postfordism, and the like. But the forms of political reason that, at the end of the 1980s, aspired to create an enterprise culture accorded a vital political value to a certain image of the human being. And I think that this image of an ‘enterprising self’ was so potent because it was not an idiosyncratic obsession of the right of the political spectrum. On the contrary, it resonated with basic presuppositions concerning the contemporary human being that remain widely distributed in our present, presuppositions that are embodied in the very language that we use to make persons thinkable, and in our ideals as to what people should be. These presuppositions are displayed in the little advertisement I have quoted. The self is to be a subjective being, it is to aspire to autonomy, it is to strive for personal fulfillment in its earthly life, it is to interpret its reality and destiny as a matter of individual responsibility, it is to find meaning in existence by shaping its life through acts of choice. These ways of thinking about humans as selves, and these ways of judging them, are linked to certain ways of acting upon such selves. The guidance of selves is no longer dependent on the authority of religion or traditional morality; it has been allocated to ‘experts of subjectivity’ who transfigure existential questions about the purpose of life and the meaning of suffering into technical questions of the most effective ways of managing malfunction and improving ‘quality of life’.

These new practices of thinking, judging, and acting are not simply ‘private’ matters. They are linked to the ways in which persons figure in the political vocabulary of advanced liberal democracies – no longer as subjects with duties and obligations, but as individuals, with rights and freedoms. Specific styles of political discourse may be ephemeral, and the salvationist rhetoric of enterprise culture espoused by the British conservatism of the 1980s may fade away. But the presupposition of the autonomous, choosing, free self as the value, ideal, and objective underpinning and legitimating political activity imbues the political mentalities of the modern West, as well as those now sweeping what used to be termed Eastern Europe. How are we to evaluate it?

Notions of personhood vary greatly from culture to culture, and there are many ways of accounting for such variation, connecting personhood to religious, legal, penal, and other practices bearing upon persons, and to wider social, political, and economic arrangements. Throughout his writings, Michel Foucault suggested a number of productive ways of thinking about these issues, by linking practices bearing on the self to forms of power. Foucault’s work is instructive partly because it rejects two ways in which we habitually think about power and subjectivity. We often think of power in terms of constraints that dominate, deny, and repress subjectivity. Foucault, however, analyzes power not as a negation of the vitality and capacities of individuals, but as the creation, shaping, and utilization of human beings as subjects. Power, that is to say, works through, and not against, subjectivity (Foucault, 1982; see Miller, 1987). Further, we think about political power largely in terms of oppositions between ‘the state’ and ‘private life’, and locate subjec-
activity within the latter. But Foucault conceives of power as that which traverses all practices—from the ‘macro’ to the ‘micro’—through which persons are ruled, mastered, held in check, administered, steered, guided, by means of which they are led by others or have come to direct or regulate their own actions (Foucault, 1979a; Miller and Rose, 1988, 1990). To analyze the relations between ‘the self’ and power, then, is not a matter of lamenting the ways in which our autonomy is suppressed by the state, but of investigating the ways in which subjectivity has become an essential object, target, and resource for certain strategies, tactics, and procedures of regulation.

To consider the terms that are accorded so high a political value in our present—autonomy, fulfillment, responsibility, choice—from this perspective is certainly to question whether they mark a kind of culmination of ethical evolution. But this does not imply that we should subject these terms to a critique, for example, by claiming that the rhetoric of freedom is an ideological mask for the workings of a political system that secretly denies it. We should, rather, examine the ways in which these ideals of the self are bound up with a profoundly ambiguous set of relations between human subjects and political power. Following Foucault, I have suggested that we use the term ‘government’ as a portmanteau notion to encompass the multiple strategies, tactics, calculations, and reflections that have sought to ‘conduct the conduct’ of human beings (Foucault, 1986a; Gordon, 1986, 1987; see this volume, especially Chapters 1 and 2).

We can explore these relations along three interlinked dimensions. The first dimension, roughly ‘political’, Foucault termed ‘governmentality’, or ‘mentalities of government’: the complex of notions, calculations, strategies, and tactics through which diverse authorities—political, military, economic, theological, medical, and so forth—have sought to act upon the lives and conducts of each and all in order to avert evils and achieve such desirable states as health, happiness, wealth, and tranquillity (Foucault, 1979b). From at least the eighteenth century, the capacities of humans, as subjects, as citizens, as individuals, as selves, have emerged as a central target and resource for authorities. Attempts to invent and exercise different types of political rule have been intimately linked to conceptions of the nature of those who are to be ruled. The autonomous subjectivity of the modern self may seem the antithesis of political power. But Foucault’s argument suggests an exploration of the ways in which this autonomization of the self is itself a central feature of contemporary governmentality.

The second dimension suggested by Foucault’s writings is roughly ‘institutional’. However, it entails construing institutions in a particular ‘technological’ way, that is to say, as ‘human’ technologies. Institutions from the prison, through the asylum to the workplace, the school, and the home can be seen as practices that put in play certain assumptions and objectives concerning the human beings that inhabit them (Foucault, 1977). These are embodied in the design of institutional space, the arrangements of institutional time and activity, procedures of reward and punishment, and the operation of systems of norms and judgments. They can be thought of as ‘technological’ in that they seek the calculated orchestration of the activities of humans under a practical rationality directed toward certain goals. They attempt to simultaneously maximize certain capacities of individuals and constrain others in accordance with particular knowledges (medical, psychological, pedagogic) and toward particular ends (responsibility, discipline, diligence, etc.). In what ways and with what consequences are our contemporary notions of subjective autonomy and enterprise embodied within the regulatory practices of a distinctively ‘modern’ form of life?

The third dimension for investigation of the modern self corresponds to a roughly ‘ethical’ field, insofar as ethics is understood in a ‘practical’ way, as modes of evaluating and acting upon oneself that have obtained in different historical periods (Foucault, 1986a, 1988; see my discussion in Chapter 1 of this volume). Foucault examined these in terms of what he called ‘technologies of the self’, techniques “which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality” (Foucault, 1988, p. 18). Ethics are thus understood as means by which individuals come to construe, decipher, act upon themselves in relation to the true and the false, the permitted and the forbidden, the desirable and the undesirable. Along this dimension, then, we would consider the ways in which the contemporary culture of autonomous subjectivity has been embodied in our techniques for understanding and improving our selves in relation to that which is true, permitted, and desirable.

‘Enterprise culture’ can be understood in terms of the particular connections that it establishes between these three dimensions. For enterprise links up a seductive ethics of the self, a powerful critique of contemporary institutional and political reality, and an apparently coherent design for the radical transformation of contemporary social arrangements. In the writings of ‘neoliberals’ like Hayek and Friedman, the well-being of both political and social existence is to be ensured not by centralized planning and bureaucracy, but through the ‘enterprising’ activities and choices of autonomous entities—businesses, organizations, persons—each striving to maximize its own advantage by inventing and promoting new projects by means of individual and local calculations of strategies and tactics, costs and benefits (Hayek, 1976; Friedman, 1982; for an extended discussion, see Rose, 1993). Neoliberalism is thus more than a phenomenon at the level of political philosophy. It constitutes a mentality of government, a conception of how authorities should use their powers in order to improve national well-being, the ends they should seek, the evils they should avoid, the means they should use, and, crucially, the nature of the persons upon whom they must act.

Enterprise is such a potent language for articulating a political rationality
because it can connect up these general political deliberations with the formulation of specific programs that simultaneously problematize organizational practices in many different social locales, and provide rationales and guidelines for transforming them. The vocabulary of enterprise thus enables a political rationality to be ‘translated’ into attempts to govern aspects of social, economic, and personal existence that have come to appear problematic. Enterprise here not only designates a kind of organizational form, with individual units competing with one another on the market, but more generally provides an image of a mode of activity to be encouraged in a multitude of arenas of life – the school, the university, the hospital, the GP’s surgery, the factory and business organization, the family, and the apparatus of social welfare. Organizations are problematized in terms of their lack of enterprise, which epitomizes their weaknesses and their failings. Correlatively, they are to be reconstructed by promoting and utilizing the enterprising capacities of each and all, encouraging them to conduct themselves with boldness and vigor, to calculate for their own advantage, to drive themselves hard, and to accept risks in the pursuit of goals. Enterprise can thus be given a ‘technological’ form by experts of organizational life, engineering human relations through architecture, timetabling, supervisory systems, payment schemes, curricula, and the like to achieve economy, efficiency, excellence, and competitiveness. Contemporary regulatory practices – from those which have sought to revitalize the civil and public services by remodelling them as private or pseudoprivate agencies with budgets and targets to those which have tried to reduce long-term unemployment by turning the unemployed individual into an active job seeker – have been transformed to embody the presupposition that humans are, could be, or should be enterprising individuals, striving for fulfillment, excellence, and achievement.

Hence the vocabulary of enterprise links political rhetoric and regulatory programs to the ‘self-steering’ capacities of subjects themselves. Along this third dimension of political rule, enterprise forges a link between the ways we are governed by others and the ways we should govern ourselves. Enterprise here designates an array of rules for the conduct of one’s everyday existence: energy, initiative, ambition, calculation, and personal responsibility. The enterprising self will make an enterprise of its life, seek to maximize its own human capital, project itself a future, and seek to shape itself in order to become that which it wishes to be. The enterprising self is thus both an active self and a calculating self, a self that calculates about itself and that acts upon itself in order to better itself. Enterprise, that is to say, designates a form of rule that is intrinsically ‘ethical’: good government is to be grounded in the ways in which persons govern themselves.

For many critics, this vocabulary of enterprise is obfuscating rhetoric: the apotheosis of the ‘capitalist illusion’ that persons are ‘sovereign individuals’. Such an assessment is facile. The language of enterprise is only one way of articulating ethical presuppositions that are very widely shared; that have come to form a common ground for almost all rationalities, programs, and techniques of rule in advanced liberal democratic societies. Government in such societies is not characterized by the utopian dream of a regulative machinery that will penetrate all regions of the social body, and administer them for the common good. Rather, since at least the nineteenth century, liberal political thought has been structured by the opposition between the constitutional limits of government on the one hand, and on the other the desire to arrange things such that social and economic processes turn out for the best without the need for direct political intervention (Rose and Miller, 1992). Thus the formal limitations on the powers of ‘the state’ have entailed, as their corollary, the proliferation of a dispersed array of programs and mechanisms, decoupled from the direct activities of the ‘public’ powers, which nonetheless promise to shape events in the domains of work, the market, and the family to produce such ‘public’ values as wealth, efficiency, health, and well-being.

The autonomy of the self is thus not the eternal antithesis of political power, but one of the objectives and instruments of modern mentalities and strategies for the conduct of conduct. Liberal democracy, if understood as an art of government and a technology of rule, has long been bound up with the invention of techniques to constitute the citizens of a democratic polity with the ‘personal’ capacities and aspirations necessary to bear the political weight that rests on them (Rose, 1993). Governing in a liberal-democratic way means governing through the freedom and aspirations of subjects rather than in spite of them. The possibility of imposing ‘liberal’ limits on the extent and scope of ‘political’ rule has thus been provided by a proliferation of discourses, practices, and techniques through which self-governing capabilities can be installed in free individuals in order to bring their own ways of conducting and evaluating themselves into alignment with political objectives.

A potential, if always risky and failing, solution to the problem of the regulation of ‘private’ spheres produced by liberal democratic mentalities has thus been provided through the proliferation of experts grounding their authority on knowledge and technique: medics, social workers, psychiatrists, psychologists, counselors, and advisers (Rose, 1987). Governing in a liberal democratic way depends upon the availability of such techniques that will shape, channel, organize, and direct the personal capacities and selves of individuals under the aegis of a claim to objectivity, neutrality, and technical efficacy rather than one of political partiality. Through the indirect alliances established by the apparatus of expertise, the objectives of ‘liberal’ government can be brought into alignment with the selves of ‘democratic’ citizens. And contemporary mutations in government have been made both thinkable and practicable by the multitude of technologies that have now been assembled for enjoining and emplacing the regulated freedom of autonomous selves.
Technologies of the self

Many authors have commented on the rise of a therapeutic culture of the self and sought to link this to more general political transformations. The most superficial analyses have consisted in a reprise on the familiar theme that capitalism breeds individualism, the obsession with therapy being the corollary of the illusion of atomistic self-sufficiency. More considered analyses have made similar melancholy assessments (Rieff, 1966; Lasch, 1979; MacIntyre, 1981; Bourdieu, 1984). But rather than disdaining these doomed attempts to fill the absence caused by the demise of religion, cultural solidarities, or parental authority, Foucault’s approach encourages us to view therapeutics as, in certain respects, continuous with these. Therapeutics, like religion, may be analyzed as a heterogeneous array of techniques of subjectification though which human beings are urged and incited to become ethical beings, to define and regulate themselves according to a moral code, to establish precepts for conducting or judging their lives, to reject or accept moral goals.

This is not the place to trace the relations between contemporary therapeutics and earlier ethical technologies (Rose, 1990; cf. Foucault, 1985, 1986a). Let me continue to explore just one significant theme: the allocation of authority over ‘the conduct of conduct’ to expertise. Expertise is important in at least three respects, each distinguishing the present regime of the self from those embodied in theological injunction, moral exhortation, hygienic instruction, or appeals to utilitarian calculation. First, the grounding of authority in a claim to scientificity and objectivity establishes in a unique way the distance between systems of self-regulation and the formal organs of political power that is necessary within liberal democratic rationalities of government. Second, expertise can mobilize and be mobilized within political argument in distinctive ways, producing a new relationship between knowledge and government. Expertise comes to be accorded a particular role in the formulation of programs of government and in the technologies that seek to give them effect. Third, expertise operates through the particular relation that it has with the self-regulating capacities of subjects. For the plausibility inherent in a claim to scientificity and rationalized efficacy binds subjectivity to truth, and subjects to experts, in new and potent ways.

The advertisement with which I began operates under a significant title: “Self-Help.” Although this notion has a long history, today it signifies that the regulation of personal existence is not a question of politicians seeking to impose norms of conduct through an intrusive state bureaucracy backed with legal powers. Nor is it a matter of the imposition of moral standards under a religious mandate. Self-help, today, entails an alliance between professionals claiming to provide an objective, rational answer to the question of how one should conduct a life to ensure normality, contentment, and success, and individuals seeking to shape a ‘life-style’, not in order to conform to social conventions but in the hope of personal happiness and an ‘improved quality of life’. And the mechanism of this alliance is the market, the ‘free’ exchange between those with a service to sell and those who have been brought to want to buy.

Contemporary individuals are incited to live as if making a project of themselves: they are to work on their emotional world, their domestic and conjugal arrangements, their relations with employment and their techniques of sexual pleasure, to develop a ‘style’ of living that will maximize the worth of their existence to themselves. Evidence from the United States, Europe, and the United Kingdom suggests that the implantation of such ‘identity projects’, characteristic of advanced liberal democracies, is constitutively linked to the rise of a new breed of spiritual directors, ‘engineers of the human soul’. Although our subjectivity might appear our most intimate sphere of experience, its contemporary intensification as a political and ethical value is intrinsically correlated with the growth of expert languages, which enable us to render our relations with our selves and others into words and into thought, and with expert techniques, which promise to allow us to transform our selves in the direction of happiness and fulfillment.

The ethics of enterprise – competitiveness, strength, vigor, boldness, outwardness, and the urge to succeed – may seem to be quite opposed to the domain of the therapeutic, which is associated with hedonism and self-centeredness. And indeed, contemporary culture is ethically pluralist: the differences that Max Weber examined between the ‘styles of conduct’ appropriate to different ‘spheres of existence’ – spiritual, economic, political, aesthetic, erotic – have not been abolished (Weber, [1915] 1948). But despite such ethical pluralism, these diverse regimes operate within a single a priori: the ‘autonomization’ and ‘responsibilization’ of the self, the instilling of a reflexive hermeneutics which will afford self-knowledge and self-mastery, and the operation of all of this under the authority of experts who claim that the self can achieve a better and happier life through the application of scientific knowledge and professional skill. The allure of expertise lies in its promise to reconcile the tensions formed across the soul of the individual who is forced concurrently to inhabit different spheres. For the new experts of the psyche promise that modes of life that appear philosophically opposed – business success and personal growth, image management and authenticity – can be brought into alignment and achieve translatability through the ethics of the autonomous, choosing, psychological self.

Freud, it will be recalled, advertised psychoanalysis thus: “You will be able to convince yourself,” he wrote to an imaginary patient, “that much will be gained if we succeed in transforming hysterical misery into common unhappiness. With a mental life that has been restored to health you will be better armed against that unhappiness” (Breuer and Freud, 1895, in Freud, 1953–7, vol. 2, p. 305; the next few paragraphs draw upon evidence discussed in more detail in Rose, 1990). His successors formulate their powers rather differently. 
The London Centre for Psychotherapy points out that psychotherapy takes time, yet it offers "far more fulfilling relationships and greater self expression. Family and social life, sexual partnerships and work are all likely to benefit" (London Centre for Psychotherapy, 1987). Advocates of behavioral psychotherapy hold only that "the client's 'symptoms' can be regarded as discrete psychological entities which can be removed or altered by direct means" (Mackay, 1984, p. 276). But 'therapy' is generalized to include such 'symptoms' as sexual orientation, anxiety, lack of assertiveness, and the wish to increase self-control. And 'therapy' is extended to such goals as 'greater self-awareness' which should not only facilitate the change process but should lead the client to reappraise his life style, 'the development of problem solving skills', and increasing 'overall perceived self-efficacy'. In the more avowedly 'humanistic' and 'alternative' therapeutic systems, from Rogers's 'client centered therapy' to Perls's 'Gestalt therapy', from Berne's 'transactional analysis' to Janov's 'primal therapy', versions of the same hope are held out: you can change, you can achieve self-mastery, you can control your own destiny, you can truly be autonomous (cf. Rose, 1990).

Become whole, become what you want, become yourself: the individual is to become, as it were, an entrepreneur of itself, seeking to maximize its own powers, its own happiness, its own quality of life, though enhancing its autonomy and then instrumentalizing its autonomous choices in the service of its life-style. The self is to style its life through acts of choice, and when it cannot conduct its life according to this norm of choice, it is to seek expert assistance. On the territory of the therapeutic, 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.

Therapeutics has transformed work – mental and manual – into a matter of personal fulfillment and psychical identity. The employment relationship becomes significant less for the cash reward it offers than for the subjectivity it confers or denies. An entire discourse on jobs, careers, and unemployment has taken shape, conducted in therapeutic rather than economic terms (Miller, 1986). The confident, thrusting self-images of the entrepreneur seem far from such therapeutic ethics. Yet this opposition is illusory. For therapeutics can forge alliances between the liberation of the self and the pathways to personal success, promising to break through the blockages that trap us into powerlessness and passivity, into undemanding jobs and underachievement. Hence therapeutics can appeal to both sides of the employment contract: it will make us better workers at the same time as it makes us better selves. Therapy can thus offer to free each of us from our psychic chains. We can become enterprising, take control of our careers, transform ourselves into high fliers, achieve excellence, and fulfill ourselves not in spite of work but by means of work.

Therapeutics has subjectified the mundane. Everyday life, from debt, through house purchase, childbirth, marriage, and divorce has been transformed into 'life events', remediable problems of coping and adjustment. Each is to be addressed by recognizing forces of a subjective order (fears, denials, repressions, lack of psychosocial skills) and similarly subjective consequences (neurosis, tension, stress, illness). The quotidian affairs of existence have become the occasion for introspection, confession, and management by expertise. Although this may appear to entail precisely the forms of dependency to which the spirit of enterprise is opposed, this opposition is misleading. For therapeutics, here, impels the subject to 'work' on itself and to assume responsibility for its life. It seeks to equip the self with a set of tools for the management of its affairs such that it can take control of its undertakings, define its goals, and plan to achieve its needs through its own powers.

Our contemporary regime of the self is not 'antisocial'. It construes the 'relationships' of the self with lovers, family, children, friends, and colleagues as central both to personal happiness and social efficacy. All kinds of social ills, from damaged children to ill health to disruption at work and frustration at home have come to be understood as emanating from remediable incapacities in our 'interactions' with others. Thus human interaction has been made amenable to therapeutic government, and therapists have sought to take charge of this domain of the interpersonal, knowing its laws, diagnosing its ills, prescribing the ways to conduct ourselves with others that are virtuous because they are both fulfilling and healthy. Yet, however 'social' this field may be, it can be turned to the account of the enterprising self: for in recognizing the dynamic nexus of interpersonal relations that it inhabits, selves can place these under conscious control and the self can learn the skills to shape its relations with others so that it will best fulfill its own destiny.

Freud, it has been argued, built psychoanalysis upon a tragic vision. Humans were unable to escape suffering; the duty of the living to tolerate life was denied and hampered by those who promulgated illusions that the pains of existence could be transcended to ensure happiness (Rieff, 1959; Richards, 1989). But grief, frustration, disappointment, and death pose dangers to the regime of the autonomous self, for they strike at the very images of sovereignty, self-possession, omnipotent powers, secular fulfillment, and joy through life-style to which it is welded. Hence, for the new therapies of finitude, suffering is not to be endured but to be reframed by expertise, to be managed as a challenge and a stimulus to the powers of the self. In transcending despair through counseling or therapy, the self can be restored to its conviction that it is master of its own existence.

Although they are heterogeneous and often originate in contexts and moralities that seem quite discrepant from the world of enterprise, each of these therapeutic systems of spiritual direction operates on an ethical terrain that can be made entirely consonant with the imperatives of the enterprising self: work on yourself, improve the quality of your life, emancipate your true self,
eliminate dependency, release your potential. The healthy self is to be ‘free
to choose’. But in embracing such an ethic of psychological health construed
in terms of autonomy we are condemned to make a project out of our own
identity and we have become bound to the powers of expertise.

The presuppositions of the self

A recent British recruiting poster for the Royal Navy, on the side of a London
bus, emphasized one key phrase: “choose your way of life.” This is indicative
of a transformation, probably most emphatic over the past couple of decades,
in the types of self that are presupposed in practices for the institutional
administration of individuals. For the power of the forms of knowledge and
techniques that I have termed the ‘expertise of subjectivity’ lies in the new
alliances that they make possible between the aspirations of selves and the
direction of life in factory, office, airline, hospital, school, and home. The
self-steering capacities of individuals are now construed as vital resources for
achieving private profit, public tranquility, and social progress, and interven­
tions in these areas have also come to be guided by the regulatory norm
of the autonomous, responsible subject, obliged to make its life meaningful
through acts of choice. Attempts to manage the enterprise to ensure produc­
tivity, competitiveness, and innovation, to regulate child rearing to maximize
emotional health and intellectual ability, to act upon dietary and other re­
gimes in order to minimize disease and maximize health no longer seek to
discipline, instruct, moralize, or threaten subjects into compliance. Rather,
they aspire to instill and use the self-directing propensities of subjects to
bring them into alliance with the aspirations of authorities.

One key site has been the workplace (Rose, 1990; Miller and Rose, 1990,
1995). A new vocabulary of the employment relation has been articulated by
organizational psychologists and management consultants, in which work
has been reconstruced, not as a constraint upon freedom and autonomy, but
as a realm in which working subjects can express their autonomy. Workers
are no longer imagined merely to endure the degradations and deprivations
of labor in order to gain a wage. Nor are workers construed as social crea­
tures seeking satisfaction of needs for solidarity and security in the group
relations of the workplace. Rather, the prevailing image of the worker is of
an individual in search of meaning and fulfillment, and work itself is inter­
preted as a site within which individuals represent, construct, and confirm their
identity, an intrinsic part of a style of life.

The world of work is reconceptualized as a realm in which productivity is
to be enhanced, quality assured, and innovation fostered through the active
engagement of the self-fulfilling impulses of the employee, through aligning
the objectives of the organization with the desires of the self. Organizations
are to get the most out of their employees, not by managing group relations
to maximize contentment, or by rationalizing management to ensure effi­
ciency, but by releasing the psychological striving of individuals for auton­
omy and creativity and channeling them into the search of the firm for ex­
cellence and success. It now appears that individuals will ally themselves
with organizational objectives to the extent that they construe them as both
dependent upon and enhancing their own skills of self-realization, self­
presentation, self-direction, and self-management. Expertise plays the role of
relay between objectives that are economically desirable and those that are
personally seductive, teaching the arts of self-realization that will enhance
employees as individuals as well as workers. Economic success, career prog­
ress, and personal development intersect in this new expertise of autonomous
subjectivity: work has become an essential element in the path to self­
realization, and the strivings of the autonomous self have become essential
allies in the path to economic success.

Reciprocally, unemployment is transformed, as the unemployed individual
is characterized, in many European policies and practices as in the United
States, as a ‘job seeker’, to be acted upon in order to maintain ‘job readiness’
and to avoid the risk of encouraging ‘dependence’ (cf. Dean, 1995). Financial
support is no longer in the form of benefits provided to claimants as a matter
of right, but allowances, paid to clients through a contract, which specifies
that they must demonstrate their active pursuit of employment through job­
search activities. As Colin Gordon puts it, “The idea of one’s life as the enter­
prise of oneself implies that there is at least a sense in which [even when
unemployed] one remains always continuously employed in (at least) that one
enterprise, and that it is part of the continuous business of living to make
adequate provision for the preservation, reproduction and reconstruction of
one’s own human capital” (Gordon, 1991, p. 44). And, as Gordon also points
out, this is why the ‘right to permanent retraining’ in France, and similar
regimes elsewhere, are able to make use of the whole panoply of techniques
from the new psychological culture for assembling the capacities for self­
awareness, self-presentation, and self-esteem. If the maximization of these
aspects of the self is not itself thought sufficient to generate new jobs, it is
argued that it will provide the key to the selection of one unemployed individ­
ual over another for those that do exist. As significantly, it is hoped that it
will reduce the psychological exclusion of the unemployed person from the
contemporary regime of subjectivity: unemployment is to become as much
like work as possible.

A second key site for the deployment of new presuppositions concerning
the self is consumption. Expertise has, once more, forged alignments between
broad sociopolitical objectives, the goals of producers and the self-regulating
propensities of individuals. Politicoeconomic analyses and calculations have
come to stress the need for a constant expansion of consumption if economic
well-being is to be maintained in the interests of the national budget, the
profitability of the firm, and the maintenance of levels of employment. A
complex economic terrain has taken shape, in which the success of an econ­
Inventing our selves

The sphere of consumption, and the mechanisms of its promotion and molding, can be extended to incorporate problems that were previously governed in other ways. Health stands as an exemplar of this transformation. Healthy bodies and hygienic homes may still be a public value and a political objective. But we no longer need state bureaucracies to enjoin healthy habits of eating, of personal hygiene, of tooth care, and the like, with compulsory inspection, subsidized incentives to eat or drink correctly, and so forth. In the new domain of consumption, individuals will want to be healthy, experts will instruct them on how to be so, and entrepreneurs will exploit and enhance this market for health. Health will be ensured through a combination of the market, expertise, and a regulated autonomy (Rose and Miller, 1989, 1992).

Perhaps the most striking example of the complex processes through which these new networks have been constructed and operate is the regulation of ‘the family’. For some two centuries, the family has been a central ideal and mechanism for the government of the social field (Donzelot, 1979). ‘Familialization’ was crucial to the means whereby personal capacities and conducts could be socialized, shaped, and maximized in a manner that accorded with the moral and political principles of liberal society. From at least the mid-nineteenth century, diverse projects sought to use the human technology of

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the family for social ends: for eliminating illegality, curbing inebriety and restricting promiscuity, imposing restrictions upon the unbridled sensuality of adults and inculcating morality into children. These had to resolve the paradox that liberal political and philosophical thought construed the family as quintessentially private, yet simultaneously accorded it all sorts of social consequences and social duties: a concurrent ‘privatization’ and ‘responsibilization’ of the family.

Expertise resolved this basic problem at the junction of the family mechanism and the goals of liberal government. It enabled a harmonization between the promotion of the family as a locus of private aspirations and the necessity that it become a kind of ‘social machine’ for the production of adjusted and responsible citizens. Initially it was the malfunctioning family that was the central concern. How could one minimize the social threat such families posed without destroying them by removing their endangered members? How could one act preventively on those sectors of the population thought to harbor the seeds of social risk? Expertise was to ensure that the malfunctioning family would neither be lured into dependency by especially favorable treatment, nor forced into resistance by measures that were frankly repressive. Instead it would be instructed in health, hygiene, and normality, encouraged to see its social duties as its own concerns, and thus returned to its obligations without compromising its autonomy and its responsibility for its own members.

During our own century, attention has gradually but decisively shifted from the prevention of maladaptation to the production of normality itself (Rose, 1985a). The family now will meet its social obligations through promising to meet the personal aspirations of its members, as adults construe the maximization of the physical and mental welfare of their offspring as the privileged path to their own happiness. Once such an ethic comes to govern family life, individuals can themselves evaluate and normalize their parental and conjugal conduct in terms of the images of normal mothers, fathers, parents, and families generated by expertise. Bureaucratic regulation of family life is no longer needed to ensure a harmony between social objectives and personal desires. The ethics of the active choosing self can infuse the ‘private’ domain that for so long appeared essentially resistant to the rationale of calculation and self-promotion. Through this new mechanism, the social field can be governed through an alliance between the powers of expertise and the wishes, hopes, and fears of the responsible, autonomous family, committed to maximizing its quality of life and to the success of family members.

The government of the self

In The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism, Daniel Bell suggested that there was a fundamental opposition between the calculative relation to existence
that was required within industrial capitalism and the ‘cult of the self’, the
h Persuasive culture that had apparently undercut the Protestant ethic, which
provided an integrative moral foundation for society at the same time as it
chimed with economic needs (Bell, 1979). The reflections in the present
discussion suggest that this analysis is misleading. In the heady
days of the 1960s, cults of the self promised a liberation of the individual from all
mundane social constraints. But today, the therapeutic culture of the self and its
experts of subjectivity offer a different freedom, a freedom to realize our
potential and our dreams through reshaping the style in which we conduct
our secular existence. And, correlativelly, mentalities of government and tech­
nologies of regulation operate in terms of an ethic of the self that stresses not
stoicism or self-denial in the service of morality and society, but the maximi­
zation of choice and self-fulfillment as the touchstone of political legitimacy
and the measure of the worth of nations. For both left and right, political
culture is to be reshaped to secure ways of life that are fitting for free, sover­
eign individuals. Neoliberalism has been a powerful contributor to this reor­
ganization of the problematics of government, questioning, from a particular
ethic of individual sovereignty, the legitimacy and the capacity of authorities
to know and administer the lives of their subjects in the name of their well­
being. But the neoliberal vocabulary of enterprise is only one way of articul­
ting this more fundamental transformation in mentalities of government, in
which the choices of the self have become central to the moral bases of politi­
cal arguments from all parts of the political arena. Within this new political
culture, the diverse and conflicting moral obligations of different spheres of
life – at work, at play, in the public arena, in the family, and in sexuality­
can achieve a mutual translatability, once each is articulated in terms of a
self striving to make its everyday existence meaningful through the choice of
its way of life.

Mentalities of government in the first half of this century operated in terms
of an image of the citizen as a social being. They sought to open a kind of
contract between government and citizens articulated in the language of so­
cial responsibilities and social welfare. In these forms of political thought,
the individual was a locus of needs that were to be socially met if malign
consequences were to be avoided, but was reciprocally to be a being to whom
political, civil, and social obligations and duties were to be attached. This
political rationality was translated into programs such as social insurance,
child welfare, and social and mental hygiene. Pedagogic technologies from
universal education to the BBC were construed as devices for forming re­
sponsible citizens. Planned and socially organized mechanisms were to weave
a complex web that would bind the inhabitants of a territory into a single
polity, a space of regulated freedom.

Over the past twenty five years, this rationality of government has entered
a chronic crisis, manifested in the appearance of counterdiscourses from all
parts of the political spectrum, left and center, as well as right. ‘Welfare’ is
criticized as bureaucratic and inefficient, as patronizing and patriarchal, as
doing nothing to tackle or redress fundamental inequalities, as a usurper of
private choices and freedoms, as a violation of individual rights, and much
more. These counterdiscourses are not only articulated in terms of a different
vision of the respective roles of the state, the market, pluralism, civil society,
and the like. They are also predicated on a different notion of the proper
relations between the citizen and his or her community. Across their manifold
differences, these critiques of welfare are framed in a vocabulary of individual
freedom, personal choice, self-fulfillment, and initiative. Citizenship is to be
active and individualistic rather than passive and dependent. The political
subject is henceforth to be an individual whose citizenship is manifested
through the free exercise of personal choice among a variety of options.
Douglas Hurd, British home secretary in the late 1980s, may have argued
that “The idea of active citizenship is a necessary complement to that of the
enterprise culture” (Hurd 1989, quoted in Barnett, 1989, p. 9), while his left­
wing critics argued that “there can be no such thing as an active citizen in
the United Kingdom until there are actual citizens” (ibid., p. 11), and clam­
ored for a written constitution and democratic rights. But all shades of politi­
cal opinion now agree that citizens should be active and not passive, that
democratic government must engage the self-activating capacities of individ­
uals in a new governmental dispensation, that it is upon the political con­
sciousness and commitments of individual subjects that a new politics will
depend.

Such a notion of the active political subject should, I suggest, be under­
stood in terms of its consonance with the rise of regulatory technologies that
enable the subject at home and at work, in acts of consumption and pleasure,
to be governed ‘at a distance’. We should analyze notions like ‘the active
citizen’ not merely as rhetoric or ideology, but in terms of the ways in which
contemporary political rationalities rely upon and utilize a range of technol­
ologies that install and support the civilizing project by shaping and governing
subjects and enhancing their social commitment, yet are outside the formal
control of the ‘public powers’. To such basic nation-forming devices as a
common language, skills of literacy, and transportation networks, our cen­
tury has added the mass media of communication, with their pedagogies
though documentary and soap opera; opinion polls and other devices that
provide reciprocal links between authorities and subjects; the regulation of
life-styles through advertising, marketing, and the world of goods; and the
experts of subjectivity. These technolo...
marginalized, controlled by older, harsher ways, or maintained under the particular regimes of environmental intervention and nonintervention known as 'community care'. Yet even here, as we have seen in the case of programs for the unemployed, one may observe the utilization of very similar psychological vocabularies of diagnosis and techniques of intervention, in the logics of social skills training, in the new strategies of empowerment, in the emphasis upon the importance of self-esteem. Under very different political auspices, in the activities not only of professionals but also in antiaddiction programs, self-help organizations, and special educational programs set up by leaders of disadvantaged groups and communities, one sees the operation of a very similar image of the subject we could and should be, and the use of the same psychological and therapeutic devices for reconstructing the will on the model of enterprise, self-esteem, and self-actualization.

Neoliberalism is perhaps of enduring significance, and not merely an ephemeral or corrupt phenomenon, because it was the right, rather than the left, that succeeded in formulating a political rationality consonant with this new regime of the self. In so doing, the right established some models for ways in which political authorities could make use of human technologies through which citizens themselves can act upon themselves in order to avoid what they have come to consider undesirable and achieve what they have come to think will make them happy. In all the novel political rationalities of advanced liberalism that have emerged in the wake of the neoliberal revival of the 1980s, citizens now are no longer thought to need instruction by 'political' authorities as to how to conduct themselves and regulate their everyday existence. We can now be governed through the choices that we will ourselves make, under the guidance of cultural and cognitive authorities, in the space of regulated freedom, in our individual search for happiness, self-esteem, and self-actualization, for the fulfillment of our autonomous selves.

A critical ontology of our selves

This investigation of the forms of self that are presupposed within modern social, economic, and political relations evokes a central question addressed by Max Weber. Wilhelm Hennis has suggested that Weber's work should be read as a sustained reflection on *Menschentum*, the history of what humans are in their nature and how human lives are conducted (Hennis, 1987). Weber thus addresses questions of enduring importance: the forms of life entailed within certain economic relations; the modes in which different religious systems and forms of religious 'association' shape and direct the practical conduct of everyday economic and vocational existence; the ways in which these and other forces, such as the modern press, mold the subjective individuality of individuals and shape their *Lebensstil* or life-styles at particular historical moments. This interpretation of Weber has been linked, by Colin Gordon, to the concerns of Michel Foucault (Gordon, 1986, 1987). In the last period of his work, Foucault returned on a number of occasions to Kant's essay of 1784 entitled *What Is Enlightenment?* (Foucault, 1986c). He argued that one of the central roles of philosophy since Kant's question was to describe the nature of our present and of ourselves in that present. To ask the question *What is enlightenment?* for Foucault, is to understand the importance of historical investigations into the events through which we have come to recognize ourselves and act upon ourselves as certain kinds of subjects. It is to interrogate what we have become, as subjects, in our individuality, and the nature of that present in which we are.

Such an investigation would not attempt a psychological diagnosis of the modern soul. Rather, it would seek to document the categories and explanatory schemes according to which we think ourselves, the criteria and norms we use to judge ourselves, the practices through which we act upon ourselves and one another in order to make us particular kinds of being. We would, that is to say, endeavor to describe the historical a priori of our existence as subjects. And, perhaps, we should take as a starting point the notions of subjectivity, autonomy, and freedom themselves.

In this chapter I have suggested that subjectivity is inherently linked to certain types of knowledge, that projects of autonomy are linked to the growth of expertise, and that freedom is inextricably bound up with certain ways of exercising power. But I have not intended to imply that such notions are false and should be subjected to a critique, or to recommend a nihilism that proclaims the corruption of all values. If the faithful incantation of weary political nostrums is inadequate to the task of serious analysis of the conditions and consequences of our 'age of freedom', so too is knowing sociological relativism or fashionable 'postmodern' irony. If this point requires reinforcement, it would be amply supplied by the part played by the language of freedom, individuality, and choice in the recent revolutions in Eastern Europe. Hence my aim has not been to expose or to denounce our current ethical vocabulary, but to open a space for critical reflection upon the complex practices of knowledge, power, and authority that sustain the forms of life that we have come to value, and that underpin the norms of selfhood according to which we have come to regulate our existence. To claim that values are more technical than philosophically is not to denounce all values, but it is, perhaps, to suggest the limits of philosophy as the basis for a critical understanding of ethics.

From such a perspective I have tried to indicate a general change in categories of self-understanding and techniques of self-improvement that goes beyond the political dichotomy of left and right, and which forms the ethicopolitical terrain upon which their programs must be articulated and legitimated. I have argued that the rationalities of liberal government have always been concerned with internalizing their authority in citizens through inspiring, encouraging, and inaugurating programs and techniques that will simultaneously 'autonomize' and 'responsibilize' subjects. I have suggested that, over
the past century, a complex network of experts and mechanisms has taken shape, outside 'the state', but fundamentally bound up with the government of health, wealth, tranquillity, and virtue. A host of programs and technologies have come to inculcate and sustain the ethic that individuals are free to the extent that they choose a life of responsible selfhood, and have promoted the dreams of self-fulfillment through the crafting of a life-style. And I have argued that the potency of a notion of an 'enterprise culture', however short-lived its particular vocabulary might prove to be, is that it embodies a political program grounded in, and drawing upon, the new regime of the active, autonomous, choosing self.