Advent of the online Neo-subject

*ICT as an accelerator of ultra-subjectivation in light of social practices
– Central European horizons*

Arguably, from a post-Foucauldian perspective, information and communications technology (ICT) offers an arena for ongoing subjectivation aligned with societal or moral guidelines, such as the principles of efficacy and joy, technology-centrism and consumerism. In line with the tradition of critical social theory, the present paper offers a theoretical and a Central and Eastern Europe (CEE)-centred empirical framework based on recent social practices.

Keywords: *Critical social theory, ICT, information society, innovation, postmodernism, neoliberalism*

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1. Introduction and the traditions of postmodern critique

"It is a system in which reality itself (that is people's material/symbolic existence) is entirely captured" wrote Spanish sociologist Manuel Castells at some point in the second half of the nineties (1996, I, 371-372) referring to the interactions between society and technology. In a subsequent work co-edited with Portuguese colleague Gustavo Cardoso, it was further pointed out that "the new technological system" in the modern information age is supposed to be "rooted in microelectronics, computing, and digital communication, with its growing connection to the biological revolution and its derivative, genetic engineering" (Castells and Cardoso 2005, 3).

Our interdisciplinary research described below aims both to 1) project the former understanding of the "new" communicative environment described by Castells onto current usage and (self-)representation of ICT, and to 2) juxtapose that with the tradition of social critiquing to the broader framework of evolutive processes that give rise to ICT and maintain its the politico-economic hegemony with its ever-growing expansion in various spheres of social life.

Both sociocultural and critical traditions in the field of communication theory (Craig 1999, 144-149) have been engaged in understanding and discussing the "force field" of communication. For Craig, sociocultural communication theory represents communication, under the influence of semiotic thought, within the intellectual traditions of sociology and anthropology. "Communication in these traditions is typically theorised as a symbolic process that produces and reproduces shared sociocultural patterns." So conceived, Craig goes on to say, "communication explains how social order (a macro-level phenomenon) is created, realised, sustained, and transformed in micro-level interaction processes". Thus, "we exist in a sociocultural environment that is constituted and maintained in large part by symbolic codes and media of communication" (ibid.).

At the same time, the premise of critical communication theory is that the basic "problem of communication" in society lies in the fact that "material and ideological forces […] preclude or distort discursive reflection" (Craig 1999, 147). Consequently, this latter tradition is inclined to revolve around the powers, potential inequalities and oppressions, and different privileges of the communicating society.

Corresponding postmodern tendencies aim to explore how certain representations become dominant and permanently shape the ways in which reality is viewed and acted upon. Foucault's (1978, 1994) work on the dynamics of discourse and power in the representation of social reality, in particular, has been instrumental in revealing the mechanisms by which a certain order of discourse produces permissible modes of being and thinking while disqualifying and even making others impossible (Escobar 2012, 5). The essence of Foucault's notions, which are crucial for our current train of thought, is that power [fr. *pouvoir*] may achieve an effect over the social life of the population only when it becomes an integral, vital function that the individual itself embraces and reactivates.

It is worth exposing these traditions also to the "system" described by Castells (1996, I, 371-2; 2011) in his introduction and even beyond, to the realm of ICT and the surrounding communicative "force field".

This paper, once having overviewed the relevant literature on the complex concept and phenomenon of neoliberalism and its intersections with ICT, without any claim to completeness, intends to grasp the relevant trends in ICT by considering six case studies involving major recent conferences held in Central and Eastern Europe. Textual analysis (Fairclough 2013) of the agendas of these conferences in Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and the Czech Republic indicates the corresponding orders of discourse in this field and arguably go beyond the direct milieu of these events themselves. Namely, they point towards a new (neoliberal) way of the world, as Dardot and Laval (2013, 2014a, 2014b) put it, or "system", using the description of Castells above.

Ultimately, innovations in technology, competitive entrepreneurship and consumptive practices become integrated in a discursive order (Escobar 2012, 5), or, in the words of Fairclough (2013, 382) an "order of a discourse" that paves the way not only for ultra-subjectivation (Dardot and Laval 2013, 297), (Dardot and Laval 2014b) but also the corresponding ICT usage and growth. Here, a crucial need arises to define such orders of discourse, which involves, for Fairclough (2013, 291) once again, the "social structuring of semiotic difference and variation".

2. Neoliberalism and the information society

At the intersection of our sociocultural focus on identity and the postmodern critique's field of vision lies the information society, as a framework of ICT, which is interwoven with and furnished by a number of aspects of neoliberalism.

It is evident here, that communication theory, itself an interdisciplinary field, overlaps with other scientific disciplines, and so the move towards an interdisciplinary interpretation of the multidimensional concept of neoliberalism seems perhaps inevitable.

In line with our intention to employ our theoretical framework, immediately the questions arise: i) what is neoliberalism? and ii) why it is crucial to grasp this "vague and highly contested" (Rondelez 2021, 1-2) or "slippery, hazy and contentious" (Wacquant 2012, 68) concept, which has been a central, key term of academic debate since the 1990s, and iii) what relevance does it carry for ICT-related discussions?

Milton Friedman is usually considered an epitome of neoliberal thought, at least in view of his hegemonic economic model anchored by variants of market rule (Wacquant 2012, 66-69). Milton postulates on the notion of "private enterprise operating in a free market as a system of economic freedom and a necessary condition for political freedom" (2020, 6).

Friedman here followed in the footsteps of earlier authors, such as Dicey, Mises, Simons and Hayek, whose "emphasis was on economic freedom as a means toward political freedom" (2020, 15). In particular, Hayek, in his analysis of the process, titled *Road to Serfdom*, recognizes the importance of "autonomous spheres in which the ends of the individuals are supreme" (2006, 60). Accordingly, Milton Friedman argues that "individual freedom to choose, and competition of private enterprises

for custom, would promote improvements in the kinds of contracts available, and foster variety and diversity to meet individual need" (2020, 222).

Such approaches that postulate "economic freedom is also an indispensable means toward the achievement of political freedom" (Friedman 2020, 11) gave rise to the paradigm of neoliberalism based on a Foucauldian understanding that can be, *tout court*, grasped as the art of shaping populations (subjection) and the self (subjectivation) (Wacquant 2012, 69; Lorenzini 2018, 154; Iványi 2023, 648).

There is indeed also a wide-ranging corpus that suggests, based on these latter grounds, that "at the individual-level, neoliberalism insists that rationality, individuality, and self-interest guide all actions". Accordingly, in fact, the relevant ideology views itself as a global social science capable of explaining all human behaviour since all behaviour is thought to be directed by logical, individualistic, and selfish goals (Peters 2001; Smith 2012; Dardot and Laval 2014a, 2014b).

However, we also have to acknowledge here that the (post-)Foucauldian governmentality-focused interpretations of neoliberalism have provoked critique from numerous angles. First, in summarizing the corresponding traditions, Wacquant states that it remains "unclear what makes a technology of conduct neoliberal: certainly, such bureaucratic techniques as the audit, performance indicators and benchmarks (favourites of the neo-Foucauldian anthropology of neoliberalism) can be used to bolster or foster other logics, as can actuarial techniques". Similarly, he goes on to further state, "there is nothing about norms of transparency, accountability and efficiency that makes them necessary boosters to commodification". Thus, the "trouble with the governmentality approach is that its working characterisation of neoliberalism as 'governing through calculation' is so devoid of specificity as to make it coeval with any minimally proficient regime". In addition, he concludes "as technologies of conduct 'migrate' and 'mutate', neoliberalism is found to be everywhere and nowhere at the same time. It becomes all process and no contents; it resides in flowing form without substance, pattern or direction. In the end, then, the governmentality school gives us a conception of neoliberalism just as thin as that propounded by the economic orthodoxy it wishes to overturn" (Wacquant 2012, 70).

Pieter Rondelez points out that "scholars who reduce all the transformation in (urban) society to a neoliberal force or reality" deprive themselves "of a more complete vision of ongoing change and its concrete mechanisms and processes" (2021, 9). Others, such as Mark Purcell, show the limits of the critical approaches to neoliberalism from within the critical camp, arguing, instead of an "obsession" with neoliberalism, "we need to train ourselves to think not in terms of negating what exists, but in terms of producing what we desire. We need to be attentive to and discover our excellence, our power, our ability to imagine and create new objects, new relations, and new forms of life" (Purcell 2016, 616). Here Purcell refers to already existing frameworks, such as Deleuze and Guattari's collaborative work that teach us to focus our attention on our power to produce and create the world. At the same time, Rondelez points out that "Deleuze and Guattari do not argue that we should entirely neglect apparatuses of capital and the state—which indeed have a controlling function on our power to produce" (Rondelez 2021, 9).

Nevertheless, Dardot and Laval's (2013, 2014a, 2014b) focus arguably stands on firm grounds in as much as they outline the characteristics of neoliberalism where its essence is represented by the necessity to establish an adaptable alignment between individuals and institutions, expressed through the concept of the "enterprise man" (cf. Foucault 2008, 226) and simultaneously, an economic dynamics that is inherently subject to change due to its foundation in the fundamental principle of competition.

Information society indeed encounters most of the existing and contradictory definitions of neoliberalism, polarised along the market rule versus the Foucauldian *governmentality*[1] axis (Wacquant 2012, 68-70; cf. Dardot and Laval 2013, 272). Thus, information society can be interpreted as a macrocosm, i.e. a powerful set of ideas and institutional (Escobar 2012, viii) and political-economic (Harvey 2005, 2) practices, and its essential, individual constituent as a microcosm, such as in post-Foucauldian notions of the so-called "entrepreneurial subject" (Dardot and Laval 2013, 2014a, 2014b).

Anthropologist David Harvey (2005, 3-4) highlights such intertwinements, covering the entire spectrum between both poles above, attributing to neoliberalism the disruption of the divisions of labour, social relations, welfare provisions, technological mixes, ways of life and thought, and reproductive activities, in so far as neoliberalism values market exchange as "an ethic in itself", and by doing that "it seeks to bring all human action into the domain of the market".

These manoeuvres require, Harvey (ibid.) goes on to point out, "technologies of information creation and capacities to accumulate, store, transfer, analyse, and use massive databases to guide decisions in the global marketplace". Therefore, a symbiotic relation is suggested between these two spheres (cf. Wacquant 2012, 69).

3. Neoliberalism and cultural evolution: social and anthropological aspects

As anticipated above, neoliberalism has prevailed in a number of spheres of individual social life (Escobar 2012; Wacquant 2012), such as in the microcosm of the entrepreneurial subject (Dardot and Laval 2013, 2014a) and in the macrocosm of the global market (Harvey 2005).

3.1. Citius, altius, fortius: *the entrepreneurial ethos and the spirit of self-accomplishment*

The influence of neoliberalism on culture and subjectivity is well documented. Authors from various backgrounds (Foucault 1978, 1994; Guattari 2000; Harvey 2005;

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[1] As Wacquant (2012, 69) notes: "Students of governmentality propound a 'messy' view of neoliberalism as a flowing and flexible conglomeration of calculative notions, strategies and technologies aimed at fashioning populations and people". This view derives from Foucault's writings and 1978–1979 lecture course at the College de France on The birth of biopolitics (Foucault 2008), which have inspired a general research programme on "governmentality" as the art of shaping populations (subjection) and the self (subjectification). (ibid.)

Mignolo 2011[2]; Dardot and Laval 2013, 2014a, 2014b; Türken et al. 2015) have explored how subject formation has taken place in multiple and contradictory ways in recent years and how it is related to the paradigm of neoliberalism.

In modern capitalist societies, competition and personal success, both economically and politically as well as in the world of entertainment and sport, is encouraged, celebrated and rewarded (Mignolo 2011, 255; Dardot and Laval 2013, 2014b). Such dynamics already given in the real (offline) world are arguably only amplified by ICT, as will be shown soon.

Guattari (2000, 6) argues that the system of post-industrial capitalism, which we may substitute for neoliberalism in view of their common grounds and shared values, has been engaged in an insidious and invisible "penetration of people's attitudes, sensibility and minds".

Accordingly, a new type of individual, namely, a competitive one, is being shaped and moulded by the unseen pressure of neoliberal discursive sets (Escobar 2012) and corresponding market forces (Harvey 2005).

In the interpretation of sociologist Mark Featherstone (2017, 100), the neoliberal subject, or, in the words of Dardot and Laval, the neo-subject *tout court*, "is always in excess of itself, endlessly looking to overcome its own limitations, in a world that is similarly unbounded and endless" (Dardot and Laval 2013, 279). This definition is of crucial importance both in terms of the hypothesis described earlier and the empirical findings to be demonstrated later on.

As argued above, this process occurs with the involvement of beings themselves and, we may add, in developed (Western) societies in particular.

The neoliberal subject is a man of competition and of power. The new subject, i.e. the ideal entrepreneur, is presented as a person of competition and performance. The self-entrepreneur is a being made to "succeed", to "win" (Dardot and Laval 2014b).

The new subject must be grasped in line with the discursive and institutional practices that engendered the figure of the man-enterprise or "entrepreneurial subject" in the late twentieth century, by encouraging the institution of a mesh of sanctions, incentives, and commitments, whose effect is to generate new kinds of psychic functioning. "As a way of being of the human ego", personal enterprise is supposed to be "a way of governing oneself according to principles and values" (Dardot and Laval 2014a; cf. Wacquant 2012, 70). Social theorist Nikolas Rose (1996, 154) identifies some of those principles and values as "energy, initiative, ambition, calculation and personal responsibility".

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[2] In the words of Mignolo, accordingly, "The technological revolution together with the corporate values that were prioritised in Western Europe and the United States [...] made management itself the prime centre of social life and knowledge. Corporate values require efficiency — the more you produce, the larger the gains, the happier you are supposed to be. And technology has trained its own experts who are paid to 'improve' technological management of everything. In the case of nurturing and education, the technological revolution is creating a new type of subject whose 'knowledge' consists in spending time to package 'knowledge' according to the technological options on the menu. 'Technological thinking' takes the place of thinking in general and of disciplines like philosophy and the philosophical aspect of all knowledge, reducing them to a technological packaging of options. Nevertheless, this is happening to [...] the population that has the 'privilege and the benefit' of economic and energy resources that enable them to 'enjoy' technology" (Mignolo 2011, 15).

Accordingly, the new person always has to produce and enjoy "even more", so he or she becomes directly "addicted to systematic enjoyment". Thus, according to Dardot and Laval (2013, 2014a, 2014b), life in its entirety becomes an element of production, performance and pleasure.

For the neo-subject, the target of the new power is the desire to realise oneself, the project one wishes to pursue, the motivation that inspires the "collaborator" of the enterprise, and, ultimately, "desire" by whatever name one chooses to call it. The desiring being is not only the point of application of this power; it is the relay of apparatuses for steering conduct (Dardot and Laval 2013, 260).

This is the twin sense of a performance-focused managerial attitude or even the "palming off" advertising slogans described later on. If we did not take the importance of the tradition of critical social theory (Craig 1999) into account, we would underestimate the "even more" imperative that targets the increase in individual efficiency in all spheres of life that is always in demand. "We are the champions" has become the anthem of the new entrepreneurial man (Dardot and Laval 2013, 102-106). In the text of this song, also the line "No time for losers!" can be heard (Dardot and Laval 2013, 283), (Dardot and Laval 2014b), encapsulating the spirit of the age of self-mastery (2013, 267).

In this perspective, today's beings are required to "go beyond themselves" and to "expand their boundaries". This particular requirement of the system is based on "growth" (i.e. capital accumulation) conditions that the entrepreneurial self and human capital fuses. "Extra pleasure" extruded from ourselves is the driving force that propels the new subject and the new competitive system.

Here an unprecedented degree of subjectivation, namely "ultra-subjectivation", emerges, the purpose of which is no longer the ultimate and stable state of "self-possession", but rather the self-perpetuating transcendence of the self, which is in its system most closely aligned with the logic of the universal principle of competition (i.e. enterprise), and beyond that, with the "cosmos" of the global market.

The corresponding transformations, driven by the individual and collective internalisation of the spirit of entrepreneurial competitiveness as a general behavioural and/or user model, are also materialized in patterns of ICT promotion and the sharing of online content, representing an internal conformity to "self-accomplishment" (Dardot and Laval 2013, 267). The search for excellence by constant self-work or self-improvement is embodied in the usage and (self-)representation of ICT, with a continuous, and now even enhanced emphasis not only on innovation, but also on competitiveness, as will be shown later on.

3.2. Semper aliquid novi: *fetishization of innovation and technology*

Arguably, discursive and institutional practices have been promoting innovation within and surrounding digital media as a normative logic that results in constant changes manifested in a number of contexts. These include the regular modifications of media surfaces, new available apps and the behaviour patterns of ever-changing

user environments. Accordingly, innovation and technology have become both the driving forces and displays of ICT growth.

The transformations at hand, accompanied by "the restructuring and re-scaling of network relations between social practises" (Fairclough 2013, 126), all depend upon new technologies.

It is evident that along with neoliberalism there has been an extraordinary boom in information technologies, which have become a privileged arena of neoliberalism. In line with this, the main arenas of production that have gained from this boom in ICT are the emergent cultural industries (films, videos, video games, music, advertising, art shows), which use IT as a basis for innovation and the marketing of new products. These processes, described thoroughly already by Harvey (2005, 157-158), result in a "hype around these new sectors". In addition, "the neoliberal theory of technological change relies upon the coercive powers of competition to drive the search for new products, new production methods, and new organisational forms. This drive becomes so deeply embedded in entrepreneurial common sense, however, that it becomes sort of a fetish belief: that there is a technological fix for each and every problem. To the degree that this takes hold not only within corporations", but also various – if not all — spheres of life, "producing powerful independent trends of technological change" (Harvey 2005, 68-69).

Analysis has a significant contribution to make to research on the relationship between technological change, mediation, economic change, and wider social change – both in terms of how the integration of new technologies into economic, political, social and cultural processes is instantiated through new genres (i.e. elements of orders of discourse), and in terms of how textual elements are woven into the fabric of the "information society" (cf. Castells 2010).

3.3. Sumptus effusi *and the hegemony of consumptive practices*

Consumptive practices have arisen and been driven by "market demands", i.e. an economics dynamics reflected by and dovetailing conveniently with advertisements and tracking strategies targeting online activities. Thus, innovation and competitiveness are shaped according to the principles of performance and pleasure, which frame both ICT usage and its (self-)presentation or marketing.

According to the post-Foucauldian interpretation of Rose (2007, 131, 252), in the context of the "politics of life itself" and, in Foucauldian terms, "bio-politics", we may well agree with semiotician Walter Mignolo (2011, 144), who states that "political and economic strategies for controlling life join forces with consumerism in a particular way: consumers are seduced to consume not because of the value of having such and such an object, but because consuming that would ensure a better and happier life. What is being sold and bought is not merely the commodity but the commodity as the ticket to enter the dream-world of a longer and better life". This politics of life itself extends into the macrocosm of the global market (Dardot and Laval 2014a).

Consumption as a social reality has been present since well before the advent of ICT. As a consequence, most of us are already living in a consumption economy, which never tires of novelty and citizens have long been turned into consumers of services (Toulmin 1990, 5; Dardot and Laval 2014a).

Canadian economist of Hungarian and Polish background Kari Polanyi Levitt (2013, 207) even ventures to suggest that "consumerism is elevated to the status of the supreme objective governing rational human behaviour".

Way before ICT, traditional media itself had contributed thereto, as "there is a wide range of specific messages in advertisements, suggesting connections between products and lifestyles and between services and states of mind. There is an underlying commonality to almost all advertisements: they are fundamentally about selling, address their audiences as consumers and celebrate and take for granted the consumer-capitalist organisation of society. Their perspective is, of course, decidedly ideological. Ads tell us that happiness and satisfaction can be purchased, that each of us is first and foremost an individual consumption unit, and that market relations of buying and selling are the appropriate – perhaps the only – form of social relations. In this process in question, advertising elevates certain values – specifically, those associated with acquiring wealth and consuming goods – to an almost religious status. All in all, the underlying message in advertising, which permeates our media culture, is the importance of the values of consumerism" (Croteau and Hoynes 2003, 184-188).

Consequently, the "performance/pleasure" apparatus discussed earlier, also becomes "apportioned into diversified mechanisms of control, evaluation, and incentivisation and pertains to all the cogs of production, all modes of consumption, and all forms of social relations" (Dardot and Laval 2014b).

Not surprisingly, consumptive practices have emerged and been propelled by "market demands", i.e. an economics dynamics, and are mirrored by and aligned conveniently also with advertisements and tracking strategies targeting and surrounding online activities.

4. App users vs the rest: Central European case studies of the online neo-subject

4.1. Hypothesis in detail with a hindsight to our theoretical postulata

Our hypothesis, as we have seen, is that neoliberal ideology has had a significant influence on contemporary international conferences dedicated to technology and innovations, shaping the way these events are presented and conducted. These are *inter alia*, the following senses, generally falling under our threefold starting points that were set out above in sections 3.1–3.3 covering the entrepreneurial ethos and the spirit of self-accomplishment; the fetishization of innovation and technology; and the hegemony of consumptive practices. Specifically:

Neoliberalism promotes the idea that markets and competition are the most efficient mechanisms for resource allocation. In the context of innovation conferences, this often means that these events are organized and funded by private entities or corporations seeking to promote their products, services, or brands. These sponsors often influence the agenda and content of the conferences, aligning them with their own market-driven goals.

In addition, neoliberalism encourages globalization and market integration. Thus, innovation conferences frequently have a global perspective, aiming to connect innovators and markets across borders, fostering international collaboration, and promoting free trade and investment.

Neoliberal ideology also strengthens the belief that market-driven solutions are the most efficient. With view to this end, conference themes often concentrate on how technology can solve various problems, with a strong commercial and consumer-oriented perspective. Discussions may explicitly revolve around how technology can optimize business operations, improve customer experiences, and drive profits.

Strong emphasis is placed on entrepreneurship and profit-seeking. Innovation conferences, in this spirit, often focus on showcasing entrepreneurial success stories and promoting the idea that innovation should primarily serve economic growth and profit generation. Attendees are encouraged to pursue innovation for commercial purposes.

Neoliberalism underscores individual initiative and self-reliance. Therefore, current conferences dedicated to innovation and technology tend to highlight individual innovators, entrepreneurs, and tech start-ups, and their innovative achievements, concentrating on personal success stories and achievements (*NB*, this can overshadow the role of collective efforts or public sector initiatives in shaping online technology).

Neoliberal ideology accentuates measurable outcomes and metrics. As a result, innovation conferences may focus on quantifiable results, such as return on investment, market impact, and profitability (while, we may add, at the same time, sometimes neglect broader societal or environmental outcomes).

In summa, neoliberal ideology has influenced innovation conferences by fostering a market-driven, profit-oriented approach to innovation, emphasizing individualism and entrepreneurship, and promoting global market integration.

4.2. Methodology

Bearing in mind that Foucault focuses almost exclusively on texts when trying to grasp neoliberalism (Rondelez 2021, 3), our methodology follows critical discourse analysis. That is, a systematic exploration of "often opaque relationships of causality and determination between (a) discursive practices, events and texts, and (b) wider social and cultural structures, relations and processes; to investigate how such practices, events and texts arise out of and are ideologically shaped by relations of power and struggles over power" (Fairclough 2013, 93).

This was followed with the intention to grasp how values, beliefs and assumptions are communicated in the study genre (Fairclough 2013, 75-79, 939-7) of manually chosen "tech conferences" of 2023 held in Central and Eastern Europe, and how the corresponding language (and phraseology) used related to their social, political and historical contexts (cf. Luo 2019).

4.3. Relevance of the discourse manifested by social practices

The experiences of a series of conferences as forms of social practices (cf. Fairclough 2013, 172–232) from, although regionally connected but separate countries, namely Hungary, Slovakia, the Czech Republic and Poland, represent a similar set of concepts with substantially overlapping imagery, phraseology and vocabulary of texts, i.e. interpretations of social reality arguably constituting an international tendency. The factual reality of the organizing and the taking place of such events demonstrates an existing social engagement, which also has relevance for any scholar of social sciences.

Such an empirical framework can well be juxtaposed to the experiences of international tendencies previously described by already cited scholars, such as Dardot and Laval (2013, 2014a, 2014b). Textual analysis, which was used hereinafter to consider the texts related to the conferences, includes, as the Gramscian scholar Fairclough (2013, 299) points out, "linguistic analysis and social analysis". It also includes, what the author has called "interdiscursive analysis", that is, seeing texts in terms of the different discourses, genres and styles they draw upon and articulate together.

The reason to analyse texts and discourses is to ascertain the significance of ideologies, which also cannot be undervalued. The latter have a durability and stability which transcends individual texts or bodies of texts, they can be associated *inter alia* with discourses as representations. A discourse is thus a particular way of representing some part of the world (cf. Escobar 2012).

Recognizing the importance of the dynamics of discourse and power to any study (cf. Escobar 2012, vii), having all these perspectives and the tradition of critical social theory (Craig 1999) in mind, it was necessary to enter into the social and cultural configurations through discourses that are being produced *in situ*, with a focus on performing a textual analysis (Fairclough 2013) of Central and Eastern European conferences as follows.

4.4. Recent regional reflections of a regime

Although as introduced above, the tendencies of neoliberal subjectivation (Dardot and Laval 2013, 2014a; Türken et al. 2015) in terms of innovation, consumerism, and the principles of performance and pleasure (Dardot and Laval 2014b) far surpass the Central European theatre, it is relevant to identify local, regional concentration points of large, arguably global processes.

In order to capture certain social tendencies of significant magnitude, it is arguably worthwhile to cast a glance based both on a Dardot and Laval-based perspective (2013, 2014a, 2014b) and a textual analysis (Fairclough 2013), on some major conferences in the Central European region, bearing in mind that "social practises involve forms of work, identification, that is the construction of social identities, and representations of the social world" (Fairclough 2013, 172).

The following thematic compositions represent and form discursive sets, at the intersection of which notions of pleasure (joy) and performance (efficacy), (technological) innovation and consumption are to be found, along with a general teleology and the authority of neoliberal ideals.

Conference 1 held in Hungary, in mid-spring of 2023, explicitly presented pleasure and performance not only as natural drives *per se*, but also channelled them into the ICT growth agenda, in the context of the following theme: "Tyrants in our souls. Imagination and desire as (evolutionary) driving forces".

Users of ICT were defined in teleological terms, regularly portrayed as accomplishers of historical or heroic deeds, distinguished in a dichotomous manner from others: "Who buys more meat, app users or those lagging behind?".

In addition, other titles of presentations and panel discussion also echoed this division of society, while at the same time, tended to reflect an overall orientation to the "market": "Content consumption and purchasing habits of the digitally affinitive population".

As a new historical era is being taken for granted (cf. title "Our new place in the New World"), one should not hesitate to join, and, obviously, consume the relevant products.

Conference No. 2, held in Poland in the early autumn of 2023, on the one hand, asserted the ideology of competition already in the context of the call for relevant applications. On the other hand, the criterion of competition between such "visions" becomes the extent to which they serve the cause of an abstract "freedom" that innovation is supposed to promote. In other words, the specific measure of the concept of universal freedom becomes the innovative impulse: "The 'Innovation for Freedom Challenge' calls on you to manifest your vision for a world in which innovation serves as a driver for freedom. Be it through freedom of speech, freedom of action, freedom from oppression, or any other meaningful interpretations of freedom that matters to individuals and communities". Thus, undisguised claims for leading the future were made, offering the choice to be included or fall behind.

Conference No. 3 held in the Czech Republic, in late spring in 2023, once again featured themes such as the Digital Economic (R)evolution. It thus raised the flag of innovation with the following announcement: "The economy is running up against its limits and, if it wants to be successful and prosperous, it must focus on technological transformation leading to higher added value".

As a *differentia specifica*, vis-à-vis the former conferences, an exhibition accompanied the event. In the relevant framework, thus, "Visitors can look forward to robots, a life-size 3D avatar with AI technology enabling voice communication, demonstrations of non-formal education, programming of ozobots, experiments

with a thermal camera and much more". Among those confirmed exhibitors, obviously, one could find numerous representatives of ICT behemoths.

In the context of the "Inspiration track" (already, inherently suggesting a normative logic) series of Conference No. 4, held in Slovakia in late autumn of 2023, the fourth presentation carried the title "Learning Culture: Adapt or Die". The contributor shared thoughts and personal experience about finding the corresponding solution. Accordingly, they tried to focus on people's development from the beginning with a current junior program of "intensive study and experience-building". In the latter framework, participants "have been forced to constantly update and experiment with how to support the learning culture".

The third presentation at the same Conference's same series titled "From kitchen to code: What software testers can learn from a Michelin-star chef about quality and excellence" aimed to highlight the "undeniable" parallels between software testing and cooking. Here, both an explicit mission resulting in excellence and self-realisation and the expansion to other arenas of life are manifested: "From careful ingredient selection and meticulous planning to the use of appropriate techniques and the importance of presentation and continuous improvement, these disciplines share fundamental principles".

Conference No. 5 held in Poland in late autumn was supposed to be "the largest data science community in Poland, based in Warsaw, Poland. It is an informal non-profit organization working to exchange ideas and knowledge about data science, data engineering and so-called artificial intelligence." Its *raison d'être* is, according to the webpage, to "discuss tools, technology and business opportunities related to collecting, processing and visualization of data, as well as machine learning and deep learning". Here again, the neoliberal ideology, which tendentiously places a strong emphasis on benchmarking, i.e. measurable results and metrics, comes into play.

One of the presenters of the "Technology Stage" in Conference 6, held in the Czech Republic, acted as a harbinger to announce that "the beat of the technology drum is certainly relentless". In this spirit, it was also concluded that this former process occurs "with no limits to cloud scale and huge innovations from the biggest brains". In a quite similar tone, another participant at the "Business Stage," offered "valuable insights for managers who plan to maximize the potential of the Power Platform in their organizations (or are already working on it)". Once again, a constant teleological drive to human and enterprise "growth" became fully displayed.

On the basis of our text analytical methodology (cf. Fairclough 2013), the general experience seemed to be that these conferences anticipated that:

1) there are elementary and comprehensive changes in society;
2) it is possible to be at the forefront of them, as kinds of "chosen ones" by making use of "once in a lifetime" opportunities, should the motivations reflect and represent performance and/or enjoyment-related objectives; and
3) digital affinity (i.e. commitment to innovation) and consumerist drives are partly the keys leading to this ability.

5. Conclusion

This paper aimed to explore the recent tendencies of the neoliberal (cf. i.a. Harvey 2005; Mignolo 2011; Wacquant 2012) ultra-subjectivation (cf. Dardot and Laval 2013, 2014a, 2014b) via ICT from a post-Foucauldian (Foucault 1978, 1994; Deleuze and Guattari 2005; Escobar 2012) perspective representing the tradition of critical social theory (Craig 1999, 144-149).

Thus, by including an interdisciplinary framework, the theoretical spectrum of this research aimed to juxtapose ICT with experiences of the microcosm of the entrepreneurial subject (Dardot and Laval 2013, 259) (Dardot and Laval 2014b) and the macrocosm of the global market (Harvey 2005; Mignolo 2011) already established in the "offline" world.

This endeavour relied on a premise that the neoliberal concept of competition, with its inherent inclination for consumption, and a contemporary binary of pleasure and performance both define user attitudes and promotional trends in ICT enforcing an ideologically loaded, normative representation.

Experiences from a textual analysis of six Central and Eastern European conferences as forms of social practices (cf. Fairclough 2013) demonstrate that:

– innovations in technology, competitive entrepreneurship and consumptive practices become integrated in a discursive order (Escobar 2012, 5; cf. Fairclough 2013, 27) that paves the way not only for an ultra-subjectivation by ICT (Dardot and Laval 2013, 297) (Dardot and Laval 2014b) but also the corresponding ICT usage and growth;

– an epistemological regime is formed, which stipulates the compliance of the microcosm of the neo-subjects, who always want to perform (produce) and enjoy (consume) "ever more", even via the macrocosm of the ICT.

These together form the new (neoliberal) way of the world, as Dardot and Laval (2013, 2014a, 2014b) put it, or, *tout court,* the "system" in the description of Castells (1996, I, 2005).

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