

a boring meeting, and a corrupt union boss's son burning a hundred-dollar bill are evidence of a "rejection without vision" (147) that "blithely reject[s] neoliberal rationality" (137). However, as Anker notes, *The Wire* exemplifies the paradoxes and trap of neoliberalism, as the show is at once a critique that also reaffirms the centrality of a key neoliberal institution, the police. The police are the one institution centered throughout the show's five seasons, and in this respect the example of police "juking" their stats to preserve this institution may represent more of a passive affirmation of neoliberal rationality than a rejection of it. The issue here may be the very messiness of neoliberalism itself. It is ubiquitous and nebulous, even nihilistic, in which the so-called "winners" it ennobles are perfectly fine with the "losers" living in their filth and boredom. If true, there may then be a need for some sort of vision after all, not just rejection. Indeed, this is what makes the final chapter with which I started this review such an inspired, brilliant way to conclude *Ugly Freedoms*, with its focus on climate destruction and consumptive sovereignty. Anker turns to, among others, Indigenous feminist scholars for a vision of freedom nurtured in the shared and inevitably messy experiences among humans and with nonhumans and all life and land. This requires letting go of our attachment to the boundaries—personal, collective, between human and nonhuman, life and land—of modern liberal freedom. There is a vision here, one that reveals the fertile ground for community and solidarity, which may be filthy and even shitty, but these are things that we humans and nonhumans have in common, and Anker makes a persuasive case that this is a good place to start.

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Michael J. Thompson: *Twilight of the Self: The Decline of the Individual in Late Capitalism*. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2022. Pp. xii, 271.)

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In the tradition of the great diagnostic philosophers—from Marx and Nietzsche, Lukács and Foucault, to Wendy Brown, Nancy Fraser, and Rahel Jaeggi—Michael J. Thompson's *Twilight of the Self* probes the central problems of contemporary social and political life. Like a "doctor" for "sick cultures," this ambitious book seeks to identify the source of our ailment, theorize its origins, and prescribe a treatment.

The "decline of the self in late capitalism" is hardly a new topic in critical theory, but Thompson's work provides a richly theorized and insightful perspective (xi). The first three chapters focus on analyzing the present conditions of subjectivity and selfhood under the stage of capitalism that he

calls *cybernetic society* (25, 34). This new form of society not only shapes our psychology by disciplining us into rational market agents, but alters our very ontology by restructuring the normative fabric that envelops us. The contemporary self is intermeshed with social structures and systems—from economic to political to cultural—to an extent never before seen in human history. For Thompson, this does not represent “an extension of the Enlightenment but its deformation” (48). Hence, unlike postmodern thinkers who seek to theorize from somewhere beyond Enlightenment categories, he understands himself as recovering its emancipatory potential.

After describing the present condition of subjectivity and selfhood, the book’s subsequent four chapters offer an evaluative theory that explains why these developments should concern us. Here, Thompson draws on an impressive, almost dizzying array of sources moving from Marx, to Searle, to Lukács, to Spinoza, to Haslanger in the space of a few pages. These far-ranging chapters provide new theories of alienation, ideology, and reification. As is to be expected in a book of this scope, some elements are more effective than others.

Readers will likely find chapter 7, “The Withering of the Self and the Regression of the Ego,” to be the most compelling of the middle four chapters. In these pages, Thompson rehearses familiar arguments about the rise of mass consumption and its effects on our psyche. But he also goes well beyond these by focusing specifically on the way that our social relations have become deformed. Drawing on Hegel’s theory of recognition, Thompson suggests that distinctive of the contemporary moment is a widespread need for what he calls *surplus recognition*. This is a pathological way of relating to other people that is encouraged, even demanded, by our social world. As he puts it, “surplus recognition is what is needed . . . when the brittleness of self is so severe that its sense of identity is threatened unless it receives validation from others” (207). In essence, the idea is that as we become less and less autonomous we seek more and more validation of our independence from other people. In other words, as we become less independent we seek out social relations that obscure that reality. This is similar to the problem Hegel identifies with mastery in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Individuals who lack genuine control over the conditions of their reality are often the ones who imagine themselves to have the most. *Surplus recognition* springs from the desire for independence and mastery in a social world recalcitrant to those demands.

But the most thought-provoking part of the book is surely the final chapter. Here, Thompson sets himself to the difficult task that many critical theorists overlook, namely, offering a prescription for the ills he diagnoses. To help rehabilitate the “withered self” he provides a new theory of freedom as *critical agency*. This, he hopes, will help us to recover the Enlightenment’s promise of the autonomous person without relying on a monadic or excessively atomistic account of the individual (231). To be sure, this is no small task—and one that many other thinkers have attempted. As Thompson acknowledges, his own account is related to recent Marxist and feminist theories of relational

autonomy, which seek to explain how individuals can be autonomous while also recognizing their social embeddedness. Thompson nonetheless sees his theory as distinct and as overcoming the limitations of relational accounts. Autonomy as critical agency, he writes, “is the capacity to comprehend the essential substrates that constitute our social world as defined by the ends and designs of others rather than ourselves,” yet to still feel and actually be “capable of generating new forms of meaning and purposes” (231).

This notion of autonomy as critical agency is designed to bridge the gap between the idea that human beings are essentially social creatures and the idea that our freedom entails independence. Thompson explains that his autonomous self is like the Hegelian “I” that is a “We” (258). Hegel’s idea with this formulation was that individuals can become aware of their social dependencies and interconnectedness, and, from that standpoint, conceive of their agency in terms of “We” or collective aims and ends. However, it is worth pointing out that Hegel himself was very careful *not* to describe the freedom available to the “I” that is a “We” as autonomy. Indeed, it is a conspicuous feature of his philosophy that the word “autonomy” rarely appears, save in reference to Kant.

Near the end of the book Thompson concludes that if his theory of autonomy as critical agency is correct, then the concept of autonomy itself needs to be “more expansive” so that it can account for the reality of humanity’s interconnectedness (266). I agree with the spirit of this idea. But, as with Marxist and feminist accounts of relational autonomy, I wonder whether the concept of autonomy is being pushed so far as to render it unhelpful. If, as Thompson writes, critical agency is really about recognizing our fundamental interconnectedness and dependencies, how can it also be “the capacity to set our own ends and purposes for our practices” (232)? Any sufficiently robust, ontological account of humanity’s interconnectedness will be in tension with the individualism inherent in the very idea of autonomy. Either our interdependence runs so deep that our purposes and aims can never entirely be our *own*, or that interconnectedness is precisely what the exercise of autonomy aims to minimize or overcome. So, along with other recent theories of autonomy that portray themselves as sensitive to the deep sociality of our species, and claim to offer reconsidered understandings of autonomy in light of it, perhaps Thompson’s approach is better understood as illuminating the limits of the concept and showing us towards an altogether new way of thinking about freedom. Not all conceptions of freedom that entail some degree of agency or self-directedness need to be classified as theories of *autonomy*.

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