

## Dia-noesis: A Journal of Philosophy

Vol 18, No 2 (2025)

Trauma, Exile, and Cultural Displacement



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doi: [10.12681/dia.43443](https://doi.org/10.12681/dia.43443)

### To cite this article:

Asimiadis, D., & Kagioglou, F. (2025). The Trauma of Autonomy: : Neoliberalism and the Forms of the Subject's Exile. *Dia-Noesis: A Journal of Philosophy*, 18(2), 63–82. <https://doi.org/10.12681/dia.43443>

## The Trauma of Autonomy: Neoliberalism and the Forms of the Subject's Exile

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### **Abstract**

The paper investigates the manner neoliberalism, as a regime of subjectivation, turns autonomy as a space of freedom into trauma. By the instrumentality of the values of personal responsibility, continuous self-enhancement, and commodifying the self, subjects are compelled into a situation of solitary existence: they are estranged from common meanings, social relationships, and other forms of belonging. Work, consumption, and the performativism of identity are disciplining agencies that conceal rather than erase the trauma originating in the estrangement from the social nucleus. The paper attempts to map these modalities of solitude in the subject under psychoanalytic, biopolitical, and cultural axes; it examines the notion of the trauma of autonomy as a structuring component of the neoliberal experience. Last, it suggests that a comprehensive understanding of neoliberal trauma can provide new avenues for a rewriting of collectivity, remembrance, and resilience against the background of diffuse exile.

**Keywords:** *Neoliberalism, Subjectivity, Trauma, Biopolitics, Alienation*

## Introduction

The notion of autonomy, with a long Intellectual History traced back to Enlightenment thinking as a promise of freedom and self-determination, has been fundamentally transformed under the neoliberal regime. Formerly, autonomy was a synonym for an individual's ability to think and act independently with regard to exterior power structures, but nowadays it has been redefined as a requirement for steady self-regulation, flexibility, and productivity.

Freedom here is transformed into a duty, and autonomy becomes a necessity. And hereupon individuals are not liberated from control structures, but internalize them instead. Disciplinary practices depart from their externality and become intrapsychic, inscribed into the person's rapport with oneself. The cultural justification inherent in neoliberalism that runs throughout the labor market, relationships, and modes of self-presentation breeds a new anthropological form: the entrepreneurial self. This is a person compelled to work incessantly to put their skills, their emotions, and their experiential storytelling to economic value.

Failure here is freed of social or political dimensions; instead, it is a mirror held up to personal failure. People are prompted to think of every failure and every experience of alienation as a tool for self-improvement, something that incorporates trauma, rather than just registers trauma.

As a result, autonomy is made traumatic precisely as a function of self-reference: the self is estranged from communal structures, undergoing a kind of exile within the performativistic self, and compensates via constant reconstructions of a frail sense of self. The neoliberal imperative to "be yourself" disguises the violent dismantling of any cohesive sense of self. The interior world is transformed into a sphere of productivity, where emotional exhaustion, doubt, and isolation are read as private stumbling blocks rather than public signs. Under this theory, trauma in response to autonomy moves beyond merely a psychic or existential problem; it also becomes a cultural and political signifier of a world that is defined by the breakdown of communal attachments. Here, the person is a wanderer, not externally from a territory, but internally from their

own symbolic world, a disconnection from communities, languages, and memories that once constituted their sense of self. Exile is not understood here as a violent disjuncture, but as a familiar internal regime: a resignation to solitude, competition, and self-mastery as inevitable elements of membership in the contemporary world.

This paper seeks to explore this transition by analyzing the modalities of the subject's exile that neoliberal rationality gives rise to. Key to this analysis is an exploration of the means by which contemporary power relations insinuate themselves into daily life, forming regimes of self-surveillance and embedded responsibility. A modern emotional economy is maintained by the fiction of a self-sufficiency that proves elusive—by the imperative that individuals turn loss into opportunity, fatigue into productivity, and isolation into self-knowledge. In the course of this analysis, autonomy emerges as the most intricate form of dependency, one that is not externally enforced but instead emanates from the individual's intrinsic requirement to adhere to the standard of the autonomous self. Consequently, the trauma associated with autonomy transcends being a simple cost of freedom; it constitutes the essential prerequisite for it. This transition signifies the point at which freedom shifts from being a lived experience to an imposed duty; wherein exile transforms from being perceived as a loss to being regarded as a viable way of life.

### **Autonomy as Narrative and as Trauma**

Under neoliberal thinking, autonomy is framed as the ultimate moral and existential obligation of the modern person. It is more than a political right or a social aim; rather, it is a duty that insinuates itself into every sphere of existence: work, education, embodied self, relationships to others, and construction of self. Neoliberalism is not a rallying cry against liberation from power; rather, power is recast as an internal obligation.<sup>1</sup>

Disciplining is no longer a matter of something done to the self externally; rather, discipline is internalized in the self, which is

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<sup>1</sup> Acuña R., *From Allende to the Pink Tide: Issues Past and Present with the Left in Power*, *Journal of Iberian and Latin American Research* 21(3), 2015, pp. 390-410.

summoned to the roles of manager, critic, and prosecutor of their own life. Autonomous subjects are thereby generated as a hegemonic discourse of self-management under the guise of an internal mode of power that assumes the form of personal agency. Consistent with this reasoning, self-liberty is synonymous with the potential for constant self-improvement.<sup>2</sup>

The self arrives at a structure of investment and return, aiming to maximize their time, affective resources, and social relationships. Success is understood as a signifier of value, and failure is understood as a character flaw more than a social outcome. As a result, autonomy is redefined as a self-centered economy, where every experience must yield meaning, benefit, or outcome. The self is not merely free to choose but is instead compelled to choose perpetually to strategize, restructure, and reinvent itself as an ongoing, inconclusive process.<sup>3</sup>

This continuous process of self-making does not lead to emancipation but instead produces a subtle and ongoing trauma. The person is in a permanent evaluative situation, in which the self is a tool and a product at the same time. Freedom, instead of bringing liberation, introduces a new type of dependency: a dependence on the intrinsic necessity to have freedom. Any deviation, weakness, or slowing down is experienced as a private failure that must be corrected. As a result, the individual no longer pertains to common entities but rather to efficient systems that privilege constant self-projection. Neoliberal freedom, then, is, in itself, a type of exile in which relational elements are replaced by constant comparison.<sup>4</sup>

The pain that accompanies this affliction is not due to injury or harm caused by others but rather due to internalized demands. The self must be at once creator and product, sovereign and helpless, responsible and exposed. Freedom is a burden, self-government a struggle to remain alive. A yearning for self-government is a root of fatigue, and the illusion of self-government conceals a great sense of loss; it is the loss of the communal, the relational,

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<sup>2</sup> Dimakopoulos, S., “Between Chaos and Cosmic Order: The Ambivalent Disposition of Matter in Middle Platonism”, *Dia-noesis*, 16, 2024, pp. 55–78.

<sup>3</sup> Crouch, C., *The Strange Non-Death of Neo-liberalism*, Polity, 2011.

<sup>4</sup> Dumenil, G., & Lévy, D., *Capital Resurgent: Roots of the Neoliberal revolution*, Harvard University Press, 2004. Cf. Basilaia, T. “Liberalism and Aristotelianism: Reflecting on Alasdair MacIntyre’s After Virtue”, *Conatus - Journal of Philosophy*, 10: 1, 2025, pp. 57-71, <https://doi.org/10.12681/cjp.38547>.

and the shared aspects of existence. The neoliberal self is not disconnected from the world but rather disconnected from the power to share a life with others. Autonomy becomes again an individualistic project, bound by the imperative of self-reliance, a trauma-producing force. That trauma is caused by the fact that this produces a regime of constant self-surveillance where the standard for judgment is ever the individual. Being occurs against a backdrop of time structures no longer within the power of the individual: time for work intersects with the quietness of the home environment; times of rest are consumed with small preoccupations designed for self-improvement; time for intersubjective relationships is transformed into a requirement for constant availability.<sup>5</sup>

The daily routine is planned based on goals and measurable outcomes that have no tolerance for nonproductivity, and nights are reserved for control, evaluation, and self-audit. The physical self is an active participant within this control: it is measured, quantified, and optimized. Weariness is no longer tolerated as a signifier of limit but is instead interpreted as a symptom of ill structuring. In the same manner, emotions of sadness, rage, and confusion are reified as variables for administration. Feelings are coded as data to be fed into the mathematical equation of performance, while deviations from the ideal of self-sufficiency are charted as dysfunctions to be corrected. It follows that subjective experience is stripped of shared depth and is made an object of incessant optimization, with the subject itself in a delicate, continuous exile from the very conditions that could sustain a shared life.<sup>6</sup>

Under the banner of autonomy, the obligation of permanent availability is substituted for a sense of self-directedness. Styles of assessment abound: quarterly goals, dashboards of performance, internal grades, and computer-assisted work assignments. Comparison with others is not merely occasional but systemic and daily, converting a sense of belonging into a chronic concern about where one stands in comparison with others. The employee familiarizes himself with the supervisor ahead of time by internalizing them within himself to correct himself prior to correction, to work harder than requested prior to needing to be prompted. Security is an

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<sup>5</sup> Tsampazis, N., “The cognitive grounds of Hobbes’ Leviathan”, *Dia-noesis*, 13, 2024, pp. 63–84.

<sup>6</sup> Harvey, D, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, Oxford University Press, 2005.

ever-elusive term, as every gain leads to a new roster of expectations. Freedom is defined as the capability to choose; yet, choices are defined to perpetuate the existing paradigm: more freedom, which leads to more vulnerability; more accountability, leading to more isolation.<sup>7</sup>

Linguistic resources, too, are subjected to a range of modes of exile. Vocabulary like resilience, empowerment, and adaptability, formerly related to practices of care, are recontextualized as standard requirements for submission. The idea of self-mastery is a device for containing emotions of shame: public declaration of limitation, ignorance, or dependency is ever more deemed illegitimate and is stigmatized as a departure from a regulatory standard. Guilt, therefore, exists not in consequences for discrete acts but in departure from a regulatory ideal. Pain is converted into a private matter: no longer is it a public event that will have to consume a chronology as well as a geography, but rather a debt to be privately maintained or promptly paid. Memory is disconnected from communal contexts and re-wired as a personal log of accomplishment, a diary of self-improvement that is not a repository of narrative and common communication. Central to these dynamics is a spiral process: as independence is increasingly emphasized, the resources that are in a position to provide actual support are eroded.<sup>8</sup>

Care, as that which must rely on reciprocal interdependence and deliberate pacing, is reduced to nothing more than self-help slogans and brisk techniques of efficiency. Institutions that can become havens and a welcome are transformed into evaluative and dividing systems. The result is not catastrophic failure, but a steady, incrementally cumulative decay: a progressive stripping away of sense from experience, a dissolving of shared communal cognizance and remembrance, and a disconnection of the self from bonds that would support healthy modes of social participation.<sup>9</sup>

In social relationships, trauma shows up as a discreet substitution of public image for shared experience. Encounters become

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<sup>7</sup> Ong, A, *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty*, Cambridge University Press, 2006.

<sup>8</sup> Plant, R, *Neo-liberal State*, Oxford University Press, 2010.

<sup>9</sup> Lemke, T, "The birth of bio-politics: Michel Foucault's lecture at the College de France on neo-liberal governmentality", *Economy and society*, 30(2), 2001, pp. 190-207.

events to be posted; stories become recitations for circuits of publicity; friendship becomes a precontract of reciprocal affirmation. Intimacy is substituted with perpetual mediation and the quantifying of attention. When an individual is measured by the impressions they leave behind, silence is transformed into disappearance. Intimacy, however, takes time and the absence of spectacle—a luxury not permitted by the neoliberal calendar. The longed-for connection, therefore, confronts the shadow of unproductivity and withdraws into formality. The outcome is a feeling of warm surface and cold depth: many contacts, scarce relationships, busy presence, tenuous grounding. At the heart of this process is an implicit contradiction. Neoliberalism professes the idea of freedom, yet dictates the very terms within which individuals can be classified as "free." It offers choices, even as it controls the situation that gives value to the choices.<sup>10</sup>

It engenders a sense of individual autonomy, even as it disintegrates any shared basis for protest or solidarity. The result is that the rhetoric surrounding autonomy moves beyond simple ideological function; it is an instrumentality for emotional and existential growth. The paradigm yields subjects who experience dependency as a terror, feel shame at their dependency, and seek validation for their strength alone. This psychic structure is the true manifestation of trauma, the point at which autonomy, far from strengthening individuals, erodes their very sense of belonging.<sup>11</sup>

### **Mechanisms of the Subject's Exile in the Neoliberal Condition**

Expulsion in the neoliberal sphere appears not as a violent disjuncture but as a gradual modulation of the terms framing daily life. Accountability is transferred from the group to the individual and is internalized without conspicuous notice: support systems are redefined as individual capabilities, guarantees as personal achievements, and communal timescales as personal timetables. This is a process that leaves dignity linked with constant sufficiency and vulnerability severed from its social moorings and attributed to the character of individuals. Exile is not generated by a forceful

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<sup>10</sup> Foucault, M, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Tavistock Publications, 1969.

<sup>11</sup> Hardt, M. and Negri, A, *Empire*, Harvard University Press, 2000.



dislocation but by internalizing a precept whereby access to resources, recognition, and notice is filtered under criteria of effectiveness.<sup>12</sup>

At its center are regimes of measurement. Indicators, targets, and algorithmic judgments reduce the complexities of experience to measured units and consequently change the criteria of belonging. That which is not measured is readily regarded as either non-existent or valueless. Work is organized as a continuous availability program, under which adaptation takes the form of permanent readiness; co-operation is recast as a competition for notice, and security as the personal acceptance of risk. Self-auditing becomes a daily survival mechanism: the internal auditor forestalls the external, revisions take place before judgment, and the subject audits itself in order to stay consistent with the expected standards of performance.<sup>13</sup>

At the same time that extensive documentation of life by means of data generates new hierarchies with respect to exposure, traces of behavior, response regimes, and modalities of expression and discursive circulation are converted into indices of credence and value. Public participation is replaced by staged attention, while communication modes that depart from conventional regimes of engagement become inactive. Silence is not the expression of no opinion, but is recorded as a deficit in value; conversely, over-exposure is read as proof of contribution.<sup>14</sup>

Exile here does not take the form of exclusion from space, but of degradation within it, lower chances of being heard, shrinking reach, and insecurity of access. This uncertainty is fueled by shifting thresholds of visibility that change without warning, short-lived windows of “relevance,” and escalation mechanisms that favor what yields quickly and predictably. Declining visibility activates feedback loops: less exposure means fewer interactions,

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<sup>12</sup> Golder, B., “Foucault and the Genealogy of Pastoral Power”, *Radical Philosophy Review*, vol. 10 number 2, 2007, pp. 144-160.

<sup>13</sup> McNay, L., “Self as Enterprise: Dilemmas of Control and Resistance”, *Theory, Culture & Society*, Vol. 26(6), 2006, 41- 56.

<sup>14</sup> Stiglitz, J., *The Price of Inequality: How Today’s Divided Society Endangers our Future*, WW Norton & Company, 2012.

which in turn justify further demotion, consolidating a state of semi-invisibility.<sup>15</sup>

Access more and more requires conformity to codes of formatting—compression of information, rhythmic regularity, visual framing that imposes particular tempos and styles, while disliking extensive argumentation and nuance. Standardization and aesthetic homogenization become a condition of entry, while variations are read as "noise" and algorithmically marginalized. Under this conceptual lens, strategic overexposure becomes a proactive counter-defense against the risk of obsolescence that precipitates a re-orientation of focus away from the substance of discourse toward the production of quantifiable engagement. Publicness is transformed from a latent quality of argumentation to a result of rhythms, signals, and compatibility protocols, thereby affecting which content gains permanence and which remains trapped within impermanent circulation. The visibility hierarchy is thereby determined as a conditional regime of accessibility, whereby participation requires constant self-standardization, silence is penalizable in statistics, and recognition is communicated via regulations that preexist the content.<sup>16</sup>

Social protection is also being reshaped in terms of conditionality. Rights are converted into benefits with conditions; need is transformed into an application that must be demonstrated endlessly with proofs of compliance; time for care is replaced by the administration of files, agendas, and protocols. The security of affiliation is substituted by ongoing suspension, given that the tie with institutions is always revocable and access is conditional upon endless re-evaluation. A chronopolitics of exile is therefore formed, whereby life is inscribed in intermediate spaces of testing and waiting with no promise of a stabilizing horizon.<sup>17</sup>

Linguistic resources are active participants in this process of re-definition. Phrases that once stood for reciprocal support and care are reanalyzed as slogans advocating conformity. The expression of limits is put under stigma; emotions are reclassified as variables

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<sup>15</sup> Tickell, A., & Peck, J, "Social Regulation after Fordism: Regulation Theory, Neo-liberalism and the Global, Local Nexus", *Economy and Society*, 2019, 24(3), pp. 260-281.

<sup>16</sup> Turner, R, *Neo-liberal Ideology*, Edinburgh University Press, 2008

<sup>17</sup> Comaroff, J., & Comaroff, J. L, "Millennial capitalism: First thoughts on a Second Coming", *Public culture*, 2000, 12(2), pp. 200-210.

to be managed; the narrative of hardships is reinterpreted as proof of a "deficit." The result is that suffering is individuated: no longer a signifier for shared necessity, it is incorporated into techniques for self-management. Memory is disconnected from its public sphere and reshaped as a bank of individualistic achievement, diminishing the grounds for shared history and sentiment.<sup>18</sup>

On the scale of time and space, daily life unfolds within structures defined by temporariness: flexible sites, intermediated interfaces, transitional stops, and the rhythms of alerts that interrupt the incessant flow. The sense of rooting is impoverished since place is no longer a shared point of reference, and time loses the continuity of a common rhythm. Presence thus becomes disconnected, and the ability to build coexistence practices is impaired, those that require stability, extension, and a shared horizon.<sup>19</sup>

The classical horizon is replaced by a series of deadlines and availability times, and coordination is shifted away from communal presence and toward scheduling alignment at the individual level. Spaces that used to work as stable gathering points are transformed into transportation hubs marked by limited occupancy times, while living spaces are reinterpreted as dual-function stations for teleworking and communication, where private time is consumed by constant alerts and micro-deliveries. Urban mobility is ever more organized by timetables that are algorithmic in character, made up of orders, routes, and pickups that impose rhythms that are almost never favorable to the support of coexistence's unpredictable nature.<sup>20</sup>

Daily existence is broken up into minute fragments of response; the activity of waiting is elevated to a ubiquitous mode of experience of time, with no correlative sense of presence; and the activity of scheduling insinuates itself into rest moments, converting evenings and Saturdays into extensions of an ever-accelerated calendar.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Slobodian, Q. *Globalists: the End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 2018.

<sup>19</sup> Chang, H. *The Market, the State and Institutions in Economic Development*, in Chang H.J. (ed.) *Rethinking Development Economics*, Anthem, 2003.

<sup>20</sup> Thorsen, D. "The neoliberal challenge: What is neoliberalism?", *Contemporary Readings in Law and Social Justice*, 2010, 2(2), pp. 130–141.

<sup>21</sup> Taylor, J.D. *Negative capitalism. Cynicism in the neoliberal era*. Winchester, Zero Books, 2013.

Changes in luminance and circadian rhythms are overtaken by the brilliance of screens and the rhythm of alerts, creating dissonance among citizens who inhabit the same geographic spaces but experience different rhythmic configurations. The failure to share a common rhythm also erodes the power of space to act as a network of references: cafés, public spaces, corridors of workspaces, and schoolyards lose their function as stable "intermediary" spaces, becoming provisional grounds upon which presence is measured, access is regulated according to time, and mobility is given priority over living.<sup>22</sup>

The resultant fragmented existence undermines practices that depend on recurrence and extended timeframes, including communal rituals, routine micro-interactions, and impromptu discussions. This condition promotes modes of coexistence devoid of community, assemblies lacking dialogue, and closeness without a common objective.

These processes flow into a unifying normativity of subjectivation, such that exile is reconfigured not merely as a physical ejection from the social corpus but as a gradual reduction of accessibility to registers such as time, space, discourse, and relationality. At this juncture, autonomy is rethought along axes of quantifiability and accessibility, and collectivity is put at the foreground as interrelated functions of visibility and evaluability.<sup>23</sup>

Coordinated rules governing life condense into response cycles; recollection separates from communal activities and is reformulated as a repository of personal achievement; responsibility transitions from relational dynamics to evaluative profiles. The experience of banishment is not introduced as a unique situation but is instead identified as a daily construction of social arrangements and an order of existence that begets modes of existence marked by weakened capabilities for affiliation, temporality, and a shared point of view.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Springer, S., Birch, K., & MacLeavy, J, *The handbook of neoliberalism*, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2016.

<sup>23</sup> Slorach, R, *A Very Capitalist Condition: A history and politics of disability*, Bookmarks, 2016.

<sup>24</sup> Roberts, R, *Psychology and capitalism: The manipulation of mind*, Zero Books, 2015.

## Autonomy and Sovereignty: A Political Ontology of Neoliberal Exile

The neoliberal condition reconfigures the sphere of sovereignty, no longer as the externality that limits freedom but as the internalized norm of self-governance. Sovereignty no longer acts as a power that limits freedom but becomes the very medium within which freedom is lived. Autonomy, the final value of the modern subject, becomes a technology of self-governance. The self is no longer tied to some externality of a sovereign but to an internal regulator, to an unrelenting obligation to govern and optimize itself. And so, autonomy, rather than being the promise of liberation, is represented as a new form of dependency.<sup>25</sup>

Dependency settles quietly at the core of the subjective, defined as it is by the very imperatives of autonomy. This is no traditional heteronomy, in which the will is warped to the pull of some manifest power; it is a bond to the normative ideal of the self, a self that requires relentless self-monitoring, self-enhancement, self-reckoning. The value of the subject lies in the ability to fit the beat, tone, and measures of this autonomy. "Freedom" is no longer a terrain of unopened possibility but a structure of conformity with criteria set as individual responsibility, unbroken availability, malleability, emotional control, and a transactional relationship to one's own life.<sup>26</sup>

The project of the self turns into the seamless project of life. Time, instead of constituting a coexistential shared rhythm, becomes split into minuscule units of self-evaluation; rest has no meaning anymore, as even silence must yield results. Experience can't mature; it is always set to the test, judged in terms of how successfully it has been "productive." The subject learns to live within the measurement gaze only, to believe that it lives as long as it can calculate its value for itself. Freedom is consumed by performativity time, and everyday life turns into a device to prove consistency.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Rose, N, *Governing the Soul: The Shaping of the Private Self*, Free Association Books, 1999.

<sup>26</sup> Asimiadis, D, "The Witches of the Reich: The Dimension of Female Mysticism in Nazi Ideology", *Dia-noesis*, 2025, 17(1), pp.271–294.

<sup>27</sup> Poulantzas, N, *State, Power, Socialism*, Verso, 1978.

Autonomy, however, is not confined to the management of time; it also permeates the emotional field. Joy, sorrow, fatigue, and doubt are interpreted through the language of functionality. Emotion loses its depth and becomes an indicator of regulatory capacity. Instead of sharing sadness, we record it; instead of acknowledging vulnerability, we translate it into personal weakness. Internal control thus extends into the most private domain of experience, turning even affect into an object of self-governance. Trauma is no longer something to be shared but something to be corrected.<sup>28</sup>

The same reasoning applies to the realms of knowing and relating. The self becomes capital, each experience is an investment that needs to pay dividends. Knowing, working, and even loving are all encompassed within a calculus of rationality. The self is summoned to be both employer and employee, boss and assessed subject. Any relation that fails to shore up this process of self-verification seems questionable, even risky. Relationships then become mirrors: they mirror not the Other, but the likeness of the self as it should look. Meeting becomes strategy, closeness becomes assessment, and friendship devolves into a transaction of performances.<sup>29</sup>

This dependency is so widespread because it covers itself with the cloak of virtue. Autonomy is framed as the ultimate moral ideal, the mark of maturity and strength. And yet beneath this self-responsibility ethics is a new kind of fear: the fear of need, of weakness, of turning to the Other. Solidarity among people recedes in the face of moralized self-responsibility; each failure becomes a deficit of character, each openness to vulnerability a failure of self-control. The self must "rise to the occasion," even as the occasion oppresses them. Dependency, then, does not go away; it just disguises itself as dignity.<sup>30</sup>

The dependency assumes, at its basis, an existential character. The human being is dependent upon the judging inner voice, upon an ideal that will always be unattained. Every day dawns with the

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<sup>28</sup> Ganas, S., "Wife Material in a Household Context as presented in Xenophon's *Oeconomicus*", *Dia-noesis*, 2025, 17(1), pp. 295–312.

<sup>29</sup> Vavouras, E., "Hobbes' hedonism in front of classical hedonism and the free market's way out", *Dia-noesis*, 2024 13, 85–114. <https://doi.org/10.12681/dia.37784>

<sup>30</sup> Millon, T., Grossman, S., & Meagher, S, *Masters of the mind: Exploring the story of mental illness*, Wiley, 2004.

imperative to certify their own existence with the gauge of a boundless autonomy. The harder one seeks to demonstrate freedom, the more one is ensnared in the self-affirmation compulsory circle. The ideal of autonomy becomes a device of coercion; its relentless pursuit generates weakness and powerlessness.<sup>31</sup>

The relationship between autonomy and sovereignty is reconfigured under the mandate of “responsibility.” Neoliberal discourse does not abolish freedom; it turns it into an obligation. Autonomy is no longer a right to be exercised but a duty to be fulfilled. Sovereignty, in other words, does not suppress autonomy; it produces it, organizes it, and distributes it. Subjectivity is thus constituted within a regime where freedom and power are not opposed but interwoven. The “sovereignty of the self” emerges as the most advanced form of discipline, in which the violence of power is translated into an imperative of self-control and self-production.<sup>32</sup>

The self-production of the self becomes the focal field where sovereignty and autonomy blend together indissociably. The human is summoned to be both the lab and product of themselves to be the creator, editor, and causally-responsible agent of all that pertains to their existence. Here, sovereignty no longer figures as a transcendent power exercised from the outside, but as a self-organization imperative working within. Control has ceased to be centralized and harsh, almost tangible; discipline no longer needs to be exerted through surveillance, as each individual has already undertaken the task of watching over themselves. Freedom and power then no longer cancel each other out but reinforce one another mutually: the one legitimates the other, the other sets the context within which freedom takes on a meaning.<sup>33</sup>

The neoliberal condition transforms autonomy into a mechanism for the production of sovereignty. The more the individual strives to manage themselves, the more completely they internalize the demands of the system that calls upon them to be “free.” Their freedom becomes a tool of governance, a way to secure conformity without the need for coercion. Sovereignty endures not through prohibition but through promise; it promises power, self-realization, superiority, while in reality it establishes a regime in which

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<sup>31</sup> La Berge, L. & Shonkwiler, A., *Reading Capitalist Realism*, University of Iowa Press, 2014.

<sup>32</sup> James, O., *The Selfish Capitalist*, Vermilion, 2008.

<sup>33</sup> Harnecker, M., *Rebuilding the Left*, Zed Books, 2007.

the subject serves its own self-image. Control arises not from the fear of punishment but from the anxiety of proving oneself insufficient.<sup>34</sup>

The relationship between sovereignty and autonomy then assumes a peculiar dialectic. The autonomy provided as freedom relies on internalization of the very workings of power, making it possible. The free self is the one that consents to conform obeys the rule, not because it is imposed, but because it is taken as one's own. The sovereignty becomes transparent, rendered dissolved into consciousness itself. The consequence is that dependency assumes a new form: power no longer needs to be imposed; it needs to be internalized. Discipline becomes self-discipline, conformity self-realization.<sup>35</sup>

In this network, the relation between the two ideas becomes that of a subtle complicity. Freedom needs power to be an institution; power needs freedom to sustain itself non-violently. Sovereignty doesn't negate autonomy, it wears it as a disguise. Every rhetoric of self-realization, every exhortation to "take initiative" or experience "personal empowerment" reiterates the same exhortation unknowingly: to persist in self-regulating within the lines of the model of productivity. The self becomes the ultimate site of power, the location where desire and rule meet to generate some kind of voluntary submission.<sup>36</sup>

The interpenetration of autonomy and sovereignty also carries an ontological dimension. Power no longer acts upon the subject but as the subject. The individual is the very form through which power endures the bearer of the rule that constitutes them. Their being is the function of the relations that define them, but the latter have ceased to be transparent. The social is translated into the psychic, the psychic into the political. Autonomy plays the role of the mirror of sovereignty: it captures the desire for freedom and gives it back as duty, thereby making the vicious circle of self-legitimation. The subject, within this schema, is in the state of exile. Not the exile from space or from community, but from the very

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<sup>34</sup> Grollios, V., *Negativity and Democracy Marxism and the Critical Theory Tradition*, Routledge, 2017.

<sup>35</sup> Bourdieu, P.P, *The Logic of Practice*, Stanford University Press, 1999.

<sup>36</sup> Grolios, V., *Illusion and Fetishism in Critical Theory, A study of Nietzsche, Benjamin, Castoriadis and the Situationists*, Routledge, 2025.



possibility of co-sharing the world with others. Autonomy, as a cultural and moral norm, imposes the form of life that is self-sufficing, self-contained, detached. The exile is no longer the event that happens to the subject from the outside, but the experience that occurs within the internal order of the self: the inability to find one's dwelling within the common. The subject stays within the social, but deprived of the right to the kind of relation that would give it the experience of freedom as relation, as opposed to duty.<sup>37</sup>

In the neoliberal ontology, the form of sovereignty is the incessant displacement of responsibility. Each failure of society or the collective is rendered as individual guilt. The jobless is no victim of the economic order, but rather the cause of the inability to "adapt." The worn-down one is not fatigued by the beats of the industrial or productive apparatus, but is found quite "inadequate." And so, the trauma of autonomy is the trauma of displacement: the replacement of the shared destiny with private accounting.<sup>38</sup>

The political aspect of this ontology goes deep. The sovereignty is no longer imposed from the top; it is manufactured every day with the help of practices of self-control, systems of judgment, and the rhetoric of improvement and rationality. The subject no longer challenges power but internalizes it, taking on the role of one's own judge and disciplinarian. Survival is the same as performance, identity as competitiveness, freedom as the capacity to selfregulate one's own vulnerability.<sup>39</sup>

Exile, then, is not leaving community but living in a world without the common. It is the experience of a mundane life in which the other is a rival, dialogue is performance, and encounter is calculus. Autonomy, under the guise of pure freedom, masks the loss of relation; sovereignty, under the guise of self-mastery, hide the reliance on the very apparatus that exercises its power.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Banerjee, A., & Duflo, E, *Poor Economics: A Radical Rethinking of the Way to Fight Global Poverty*, Public Affairs Store, 2011.

<sup>38</sup> Cohen, B., Marxist Theory. In: B. Cohen, ed., *Routledge International Handbook of Critical Mental Health*. London: Routledge, 2017.

<sup>39</sup> Chomsky, N, *Profit over people, Neoliberalism and global order*, Seven Stories Press, 1999.

<sup>40</sup> Beck U, *Risk society*, Suhrkamp, 1986.

The political ontology of the neoliberal exile is therefore that of isolation. The subject lives under a regime in which each act, each thought, each feeling is made to be judged.<sup>41</sup> The time is taken up with the relentless measurability, the space with functionality, and the memory with the repository of the performance. Freedom in this state is not lost to violence but gradually worn away like meaning erased within a surplus of information. The exile is the rule rather than the exception of a life in which the community is possible as the ghost of a broken promise.<sup>42</sup>

## Conclusion

The analysis of the neoliberal regime of subjectivity reveals a profound transformation in the very notion of autonomy and in the forms through which it is experienced. Autonomy, once understood as a promise of liberation from external constraints and as the foundation of political and moral freedom, has been absorbed into a new logic that of individual responsibility, self-regulation, and constant self-improvement. Under the neoliberal spirit, the subject is not emancipated; it assumes the management of its own dependency. Freedom no longer appears as the suspension of power but as its internal form. What was once called “sovereignty” shifts into the realm of the psyche and disguises itself as self-mastery; the individual becomes the bearer of the very rule that defines it.

The research has revealed that autonomy is now a device for the operation of power. Attempting to be “free,” the individual takes over the field of demands that make it always measurable, assessable, and disponible. There is no discipline imposed; discipline is internalized. There is no conformity based on fear, but the will towards self-affirmation. The connection between autonomy and sovereignty is no longer antagonistic but one of complicity between the two in a dialectic form. Freedom lives on to the extent that it becomes a mode of governance. Sovereignty, on the other hand, remains strong because it no longer has to be asserted

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<sup>41</sup> Theodosiadis M., *Republican perspectives on populism and hope (Beyond Christopher Lasch)*, Goldsmiths, University of London, Doctoral Thesis, 2021, pp.154-5

<sup>42</sup> Theodosiadis M., *Ancient Greek Democracy and American Republicanism Prometheus in Political Theory*, Edinburgh University Press, 2025, p.92.

openly; it functions based on the subject's consent that acknowledges it as the condition of its own freedom.

In this context, autonomy becomes traumatic. The trauma is no longer that of violent imposition but of the disruption of the relation between the self and the world. The promise of freedom is converted into the obligation of perpetual self-assertion; the experience of self into a sphere of management and judgment. The human being lives under a regime in which the responsibility for the entire breadth of one's being has been privatized. The political and social aspects of trauma are erased, as weakness, tiredness, or failure are the product of individual deficiencies. The subject no longer has the right to suffer socially; it must suffer productively. The exile is no longer spatial or political but internal, psychic, quotidian.

At the core of neoliberal exile lies the transformation of freedom into measurable performance and of relation into competition. Community recedes before the self-referentiality of the ego, while the experience of shared time and space is replaced by rhythms of constant readiness. Social trust erodes, as every bond risks being perceived as an obstacle to self-realization. The result is a form of loneliness not experienced as rejection but as normality, a condition of internal distance, where life remains digitally connected yet existentially disconnected. Power does not exile the individual from society; it renders them a stranger within it.

The analysis thus leads to a double conclusion. On the one hand, autonomy under neoliberal discourse is the most refined form of sovereignty; on the other, this very condition contains the possibility of rupture. The awareness of trauma, the realization that autonomy has turned into dependency, opens the way for a different understanding of freedom. Freedom can no longer be conceived as private property but as a relation. Autonomy must be disentangled from the imperative of self-sufficiency and reconnected with reciprocity. Only through encounter through the recognition of vulnerability as a shared experience can the possibility of a non-traumatic autonomy be reclaimed.

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