

# Psychological life as enterprise: social practice and the government of neo-liberal interiority

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## Abstract

This article theorizes the contemporary government of psychological life as neo-liberal enterprise. By drawing on Foucauldian critical social theory, it argues that the constellations of power identified with the psy-function and neo-liberal governmentality can be read through the problematic of everyday practice. On a theoretical level, this involves a re-examination of the notion of *dispositif*, to uncover the dynamic, ambivalent and temporal practices by which subjectification takes place. Empirically, this point is illustrated through a reflection of one case of neo-liberal psychological life: life coaching.

## Keywords

coaching, de-subjectification, Michel Foucault, governmentality, neo-liberalism, psychology, psy-function

A recurring concern for Michel Foucault was the figure of *Homo psychicus*, and that matrix of institutions, experts and discourses variously established for his management. This figure made two significant appearances in Foucault's work, first in the early 1960s with *Folie et déraison: Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique* (Foucault, 1961),<sup>1</sup> and again 10 years later in a series of lectures Foucault gave from 1973 to 1974 at the Collège de France, titled *Le Pouvoir Psychiatrique*, and recently translated as *Psychiatric Power* (Foucault, 2003a).

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Each of these studies offers a unique perspective: where the earlier was largely perceptual, focusing on madness as that heterological space of radical exteriority to prevailing discourses of reason, the work of the 1970s would consider madness and the psychological subject as the object of 'psy-disciplines', according to a vastly developed theory of disciplinary power (Elden, 2006). However, as Foucault's thought underwent further transformations over the course of the 1970s, and as he set aside his concerns with disciplinary institutions to consider the constitutive force of biopower and liberal government (most notably in his lectures of 1978–9, *La Naissance de la Biopolitique*), the figure of *Homo psychicus* would not be revised for a third time to keep up with these new developments (Foucault, 2008). We do not, for example, come across a theory of psychological life as enterprise, as a practice or care of the self, as we did with the figure of *Homo economicus*.

Others, of course, have taken on precisely such a project, perhaps most notably Nikolas Rose, and his sometimes collaborator Peter Miller (Miller and Rose, 1986, 1994; Rose, 1998, 1989, 1986, 1985). Since the mid-1980s, these two authors have undertaken a series of investigations into the role of psychology in relations of power, principally as an instrument of social governance. Rose's work in particular, exemplified in such studies as *Governing the Soul: The Shaping of the Private Self* (1989) and *Inventing Ourselves: Psychology, Power and Personhood* (1998), demonstrates the precise ways in which processes of subjectification are affected through institutional forms of governance aimed at such governmental concerns as military readiness, worker productivity, civic responsibility, public order, family and childhood. These concerns compose a set of issues centered on the problem of the institutional integration of large numbers of individuals into functional collectivities through governmental programs whose purchase on the subjectivities of individual people was intensified through the use of psychological methods and knowledge. Yet in many ways, these essential and useful works leave untapped much of the critical potential implied by a rereading of *Homo psychicus* through the lens of Foucault's later formulation of the problem of power, particularly through his reflections on subjectivity as a project of neo-liberal government. Part of the reason for this, I would argue, is the tendency of these works to remain within a determinist framework that carries echoes of the disciplinary model of power that Foucault himself sought to surpass through his explorations of liberal governmentality and biopower. In fact, many Foucauldian treatments of contemporary practices of psychological government passing under the banner of governmentality research do not fully embrace the autonomy, freedom and agency implied by models of neo-liberal governmentality. What this determinism obscures is the fact of practice itself, as situated, agentive and temporally grounded in the conducts of everyday life – a fact which largely disappears behind descriptions of the rationality of specific logics of government.

Indeed, this macro-level bias can be traced to the very discursive style of governmentality research itself as a scholarly convention. In a typical instance of what we might term 'governmentality prose', a certain displacement of authorial voice across a series of speaking positions – one that moves from author to an institutional strategy to the thoughts of the subject herself or himself – allows an implicit, but seldom declared, presumption of causality to slip in unnoticed. A brief example from Nikolas Rose's *Governing the Soul* serves to illustrate this point. Rose discusses a psychology that

‘obliges us to be free’, describing an imperative discourse, shared by a disparate host of experts, policy-makers, or planners concerning the need to counteract the burdensome influence of the welfare state through an appeal to the enterprising spirit of individuals: ‘An economy’, Rose writes, ‘structured in the form of relations of exchange between discrete economic unities pursuing their undertakings with boldness and energy, ever seeking the new endeavour and the path to advantage, will produce the most social goods and distribute them in the manner most advantageous to each and to all.’ This imperative discourse belongs, of course, not to Rose nor to any given actor, but to a faceless, voiceless rationality embedded in a broad structure of governmental agencies. Yet in the next sentence, we see how this voice begins to colonize the outlooks of real people. Rose goes on: ‘But enterprise also provides a rationale for the structuring of the lives of individual citizens’, until finally, the words become such as, we are invited to believe, could actually be spoken by any person about himself or herself: ‘Individuals are to become, as it were, entrepreneurs of themselves, shaping their own lives through the choices they make among the forms of life available to them’ (Rose, 1989: 230). This narrative displacement that slides from the ordinances of planners on the government of others to the thoughts of subjects on the government of themselves (a device called ‘free indirect discourse’ in literary theory), is the mediation of that gap between macro and micro, between institutional rationalities and the subjectivities of real individuals. In other words, what is lost is the ambivalence of subjectification understood as a social practice – a dimension that a critical reflection on neo-liberal forms of psychological life will make more accessible.

In this regard, a theoretical reflection on neo-liberal transformations of psychology provides a point of departure for a wider challenge to governmentality research. By theorizing that space between macro and micro, the space that disappears in the literature on governmentality, the perspective on psychological expertise proposed here aims to recast processes of subjectification through a theoretical lens sensitized to the everydayness of social actions, and of the tacit knowledges, embodied habits, micro-agencies and everyday temporalities by which things get done (Knorr Cetina, Schatzki and Von Savigny, 2001; Reckwitz, 2002). Toward this end, the following plan will be pursued. Part 1 of this article will offer a critical reading of the concept of the *dispositif*, with the aim of a richer understanding of neo-liberal subjectification as a social practice. Part 2 will expand this discussion through a reading of Foucault’s original framing of the psy-function as a disciplinary apparatus in *Le Pouvoir Psychiatrique*, and part 3 will do the same through a reflection on the government of neo-liberal enterprise. Part 4 will complete this investigation with a short excursion into one empirical domain of psychological life, that of life coaching, wherein the specific practical dynamics of the *dispositif* of psychological enterprise can be assessed.

## **I Practice and the temporality of the *dispositif***

A critical theory of the practical dimensions of subjectification will begin with a reflection on a term that is at the center of Foucault’s theory of power and subjectivity. *Dispositif* is perhaps one of Foucault’s most promiscuous expressions, one that became increasingly prominent in his work of the 1970s, and that has since prompted a rich

etymological and definitional debate that runs to the heart of his thought (Bussolini, 2010; Deleuze, 1992; Agamben, 2009). In his interview of 1977, 'The Confessions of the Flesh', Foucault defined the *dispositif* as 'a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions – in short, the said as much as the unsaid' (Foucault, 1980: 194). It is possible, therefore, to speak of the *dispositif* of sexuality, confession, psychology, liberalism, incarceration and so on – any field of social and institutional life through which subjectivity is affected – as a heterogeneous, dispersed and multidimensional assemblage of elements. Though the most literal translation of this term would be the English 'dispositive', the French *dispositif* more frequently appears in English translations of Foucault's work as the more wieldy 'apparatus', or 'deployment' – a translation that, as Jeffery Bussolini alleges, obscures many of the varied meanings possessed by the term in its original French (Bussolini, 2010). For the purposes of a recovery of the practical dimensions of the *dispositif*, there are two important features that must be drawn out. The first has to do with the sense of autonomy and agency attributed to subjects through their encounters with 'the said and the unsaid' mechanisms of social domination and in the process of subjectification, and the second with what I am calling the specific temporality of the *dispositif* as a historically situated ensemble, one that opens up on the broader notion of social practice.

A dispositive, in English usage, is a legal term referring to a decision of the court that affects another's disposition, or another's readiness to act in a certain capacity, an action that establishes the terms and background conditions, or that orders a situation such that another is disposed to a certain kind of action. In other words, *dispositives dispose*. The Random House Dictionary offers two sets of meanings for the verb 'to dispose'. The first pertains to an act of ordering: to dispose is to 'put in a particular or the proper order or arrangement; adjust by arranging the parts', 'to put in a particular or suitable place'; and the second reflects the effect of making active: to 'give a tendency or inclination to', 'to make fit or ready; prepare'.<sup>2</sup> Thus, to dispose something or someone involves the imposition of a certain order that enables a certain kind of action – a meaning that resonates with Foucault's wider concern with governmentality, as the 'conduct of conduct'. By arranging the conditions for the free acts of subjects, the *dispositif* disposes subjects to become free subjects through the practice of their own freedom. To be subjectified is therefore to be disposed to act as a free subject, and it is through this disposition to act freely that one becomes a subject. It now becomes clear how dispositive and subjectification are internally connected through the notion of free action – a free action that is predisposed by, but never completely reducible to, the rationality of the *dispositif* itself.

But the mere assertion of the fact of agency does not by itself bring us much closer to understanding how the *dispositif* affects subjectification as a form of practice. If these effects are to be understood as events occurring in the real time of everyday practice, we must explain the specific temporality through which these processes are acted out, and the unique environmental obstructions, the objects and resistances they encounter as they are enacted. More precisely, the temporality of everyday life occurs when a trajectory of action encounters some obdurate condition that places that trajectory in a state of ambivalence, which does not yield easily to the rationality of a given project, inducing uncertainty and reflection. The temporality of work comes with the degree

of intransigence posed by some thing in the path of the worker: without obstacles, time seems to fly by unhindered, but when we stumble, we become aware of our circumstances and of the contingency of our projects, and we begin to mark time. The temporality of the *dispositif*, and of the practices it imposes, therefore, must be considered in terms of the things to be worked upon, those parts of the self not yet subjectified, parts which must be made more free, more agentive, more enterprising, etc. Through the lens of neo-liberalism, these objects appear as deeply embedded predispositions to *not* act independently and resourcefully: laziness, dependency, habit, social loyalties, a fixed institutional mindset and so on, all those aspects of ourselves that were the aim of a previous rationality of the social government of the welfare state now appear, through the lens of neo-liberal discourse, as obstructions and fetters on the freedom of individual enterprise. It is these objects, as dispositions within our own conducts, that neo-liberal governmentality asks us to transform.

One way to grasp this encounter between a governmental rationality and an intransigent object of self-rule is to consider the manner in which a process of subjectification affected by the *dispositif* inevitably operates alongside its opposite, with a parallel process of de-subjectification. De-subjectification here entails a disavowal, an interrogation and a repudiation of some historically antecedent formation of selfhood, one that must be negated, suppressed, or removed through a concerted act of self-work. For Giorgio Agamben, the combined operation of subjectification and de-subjectification is one that follows a movement of truth from an older, discredited and proven ‘untrue’ self, to a new self revealed to possess a new truth, as illustrated in Foucault’s account of the *dispositif* of the confessional, and through the formation of the penitential self. Agamben writes:

The formation of Western subjectivity that both splits and, nonetheless, masters and secures the self, is inseparable from the centuries-old activity of the apparatus of penance – an apparatus in which a new I is constituted through the negation and, at the same time, the assumption of the old I. The split of the subject performed by the apparatus of penance resulted, therefore, in the production of a new subject, which found its real truth in the nontruth of the already repudiated sinning I. (Agamben, 2009: 20)

This is, indeed, very close to what Foucault intended in his analysis of the Christian pastorate, wherein the renunciation of the desires of the flesh and the pleasures of the body enable, as recounted in the writings of St Benedict, the pure state of Christian obedience – one that was only possible through the renunciation of passion or *apatheia*, understood as passion, egoism and individual will (Foucault, 2007: 179).

By locating such a splitting at the heart of the process of subjectification, one that specifies the act of repudiation as an irreducible element of the *dispositif*, the concept now opens up onto a project and a practice of subjectification conditioned by a unique problem of work, a task of renunciation to be undertaken in the uneven conditions of a mundane project. Subjectification, as a transformative task applied to an object outside of itself, cannot be an effect ‘read off’ from the rationalities of any given *dispositif*, nor from an imperative voice that silently insinuates itself from the discourse on the government of others to the thoughts one carries in one’s own head about the government of oneself. It is a project, a task, focused on specific durable objects. Importantly, the time

of this task is not given as a neat package contained in the form of the *dispositif* itself, or the governmental rationality that disposes the individual to act upon such objects. To be disposed to the task of de-subjectification is to be inclined to the undoing of those older subject formations, residues of historical techniques, habits and embodied dispositions left over from earlier processes of subjectification. Therefore, while the task of subjectification is disposed through the *dispositif*, the practice itself is determined by the particularities of the object to be de-subjectified – an older self that is the ethical substance of a project or an undertaking. This encounter between an older and a newer self occurs at unique historical junctures, and at the interfaces of emergent and moribund technologies and *dispositifs* of subjectification. Thus, to be disposed is also to be disposed against, just as to be subjectified is also to engage in a project of de-subjectification, and what one is disposed against is the residual effect of a historically retrograde set of technologies, discourses and practices of the self, and the vestiges of conduct, behavior, habits of mind and of heart that these older *dispositifs* have left lodged in the bodies and dispositions of individual subjects. De-subjectification occurs through the renunciation and negation of these historical vestiges, which constitute the disposition of the subject. In his essay ‘What is a Dispositif?’, Gilles Deleuze writes:

The newness of an apparatus in relation to those which have gone before is what we call its actuality, our actuality. The new is the current. The current is not what we are but what we are in the process of becoming – that is the Other, our becoming-other. In each apparatus [*dispositif*] it is necessary to distinguish what we are (what we are already no longer), and what we are in the process of becoming: *the historical part and the current part*. History is the archive, the drawing of what we are and what we are ceasing to be, whilst the current is the sketch of what we are becoming. (Deleuze, 1992: 164)

To speak of the temporality of the *dispositif*, then, is to indicate the historical conditions of its emergence, and to speak of the subject is to point to the lag, or interval, that exists between these moments of subjectification and de-subjectification, between the actual and the historical. It is to speak of the becoming-other of subjectification as a situated practice within uneven patterns of historical development. It is to point to that part of oneself that is not yet sufficiently new, that stands between oneself as one is and oneself as one is told, however indirectly, that one should be. And what fills this lag is time: the time of negation, of work, of practice. In this way, the *dispositif* of neo-liberalism is a set of mechanisms not only for affecting neo-liberal subjectification, but for the de-subjectification of that which came before: the social subject of the welfare governance, whose disposition is that of docility, discipline and institutional regulation. With such an understanding of the temporality of the *dispositif*, it is possible now to turn to the question of the contemporary disposal to enterprise instilled through the discourse and practice of psychological life. What tasks of subjectification and de-subjectification does the neo-liberal subject of psychology face? What repudiations are required, and from what new and old technologies of the self are these selves derived? An inquiry into the interface between two principal formations of psychology – a social technology of psy-discipline and a neo-liberal technology of psy-enterprise – allows us to trace the emergence and practice of psychological life as enterprise. In short,

to understand how neo-liberal subjectification disposes us to a certain practice, we must understand the self that it selects as the object of de-subjectification – a self that is the product of an older, moribund technology of what Foucault, in his lectures *Le Pouvoir Psychiatrique*, terms the psy-function.

## 2 The psy-function

For Rose and Miller, Foucault's critique of 18<sup>th</sup>- and 19<sup>th</sup>-century psychiatric power provides the critical thrust for the analysis of a contemporary matrix of psychiatric institutions and public health debates, variously serving as policy instruments of the welfare state, and whose effects are that of the disciplinary production of psychological subjects (Miller and Rose, 1994; Rose, 1989, 1998). In Foucault's own work, such psy-disciplines display a structural resonance with disciplinary institutions that embody an implicit systemic functionalism, at the center of which is the role of the family. Indeed, the family is central not only to the psy-function of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, but to the psy-disciplines and to those later 20<sup>th</sup>-century figurations of psy- taken up by Rose and Miller – psychoanalysis, psychotherapy and psychology, all of which tend toward the function of discipline (Foucault, 2003a). A reflection on the disciplinary character of the psy-function as it was developed by Foucault allows us to sketch out those residual aspects which become the objects of de-subjectification in the *dispositif* of neo-liberal psychology.

For Foucault, the family was not itself a disciplinary *dispositif*, but composed, with the sovereign figure of the father at its head, a 'cell of sovereignty' within the context of a disciplinary society, serving as a 'hinge' between disciplinary constellations, directing and redirecting individuals to and from various centers of work, training, service, surveillance and rehabilitative treatment (Foucault, 2003a: 81). The family was the place to which dysfunctional, rejected, or abnormal individuals were sent when they were no longer able to serve within disciplinary institutions, and where it was hoped they would receive characterological rehabilitation for reintegration into the apparatuses of work, school, military service and the like. The family was allowed to assume this task on the basis of a belief in its formative role in the psychological dispositions of individuals: since individuals were largely shaped by the family, it was the family that could be turned to when things went wrong, when it was time to search for evidence of the psychological origins that provided the foundation for their personal truth. If there was a problem, it was likely the result of a harsh father, an over-nurturing mother, an amorous sibling, etc., so it was to these relations that disciplinary powers would turn in times of crisis. Therefore, it was in this operation that the psy-complex and the family collaborated in the rehabilitation of individuals suffering from an abnormal psychology. And when things were even worse, when the individual did not respond even to the rehabilitative efforts of the family, the family would in turn refer the individual to the psy-complex: the asylums, the doctors and the entire apparatus of psychiatry emerged as a supplement to the rehabilitative task of the family, to aid in its function of curing madness with the ultimate aim of reintegrating individuals into their original roles in disciplinary institutions. Thus, madness was itself conceived within the framework of intra-familial relations: the psy-disciplines cast the mad individual as a child, regressed to a

simplistic denial of fundamental realities, and sought to reconstitute the emotional economy of the family as a therapeutic technique.

An important effect of the centrality attributed to the family motif was the inscription of biography at the center of a program of psychiatric subjectification. The family, as biographical trope, provided a schema and template for an attribution of characterological abnormality to a distant origin and a radical interior, and by extension, for the production of the psychologized individual as essentially a docile subject of the very apparatus that stood poised to interpret the truth and implement the rehabilitation of this condition. Such an interiority, construed as the inscribed residue of intra-familial relations, provided the mechanism by which abnormality was objectified, interpreted and acted upon through therapeutic intervention – the point of purchase of a normative program of psychological discipline. In time, this effect became diffused through a range of disciplinary complexes. Soon the school, the workplace, the military, all began to assume a function of normalizing surveillance based on the template of intra-familial relations – a normative framework whose effect was a psychiatric disciplining of the individual. As Foucault wrote, the psy-function was ‘precisely what reveals that familial sovereignty belongs profoundly to the disciplinary apparatuses’ (2003a: 86).

Indeed, as Rose and Miller describe, throughout the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the psy-complex forged links with other branches of the welfare state through the dissemination of a new technology for the regulation of subjectivity, understood as a problem of social government centered on the need to foster solidarity and the productive integration of populations within disciplinary institutions. In particular, in *Governing the Soul*, Rose provides a skillful summary of the spread of psychological knowledge and expertise through the expansion over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century of the institutional wherewithal of the British welfare state. This is a process that passes through such points as the military use of social psychiatry and group psychologies during the First World War, the treatment of shell shock, the mental hygienist’s preoccupation with ‘social adjustment’ among schoolchildren and housewives, and psychological considerations of popular morale during the Second World War. Indeed, it is military mobilization and industrial organization that frame the key problems of the psy-governance of the welfare state: individuals had to be coordinated into functional units within the confined institutional spaces of factories and military barracks, but also schools, housing blocks, hospitals and other institutions of civil society. Rose writes:

The concept of the group was to become the organizing principle of psychological and psychiatric thought concerning the conduct of the individual. From the wartime years onward, social and institutional life was increasingly to be conceived as intersubjective emotional relations, the interplay between social solidarities and individual personality dynamics. . . . The invention of the ‘group,’ the conception of the ‘social’ or ‘human’ relations as the key determinants of individual conduct, were the most consistent lesson of the psychological and psychiatric experience of war. (Rose, 1989: 48)

Moreover, the disciplinary effect of psy- did not remain confined to these deployments imposed through these institutional settings: it was in the related but distinct discourse of psychoanalysis that the family model was transcribed into the leitmotif of a normative psychological interiority, whose effect was the disciplinary production



of subjectivity. As Mauro Bassaure has argued, Foucault's attribution of psychoanalysis to the disciplinary function of power through the model of the family joins up with the work of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, and others of what Bassaure calls the 'anti-Oedipus movement' (Bassaure, 2009). It is through the Oedipal complex – that microcosmic encapsulation of the family as precisely such an internalized cell of sovereignty in which the father retains symbolic authority – that the *dispositif* of psy- stamps upon subjectivity the schemes of normal and pathological, and thus provides one of the most contemporary points of application for disciplinary power in the normalization of the subject. Like the subject of morale, group psychology and social hygiene, the Oedipalized subject of psychoanalysis becomes the docile body of the psy-disciplines: fabricated through its dependence on the authority of outside experts, characterized by the normative pursuit of a truth residing in the dark interior of its biographical history, and relieved of any direct responsibility for its own actions and choices by recourse of the inner agencies originating in its family history. So damning was Foucault's critique of psychoanalysis that, he claimed, any critical project invoking the family could only reinscribe the disciplinary effect of psy-itself: in a veiled warning to those on the Freudian left purporting to wield the instruments of psychoanalysis against disciplinary society and its institutions, whether by couch, cobblestone, or pen, Foucault wrote:

By appealing to the sovereignty of the family relationship, rather than escape the mechanism of discipline, we reinforce this interplay between familial sovereignty and disciplinary functioning, which seems to be typical of contemporary society and of the residual appearance of sovereignty in the family, which may seem to me in fact to function quite directly in harmony with it. (Foucault, 2003a: 87)

Practices of de-subjectification directed against the Oedipal subject of discipline, meant the repudiation of psychological interiority, the psycho-biographical as heuristic device, psychological truth born through expert practice, and any recourse to a primordial desire fashioned on the familial motif. Deleuze and Guattari celebrated this process of psychological de-subjectification as emancipatory and deeply radical: 'Where psychoanalysis says, "Stop, find your self again", we should say instead, "Let's go further still, we haven't found our BwO [Body without Organs] yet, we haven't sufficiently dismantled our self"' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 151). Ironically, as with so many radical projects of the time, the dismantling of the Oedipal self would be taken up not in the service of an emancipatory anti-capitalism, but within the *dispositif* of an ever more intensified form of capitalist subjectification. The psychological life of the neo-liberal subject would be one in which psychological depth, biography and the familial model would appear as just so much historical baggage, as a remnant of social government and its disciplinary legacy, and ultimately as a millstone around the neck of the enterprising life of the neo-liberal psyche.

### 3 De-subjectification and state-phobia

In the closing decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, those governmental rationalities identified with the social strategies of the welfare state would be gradually infiltrated and displaced

by new technologies and strategies disseminating throughout the social and institutional fabrics of advanced capitalist societies – governmental rationalities whose principal domain was that of economic policy, but which would generate homologous projects, expanding into a general program for the government of the state, civil society, social and intimate life, and ultimately subjectivity itself (Donzelot, 2008; Lazarato, 2009). Neo-liberalism would reinvent the psy-disciplines as a technology of opportunity, enterprise and self-government, centered on the repudiation of that very inwardness, that docility and the pursuit of therapeutic truth that was the hallmark of the psy-disciplines. This strategy of government is reflected in a new psychological discourse that today operates from a range of sites not only within the traditional institutional domains of the psy-function, but also through popular and media channels largely outside the halls of expert practice, including popular discourses linked with consumer lifestyles and self-help publishing, and an expansive, semi-professional network of practitioners and service providers. In other words, the neo-liberal discourse on psychological life operates through a very different logic of government than that of the psy-function, and disposes individuals through a very different process of subjectification.

To grasp this, we must uncover the fundamentally negative operation that runs through the governmental rationality of neo-liberalism. This is one in which the marketization of social relations that is the aim of neo-liberal policy, ideology and governmentality runs in direct opposition to those organizing and integrating functions practised by the welfare state. Where under social government the aim of rule was to foster cohesion, integration and social trust among a disparate population, to reconcile conflicts through empathic communication based on rich psychological self-understanding and to ensure optimal productivity through mutuality and collectivist enterprise, neo-liberal government seeks to fragment that very cohesion and social trust, now cast as a dependency and docility, in the hopes of activating a vital, entrepreneurial and enterprising spirit among its subjects. Without acting directly on subjects, neo-liberal government indirectly incites a set of specific transformations through the intentional curtailing of its own governing apparatus (the ‘rolling-back’ of the state), thereby affecting an indirect manipulation of the background conditions for individual conduct itself, and the reimagining of the social field in the image of a market, abundant with opportunities for competitive advantage, realizable through enterprises of calculation and investment. Insentivization, responsabilization, privatization and marketization take the place of regulation, normification, standardization and collectivization, forcing the subject into a stance of competitive differentiation, livelihood and opportunism (Lazarato, 2009; Larner, 2000; Harvey, 2005). The generalization of the enterprise form, Foucault writes, serves the function of ‘extending the economic model of supply and demand and of investment–costs–profit so as to make it a model of social relations and of existence itself, a form of relationship of the individual to himself, to those around him, the group and the family’ (Foucault, 2008: 242).

In psychological terms, this life is conceived as an enterprise whose goal is not the adjustment of the individual to prescribed norms of group life, the resolution of interpersonal tensions, nor the reconciliation of inner turmoil through the probing of a deep interiority. It is instead a life lived through a dynamic of pure enterprise in which others appear, not as objects of psychological investment toward a relation of mutuality, but

as pure resources in an environment of opportunity. Forgoing the medical model and the overweening authority attributed to the clinical gaze of the medical professional, neo-liberal psy- disposes the healthy individual to further maximize her or his own emotional potentials through the manipulation of life-elements in a space outside the institutional matrix entirely. What I wish to emphasize here is the uniquely negative moment that operates within such a neo-liberal pursuit of psychological life – the practices of de-subjectification and repudiation that come part and parcel with the neo-liberal *dispositif* of psy-. We can capture this moment in the discussion Foucault provides in his lecture course *La Naissance de la Biopolitique*, on what he termed state-phobia, the kernel of anxiety hatched in the crucible of postwar neo-liberal thought in the writings of the Austrian economists of the Frieberg School (the Ordoliberalists), which would constitute an important element of the disposition of the subject of neo-liberalism.

The unique fear of the state animating the works of the Ordoliberalists derived from the group's response to varied forms of mid-century interventionism, totalitarianism and welfarism, from the New Deal to the Beveridge Program to Nazism and Stalinism, all of which could be measured for the dreary effects of their collectivist economic policies on the social body. The misguided efforts of these regimes at constituting solidarity and social cohesion at the expense of economic vitality, the Ordoliberalists argued, sapped away initiative and the spirit of enterprise (Lemke, 2007). State-phobia is characterized by a paranoid and contemptuous regard for government and its interventionist policies, which attributes to the state a unique and internally consistent mode of being (Foucault, 2008: 76–8, 187–8). For the state-phobic, states tend to grow: they are thought to possess an indefatigable power of expansion, a tendency to extend into and monopolize the very object over which they seek to provide government and care – civil society and the lives of its members. Yet their expansionism does not entail an organic vitalism of any sort: states are driven by a distinct and generative dynamism that is strictly internal, one which derives from the various interlinking forms it carries within itself rather than from any productive relationship with the outside world. States exist through vast networks extending like octopus tentacles across historically varied formations from liberal welfarism to National Socialism, imposing uniformity and denying individual difference under a misguided mandate of democratization and the mass provisioning of social services. At once nurturing and parasitical, the state enriches itself by draining the vitality and livelihood from those it claims for its charge (ibid.: 188).

Such phobia informs practices of neo-liberal de-subjectification, a repudiation and denial of the 'man' of government, the 'man' of welfare who inclines us to dependence, docility, parasitism and inaction. If the enterprising spirit of neo-liberalism is animated by the invisible hand of the market expressed in psychological life, then this life is realized only through a phobic repudiation of another hand, the dead hand of the state residing within. In the tension between these two is the temporality of neo-liberal subjectification as a practice: the tendency toward social solidarity, mutual interdependence and a reliance on the direction of state leadership must be teased out from one's own habits and conducts, expunged from one's body and subjectivity. Indeed, this project, ostensibly a matter of economic conduct, replicates itself in other areas. In psychology, this tendency is evident in a range of self-help books, new psychologies and emerging therapeutic services, and in the various professional and lay markets,

subcultures and readerships generated by these new practices. Such a new psychological discourse prefers preventative to restorative measures, celebrates the agency and potential of the individual while specifically rejecting appeals to psychological inwardness, interiority and therapeutic rumination. Of course, much of this is not new: the human potential movement and humanistic psychology of the 1960s and 1970s generally assumed a similar antinomian stance within and against their own fields, stressing individual empowerment over medical pathology. Yet, its individualist tendencies aside, humanistic formations of psy- remained principally disciplinary in their intentions and assumptions, focusing on mutuality, cooperation and emotional reciprocity as a problem of psychological interiority. While the humanistic psychologies of Maslow and Rogers typically saw self-realization as a transformative experience embedded within the normative expectations of interpersonal life and human frailty, the new psychological discourses summon the individual to a highly autonomous task of psychological self-optimization within a distinctly individualistic therapeutic regime. In short, this is a vision of psychological life as enterprise, one centered on the individual pursuit of well-being as one of calculating self-interest, and a project of repudiation centered on the inherited dependencies of social government.

#### **4 Coaching as neo-liberal *dispositif***

What, then, does this practice look like? How does a neo-liberal psychology dispose individuals to the twin projects of subjectification and de-subjectification, and how does this practice entail a unique set of problems and temporalities? It is perhaps impossible in an investigation that is primarily theoretical to answer this question with an empirical case that is satisfactory on its own terms, or that serves as anything more than an illustrative example. However, in answering the question of the practical dimensions of the *dispositif* of neo-liberal psy-, and by way of a conclusion to this study, a shift of registers from theoretical to empirical allows us to sound out what has been said about the time and practice of the *dispositif* of neo-liberal psy- in the context of a distinct therapeutic discourse, and even in the unique voices of the practitioners themselves.

First, some obvious examples of neo-liberal psy- can be named: the case of positive psychology, for example, presents an explosive new field with broad academic, clinical and popular appeal, whose founder, Martin Seligman, has devised a new ‘science of happiness’ which promises to move psychology beyond the disease model to focus on the unlocking of the rich potentials for a fulfilling life of expressive well-being. Positive psychology, which has expanded into a broad literature with many personal and managerial applications, regards with caution and contempt the therapeutic methods of traditional psychology, which, in the vast majority of cases, lull the client into reflective wallowing, rather than driving her or him to take responsibility for and action toward the realization of her or his own happiness (Seligman, 2000; Binkley, 2011). Another is that of the new discourse on ‘emotional intelligence’, a flourishing self-help phenomenon which encourages individuals to reflect upon, control and apply their emotional affects for the attainment of specific goals, usually advancement in professional careers. The field’s best-selling text, *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ* by founder Daniel Goleman, outlines specific techniques of impulse management and emotional

manipulation appropriate to the various settings of marriage, work and interpersonal life (Goleman, 1995). A third case comes with the field of life coaching, another expanding frontier in the psy-industries, wherein the traditional role of the therapist, charged with deliberately stagnating psychological life by inducing reflection on the deep psychic origins of one's emotional states, is replaced by a semi-professional coach, whose task is to encourage clients to take action toward their own happiness and life-goals without slipping into disabling introspection or dependence on an overweening psychological expert (Brock, 2008). There is, in all three of these cases, an unmistakable appeal to a psychological life premised on the agency and autonomy of the enterprising individual in a way that is different from that of other traditions, and which displays a distinct disdain for a therapeutic legacy of a psy- tradition they deem obsolete to the real-life challenges of contemporary life. By way of a conclusion to this study, the case of life coaching can be considered in greater depth.

The field of professional coaching today is broad and encompasses many practices and focuses, ranging from professional and corporate coaching to life coaching, relationship and family coaching, wellness coaching, spiritual coaching and so on. Historical works on coaching typically cite three principal influences: psychotherapy and counseling; consulting and business leadership; human potential exercises such as EST, Landmark Forum and Lifespring – though inspiration also comes from such fields as education studies, the dramatic arts, athletics and holistic and body therapies (Brock, 2008). While the psychological roots of coaching lie in a mix of behavioral, humanistic and transpersonal methodologies, with the influence of Maslow's and Rogers' affirmative view of human potential at its core, corporate and athletic influences have given coaching an emphasis on organizational, career and business concerns, and a distinct model of authority and expertise that is uniquely informal, horizontal and anti-institutional, focused on the optimization of individual performance through the rigorous mentoring process with one whose knowledge is derived more from direct experience than institutional credentials.

Coaching operates largely on the model of a cottage industry, made possible by the use of teleconferencing. When Thomas Leonard, one of the inventors of contemporary coaching and founder of Coach University, decided in 1992 to incorporate teleconferencing into the coaching methodology, he opened the field to new clients and practitioners, and helped foster a new cohort of self-selected professionals in this largely unregulated field. Throughout the 1990s the field expanded rapidly with growing numbers of schools, training centers, conventions and conferences, although it would remain without enforceable licensing or certification standards, and is today estimated to constitute a 1-billion-dollar-a-year industry worldwide (Liljenstrand and Nebeker, 2008). Coaching is, for the vast majority of practising coaches, undertaken through regular weekly telephone sessions with clients paying 100–300 US dollars for sessions of approximately 30 minutes in length (additional contact often includes email exchanges and the occasional 5-minute 'power session'). Coaching cycles typically continue for anywhere from 3 months to 1–2 years. A 2006 international survey conducted by Solutionbox, an American coaching firm selling DVDs, books and other coaching materials, collected data on 3,108 coaches worldwide. The results provide a profile of the coaching profession: coaching is largely an English-language practice, with the United States representing more than half of the responding coaches, and significant numbers operating in the UK and Australia.

In the United States, half of practising coaches earn less than \$10,000 a year; most find new clients through word of mouth and referrals, roughly half see two or fewer clients a week (with more than half citing the need to expand their client base as their most urgent business challenge). Two thirds are female, nearly all are over 30, and roughly two thirds call themselves life coaches, as opposed to other dominant fields of coaching, including career, relationship, financial, spiritual, or dating coaches (Solutionbox, 2010).

The coaching profession's freedom from conventional licensing requirements stems from the field's deeply rooted opposition to the traditions of psychotherapy and counseling – methods which are characterized by all the medicalizing, pathologizing, backward-looking and negative views that have dogged the psychological enterprise from the beginning, and influenced clients toward docility and dependence. Indeed, it was an influential decision of the state legislature in Colorado in 2004 that established the coaching profession's exemption from the regulatory oversights applied to psychotherapy, on the basis of the former's reluctance to engage the personal history of its clients, and its emphasis on present and future problems. An article comparing coaching with therapy marks these differences: therapy, by its very nature, 'assumes the client needs healing. . . Works with people to achieve self-understanding and emotional healing. . . Explores the root of problems. . . Focuses on feelings and past events. . . Works for internal resolution of pain and to let go of old patterns.' By contrast, coaching is forward-looking, optimistic and opportunistic, concentrating not on past pains and their internal residues, but on potentials for future aspiration. Coaching 'Assumes the client is whole. . . Focuses on actions and the future. . . Works with the conscious mind. . . Works for external solutions to overcome barriers, learn new skills and implement effective choices' (Hayden and Whitworth, 1995). Indeed, the coach is uniquely distinguished from the therapist through a specific renunciation of the expert stature that adheres to therapy: coaches, one commentator explains, prefer to operate less as 'experts' than as 'thought partners' for their clients (Eggers and Clark, 2000: 67).

The *dispositif* of life coaching disposes the individual to his or her own autonomy through the fixing of precise goals in the transformation of one's identity or way of life, and by charting specific measures, benchmarks and changes meant to bring about this goal. Life coaching is overwhelmingly pragmatic in this regard, disposing the individual to regard her or his attributes, emotional states and capacities as potentials and resources, whose intensity and magnitude can be optimized through resourceful exploitation of opportunities in one's own life. What the coachee affirms, therefore, and what he or she becomes through the practice of this enterprise, is a self that is an agent within a field of opportunity. The voices of life coaches themselves, taken from 9 telephone interviews conducted in the spring of 2010, express this gentle exhortation by which enterprise is disposed.<sup>3</sup> One coach describes a technique she calls 'A Perfect World', in which she asks her client:

'If I were to meet you a year from now, how would you walk? How would you carry yourself? What would you wear? Would your hair be different? What would your energy be? You know, 'how would I experience you differently?' . . . then when we talk about what it is they're striving to change – whether it's energy, exercise, nutrition, relationships – I will say, 'So, can you picture . . . what would the woman that you aspire to be need right now?'

And for many people, that somehow makes it easier to say, ‘well, she wouldn’t need this!’ and that gives them some sense of strength about that.

Another exercise is called ‘I choose to’:

I do exercises; I have an ‘I choose to’, which is kind of like setting a commitment with one’s self. ‘I choose to’, – and then whatever it is, you know – ‘I choose to exercise consistently so that I have the energy and health and capacity to live the way I want’. One of the other exercises is one that’s called, ‘What I really need in my life right now is more’, and then there’s four categories: physical, mental, career, emotional, and then spiritual self. And then people go through that and I ask to check things off. And we take a look at, ‘do you see a lot more needs in one part of your life than others?’ and whether you’re ready and willing to work on them.

Such an exhortation to choice is at once emancipatory, opening up a domain of inventiveness and possibility, but also subtly coercive: given such a field of possibility, the failure to take advantage, to apply one’s resolve and skill to the realization of one’s desires, is tantamount to failure. And the image of failure is quite clearly etched in the figure of those that, through their own lack of initiative, their inflexibility and inability to perceive opportunities in their environment, fail to realize their potentials. Another coach describes the obstructions that block the efforts of some of her clients:

If you’re carrying around past stuff, it follows you around like a little rain cloud. And if you’re not optimistic about the future, that follows you around. So you really have to cultivate positive emotions about past, present, and future, to be at your optimum today.

Lack of optimism is a problem that is clearly etched in the discourse of coaching. It reflects an inwardness and a penchant for reflection, a dwelling on one’s past and on one’s problems that is anathema to the vital, energetic spirit of enterprise which the coaching methodology attempts to enhance. Talk-based therapies and psychological counseling are in this way specifically implicated in cultivating such rumination and inwardness, and are thus regarded with a contempt that resonates with that of a state-phobia: they are forces that grow through their own self-consuming dynamic, and, as parasites, take without giving. The enterprising individual of the coaching practice is one that is made alive to the dangers brought by the figure of the docile, dependent subject of therapy, whose presence is always felt within:

Sometimes when you just focus on talking about the problem . . . you sometimes just make the problem seem bigger, and you validate their view . . . ‘and no wonder I’m in such bad shape, look at the problems I’ve got!’ . . . [Coaches] have a quote, which is ‘What you appreciate, appreciates’. So if you really appreciate your problems a lot, they’ll appreciate. And so ruminating and dwelling on problems is not helpful, as well. So sometimes the therapeutics that focus on the negative doesn’t build enough positive energy to help people get unblocked and forward.

Or similarly, from another coach who came to her practice from a long career as a counselor in a Chicago hospital:

A psychologist tends to see a person as a patient – you know, ill, and needing to be fixed. Coaches don't inherently see people as needing to be fixed. We see people as being very strong already, on the inside, and that they are resilient, and they do pop back, and they can make it, if they learn to live life based on their own terms ... I tell my clients when they first come to me, that we are not going to spend a lot of time talking about your past, or where the trauma came from, because even with 100% knowledge of where it came from, it's not charting a direction of where you want to go now. I'm always asking the question, 'okay, what now?' because we could spend the rest of your life talking about why you're that way, why you feel this way, what your parents did or didn't do, and it definitely has some merit, but, 'now what?' Now that we have that understanding, now what, what's the strategy now? Let's not stay in this place for a long time.

From the coaching perspective, then, the problem is that introspection, rumination and dwelling on one's problems is not merely an accidental attribute of the individual: it is a specific residual legacy carried along by the culture itself. It is the legacy of the therapeutic discourse, with its emphasis on biographical history, early childhood and an emotional core residing in a rich interiority that must be repudiated and turned away. Another coach describes his impatience with the therapeutic tradition, and with clients who enter his practice with therapeutic expectations:

I don't care so much about your childhood, and what you did. What I want to know is – we're here right now, where do you want to go, what's the gap between here and there, and what's the plan to get there and how can I help you get there? We're more focusing on what people want, more in the future.

And again, the coach from Chicago recalls her experiences with traditional therapy in a more institutional setting:

Every so often I wanted to say to patients, 'why don't you just get off your butt and do the very thing you know you need to?' And it wasn't the professional approach, if you will. Um, but truly I felt there was a lot of things people could do if they were encouraged or challenged to do it, and, um, I also felt many of the therapists in our unit, just at the time, I felt were putting some of their own stuff on the patients, and I found that annoying.

Perhaps more than anything else, it is the principal object of therapeutic work itself that had to be renounced – emotions, and the painful exploration of emotional states through talk. With such states of deep feeling expunged from the process, and with the subject of enterprise enlisted in the task of such renunciation in the name of her or his own freedom, the linking of subjectification and de-subjectification finds a perfect form in the *dispositif* of neo-liberal psy-. A coach with training in therapeutic technique describes her early exposure to coaching methodology while being coached herself:

I remember once, being in a coaching session after I had had something really, really horrible happen, I mean really horrible. And it actually never got better. And I was crying. And so I was crying, and [my coach] was wonderfully supportive. And then at some point – this is the kind of thing you would never do in therapy – but in coaching [my coach] said,



‘Okay Jane, are you finished? Did you express – do you feel you described to me what you needed to?’ and I said, ‘Yes’. And I’m still crying. And she goes, ‘Jane . . . are you done crying yet?’ I’m like, ‘Well, I think I am *now!*’ [Laughs] And then she proceeded to ask me some really probing, challenging questions just to really get me where I wanted to go, to get me out of that state. She needed to hit me on the side of the head with a baseball bat. In therapy, you don’t hit people on the side of the head with a baseball bat.

## Conclusion

A reading of neo-liberal psychological governmentality through the lens of social practice, as a micro-level undertaking entailing the unique temporality of a given form of conduct, is an endeavor that seeks to excavate the interlocking ways in which discipline and enterprise, or the docile bodies of social government and the entrepreneurial subjects of neo-liberal governmentality, converge in what we might call the *dispositif* of contemporary psychological life. The point has been made that this *dispositif* is itself dynamic, ambivalent and multidimensional in a way that escapes the typical methodologies of governmentality research. By situating the linked practices of subjectification and de-subjectification at the center of the apparatus of neo-liberal psy-, what is uncovered is a psychological life as enterprise, which can only be won through the situated work of a repudiation directed at the residue and legacy of psychology’s moribund disciplinary form.

## Notes

I am grateful to Christopher Rand for his steadfast research support, to Jeffrey Bussolini for his helpful comments on an early draft of this manuscript, and to Yu-Jin Chang for explaining to me the concept of ‘free indirect discourse.’

1. First published in English in 1965 in a much abridged edition with the title *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (Foucault, 1965).
2. Entry for ‘disposed’ from *Dictionary.com Unabridged*. Random House, Inc., accessed 8 January 2011 @: <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/dispoused>
3. Interview techniques are taken from Skype and telephone open-ended interviews conducted between January and May of 2010. Life coaches were contacted through their commercial websites, and approached via email with an interview request. Those consenting were forwarded a research subject consent form, which was signed and returned prior to the scheduling of an interview date. All interviewees are commercially active life coaches, supporting themselves in full or in part through their practice. Interview methodology was approved by the Institutional Review Board at Emerson College, Boston, USA.

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