

Late Modern Individualization in Light of Critical Theory (the Frankfurt School): An Essay¹

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<https://doi.org/10.18778/1733-8069.20.1.05>

Keywords:

modernity, late
modernity,
individualization,
critical theory,
change, productivity

Abstract: The article describes the dialectic of the process of individualization in modernity and late modernity from the perspective of critical theory, particularly in its classical form (Frankfurt School). This dialectic consists in the transformation of individualization as a medium of emancipation into individualization understood not only as an ideology but most of all as a productive force of neoliberal capitalism, as a principle of its functioning. The article discusses the social-cultural determinants of this transformation, and subsequently the way in which late-modern individualism in the form of self-realization is functionalized by the market and subjected to the requirements of profit and efficiency in individual areas of economic and social life in the neoliberal world. The article refers to the methodology of qualitative sociology.

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¹ The article was written as part of the grant of the National Science Center (Opus 14 competition) “The shaping of subjectivity and biography of individuals in the face of changes in neo-modern society” (UMO2017/27/B/HS1/00462).



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Introduction

Contemporary disputes about postmodernity (or late modernity, reflexive modernity²) concern not only definitional disputes regarding its nature in relation to modernity, but also its assessment carried out from anthropological and philosophical positions, or at least implying them. The ambivalence of the processes and phenomena of late modernity, as well as of modernity, is frequently pointed out; it is noticed by both the supporters of postmodernism and its critics, but with different emphasis. The former (including postmodernists) also note their negative aspects, but, evaluating them in terms of possible threats, they will emphasize the dominance of positive tendencies. On the other hand, the latter, in their critique of late modernity, regard as dominant what the former treated as a threat. They often refer to the heritage of the Frankfurt School and the critical theory that grew out of it, although the analysis of the Frankfurt School itself (classical critical theory) referred to classical modernity (after the 1950s and 1960s), without taking into account the structural re-evaluations taking place within it, which in the 1970s and 1980s led to the transformation of modernity into late modernity.

Considering the continuity and breaks between the two formations, it is worth examining to what extent the analytical and critical tools developed by the Frankfurt School and its successors can be applied to the analysis of late modernity. The basic plane is constituted by the processes of the individualization of modernity and late modernity, in which the ambivalence inherent in them is focused; in this text, the author will focus on its critical-negative aspects. In the modern and late modern world, these processes are freed from the framework of metaphysical and religious essentialism. Embedded in the social order, they are expressed in the “transformation of human “identity” from “given” into “task”” related to the empowerment of freedom, for which the individual bears sole responsibility (Bauman, 2000: 31). Freedom should be understood here, following Simmel and Taylor, in two aspects: as the autonomy of the individual and as self-realization, the free expression of his/her personality. In late modernity, freed from modern historiosophical frameworks and great narratives, individualization takes the form of a compulsion of individual self-determination, it becomes “man’s fate, not a choice. In a world of freedom of individual choice, no one can avoid individualization or refuse to participate in the universal, individualizing game” (Bauman, 2000: 34, see 30–35). The dominant form of individualization in late modernity is projectivity, understood both as project work and as processes of shaping individuals’ biographies and identities.

The article aims to analyze late-modern individualization. This will be carried out in the critical perspective developed by the Frankfurt School. First, the transformations of individualization in

2 I use these terms interchangeably, having in mind, above all, the understanding of late modernity as reflexive modernity (as opposed to classical or industrial), on the basis of which “the process of modernization detraditionalizes its social foundations” (Beck, 1992: 153, cf. 9–15, 153–154). In the text, therefore, I refer primarily to Beck, Giddens, and Bauman as those theoreticians of late modernity who saw it as a reflexive transformation of modernity. I refer to the opposition between modernity (classical) and late (reflexive) modernity for reasons of the transparency of analyses, being aware of the presence of elements of modernity in late modernity.

modernity will be discussed and then the shape it took in late modernity will be elaborated on, first in the economic dimension and then in other areas of social life.

The above analysis is of a sociological and philosophical nature insofar as the social aspects of individualization in late modernity will be examined in terms of their compliance with two philosophical models of subjectivity – the model of autonomy presented by the Frankfurt School and the model of self-realization, adopted in late modernity as a positive, projective model of human subjectivity. In this sense, this analysis is comparative and heuristic in nature. The assumed models of subjectivity will make it possible, on the one hand, to highlight the socioeconomic features of late-modern projective individualization from the perspective of the category of subjectivity, and, on the other hand, to assess the effects of this individualization and show its deficits. In turn, the basis for the analysis of the socioeconomic conditions of projective individualization includes both general findings presented in the sociological literature and findings enabling verification of the empirical material collected during grant research using qualitative sociology methods, i.e. interviews based on the(auto)biographical narrative interview technique (in F. Schütze's version) and the technique of interviewing about current life; the latter was developed under a grant with reference to Gestalt phenomenology and psychotherapy (see Biały, Piasek, 2024).

Individualization and its transformation into modernity

Let us begin with modernity. In the strictly social dimension, it was defined by the existence of massive, stable social structures created by social classes and strata as well as institutions with their constant bureaucratic routines (Sennett, 2006: 36–54). They determined strong social bonds and commitments as well as, at the same time, permanent roles (professional: a full-time job with a long-term career path and professional development; social and family: the nuclear family). In this way, they created a rigid framework for the individuals' biographies, guaranteeing the continuity and cohesion of their identity³, a "linear process of their development" (Honneth, 2004: 470) within long-term, lifelong "life projects". The social identities of individuals defined by this framework are acquired, because they are the subject of their choices which, on the basis of political and economic freedoms, are confirmed or rejected in favor of others (e.g., social advancement), equally stable identities (see Bauman, 2000: 31–32; 2001: 230–231).

It was within this social framework of classical modernity that classical sociology described the processes of individualization and individual freedom. Thus, Durkheim and Simmel pointed to the positive consequences of the capitalist commodity-money economy for the freedom of individuals, whilst also noting the threats. The increasing differentiation and expansion of the social division of labor (the transition from a mechanical to an organic society), according to Durkheim, and monetary

3 "The 'classic' identities of modern society were, in effect, long-term projects, developing like a Bildungsroman" (Rosa, 2012: 103).

exchange liberating individuals from personal dependencies (proper for a state society), according to Simmel, increase the freedom of the individual by depersonalizing dependence and by expanding the scope of their freedom of choice which leads to greater autonomy and pluralism of lifestyles. Simmel, on the other hand, pointed to two fundamental tendencies. On the one hand, “numerical individualism”, which binds the freedom and equality of individuals and relates them to their common nature, which is inherent in all individuals of the human species and is related to their reflective, personal autonomy. On the other hand, there is “quality” or “uniqueness” individualism, which is a legacy of German Romanticism and refers to the uniqueness of individuals and the authenticity of their personalities. The first expresses “the idea of a free personality”, the second – “the idea of a unique personality”⁴ (Simmel, 1980: 223–233; Honneth, 2004: 464–468).

The Frankfurt School, which grew out of the tradition of German idealism and Marxism, linked the autonomy, freedom, and happiness of the individual with the idea of social justice in the name of social rationality. It mainly perceived the negative consequences of freedom conditioned by the division of labor and money economy that were destructive for the development of the individual and society (noted in part by Durkheim and Simmel): excessive rationalization, social anomie, the loneliness and atomization of individuals, the disappearance of personal social ties, the lack of opportunities for integral personality development (Durkheim), and the negative nature of freedom, its contentlessness and aimlessness condemning the individual to accidental impulses, instability as well as emptiness and dependence on “fleeting values” (Simmel). In these phenomena, the Frankfurt School saw a denial of freedom in the meaning of autonomy understood as the ability to define oneself and take responsibility for oneself reflectively and critically. Based on its radical critique of capitalism, which denies social justice and equality, the Frankfurt School framed these phenomena in terms of alienation and reification.

Under the influence of Lukacs’ theory of reification, it extended reification and commodification from the economic sphere of production and circulation of goods to the entirety of social relations and then linked it with Weber’s theory of instrumental rationalization, expressed in economic and market rationality and in the bureaucratic rationality that pervades all spheres of social life. This procedure made it possible to capture the social reality of modernity in terms of a system of domination, which, going beyond class rule (economic and political), makes the individual itself its object. Freed from traditional social dependencies, it becomes a function of the abstract generality of the system, a bundle of heteronomous, factual functions – emptied of “all personal content”; functions that are economically- and bureaucratically-functionalized⁵. Subject to the law of exchange value, it constitutes an abstract, exchangeable unity⁶, and it loses its concrete individuality and uniqueness.

4 Simmel (1980: 230) evokes Schlegel: “It is individuality that is primordial and eternal in man: personality is about something less important”.

5 “The individual shrinks, he is no more than the intersection of conventional reactions and functions expected of him [...]. The only criterion is self-preservation, successful or unsuccessful adaptation to objective function and the patterns that define it” (Horkheimer, Adorno, 1994: 44).

6 “Everything is identical with everything – but nothing can be identical with itself” (Horkheimer, Adorno, 1994: 28).

The social identity of an individual is constructed by a system of social constraints, which induces adaptation or self-preservation in order to maintain the status quo. Considering this criticism, positive freedom is “subjective freedom” and expresses a false consciousness sustained by modern individual rights. Under the guise of individuality, it is produced by the “cultural industry” that serves the ideological, systemic control of individuals by satisfying the needs that it creates, unifies, and imposes on the basis of mass, industrially “standardized production of consumer goods”, and thus the commodification and commercialization of art and cultural goods. In this way, the dialectic of individualization in modernity, constituting the nerve of the Enlightenment’s dialectic projected onto the course of history leads, in the name of emancipatory and modern ideals of freedom, to the “liquidation of the individual”⁷ through its conformation, uniformity, and the “integration of consciousness”⁸. It finds its negative expression in the experience of alienation and suffering.

In the opinion of Horkheimer and Adorno, the total character of the cultural industry in Western societies corresponded with the totalitarianisms of the 20th century (communism and Nazism). It appeared as the ominous side of classical modernity’s emancipatory aspirations to achieve order as the ultimate goal of social development and history: modernity “was endemically pregnant with the tendency towards totalitarianism. A totalitarian society of all-encompassing, compulsory and enforced homogeneity loomed constantly and threateningly on the horizon – as its ultimate destiny” (see Bauman, 2000: 25, 24–26). It provided a natural context for the pessimistic description of the fate of individualization in classical modernity.

In the 1960s and 1970s, however, phenomena appeared that significantly influenced the processes of individualization in Western societies because of diverse, structural sociocultural changes, leading to new forms of individualism related to the expansion of the possibility of choosing an individual way of life, self-realization, and individual development. The main determinants of these changes were, as Honneth notes: an increase in income and free time, which freed people from the formative influence of classes; and the rapid development of the service sector, accelerating vertical social mobility and broadening access to education, which increased the possibility of choosing a profession. These factors fostered participation in different social environments and exposure to different lifestyles (Honneth, 2004: 68–70). The above social processes, however, would not have emerged as a new form of individualism if they had not been accompanied by the rapid growth of consumerism following World War II, which also had non-economic, cultural roots. The specific meaning given to the consumption of goods (especially luxury, redundant goods), expressed in the intensification of a sense of life and in pleasure, had its source, according to Campbell, in the tradition of Protestant and then Romantic sentimentalism. These experiences, initially reserved for the elite, became the impetus for mass consumerism (Honneth, 2004: 464–470). The same was true of the “sexual revolution”; it is difficult to recognize that only social individualization itself, which expanded the social field of shaping the identity of individuals, made sexuality a privileged sphere of “trying

7 It was present in its limited form in the 19th century, i.e. the liberal-market phase of capitalism.

8 “Radical socialization is radical alienation” (Horkheimer, Adorno, 1994: 79).

out one's individuality". The "decisive intermediary role" was played by the cultural impulse (literary modernism, rock music) flowing from the Romantic ideals of authenticity, experimentation with one's own identity, free expression, and self-discovery (Honneth, 2004: 470). In this form, the new individualism referred primarily to qualitative (Simmel) and expressive individualism.

The new individualism began to significantly influence social changes: the transformation of the family structure and the weakening of family ties (seen in increasing rates of divorce alongside decreasing birth rates); the transformation of social ties and the shaping of "pure relations" related to the "reflexive project of the self" (Giddens); self-referential relations based on rational decisions, emotions, and inclinations of the individuals themselves (Giddens); the way to use the increase in free time, which ceased to be merely a break from the daily work regime, becoming a sphere for the shaping and expressing of one's separate individuality, and, finally, growing consumption, which allows the esthetic shaping of identities of individuals and lifestyles (Honneth, 2004: 471).

It might have seemed that the growing individualist tendencies, especially consumerism, contradicted the requirements of capitalism and threatened its existence. This view was expressed by Bell, who saw the internal contradiction of capitalism in the contradiction between production (economic and technical subsystem) determining social stratification and consumption, between the work ethic (puritan and disciplined) conditioning production (Bell refers here to Weber's thesis about the Protestant-Calvinist ascetic work ethos as the basis of capitalism) and the values of artistic creativity and sensual drive that constitute the legacy of the artistic, modernist avant-gardes (Bell, 1976). The latter, already in the form of hedonistic and consumerist attitudes, increasingly shaped everyday attitudes and undermined the requirements of economic efficiency. However, the further development of capitalism abolished this contradiction, making hedonistic consumption as well as individualization the basis of its development.

This transformation determined the structural transformation of modernity into late modernity. In short, it consisted of the emancipation of the underlying modernity and the anti-tradition principle expressed by Marx from the emancipatory, Enlightenment-based heritage horizon of unlimited progress toward the (utopian) end of history and ultimate fulfillment (socially and individually). Freed from its emancipatory context, this principle becomes independent and autonomous (analogous to the independence of instrumental reason in modernity against substantial reason) and becomes an uninhibited imperative of late modernity, a goal in itself. Covering all spheres of life, it triggers the acceleration of social processes and with it transforms modernity into reflexive modernity, with its various speeds (see Biały, Haratyk, 2018) in two senses. The first one is that modern society is becoming a society of risk, which is faced with unforeseen negative (socioeconomic) consequences of the development of modern civilization, with threats caused by its impetus to modernize. The second one is that it opens up new areas of risk by questioning social foundations, which still bind it to tradition: the traditional, class-conditioned stratification and the types of social bonds it defines, along with the nuclear family, leads to the expanding sphere of pure relations and the aforementioned social phenomena related to the new individualism. In this way, it creates a space for individualization, owing to which an

individual, freed from stable structures, institutions, and the ties of modernity, is forced to shape their fragile and liquid identity and equally fragile and unstable relationships constantly and reflexively with others, based on their free choices and lifestyle. Self-realization transforms into a sociocultural norm that turns into a compulsive requirement, and the individualization it defines becomes the basis for social change, its acceleration, and, thus, the principle of transition from modernity to late modernity, from a prosperous society to a neoliberal society and a deregulated economy (deregulation of industry and services), from the capitalism of production to the capitalism of consumption. The latter abolishes the conflict of production and consumption diagnosed by Bell by making it the automatic goal of production and the vocation of the individual (Bauman, 2006: 173–174). If earlier it threatened the social order of classical modernity, it is now transforming into the basis of late modernity, where it becomes the principle of social reproduction. The aforementioned transition is also a transition from the “society of discipline” to the “society of achievement” (Han, 2022: 28).

In its historiosophical pessimism, the Frankfurt School could no longer take these sociocultural processes into account, although it noticed some of their manifestations. Nevertheless, the emergence of late modern capitalism could not in any way change the essence of its critique, referring to its inherent inequalities and the lack of social justice, despite the disappearance of the class stratification of society. Thus, this criticism would equally apply to the new individualism as the principle of the functioning of the late modern society and as the principle (abolishing the power of social determinations) of the “culturalization of social differences” (Jacyno, 2007: 19–30). An analysis of the new individualism would force a revision of the conceptual-critical apparatus so that it would allow an analysis of its functions and the mechanisms of preservation and adaptation in this new context, i.e., new modalities of the social functionalization of the individual. Besides this, the creators of critical theory critically anticipated many late modern phenomena such as mass consumption, but their analysis concerned the mass consumption of standardized cultural goods serving the ideological normalization of individuals and their adaptation to reality; the false needs of individuals no longer being satisfied by ideological illusions but by the hope of satisfying them, all stimulated by the infinite growth (of the consumer market and expectations). In turn, the mechanism of the ideological neutralization of resistance, diagnosed by them in relation to the cultural industry by transforming it into a mechanism of collective conformism, became the basis of real socioeconomic practices and was intercepted by the neoliberal regime of the economic productivization of individualism. In this spirit, Marcuse pointed to the penetration of the cultural patterns of individualization into everyday life, intended to neutralize the elements that transcend reality, their negativity, and their contesting potential. He also pointed to the adaptation of de-erotized sexuality by the service sector. Let us add that, at least initially (which was then revived by the cultural contestation of 1968), he hoped to develop emancipatory eroticism as the principle for transforming society. Adorno, being from the beginning critical of student movements and their libertarian slogans, including the moral and sexual revolution, rightly feared that their subversive potential would be neutralized and assimilated by bourgeois-capitalist society. In the 1960s, however, he noticed the penetration of the principle of the economic productivity and optimization of forces into various areas of social life (e.g., sport), without yet clearly linking it to the individualization of productivity, including in the field of production.

Individualization through self-realization soon became its productive force. Adorno formulated the general principle of this transformation, referring to free time: “the need for freedom has been functionalized, developed and reproduced by business: what people want is imposed on them” (Adorno, 2019: 261).

Individualization in late modernity – the new individualism in economy

I shall begin with individualization in the area of neoliberal economics, which has ceased to serve social and political goals, subordinating society and its institutions to its own imperatives (Bröckling, 2016: 24) of effectiveness, efficiency, and the optimization of economic forces. These imperatives have been individualized by functionalizing the cultural requirement of self-actualization in the form of self-entrepreneurship; the aim of the neoliberal state is to activate various forms of individual entrepreneurship, to promote its spirit. In this form, becoming a requirement of neoliberal economics, entrepreneurial self-fulfillment, or the authenticity of being oneself, working on oneself and creativity is intercepted by competitive economic and market practices, and translated into the language of individualized economic activity. Stripped of its emancipatory ethos, it serves the imperatives of maximizing efficiency and profit: “ideals have fallen away, leaving the forms of organization that gave rise to a ‘new spirit of capitalism’” (Bröckling, 2016: 177). In this way, according to the conviction of Boltanski and Chiapello (2022: 258–297), the “new spirit of capitalism” took over the critique of modern capitalism – both social and, above all, artistic – aimed at inauthenticity (the criticism of “mechanization of the world”, “standardization”, the “massification” and recognition of individual aspirations, “autonomy and responsibility”). In the case of the latter, he assimilated the individualistic ethos of the counterculture and the various anti-capitalist discourses, experiments, and social practices associated with it. These were alternative, anarcho-democratic movements and communities that, by promoting the ideals of the harmonization of life and work, the extension of work to all spheres of life, and autonomy, were to replace the factory, the nuclear family, and the university, and which actually became a laboratory of entrepreneurship (Bröckling, 2016: 27, 175)⁹.

The “new individualism” not only transformed the goals of the contested claims to self-actualization into the “system’s legitimacy” and became “the ideology of deinstitutionalization”, but, most of all, it became a real, “productive force in the capitalist economy”; “an instrument of economic development” (Honneth, 2004: 467, 473, 474).

Economic individualization was associated with a departure from the Taylorian model in favor of “increasing normative empowerment of direct labor processes” emerging along with the discourse of entrepreneurship (Baethge, 1991: 6). It consisted not only in reconciling them with one’s own perception, preferences, etc., but also in shaping them (Baethge, 1991: 7–10) corresponding to the

⁹ This is noted by Adorno when he states that the campsite “once loved by representatives of the youth movement” was “a protest against bourgeois boredom and convention”; its need, “after the extinction of the youth movement, was captured and institutionalized by the camping industry” as part of commercially-organized leisure time (Adorno, 2019: 260).

requirements of individual development and self-realization. Work is no longer merely a source of income, detached from other types of social activity, but it also becomes an individualized form of expression on the basis of new management structures and a “system of pluralized, flexible decentralized underemployment” (Beck, 1992: 149)¹⁰. Creativity, commitment, and flexibility consist of the ability to acquire completely new competences and the readiness to take up new opportunities within a given employee structure and the labor market in general.

Self-realization finds its highly-individualized professional form in project work, which has become a new institutional pattern and a standard form of work organization in postmodern times. It is characterized by its definability, finiteness, and temporal character manifested by setting a goal and performing strictly-defined and planned tasks, which are carried out and evaluated in structured sequences of separate units and functions. These tasks are characterized as once-only; there is often uniqueness and complexity requiring inventiveness, flexibility and improvisation, redefining the rules of work, as well as modifying goals and means in order to find creative solutions (see Birken, 2012: 2–4). The project combines the autonomy of the “project team” with the autonomy of individual contractors (with their complementary competences and specific tasks), rationalized self-organization and self-control with individual motivation, energy and enthusiasm, initiative, and personal development with constructive and creative cooperation with others. It becomes a “school for the advancement of entrepreneurial thinking” (Bröckling, 2016: 185). In exchange for the loss of security promised by the welfare society, the individual gains with it the possibility of self-development, expanding the possibilities of choice and action (Bröckling, 2016: 23, 135, 139).

The economic functionalization of self-realization has two aspects, the most visible in project work: external, related to the organization of management, and internal, related to motivation. As for the first aspect, the disciplinary productivity characteristic of modern society – framed by vertical and hierarchical institutions in the post-modern, post-disciplinary society – is replaced by individualized, non-hierarchical, and democratic forms of management and organization of work. They are located on the horizontal plane of individual; team forms of rationalized self-organization and self-monitoring, self-control and self-evaluation are understood as a comprehensive evaluation system constituting a “democratic panopticon”, “a non-hierarchical structure of reciprocal visibility”, on the basis of which “everyone observes everyone and is observed by everyone” (Bröckling, 2016: 159–160). Bröckling speaks directly about exhibitionism and voyeurism (Bröckling, 2016: 161), which undoubtedly correspond to the exhibitionism that governs communication in the area of social media. The second aspect concerns the fundamental transformation of motivation. If in modernity motivating an employee had a negative character due to being based on external authority and external pressure as well as a system of coercion, orders, and prohibitions, in late modernity it acquires a positive character; it is aimed at strengthening non-economic, non-material sources of motivation (Bröckling, 2016: 139), which is determined not only by earnings or promotion, but also by the expectation of personal development

¹⁰ “The focus of life shifts from the place and workplace to the sphere of shaping and testing new forms and styles of life” (Beck, 2002: 144).

and the satisfaction that comes with it. It serves the greater mobilization of individuals and the use of their initiative, potential, and ability to self-optimize efforts for the sake of their own and the company's competitiveness. Meeting the desire for self-fulfillment, autonomy, and non-alienated work, the requirement of self-entrepreneurship serves to maximize production (Bröckling, 2016: 28, 201). The price of freedom from disciplinary authority is the compulsion to engage in continuous self-optimization (Bröckling, 2016: 138): "A call for motivation, initiative and project is more effective for exploitation than a whip and an order [...]. To be able to further increase performance, the paradigm of discipline must give way to the paradigm of achievement, that is, the positive schema of potentiality because, beyond a certain level of performance, the negativity of prohibition acts as a blocker and prevents further growth. The positivity of potentiality is much more efficient than the negativity of duties" (Han, 2022: 29, 160).

The economic institutionalization of the ethos of self-realization manifests itself in constant stimulation to enhance the self-optimization potential of the individual at the level of both rhetoric and practice. "Activating rhetoric", guides, and scientific discourse (anthropological, psychological, sociological) all accompany the whole system of programs, schools, personal workshops, seminars, training, and coaching (Bröckling, 2016: 36). Their goal is to strengthen motivation, commitment, and enthusiasm, and to stimulate creativity focused on solving problems; "faith in the creative potential of the individual is the secular religion of the entrepreneurial self". On the other hand, there is strengthening competencies and abilities, the readiness for "continual modification and self-modification" (Bröckling, 2016: 20, 101).

Practices of self-actualization and stimulation are the essence of a post-disciplinary regime of subjectification defined by social technology and the techniques of self-governance, which "aim to organize life around an entrepreneurial model of behavior", shaping the self to be validated in competition (Bröckling, 2016: 21). Individuals are governed to govern themselves. Governance means, according to Foucault's understanding of power, "the exercise of power over people aimed at increasing their ability to exercise power themselves and over themselves, i.e. to self-govern" (Bröckling, 2016: 122).

Replacing external coercion with "new forms of control" (Boltanski, Chiapello, 2022) – hidden coercion or internalized coercion, forcing individuals to self-fulfillment and self-management for the sake of the imperative of economic growth and profit – reveals the basic paradox of the economic institutionalization of individualization: calling and coercing to freedom, self-realization, and creativity means calling and forcing spontaneity, which, after all, cannot be ordered (Bröckling: 2016: 114). On the one hand, economized self-fulfillment is accompanied by a sense of freedom, which facilitates the adjustment of employees' motivation to the external requirements of work, which appear to them as "flowing from their own choice" (Honneth, 2004: 473). Han even writes about "the violence of freedom that underlies self-exploitation" and he states that: "Exploitation of oneself is much more effective than exploitation of someone else, because it goes hand in hand with the feeling of freedom. This makes exploitation without power possible" (Han, 2022: 160, 161). This sense of freedom allows

individuals to be held responsible for failures: “This is the trick of neoliberalism. Whoever fails is to blame for himself and carries the blame everywhere. No one else can be held responsible for failure” (Han, 2022: 161). This “apparent individual freedom” cannot be the basis of resistance, “because it is impossible to resist against oneself” (Han, 2022: 161). If Han refers to expressive resources, Bröckling refers this remark to “creativity training”, the mechanisms of democratic organization which “standardize the rupture with standard solutions, making a norm of divergence from the norm” (Bröckling, 2016: 115).

On the other hand, in critical situations, internalized coercion is felt as external coercion. The power of the latter is articulated by one of the respondents in the context of a vision of an alternative life to her life dominated by work in a large corporation:

A place where I don't have to do anything. A place where I don't always want to [laughs], and don't have to [...], where I can do everything and don't have to do anything.

In this way, claims to self-actualization alienate themselves by transforming into the expectations of the institutions and organizations which are themselves transformed by these claims and, on becoming institutional requirements, they transform into external coercions which in their compulsiveness appear “as though they were demands issuing from without” (Honneth, 2004: 468, 472).

In both aspects of late modern self-optimization, combining individualized motivation with hetero-self-control, it seems that both currents of modern individualism come to the fore; expressive individualism and autonomous individualism with the reflective attitude of the individual toward themselves, expressed in self-discipline, self-control, and self-improvement. Undoubtedly, the latter has been taken over by the utilitarian rationalization of expressive self-realization, rooted in the “puritan ethos” adapted by modernity (disciplining the resources of the inner life is no longer used to suppress it in favor of salvation, but to liberate and use it) (Jacyno, 2007: 8–11, 52–56, also 110–111). Thus, we would be dealing with a tension between “expressive individualism and utilitarian individualism” (Jacyno, 2007: 174). It would manifest itself in the irremovable tension between the requirements of adaptability, mobility, and the requirements of authenticity in several of its dimensions: within the interior of the individual and others, between the fluidity of identity, coherence, and durability necessary for accumulation as a condition for enrichment in the course of self-optimization, between commitment and short-term projects, between collective-connectionist adaptation and plasticity and uniqueness that distances itself from others (see Boltanski, Chiapello, 2022: 589–600). Let us add: between commitment and uncertainty of the results; it is additionally a tension between the imperative of unrestrained creativity and its effectiveness: “the greater the pressure to innovate, the more short-lived the novelty becomes and the quicker creative potential is worn out”, and, more generally: the tension between being strict with oneself and caring for oneself, between self-discipline and enthusiasm, and finally, between career and *joie de vivre* (Bröckling, 2016: 34, 117).

The data collected in the interviews diversifies and complicates this uniform picture, which certainly applies to large corporations. This data makes it possible to create a continuum of the degree of the functionalization of self-actualization and its various determinants. A good starting point is the case of one of the respondents. She works full-time in an educational institution, where she performs many tasks, some of them as projects. She claims that she finds self-fulfillment at work and declares satisfaction: "I combine work with interests and passion; she describes work as creative and educational"; she says: "I feel good doing project work". And yet, in her case, we undoubtedly have the phenomenon of the pragmatic functionalization of self-actualization. Several factors indicate this. First of all, there is the stimulation of self-realization:

I also like to take on new challenges. I rarely refuse. [...] I have such great ease in finding my way around various topics and being interested in what I do.

Therefore, the respondent herself does not show initiative in assigning tasks; she undertakes them (she lists several of them) and only then she adds: "I get excited, even if something seems uninteresting".

Secondly, there is her fatigue and burnout due to the multitude of tasks and projects carried out, creating a personal crisis (also partly related to her family situation). There was:

[...] an accumulation of stress at work and at home, but [...] at work it was really an accumulation resulting from several such large projects.

Thirdly, there is the nature of her dreams, which do not concern the possibility of full self-fulfillment, but the desire for peace and security and for life in the circle of the people closest to her, as well as a short time horizon of living one's own life – even negates the need for dreams: "Because I have no dreams [...], I have plans rather than dreams" (when talking about plans, she mentions holiday plans).

The functionalization of self-realization is clearly visible in another group of respondents. In their case, this self-fulfillment does not have a deeper character, but it is related primarily to economic and prestige motivation, although these respondents affirm the nature of their design work, they like it, they know it, and they have extensive experience. However, they feel burnt out and tired:

Oh, I get some satisfaction from it, of course, and I like to see the effects of my work, and they are there. However, it is very, very tiring. It is a very strenuous job. Well, very absorbing for me. [...] Unfortunately, I am so tired, so overworked [...].

Another respondent says:

I'm burning myself out at this job and in fact, sometimes on Fridays, I'm just as exhausted as if I'd been run over by a tank... And, well, this weekend [...], I need a kick to leave the house.

Work has a destructive impact on other areas of the lives of many respondents, on their relationships and family life, preventing them from pursuing their proper interests. A respondent from Generation Z, whose hyperactivity has the features of compulsion, even admits:

I don't feel the need to establish closer bonds [...], I don't have the head for a family [...], I'm weak at maintaining relationships; these relationships limit her, unless I fall in love, [but] it's not a priority, I don't feel [that] I need it, I don't need it.

In another group, we are dealing with a deep desire for self-fulfillment, but it is institutionalized and functionalized to a small extent, because it usually takes place outside the sphere of institutions, but if it also happens within that sphere, it is only to a limited degree in order to ensure stabilization, including financial stabilization. In this case, problems related to self-realization are not directly related to its functionalization. On the one hand, this self-realization is multiple and dispersed (many projects, e.g. artistic), so they cannot self-define through it and give it a deeper meaning and direction. On the other hand, and this problem also concerns some respondents from the previous groups, self-realization is an expression of hyperactivism, which has its roots in various early family traumas (ADA, ADHD, violence, authoritarian traits of parents) and which, therefore, gives it a reactive, escapist character. This hyperactivism prevents the project-identity integration of the self and authentic self-fulfillment, and is often the proper source of project work, not the declared positive self-realization. This phenomenon is important, because it shows that problems with self-fulfillment among many respondents do not result from its economic and institutional functionalization, but, primarily, from family and identity crises related largely to the social impact of the traditional family model, with its authoritarian features.

The positive end of the mentioned continuum is self-fulfillment among several respondents, from Generation X; it is authentic, institutionalized (the case of a research worker) or non-institutional (the case of a retiree who devotes his life to artistic self-realization: "I would like to pursue my own, private creation"). The other end of the mentioned continuum is the example of a respondent, also from Generation X, who completely rejects the possibility of self-fulfillment within paid work and institutions. He states:

[There are] conflicts of interests between the world of creators, to which I mentally and spiritually belong, although I do not create anything like them, and the world in which I function because I earn money there, i.e. the world of administration. Two worlds that do not understand each other at all [...]. Somewhere in my life is my current work, although I wish it wasn't there. In general, I think that paid work is a kind of pathology.

Self-realization in the case of this respondent, as well as the previous two, has the hallmarks of modern autonomy, is not of a network nature, and takes the form of a long-term life project. Its model is modernist individualism (elitism, criticism of mass and popular culture), not the ideal of socially-grounded autonomy (Frankfurt School). This positive self-fulfillment prevents the ambiguity associated with the tensions mentioned above between the internal aspect of self-actualization and its external aspect.

The ambiguity of institutionalized self-fulfillment results in uncertainty about the source of success and the inability to distinguish whether it is the result of effort or chance and luck (Bröckling, 2016: 58) associated with the increasing risk and randomness that rules the market. This ambiguity is a source of chronic psycho-existential discomfort; Bröckling even writes about “unhappy consciousness” that is unable to “distinguish between outer appearance and inner being, objective commandment and subjective desire”, duty, and desire (Bröckling, 2016: 35).

It seems that the experience of the ambiguity of self-optimization is partly mitigated by the “belief in the unlimited ability of an individual to shape his [or her – P.P.] life” and the infinite development of his/her personal potential, which is decisive for the dynamics of motivation. Belief in “unlimited ability” (Han) translates into a despotic requirement for continuous growth and self-optimization (Bröckling, 2016: 33, 153), which transforms self-realization into a compulsion of endless effort, forcing one “to accumulate more achievements. For this reason, gratification will never happen” (Han, 2022: 64). It is precisely this compulsive self-demand that is decisive in its limitlessness for the shape of late modern individualization and is the driving force of late modern, liberated change and acceleration. This, within the logic of individualization that governs it, corresponds to the final liquidation of essentialism: at various levels of their lives, individuals no longer seek the core or the hidden truth of their *selves*, but they strive to realize their potential, which can be endlessly discovered, explored, and exploited in all its ambiguity. On the one hand, faith in the infinite ability to develop is conducive to a sense of self-confidence and self-agency, mobilizing the effort of self-improvement and the improvement of one’s achievements through the functionalization of errors and the acquisition of new competences. In this way, it serves mobility, flexibility, and willingness to take risks for the chance for success and meeting market competitiveness. On the other hand, self-criticism and self-assessment inherent in the “imperative of infinite growth” accompanying systemic control and evaluation, and constant self-pressure and pressure lead to the transformation of the requirement of self-optimization and self-mobilization into a goal in itself, and, thus, to continuous self-exploration and self-exploitation (Bröckling, 2016: 51, 58, 153, 163). Undoubtedly, the endless self-optimization is related to the neutralization of the possibility of resistance, which in late modernity is increasingly reflexive (e.g., what can be seen in marketing and consumption strategies). Either it opens a horizon of hope for continuous effort or, due to the fear of failing to meet the norm of continuous growth replacing a certain level of achievement, it is a source of mental overload for the individual and a sense of helplessness and inefficiency which leads to exhaustion and burnout. This results in an experience of despair, emptiness, and depression; “social suffering [...] in a certain way without precedent in the history of capitalist societies” (Honneth, 2004: 475). As Han bluntly puts it, “we optimize ourselves to death in order to function better” (Han, 2022: 84). Burnout no longer results from exceeding established norms and failing to meet external obligations; rather, the self consumes itself (Bröckling, 2016: 201). Its source is not the “superego”, but the “imago (Ideal-Ich)” and the gap between it and the real ego (Han, 2022: 73).

It stems not so much from being tired of oneself or of self-fulfillment and being authentic, as Ehrenberg claims, but, as one has to agree with Han, from the requirement of economic self-optimization,

self-exploitation, and “voluntary self-exploitation”; from “absolute competition”, i.e., “the destructive compulsion to constantly surpass oneself” (Han, 2020: 72): “It is not the imperative of ‘being oneself’ itself, but the pressure of success that causes exhaustion depression”, a state in which “the subject of achievement can no longer be able” (Han, 2022: 30–31). However, if one assumes that self-optimization defines the essence of late modern, broadly-understood self-realization, then burnout has its source precisely in this latter.

The answer to mass burnout is therapy taking on systemic features. It becomes a palliative to the extent that it no longer serves, following the example of the psychoanalytical model, to resolve crises and conflicts through the effort of emancipatory understanding and the working through them. In their pursuit of happiness through self-realization, modern people avoid conflicts and the negative feelings that give rise to them, “[they are – P.P.] not able to work on conflict because it takes too much time. It is much easier to reach for antidepressants, which quickly restore [their – P.P.] ability to function and work” (Han, 2022: 193). In this way, let us add, the therapeutic exclusion of the negativity of existence and deeper conflicts agrees with the “sequestration of experience” diagnosed by Giddens (see Giddens, 1991: 144–169).

This phenomenon can be noticed among respondents from different generations. The above-mentioned respondent (works in an educational institution, generation Y), although she proclaims humanistic ideals, admits regarding metaphysical issues:

I put them aside completely. [...] But I’m not worried about that. [...] I do not know what created the world. [...] But what is life all about? No, I have no idea.

A respondent from Generation Z answers *the question about spirituality*:

I don’t really need that. Perhaps it’s just that I haven’t had any such experiences in my life, for example I have never been to a funeral, I have never lost anyone close to me, for example, to devote any greater reflection to what happens to a person after death, or I’ve never felt such need, just that I don’t know, I need some higher power to whom I can turn for help.

The “sequestration of experience” makes individuals defenseless in the face of crises, does not allow them to work through them through their own efforts, and makes them completely dependent on the therapeutic culture. Moreover, the above-mentioned respondent from Generation Z faces a crisis related to the inability to define herself as a result of her hyperactivity, the source of which is the authoritarian pressure from her parents who impose their career and success patterns on her.

The aim of therapy is only to alleviate symptoms with psychological support through pharmacological treatment, which is transformed into a continuous process and thus adaptation by maintaining the capacity for continuous mobilization and self-optimization (Bröckling, 2016: 201) whilst not developing any emancipatory reflection, which is blocked, according to Beck’s thesis, by making the

individual responsible for themselves and their failures. Therapy leads to their “privatization and psychologicalization” (Han, 2022: 212), displacing and replacing the critical view of social relations: “Massively prescribed painkillers only cover up social relations that lead to pain. Aggressive medicalization and pharmacologization prevent it from being verbalized as criticism”. Meanwhile, “instead of revolution comes depression. [...] The ferment of revolution, on the contrary, creates shared pain”, the negativity of experience (Han, 2022: 213–214). Thus, postmodern therapy serves survival and adaptation to neoliberal society (Jacyno, 2007: 254–257) to the same extent as economic self-optimization, the negative effects of which it is supposed to eliminate.

The new individualism in other areas of late modern society

Late-modern individualization extends the requirement of unlimited self-optimization to all areas and forms of the individual’s social and private life (their leisure, love life, and sex life); “the market acts as a place of social integration.” Just as the enterprise becomes a “universal model of social organization” that extends to public and private institutions, so does the entrepreneur themselves become a “universal model of human subjectivity” (Bröckling, 2016: 44), which, by blurring the boundaries between professional and private life, is reproduced in the daily practices of the individual. The “hetero-organized self-organization” (Voss, Pongratz), inherent in institutional and economic self-realization, permeates its attitude toward itself and toward others (Bröckling, 2016: 21).

Let us start with individualization in the sphere of consumption. As has been said, in postmodernity mass consumption has turned into a driving force of economic development and a condition for sustaining capitalism; according to Boltanski and Chiapello (2022: 672), it is “a kind of liberation” though, unlike its other forms, both assimilated and limited – “which capitalism does not have to inhibit, because it allows its development.” It not only satisfies existing needs so as not to limit the accumulation of capital, but, above all, it constantly creates new ones and through them increases the unlimited demand and production of commodities. Thus, it has developed a new consumer attitude that makes it a “goal for itself”, a “vocation”, which transforms the need into an insatiable desire and this into a wish to maximize consumption and give it a hedonistic and individual character. Individualization means individualizing consumption patterns as well as creating new needs through an aggressive advertising industry. On the one hand, the consumer market expands its offer focused on diverse, individualized preferences and consumer choices, creating a field for new, individual lifestyles that are propagated by advertising and electronic media and provide an image of authentic life. On the other hand, consumers find the sphere of their freedom in consumption – i.e., the privileged and aestheticized medium of their individualization – in the sense of freely expressing their personality and their distinctiveness, constructing their unique identity: moderate private hedonism penetrates into “consumption, which no longer promised the serial satisfaction of standardized needs in a Fordian mass culture, but lured instead with adventure and self-realization and rendered material inequality inaudible under a hymn to difference” (Bröckling, 2016: 23). The individualization of consumption means the estheticization of both the consumptive self-creation

of individuals through their choice of lifestyles as well as the advertising and marketing to promote them: “The economization of culture goes hand in hand with the culturalization of the economy. Consumer goods are provided with an added value, they promise a cultural, aesthetic experience. In this way, design becomes more important than utility value. The consumer sphere penetrates into the field of the art sphere, and consumer goods present themselves as works of art” (Han, 2022: 207).

Due to its individualistic and hedonistic nature, postmodern consumerism reconciles the principle of reality with the principle of pleasure (Bauman, 2006: 212–218); it results in the increasing commodification of life (Bauman, 2009: 129) and leads to the consumerist extension of the consumptive rules of the market to other spheres of life. Being the basis for the reproduction of neoliberal capitalism, it is subject to the principle of efficiency and effectiveness, and is the basic mechanism for adapting individuals to the existing reality. Consumption not only recreates, but also on the basis of the “culturalization of social differences” secondarily creates constitutive social inequalities. It embodies the pattern referred by Horkheimer/Adorno to the culture industry when it creates individual lifestyles by adapting individualistic impulses and innovations to its advertising and marketing strategies, as a result of which individuals seeking their unique identity in it refer to “standardized patterns” (Honneth, 2004: 472) of estheticized consumer self-realization. Thus, it captures pre-existing manifestations of authenticity outside the market in order to subject them to the “trading of authenticity” and “difference” for profit (Boltanski, Chiapello, 2022: 568–582). The conservative and conforming moment lies in the very hedonistic essence of consumerism, namely pleasure. It is an expression of unconscious, passive consent to the world that makes it possible, because in its directness and positivity it overcomes the critical distance toward it and the negativity associated with it. The more so that in late modernity it is limited, as Campbell notes, to pure experience or one that is detached from emotions (as cited in Stoll, 2017: 254) related to reflection and having a significant share in expressing and shaping an individual’s personality and their relationship with the world and others. Consumerism thus destroys the affective, intellectual, and communicative resources of emancipation. In turn, the hedonistic experience is subject to the logic of intensification and its maximization, a logic corresponding to the principle of efficiency and effectiveness. For this reason, Bröckling can equate hedonistic individualism with entrepreneurial individualism and consumption with an entrepreneurial act, when he attributes to the consumer the accumulation of the “pleasure capital” and “entrepreneurial imperatives”, because he/she is no longer a “passive receiver of goods but also an active producer” of maximum satisfaction (Bröckling, 2016: 23–24, 49).

The self-preservation and destructive nature of consumption for the individual and its emancipatory claims clearly emphasizes its time dimension, which brings it to the here and now. The consumption experience brings the experience of time to the present, detaching it from the past and the future. The temporality of time is the reproduction of the shrunken present. In this manner, it destroys the continuity of the individual’s biographical experience that establishes the order of meanings and their capacity for reflective self-narrative as a condition of emancipation. Late modern consumption undoubtedly presupposes, owing to the credit system, long-term consumption projects inscribed into consumer self-optimization with its moments of self-rationalization and self-control, rendering

it “calculated consumption”, similarly in the case of “new hedonism” (Jacyno, 2007: 209–210, 244). Nevertheless, they are governed, in this case, by the same principle of deferred pleasure. In this sense, one can agree with Bauman that the irrationality of a thoughtless experience complements the irrationality of consumption choices dictated by impulses and whims: “The rationality of a consumer society is built on the irrationality of its individualized members” (Bauman, 2007: 218).

An integral part of mass consumerism is the culture industry. It is increasingly subject to the laws of market consumption, including the primacy of advertising and esthetic value. It penetrates into everyday life and leads to the “estheticization of social reality” (Bernstein, 2019: 60). Described by Marcuse, developing Adorno/Horkheimer’s intuition, the mechanism of repressive desublimation is extended; the abolition of the difference between art, with its utopian “promise of happiness”, and life by the cultural industry along with the suppression of the desire for happiness by removing the sublimation moment contained in alienation as a premise for the negation of the existing reality (see Marcuse, 1964: 59–86), penetrates to production. The fundamental, conservative function of the cultural industry is not changed by the departure from its standardized form in favor of its pluralization and differentiation. The promotion of various competitive lifestyles, often “recycling styles in art”, corresponded to the changes of the hitherto unified and constant market offer as a result of the expansion of capital-seeking opportunities to stimulate demand for new goods by assimilating the cult of novelty and the related negativity characteristic of modernist and avant-garde art: “thanks to the cultural industry, capital has assimilated the dynamics of negation, both in diachronic terms, with its constant production of new and ‘other’ goods, and synchronously, with its typical promotion of alternative ‘lifestyles’” (Bernstein, 2019: 60). In this way, “the individualization of the appearance of official culture, which necessarily grows with the abolition of the individual” (Adorno, 2019: 79), loses the hallmarks of ideological alienation and becomes grounded in commercial and consumer practices, the production of individual lifestyles that penetrates into everyday life.

The mass media, including social media, are unable to mediate socially-sound criticism of injustice and inequality or to negotiate a profound change in fundamental social structures. In the face of the dominant sense of capitalism’s lack of alternatives, they focus on conflicts related to “ideologies of sexism and racism, which have always been incompatible and regressive with respect to the egalitarian logic of legal entities in the market” (Bernstein, 2019: 59).

Expanding to the entirety of social life, the project of entrepreneurial self-realization began to take shape, independent of the cultural pattern of individualization, of the biographical projectivity that defines individuals in late modernity; the identity project defining it becomes “a fundamental category within which we understand ourselves and shape ourselves” (Bröckling, 2016: 191). Through the individualized project, the individual makes themselves the center of their own biographical plans and strategies, shaping their constantly changing, fluid, and patchwork identity, which often integrates several different projects (referring to different activities) in constantly changing social and life contexts. Regardless of the sphere of everyday life (health, recreation, free time, or social relations), the biographical project is subject to the logic of self-optimization and achievement in its

two structural aspects and in their various intensifications. On the one hand, it is formed by the emotions of individuals, enthusiasm, passion, and risk-taking and, while on the other hand, it is related to the transformation of life into a series of problems to be solved and tasks to be performed; it is the dimension of strict planning, which manifests itself in rational self-management and self-control (see Bröckling, 2016: 172, 189–191). The sense of self-realized authenticity obscures the rational dimension of the self-creation project as well as the hidden coercion of a deeply internalized norm of self-realization propagated by a wide sociocultural context (mass media, therapy, self-help books, etc.).

The biographical identity project also includes Giddens' pure relations. Separated from the public sphere and de-traditionalized in its self-reflexivity, based on individual decisions of individuals/partners determined by their preferences, feelings and emotions, life plans, etc., relations are subject to the logic of reflexive self-optimization oriented toward satisfaction and gratification. Despite the norm of a successful relationship (mediated in counseling or expert-therapeutic systems), they certainly contain less rationality and self-management control. The other side of their foundation in the reflexive decisions of individuals and the lack of permanent commitments, devoid of the "forever" clause, is their short duration, risk, uncertainty, and the fear inherent in them.

It is a love situation that excludes permanent commitments that require work, effort, and discipline, and it is oriented toward self-affirmation, "pleasant feelings", and comfort through the elimination of negativity (suffering and the threat of injury inherent in its passionate dimension). Stripped of its erotic, transgressive dimension, its positivity is reduced to "an object of consumption and hedonistic calculation", it is "turned into a consumption formula that knows no risk and bravado, excess and madness" (Han, 2022: 169). Sexuality is subject to this efficiency logic of the greatest gratification. Detached in its plasticity from the erotic context, built by emotions and passions, which creates deeper personal relationships and provides them with symbolic and cultural meanings, sexuality is oriented toward obtaining satisfaction and pleasure in the shortest time. It is subject to repressive desublimation through consumerist functionalization, simultaneously becoming a commercial stimulator of consumption, as well as a cultural one.

The same is true of free time. On the basis of project, flexible, and mobile work, it is no longer strictly separated from working time. Howsoever it is performed, one has to agree with Adorno's analysis that it has the same function as before: on the one hand, it is to restore energy and work capacity, to "multiply the worker's strength", while on the other hand, due to the internalization of its requirements, it is to complete and "extend work" through reproducing its constraints so that "[people] can exert themselves during their work as much as the social order requires of them" (Adorno, 2019: 263)¹¹. However, if in modernity Adorno is still concerned with mindless entertainment corresponding to Ford's "mechanized work process" (Adorno, 1994: 156), then in late modernity – with self-realization at work and in leisure time. This function is also not fulfilled, for example, by the fetishized "pseudo-activity" analyzed by him later, which, manifesting itself in "excessive senseless activity" and in

¹¹ "Leisure is an extension of work in late capitalism" (Adorno, 1994: 155).

“illusory activities”, expresses “institutionalized substitute satisfactions”: “[it] is a fiction and a parody of this productivity which society [...] invariably promotes” (Adorno, 2019: 265). It is also performed by fetishized self-realization projects. However, on the basis of the pluralism of alternative styles and ways of life, they are significantly individualized, subject to social self-fulfillment compulsions that standardize them, and defined primarily by the imperative of effectiveness and self-optimization as well as the intensity of achievements. Adorno (2019: 265) already noticed its action in professional sport in the form of “fitness” as “an end in itself. Fitness for work [...] is certainly one of the hidden goals of sport.” In this sense, Adorno’s next remark is valid that “people are subjectively convinced that they act in accordance with their own will, this will is shaped by what they wanted to get rid of during their free time” (Adorno, 2019: 258). Fitness cultivated in leisure time serves socially-fetishized health as a condition for economic mobilization and productivity.

However, the example of one of the respondents shows another function of physical activity:

There was a year when it was very stressful here [at work]. So [...] I rode my bike to work the whole winter, I rode my bike to work several winters and years, but the winters were a bigger challenge. And it helped me a lot that when I was so tired, I didn’t think or worry about what was happening here.

In this case, physical exercise is reactive; it serves to relieve mental stress and leads to a certain indifference.

Concluding remarks

As the above cursory review of several important areas of social life shows, the principle of the efficiency, optimization, and intensity of achievements becomes a structural principle of shaping the activity of individuals in a postmodern society. Its conservative character is emphasized by its proper detemporalization. As has already been pointed out, the time of infinite self-optimization destroys the unity of the experience of time, defined by the interplay of the present, past, and future, transforming itself into a series of successive and unrelated episodes of the present which, in their point positivity, eliminates the narrative unity of time and its potentially emancipatory negativity created by their dialectical connections to the past and the future. At the same time, detemporalization abolishes the paradox of subjective time experience, which is characteristic of continuous time, according to which an intense, positive experience of the present leaves a long-lasting memory, in contrast to a negative, prolonged experience (e.g., boredom), which does not, and, as a result, the memory becomes short in both cases, whilst adapting to the present (Rosa, 2020: 139). In this form, they “leave almost no traces of memory and, therefore, they are conducive to experiencing the accelerated passage of time” (Rosa, 2011: 1054). Han, on the other hand, recognizes that “the contemporary crisis is not about acceleration, but about the dispersion and dissociation of time” (Han, 2022: 130), which, it can be assumed, would condition the experience of its acceleration.

One way or another, it determines the essence of late modern change, devoid of purpose and emancipatory horizon. For this reason, this change does not lead to a transformation of its context and the conditions that define it; rather, it is a “running stillness” (Virilio), expressing time that has stopped or “timeless time” (Rosa), a time in which nothing happens. It is the return of “the same”. It establishes an alternative social positivity from which it removes all transcendent and negative elements, opening up to what is different: “The pressure of reform and competition inevitably increases, not for the sake of implementation, but as an assumption of pure preservation of the status quo” (Rosa, 2011: 1059). The transformation of the experience of time shows the disappearance of the emancipatory potential of the imperative of constant change, the disappearance of progress orientation, the increase in freedom, and the improvement of the quality of life: “Growth and acceleration no longer serve to improve, but to maintain the status quo [...]” (Rosa, 2011: 1058). According to Rosa, “The pathology of time” reveals a new form of human alienation, which consists precisely in breaking the continuity of the experience of time that determines the unity of human personality in its dialectical interaction with the experience of the world. In other words, it means the exhaustion of existential and communicative resources of self-realization turning into a monotony of the same. As such, acceleration is a threefold source of mass depression (Rosa, 2011: 1054–1059). Firstly, the pressure of time, the inability to keep up with its pace, and the associated uncertainty all create stress. Secondly, depression is caused by the disappearance of a temporalizing human existence and binding it together: depression and burnout are “less a consequence of greater effort or burden, but rather a consequence of persistent pressure without a goal horizon” (Rosa, 2011: 1058). Thirdly, a feeling of worthlessness and insignificance for self-development, associated with the increasing demands of mobility and flexibility, undermines the value of commitment to a worthy goal and ends up with a sense of emptiness; depression expresses the inability to act. Moreover, on the basis of situational, constructivist identity, an individual faces an unlimited multitude of choices, both alternative and counterfactual. Thus, the alienation of time means “the loss of perception of the directed movement of self or life through time” (Rosa, 2011: 1058). These findings allow for a better understanding of Ehrenberg’s thesis about the depressive overload of the individual with the compulsive requirement of self-realization, resulting from the erosion of the internal resources of his/her inner life and from the lack of reflective narration of experience.

The processes of individualization in late modernity are subject to the same dialectic that determined its fate in classical modernity. In modernity, the dialectic of individualization, theorized by the Frankfurt School, consisted in subordinating individuals to the disciplinary requirements and constraints of the social system and in ideologically appropriating their emancipatory claims to autonomy and self-realization. Late modernity reiterated and reflexively took up these claims by making individualization the basis of its order and the principle of the totality of practices that define it. However, by subordinating the pursuit of self-fulfillment and autonomy to the logic of profit and efficiency, it included them in the project of economic self-optimization, which made a model of individuals’ activity in all areas of social life and, thus, the principle of individuals’ adaptation to the established *status quo*. In this way, late modernity subjected individualization to the same alienating logic of (late) capitalism as in modernity. This time, it did so by internalizing constraints within a self-actualization project of self-optimization of individuals’ lives in favor of efficiency imperatives. These

compulsions operate in both of its aspects, being at the same time a synthesis of both currents of individualization: the norm of self-realization determines the matter and the area of expression, and its fulfillment is achieved through the utilitarian rationality of self-control and self-optimization adopted from autonomy for the benefit of profit and pleasure efficiency. In this way, alienation takes the form of repressive disalienation: The "liquidation of the individual" takes place within their individual identity through identity practices and choices; it is the choice of the individual themselves. It takes the form of self-enslavement and self-alienation, destroying the space for any ideological articulation of emancipatory claims. In the face of the loss of the social context of binding meanings, the late modern individual is left only with the constantly reproduced appearance of change.

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Cytowanie

Paweł Pieniążek (2024), *Late Modern Individualization in Light of Critical Theory (the Frankfurt School): An Essay*, „Przegląd Socjologii Jakościowej”, t. XX, nr 1, s. 78–101, <https://doi.org/10.18778/1733-8069.20.1.05>

Indywidualizacja ponowoczesna w świetle teorii krytycznej (szkoła frankfurcka). Esej

Abstrakt: Artykuł opisuje dialektykę procesu indywidualizacji w nowoczesności i późnej nowoczesności w perspektywie teorii krytycznej, zwłaszcza jej postaci klasycznej (szkoła frankfurcka). Dialektyka ta polega na przekształceniu indywidualizacji jako nośnika emancypacji w indywidualizację rozumianą nie tylko jako ideologia, ale przede wszystkim jako siła produkcyjna kapitalizmu neoliberalnego, zasada jego funkcjonowania. Artykuł omawia społeczne i kulturowe determinanty tego przekształcenia, a następnie sposób, w jaki późnonowoczesny indywidualizm pod postacią samorealizacji zostaje sfunkcjonalizowany przez rynek i podporządkowany wymogom zysku i wydajności w poszczególnych obszarach życia (ekonomia i społeczeństwo) w świecie neoliberalnym. Artykuł odwołuje się do metodologii socjologii jakościowej.

Słowa kluczowe: nowoczesność, późna nowoczesność, indywidualizacja, teoria krytyczna, zmiana, produktywność