#### Research Article

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# Me, Myself and I: Self-fetishisation in the Age of the *Selfie*

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**Abstract:** In this article, I deal with some new aspects of the late-modern constitution of subjectivity, related to the use of new communication technologies. By developing some intuitions associated with an interpretation of contemporary social life based mostly on Marx's conception of *fetishism*, I hope to offer a provisional account of a few consequences of such developments for the conception of the self. I differentiate among several dimensions of a process through which the self-objectification enhanced by those developments leads to self-fetishisation and self-commodification, as well as capitalisation, and indicate its possible contradictions. I argue that while self-objectification is in itself not a problem, reflecting only a shift towards a conception of authenticity which is no longer related to something like an inner true core, self-fetishisation and its consequences contradicts this process' own promises.

Keywords: subjectivity, communication technology, Marx, fetishism

The development of communication technology since the last decades of the twentieth century has been associated with all sorts of ends and intentions, even military ones (Tarnoff). Notwithstanding, communication technologies linked to the development of personal computers and digital telephonic devices have undeniably produced a change in our lives. The increase in the communication possibilities on the public and private levels—the access to and diffusion of valuable and relevant news, the maintenance of individual and collective connection between relatives, friends, acquaintances or social groups and the participation in each other lives and debates across distances, the widening of social relationship circles—have often since been associated with an increase in autonomy and individual freedom of expression and with the democratization of the access to culture and information, if not to an increase in connections in a social sense—between individuals, countries, cultures, which could mean an increase in the potentials of some sort of solidarity.<sup>1</sup>

However, through growing communicability and access to information, permanent reachability and self-exposure have also grown, in ways and with consequences still to be fully identified. People in developed modern societies (and in developing countries) seem to be increasingly exposing their private lives to others, and expecting the others to have theirs exposed. This also means private lives are increasingly exposed to appreciation, judgement and, of course, control. In social media such as Facebook or Instagram, not only your holidays, births, weddings and graduations are to be made public (in whatever sense "public" might be understood), but also your meals, your shopping, your pet, yourself sitting on the sofa or lying on your

<sup>1</sup> I will not give references to concrete examples of such developments, as they are all well known.

<sup>2</sup> The question of what is to be considered "public" and "private" in terms of modern communication technology would merit a discussion in itself. Not only is it clear that what is meant by "public" is usually not to be understood in terms of a democratic public sphere, but also it is possible to differentiate among several levels of "publicity," even within a single social media platform. Similarly, the meaning of "privacy" changes as most platforms (and even other private and public institutions) have—explicit or implicit, even illegal -access to information supposed to be beyond "public" reach. Unfortunately, I won't be able to develop here this aspect of the problem.

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bed; not only your favoured candidate for the following elections, but also your opinion on international economy, music, abortion and the idea of building a hospital next to the park you go on Sundays; not only your answers to Facebook's own questions suggestions, such as "What are you thinking about?" or "How are you feeling today?," but also your reflections on life, poems, jokes, indirect messages, implicit or explicit love declarations. These expressions of one-self (called by Facebook "your activity") are expected to be seen and somehow evaluated by others, if possible positively so that there is also a reward for your posts: an assurance that your life is exactly as it should be. (Or else, not: seeking non-approval is also a form of seeking approval, or is at least a confirmation of your misfortunes.) Moreover, self-exposure and evaluation expand beyond the simple exposition of what already *is*: intimate relationships are searched for and found through dating applications such as Tinder, and work connections through LinkedIn. Meetings, lunches with friends, conversation circles are giving way to WhatsApp conversations and similar applications. Most services, from food to hotels and taxis, can be found through applications developed for smartphones, and their use follows the same logic of exposure and evaluation, as it is the case with services such as Uber or Airbnb.

But what are the consequences of such developments? First of all, as implied above, permanent exposure definitely opens the possibility of permanent control and misuse of the information made available. Such control and misuse are exerted not only by your Facebook "friends," but also in the political sense already imagined in George Orwell's 1984 (Orwell, Cadwalladr, and Graham-Harrison). As a consequence, instead of more freedom and autonomy, it might result in the loss of both. But although the latter is possibly its worst aspect, in this article, I wish to deal with consequences on a more social level, which are anyway deeply connected to the aspects related to the political. It seems that the increasing hyper-exposure of the self nowadays, noticeable for instance in the explosion of intentional self-portrayal in the form of instant photos of oneself (the selfie), potentialises and deepens a tendency towards what might be called with Karl Marx the fetishisation of the self. This is at once a consequence and the cause: through the identification of the self with its exposed image in what could be called the *selfie* (in a broad, not only visual sense), the so-produced self appears as a "mystical" object (Marx, Kapital 85)3 detached and independent from its connections to the "real" self and to the relationships which constitute it. It is also attached to the logic of the capitalist market economy, even where it is not fundamentally related to the economy. Since this process of fetishisation follows the logic of a particular sphere of modern society that in capitalist modernity seems to be swallowing up all other dimensions, capitalist market economy, it can also be understood in terms of commodification—or even, following the contemporary logic of neoliberal late-capitalist, financial markets, of capitalisation.

In this paper I deal with these new aspects of late-modern constitution of subjectivity, related to the use of new communication technologies, but not restricted to nor caused specifically solely by them: the use of these technologies itself is obviously also a consequence of social and economic processes far beyond the development of new forms of communication. By developing some intuitions associated with an interpretation of contemporary social life based mostly on Marx's conception of fetishism, I hope to offer a provisional account of a few consequences of such developments for the conception of the self. I will differentiate among several dimensions of a process through which the self-objectification enhanced by those developments leads to self-fetishisation, self-commodification, and capitalisation, and I will also indicate its possible contradictions. I argue that self-objectification is in itself not a problem: it only reflects a shift towards a conception of authenticity that is no longer related to something like a true inner core, but, instead, to its intersubjective constitution. However, self-fetishisation and its consequences contradict this process' own promises: instead of enhancing the possibilities of expression, freedom, and communication of an authentic self, it limits these same possibilities to what is compatible with its market value as a commodity. After presenting, in the first part, three different levels of this process, I shall briefly indicate, in the second part, the contradictions associated with it. It is not my intention to present here an exhaustive description or analysis of such phenomena, as this process is not complete, and further investigation is definitely necessary, including further empirical investigation I am not able to develop now. I will also

<sup>3</sup> All translations from the German original are my own. In the case of Kapital, they were based on Marx, Capital.

have to leave aside other consequences or aspects both of the development of such technologies and of processes of fetishisation, as well as their interpretation from other theoretical points of view. This article—following the idea of this special issue on Marx—only intends to develop those insights Marx's conception of fetishism might have to offer to the interpretation of the phenomena discussed here, hoping it might make an interesting contribution to these debates.<sup>4</sup>

## Me, Myself and I: The Self in the Age of the Selfie

First of all, it is necessary to recognise that, concerning the conception of the self, the increasing use of communication technologies in the age of the *selfie* has consequences on different levels. Self-exposure is not the same as self-objectification or fetishisation. It seems to me that it is possible to identify at least four aspects related to the constitution of modern subjectivities, connected to one another but distinguishable, in which those developments have played a role: the first aspect of the consequences of self-exposure enabled by communication technologies can be called *objectification*, and is actually prior to fetishisation itself; the second and third aspects of the process, self-*fetishisation*, and self-*commodification*, together belong to another level of the process; and, possibly as a contemporary radicalisation of these processes, it seems that self-*capitalisation* might constitute a further level. In what follows, I will deal with these four aspects on three levels, which I will expose separately in three different subsections.

## Objectification and the Authentic Self in the Age of the Selfie

The first consequence of the contemporary developments of communication technologies is not necessarily negative, although at first, it seems to be so; it can be understood as a self-objectification not yet necessarily understood as self-fetishisation, and presupposed by it. It is best understood as a form of intersubjective objectification and is probably better scrutinised from a Hegelian, and not Marxian perspective.

One of the most obvious aspects of the expansion of the use of this technology, in particular, the use of social media as a means of communication, is a tendency towards an increase in the perception of ourselves *from the outside*. Self-exposure, especially in *selfies* and short home-made films, has the effect of creating a certain image of ourselves made for public viewing, "liking," sharing and commenting. The creation of this sort of made-for-the-public image goes hand in hand with a self-perception based on the opinion others might have of ourselves; the image is supposed to please them, or to annoy them, or to show aspects of our personality we would like to emphasise (and hide ones we would not). This process may go so far as to change our own self-perception and raises the question whether what is being presented is really our "authentic" self, or if it is a fictional character we would like to be associated with. Am I actually the relaxed woman spending her holidays on the beach, the respected academic presenting a paper at a conference in Paris, the dedicated mother who baked this birthday cake, are we the happy family portrayed on a Sunday afternoon, are we all of them, none of them? Is the identity broadcast in selfies by social media my-self?

However, this same question relies on a certain conception of the self and of authenticity that has a historical character itself, which precisely is what might be changing. Charles Taylor, in his impressive work on the construction of modern identity *Sources of the Self*, has described the conception of inwardness associated with it as a distinct modern aspect of this conception, and has put the dimension usually associated with the idea of authenticity—together with "disengaged reason" and "affirmation of ordinary life"- as one of its main aspects (Taylor, *Sources of the self*). Taylor describes how, in the eighteenth century, the conception of nature as a source of goodness, truth, and freedom, present for instance in Rousseau and Herder, and the valorisation of feelings associated with it, led to what he calls an expressivist conception of human life and of the self (Taylor, *Sources* 368). This conception consists, first of all, in the idea that "each individual is different and original, and that this originality determines how she or he ought to live" (Taylor,

<sup>4</sup> This is also the reason why this article won't be able to deal with other perspectives and interpretations of the use of modern communication technologies, including contemporary media theory.

Sources 375). The expression of our true nature, which is supposed to be found inside us, would reveal, at least to a certain extent, our authentic inner self, which is understood as lacking transparency and having an inner "depth" (389) not deemed completely externalisable: Taylor makes clear that this authenticity concept also includes the belief that our unique true nature "cannot be fully known outside of and prior to our articulation/definition of it" (Taylor, Sources 376). But even if the actualization of this true inner core is thought to be possible only through articulation and externalization, this view is obviously dependent on a concept of self-fulfillment which is highly individualistic, the most recent examples of which are to be seen, according to Taylor, in the "flower generation" movements of the 1960's (Taylor, Sources 373).

Now, if individual personality in the age of the *selfie* is increasingly understood as dependent on the outside (on other peoples' opinion, approval, affirmation), the inwardness Taylor describes seems to be being lost, and with it, that which made of each of us something original, unique. The conception of a personality based on the depths of our own inner true core might so be giving its place to a shallow, chameleonic conception of individuality, ready to adapt to its environment, unable to express anything which does not lead to immediate approval. As in traditional or authoritarian societies, in which individuals are expected to follow what is expected from them, what the development of the new communication technologies described above might be showing is that in a world dominated by such technologies there would be no place for authenticity—or for contestation.

But the historical character of the conception of the self as based on inwardness makes it clear that this is by no means the only possible understanding of it. First of all, the traditional understanding of the role played by the individual in society just mentioned—which can be also found in Aristotelian view that "the city is prior in the order of the nature to the family and the individual" (Aristotle, *Politics* 1253a18)—is not necessarily to be understood as authoritarian, at least not if a certain degree of identity between individual and collective conceptions of good life can be presupposed. But given the fact that modernity supposes an idea of individual freedom and plurality, to what extent might the loss of inwardness be considered a regression?

Now, I think it is possible to renounce a conception of authenticity based on sheer inwardness without renouncing modernity. This renunciation might then be considered a shift from the assumption of something like a true core individuality, which is supposed to make each of us unique, to a conception in which the self becomes increasingly perceived as socially constructed—what does not at all necessarily mean socially determined. As Taylor himself argues, from a Hegelian point of view, in his essay on "The Politics of Recognition," the modern idea of an inwardly generated authentic self does not correspond to the way identity is actually defined—and not only in modern society ("The Politics of Recognition" 32). As the human condition is fundamentally dialogical (Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition" 32), identity has always depended on interaction with others and—a central concept here—recognition by them. The connection between this aspect of the human condition and the modern idea of authenticity gives in Taylor's opinion "a new importance to recognition" ("The Politics of Recognition" 34). This would mean taking another route within modernity, one that already incorporates the critique of what Hegel used to call the atomistic conception of the social (Hegel, "Über die wissenschaftlichen Behandlungsarten" 445) and towards a conception that emphasizes intersubjectivity. Taylor himself and recent Frankfurt Critical Theory, especially in Axel Honneth's theory of recognition, have already done so (Taylor "The Politics of Recognition," Honneth, Kampf um Anerkennung). This shift is also related to a parallel shift in the concept of autonomy, from a strictly individualistic conception towards one of autonomy as intersubjectively constituted and dependent on social relationships and contexts.

So, if the monological character of "mainstream modern philosophy" contributed to making the intersubjective aspect of identity-constitution "invisible," as Taylor puts it ("The Politics of Recognition" 32), maybe we should understand the shift towards a self-conception that is more and more dependent on external evaluations as making it visible. It would then reflect an increase in the awareness of the means by which we are constituted as individuals. If this is true, self-exposure through social media would not necessarily have to be regarded as connected to some sort of loss: the self-objectification attached to intersubjective identity construction does not mean *per se* the submission to powers external to the individual, at least no more than the fact that our sociality already implies absolute inwardness to be a

fiction. My authentic self might then have to be found between the way I would describe myself and the way I am described by the ones I interact with, which have anyway never been independent of one another. This notion of authenticity (if it is at all still possible to use this concept) would certainly be less stable and less rigid than one based on some sort of inner truth, as the relationship between depth and surface would have to be understood as a fluid continuity. But already the conception of authenticity as linked to an inner truth excluded the possibility of an exhaustive understanding of who we actually are, as it was based on the endless depths of feelings which were never to be fully expressed; thus, the shift towards intersubjectivity can only add a new dimension of de-centering to the already de-centered modern self.5

### Self-fetishisation and Self-commodification

But if the shift towards the outside noticeable nowadays is not per se negative, the objectification implied by it is actually attached to more than the de-centering described in the interpretation of objectification in intersubjective terms. It seems that the sort of self-exposure found in contemporary society, and easily identified in the expansion of today's communication technologies, has already resulted in overexposure, and that excessive weight is bearing on the way we appear as objects. Insofar as the feedback we receive from the outside becomes more and more relevant, image (again in a broad, not only visual, sense) seems to become more important than content, or even independent from it; the objectified self loses the fluidity implied in the idea of intersubjective constitution and becomes fixed, crystallized in the image that appears on the selfie. This aspect is what could be called self-fetishisation; it is closely connected to selfcommodification, the transformation of one-self into a commodity, and both together correspond to a new level of the same process, as they take it beyond mere *objectification*.

As it is well known, fetishism is a term Marx introduces in his analysis of the commodity in the first chapter of Capital (Marx, Kapital). It can be interpreted as related to Marx's earlier concept of alienation, which he developed in the Manuscripts of 1844 (Ökonomische-philosophische Manuskripte). In his analysis of alienated work in the Manuscripts, Marx described alienation in connection to work as a fundamental activity in human being's self-realisation. Alienated work is for Marx, a result of private property in a capitalist society. The extent to which the worker in capitalist society loses control of the whole production process—including his means of production, the activity of production itself and the result of this process, objectified in the product itself—results in the object produced appearing to him as a "strange object" (Marx Ökonomische-philosophische *Manuskripte*, 512), one to which he does not feel related. But alienation had, for the young Marx, at least 4 dimensions: it consisted in not being able to recognize oneself in one's own products, activities, nor in one's own species-being, that is, your own humanity, and in your fellow humans (Marx Ökonomische-philosophische Manuskripte, 514-8). As these dimensions included the impossibility of self-realization, alienated work implied self-alienation (Marx Ökonomische-philosophische Manuskripte, 515).

Although Marx's analysis in Capital explores a different perspective, those dimensions of alienation are implicitly present in the category of fetishism. Marx starts Capital with the way wealth appears in capitalist society: as "an immense accumulation of commodities" (Kapital, 49); then he proceeds to the analysis of commodity itself, describing its double character and their respective relationship to (concrete and abstract) work, in which commodities' value (as use-value and as value) is grounded. Interesting for our own analysis is the fact that this grounding, the relationship of value to human work, and thus the whole structure of capitalist social relationships behind the production of commodities, is obscured by the fact that what is actually visible is only the surface of this whole process This results in the "immense accumulation of commodities" quoted above. Human concrete labour, that is, productive activity, produces useful things in all societies, and this process, which implies a certain objectivation of labour-power in products, is understood by Marx as the "metabolism between human beings and nature" (Kapital 57). On the other hand, the production of commodities, and not only products, is for Marx the production of things meant

<sup>5</sup> Other aspects of this de-centering include, for instance, Freud's idea of the unconscious in its different versions. See, for instance, Freud.

to be exchanged in the market. But, as Marx explains in section 4 of that chapter, as soon as the product of labour appears in the *form* "commodity" (*Kapital* 86), it seems to acquire an "enigmatic" (*Kapital* 86), "mystical" character (*Kapital* 85), as if commodities had a life of their own. The fetishism of commodities is defined by Marx as the fact that in a capitalist society

the social character of men's labour appears to them as an objective character stamped upon the product of that labour; because the relation of the producers to the sum total of their own labour is presented to them as a social relation, existing not between themselves, but between the products of their labour (*Kapital* 86).

Now, Marx doesn't use the expression *fetishism* as associated with human beings or the self. But since he does mention *self-alienation* explicitly in his earlier writings on alienation, and insofar as human labour-power is, in the capitalist mode of production, also a commodity, this extrapolation seems to be possible.

First of all, just like fetishism of the commodity appears only when products are produced *as commodities*, depending on this form and on the capitalist social relationships behind it, the fetishism of the commodity labour-power also depends on labour-power being a commodity.

This is also the reason why self-fetishisation and self-commodification are inseparable. Marx defines labour-power (or "capacity for labour") as "the aggregate of those mental and physical capabilities existing in a human being, which he exercises whenever he produces a use-value of any description" (*Kapital* 181). As Marx explains it, labour-power can only become a commodity after, with the dissolution of feudal structures and the expropriation of peasants of their land, large masses of workers emerge who have "nothing to sell except themselves" (*Kapital* 741). It presupposes the availability of "free" workers in the market, ready to sell the only thing they own—that is, their labour-power.

It is important to notice that what is commodified is *labour-power*, not the labourer who owns it himself; furthermore, this transaction appears as a usual exchange contract between equals exchanging equivalents in the market, and is actually less a sale than renting, since labour-power is only sold for a certain number of hours each time (Marx *Kapital* 182). However, it is not difficult to see that this sale has further consequences. For the capitalist buying it, there is an implicit identification between labour-power and labourer, as only the former interests him: as Marx puts it,

By the purchase of labour-power, the capitalist incorporates labour, as a living ferment, with the lifeless constituents of the product. From his point of view, the labour-process is nothing more than the consumption of the commodity purchased, i. e., of labour-power; ... The labour-process, is a process between things that the capitalist has purchased, things that have become his property.(Marx *Kapital* 200).

This understanding of the workers' labour-power as *a thing* goes hand in hand with the identification of the worker with his labour-power. This becomes perceptible in the identification of the value *of labour-power* with the value of the survival *of the labourer* (per day): for Marx, this value is "determined by the value of the commodities, without the daily supply of which *the labourer* cannot renew his vital energy, consequently by the value of those means of subsistence that are physically indispensable" (*Kapital* 187).

Now we can arrive at a definition of what Marx might call in this context the fetishisation of the commodity labour-power. If the labourer is reduced to his labour-power, and this latter is regarded as "a thing" in relation to other things in the process of production, we have here again the case of "a social relation, existing not between [human beings], but between the products of their labour" (*Kapital* 86). It is true that labour-power is not exactly a result of the workers' production (but maybe might be seen as a result of his/her re-production); however, it is difficult to deny that its gaining a life of its own means its assuming the form of a fetish, just like other commodities do.

It is relevant that similarly to what Marx describes in relation to the production of commodities in general, there is also here a difference between *objectification*, understood as the result of human work as the production of products, and *fetishisation*, which consists on the fact that the work-products produced under the commodity-form lose their relationship to what produced them, and seem to acquire the "mystical" abilities that make them look as if they held "social" relationships between themselves. Through *fetishisation* then, those individual productive capacities and abilities understood as an individual's labour-

power seem to gain a life of their own, being able to exchange themselves in the market as if they were living things – and this might be true not only for the capitalist who purchases them but for their owner himself, who, through their identification with these marketable capacities, appear as *fetishized* themselves. In a broader sense, self-fetishisation should then be understood as the fact that, since, in capitalist societies, relationships between human beings appear as relationships between things, human beings themselves appear, even for themselves, as things: as commodities to be exchanged.

Now, what does it mean for the age of the selfie? First of all, it is important to notice that, from the interpretation of the "mystical" character, individual abilities seem to gain through the fetishisation of the image individuals project, it does not follow that this image is a *simulacrum*, or not connected to something "real." According to this interpretation, there is something beneath the image through which individual abilities become commodities: the image projected through the selfie seems to acquire a life of its own, but this "mystical" appearance is just part of the truth. Even if it is not possible to understand it as related to a monologically inwardly defined "true" core anymore, the existence of a relationship between intersubjective and subjective self-perceptions implies the existence of both poles of this relationship: the selfie seems to have a life of its own, but it does not. 7

On the other hand, fetishisation does emphasise and deepen those aspects of that relationship which are associated with the "outside," in particular those related to the idea of the market. I have already mentioned that the always wider use of communication technology adds new aspects to a trend which is not new but tends to be potentialised by it. This potentialisation, which corresponds to the always deeper penetration of the logic of commodity in the ways we conceive ourselves and our relationships, occurs in a double sense.

Self-fetishisation takes place first of all within the self, as the inclusion of more and more individual qualities and abilities to the list of potentially marketable elements, at first in the conventional sense of market economy. Of course—as we can take from Marx's analysis itself—self-fetishisation is not new, and should not be understood exclusively as a consequence of the development of new communication technologies. This was already evident from the way modern subjects in liberal, capitalist societies defined themselves and conceived of their own capacities, abilities, and education, even before those developments: by relating them to their chances in a market economy. Newspapers, magazines and internet pages have already long been full of suggestions of ways through which one might best sell oneself in work interviews, or add a surplus value to his or her resume (for instance, by learning a language, or by studying abroad).

But with the use of new communication technologies, oneself becomes a commodity in ever new dimensions: not only concrete productive capacities, education and experience are being taken into account, but also aspects which used to have no meaning in work contexts: social skills, communicational abilities, emotional intelligence, readiness to accept "flexible" work forms, which may mean availability at nights and weekends, personality and even the relationships you "have": the "contacts" you have become themselves part of your marketable personality, as clearly shown by the emphasis on the importance of "networking" and the emergence of the "youtuber" and the "influencer" as new professionals.

This commodification of personality becomes especially clear in the context of the new, technologymediated services: in times of the flexibilisation of labour and constant client-feedback in services such as Uber, or Airbnb, workers have to make sure they please their clients, so that aspects which still remained human within earlier capitalist production (such as the taxi-drivers' personality and musical taste) can now be objectified through technology-mediated evaluation (How do you evaluate this service?), and any dissatisfaction can lead to sanctions or unemployment. Due to this permanent objectification, the moment an Uber-driver, for instance, sells her services, she is also selling herself in a more personal sense than workers in conventional service businesses used to honesty, kindness, hospitality, behaviour, everything can be evaluated and graded, and the services offered tend to become always more identified

**<sup>6</sup>** For the notion of "simulacrum," see Baudrillard.

<sup>7</sup> Unless we understand as "real" self only one that is monologically, inwardly produced. This seems to be the unspoken premise of many contemporary interpretations such as Slavoj Žižek's, who, through his association of Marx and Lacan, tends to regard "reality" in late capitalist cyberspace as only "virtual." See Žižek.

with their owner—who becomes then identified with the commodity she sells, that is, fetishizes it. It is then understandable one tries to raise her own value as a commodity, by offering clients water, letting clients choose what music to listen to, and similar behaviours.

But, secondly, self-fetishisation occurs also in other contexts.<sup>8</sup> Parallel to the radicalisation of the neoliberal renewed emphasis of the individual, with the expansion of communication technologies, the logic of the market expands beyond market economy in a strict sense, occupying contexts and areas which used to follow other kinds of logic. Most personal relationships tend now to be understood in terms of "markets," so that the self tends to present itself as a commodity also in its efforts of making new acquaintances, friends, or searching for love.

Again, this process is not due exclusively to the expansion of the use of communication technologies and is not really new. The idea that the logic of commodity had expanded beyond market economy was already central to Gyorgy Lukács conception of reification (which was based on Marx's idea of fetishism and Max Weber's interpretation of modern society as based on rationalization). (Lukács), and Theodor Adorno described, for instance in *Minima Moralia*, how the market's logic of instrumentalisation, to which fetishisation is attached, pervaded personal relationships to the extent that human beings had unlearned the meaning of a gift (Adorno, *Minima Moralia* 64) or the use of "tact" towards others (Adorno, *Minima Moralia* 50). And this expansion is also clearly what Jürgen Habermas describes as the "colonization of the life-worlds" in *Theory of Communicative Action* (Habermas, *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns* 275-293).

But it seems that communication technologies add, again, new aspects to it, as self-commodification becomes more and more evident also outside the market economy. As self-fetishisation grows, all sorts of social and intimate relationships are understood in terms of market choices: one can gain new friends by clicking on their profile, and lose them in an instant; on applications such as Tinder, love partners are found through the swiping of their images in the right direction. The fact that also one-self is going to be exposed to being welcome or rejected through a click or a swipe contributes to trying to show your image at its best. To *look* or to *be regarded as* (not only in the visual sense) becomes more relevant than *being*, as you image is actually what is going to be taken into account: you have to please your Facebook friends, your viewers, your employers, your potential friends and love partners, in order to sell yourself also in these markets, not being "unfriended," left out, or swiped in the wrong direction. It is not surprising, then, that these developments affect individual self-interpretation, as a rise in narcissism and depression among such overexposed subjects is already obvious, especially among strongly susceptible groups (like teenagers) (Shafer).

## **Self-capitalisation**

Although self-fetishisation and commodification already describe precisely enough the negative effects of the expansion of communicative technologies for the self, there seems to be nowadays still a further level in this same process which might be interesting to explore. In a recent book where she discusses the negative effects of contemporary, neoliberal capitalism on democracy (Brown), Wendy Brown establishes, by using Foucault and Marxist theory, distinctions between neoliberal and liberal capitalism which might be useful for our analysis, as it incorporates developments in capitalism not best analysed exclusively through Marx.

Brown defines neoliberalism as "an order of normative reason that, when it becomes ascendant, takes shape as governing rationality extending a specific formulation of economic values, practices, and metrics to every dimension of human life" (Brown 30). This is not supposed not to mean that "neoliberalism literally marketises all spheres" but rather

**<sup>8</sup>** The expansion of fetishization and commodification in contemporary society can obviously be related to other aspects, apart from the subjective and intersubjective ones I am dealing with. In particular the relationship towards the objective world of things, that is, nature is obviously deeply characterized by it. Here I have left such aspects aside.

that neo-liberal rationality disseminates the model of the market to all domains and activities—even where money is not at issue—and configures human beings exhaustively as market actors, always, only, and everywhere as *homo oeconomicus*. (Brown 31)

But in contrast to liberalism, where exchange was central, "in neoliberal reason, competition replaces exchange as the market's root principle and basic good" (Brown 36), while inequality replaces equality as a normative parameter (Brown 38).

Especially interesting for our reflection on the self is the emphasis Brown places on the fact that within neo-liberal rationality, subjects are understood as "human capital": while the liberal form of the *homo oeconomicus* used to be understood as an interest maximizer and profit seeker, the neoliberal subject is to be seen as "both a member of a firm and as itself a firm, and in both cases as appropriately conducted by the governance practices appropriate to firms" (Brown 34), but not mainly in the sense of old industrial capitalism: "the specific model for human capital and its spheres of activity is increasingly that of financial or investment capital, and not only productive or entrepreneurial capital" (Brown 33). This means contemporary *homo oeconomicus* is permanently "concerned with enhancing its portfolio value in all domains of its life, an activity undertaken through practices of self-investment and attracting investors" (Brown 33-4).

Although I do not agree with all aspects of Brown's interpretation,<sup>9</sup> it obviously shows many parallels to my own analysis and offers many useful insights for the matters that interest us here. Brown does not use these terms, but what she describes as the behaviour of human capital can be easily understood as a potentialisation of what I called self-*fetishisation* into self-*capitalisation*;<sup>10</sup> and also the relationship between self-capitalisation and the expansion of new communication technologies is easy to establish, as Brown herself notices.

Actually, in my description, commodification was already associated with the intention of raising one's value as a commodity. But if self-commodification could be understood as the transposition of the logic of commodity to the (self-)conception of the self, self-capitalisation goes a step further and should then be understood as the potentialisation of this logic through the idea, characteristic of financial markets, of self-investment and self-appreciation as capital—in this case, related to the commodity labour-power.

At first sight, it seems that also here we could base our analysis of self-capitalisation to Marx's reflection. Although for historical reasons Marx is probably no longer enough to understand this process in its contemporary financial dimension fully, it might be interesting to notice that labour-power also appeared in Capital, from the perspective of the capitalist, as "variable capital" (Marx, Kapital 147). However, in neoliberalism we apparently have self-appreciating labour-power, understood as capital, while what defined capital for Marx was the self-appreciation of it as a whole, made possible only through the exploitation of labour-power. Capital was defined by Marx through the circuit M-C-M', while M'>M, (that is, the exchange money-commodity-money', while the money received is greater than the money spent) (Kapital 111), and the valorization shown in this circuit is possible only through the extraction of surplusvalue within the sphere of production, which did not imply valorization of labour-power as such. So, if we want to avoid forcing Marx's theory to fit a reality it was not developed for, we might have to understand capital as human capital (and self-capitalisation) in a looser sense than the one deployed by Marx—which might even include aspects such as what is nowadays called "cultural," "social" and other forms of "capital" (Bourdieu). Self-capitalisation should then be understood as a specific form of self-fetishisation, in which, beyond mere self-marketability as a commodity, self-appreciation, that is, raising your self-value as a commodity, becomes central.

**<sup>9</sup>** For instance, I don't think we can derive from the fact that inequality is dominant in neo-liberalism that it is normative, as she argues, and I think there is a greater continuity between liberalism and neo-liberalism than Brown acknowledges. I also think the destruction of democracy Brown describes started with liberalism already, as the liberal conception of politics and democracy already implied nothing more than particulars who competed for power. I will not be able to discuss these issues here. See Brown.

<sup>10</sup> She does use "human capitalisation" in this sense. See Brown 133.

It is evident that here, too, the effect of new communication technology is clearly noticeable. Brown herself connects her analysis to the development of these technologies, for instance when she mentions that increasing social media "followers," "likes" and "retweets" can be understood as "enhancing" one's "portfolio value" through the attraction of "investors" (Brown 33-4). But by relating the idea of self-appreciation and self-investment to the forms of self-commodification already discussed, many other examples of self-capitalisation related to communication technologies could be found. However, what exactly this new level of self-fetishisation means for the self is not yet clear, and deserves further investigation.

## The Self and the Selfie

Now, what can we conclude from these reflections? If self-objectification *per se* does not have to be interpreted as negative, as it could be only reflecting a shift in our self-conception, it is difficult to interpret the fetishisation of the self in the *selfie* shown in commodification, and, still worse, in contemporary self-capitalisation, as positive developments or even as neutral. Marx's interpretation of fetishism as something which obscured the relationships in which it was grounded implied a negative evaluation already made clear in his analysis of alienation. Self-fetishisation has obviously something to do with a loss of control over the image we project, and the identification of our-selves with such an image means an evident restriction of our possibilities—and thus of our freedom of self-expression, choice, and movement. The degree this process achieves in late financial capitalism, the potentialisation—and, we could say with Hartmut Rosa, acceleration (Rosa)—of this whole process seem to take us to a point where maybe we can only hope not to end up exploding our-selves like financial bubbles.

It is not possible to develop here a critique of contemporary capitalist society as a whole (if this is at all still possible), but maybe we can introduce here a few starting points for a critique of the negative aspects associated with the development of new communicative technologies. I started this exposition by stating that the development of the new communication technologies tends to be interpreted as related to an increase in freedom of expression and democratization of the access and diffusion of information, and that we could add to it the expectation of being connected in a social sense which might be regarded as connected to some sort of solidarity. In this sense, their development could seem to have obeyed, and to develop further, the same normative criteria which are regarded as the normative criteria of modernity itself: liberty, equality, fraternity.

However, these promises do not seem to be being fulfilled. While new communication technologies promise freedom to the self, the fetishized *selfie* becomes more and more submitted to the logic of commodification and capitalisation; while such technologies promise democratization and horizontality in communication, which also means equality in access to communication, the fact that the fetishized *selfie* does not really have a choice over the way it commodifies and capitalizes itself, reflects already inequality and power relationships she/he has to surrender to; while it promises communication, and maybe solidarity, the *selfie* regards itself as being in permanent competition with other *selfies*, as all of them are pursuing the same objectives, of gaining investors and raising their value. Already the fact that a development that promises connection, horizontality and freedom ends up with the promotion of highly self-related, individualistic selves, should be seen as a contradiction.

Does it mean then that these developments should be rejected as a whole? Maybe not. It seems to me that if critique is to proceed immanently (and I see no other option), it has to insist on the contradictions to be found in what is criticized, equally avoiding absolute affirmation and absolute rejection: the contradictions between what is promised by the normative parameters a society choose (without which no society would work), and which promises are actually carries out.

If we have this in mind, we might be able to recognize there *is* a potential for freedom, equality, and solidarity within the development of such technologies. The first aspect related to the development of communication technologies was still neutral enough to offer a good starting point: what appeared as self-objectification was not to be necessarily interpreted as self-fetishisation; it could also be understood in a positive sense,

as a shift towards what I called intersubjective conception of the self which would reflect an increase in the awareness of the intersubjective conditions of self-constitution. This also could be interpreted as a shift from an individualistic conception of freedom to a conception which could be called social, or communicative, as it might be found in Hegel (Hegel, Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts 57), 11 so that objectification would not mean a loss of freedom, but rather a shift in its conception. Likewise, the idea of open access to information does have a democratic potential, if it does not lead to fetishisation and commodification; and also solidarity could at least be hoped for in the context of the expansion of communication.

Critique should then begin by disentangling how much of the promises made to the objectifiable self are being fulfilled for the fetishized selfie, and insist on their realization. Of course, this would mean finding out the reason they are usually not.

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<sup>11</sup> For this conception of freedom in Hegel, see for instance Honneth Leiden an Unbestimmtheit.