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In the Realm of the Weak Tie: Social Networks, Turning Points and Serendipitous Desire

Paper presented at *Libidinal Economies of Contemporary Capitalism*
City, University of London, 15-16 April 2021

In a widely viewed 2013 TED talk, clinical psychologist Meg Jay implores listeners to make the most of their twenties: to work on relationships, social networks and ‘identity capital’ *now*, rather than procrastinating on major life decisions. “Twentysomethings are like airplanes just leaving LAX, bound for somewhere west,” she explains. “Right after take-off, a slight change in course is the difference between landing in Alaska or Fiji.”¹ Echoing Mark Granovetter’s hugely influential 1973 paper ‘The Strength of Weak Ties,’ she advises twentysomethings to explore their connections with acquaintances and friends of friends – those who tend to be the richest sources of new opportunities (such as jobs and romantic partnerships), since they bring new information from outside our primary social circles. Transforming Granovetter’s sociology into self-help, Jay’s talk typifies a neoliberal stylization of desire, in which self-actualization is recast as navigating the serendipitous horizons of possibility at the edges of our social networks, in order to change course in life. In parallel, financialized surveillance apparatuses (from U.S. retailer Target’s early 2000s ‘pregnancy prediction scores’ to social impact bond evaluations) perform acute interest in identifying (and intervening in) life’s turning points. Informed by ‘nudging,’ ‘neoliberal’ or ‘social physics’ approaches, such apparatuses model life changes by mapping (and manipulating) the spread of behaviours through neural and social networks. How does Jay’s stylization of neoliberal desire – which places luck and chance within the realm of the weak tie – relate to the widespread, instrumentalized mapping of turning points in lives and social networks? How might this pervasive mapping reshape desire itself? Drawing from Wendy Chun’s work on networks and neoliberalism, as well as debates on data colonialism and the social logic of the derivative, I argue that the extensive instrumentalization of social networks newly aligns the desire for life-changing, chance encounters with financial practices of hedging investment portfolios. Further, this effectively enables the expropriation of serendipity – such that the desire for life-changing, chance encounters itself acts as a source of value for those who can effectively control the mapping of social networks, and regulate the predictive terrains in which serendipity newly operates.

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¹ Meg Jay, ‘Why 30 Is Not the New 20’,
https://www.ted.com/talks/meg_jay_why_30_is_not_the_new_20?language=en.