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Conditional Recognition and the Popularization of the Contemporary Wellness Industry

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Degree of

Master of Arts in Liberal Studies

by Janina Lynn Misiewicz

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August 2021

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Abstract

During the second half of the twentieth century, liberalism gave way to neoliberalism, and as a result, the cultural role of wellness also expanded, leading to the creation of what Carl Cederström and André Spicer call “the wellness syndrome.” Now, in a society inundated by yoga studios, corporate mindfulness programs, and data tracking apps, wellness has expanded into a multibillion dollar industry. Yet the allure of wellness is not immediately understandable. What is it about wellness that has created an almost religious fervor among its adherents? This thesis offers a solution to this question in the form of what I will call conditional recognition, or a form of recognition that is dependent on certain circumstances to exist.

In viewing the contemporary wellness industry through the lens of conditional recognition, I make the argument that people pursue wellness—and other forms of symbolic capital, like education—because they are fundamentally in search of recognition. However, when people neglect themselves in order to attain a culturally constructed ideal, the recognition conferred on them is recognition of their performance, not the person. As a result, their fundamental need to be recognized is not met and they must continue striving—and *laboring*—to be seen as valuable. Therefore, conditional recognition—and the wellness industry more generally—is ultimately in service of the healthy functioning of capitalism, not individuals.

Acknowledgments

I started writing this thesis during the COVID-19 pandemic, and although I have made it to the end, it has not been an easy process. There were long stretches of time when I spoke to no one, did not leave my room—except for food, of course—and existed solely within the confines of my own mind. It was a unique experience that was both remarkably transformative and profoundly challenging. I was able to work through it, though, because of the support I received from my thesis advisors, the MALS community, and my friends and family.

First and foremost, I would like to extend my gratitude to my three thesis readers. Without the guidance and persistent help of my first reader, Professor James Dobson, this thesis would not have been possible. Throughout the entirety of the thesis process, he has patiently provided me with invaluable feedback, made excellent book recommendations, and encouraged me to stay on track. Furthermore, many of the ideas that we studied in his class, *Autobiography & Selfie Culture*, contributed to how I think about the ideas that I explore here. My second reader, Professor Donald Pease, has been a guiding light throughout my MALS journey. He has persistently supported my ideas, both in and out of the classroom. Finally, Professor Regine Rosenthal has been like a rock to me. Not only did I learn from her in the classroom when I took *Diasporas & Migrations*, but she was also my independent study advisor before becoming one of my thesis advisors. She has been consistently supportive of me throughout my time in this program.

More generally, I would like to extend my gratitude to a number of people who positively influenced me during my time in the MALS program. First, I would like to extend my gratitude to Professor Christa Buschendorf, who introduced me to relational sociology, and more specifically, the scholarship of Pierre Bourdieu. She encouraged me to keep going at a time when I wanted to quit, and as a result, I learned more than I could have thought possible. I am also grateful for the support of my friends Pierce Ellinwood and Daniel Affsprung. Both of them made significant contributions to my sanity during a year when it was hard to get out of bed in the morning, let alone write a thesis. I also do not know what I would have done without the director of the MALS program, Wole Ojurongbe, or Colleen Andrasko, the MALS Administrator/Registrar. They helped me every step of the way.

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Chapter One

An Introduction to Wellness in the Neoliberal Paradigm

Anyone who absorbs the media of the twenty-first century is at risk of believing themselves to be inadequate. This is not because they are in fact inadequate, but because feeling inadequate is a large component of how contemporary capitalism works. Americans today are inundated with messages about how they could make themselves better, like boosting their immune systems, increasing their productivity, feeling less tense, or being kinder, happier, and more loving people in general. They are told that their wellbeing is only ever a single step away: if they could just master the moment,¹ commit to walking 10,000 steps per day,² avoid loud noises,³ discard those items that no longer “strike joy” in them,⁴ or develop a regular weight training regimen,⁵ then they could be the living embodiment of wellness. But this of course is an illusion, for once one aspect of this never-ending-to-do list of happiness has been mastered, the messaging changes: rather than walking 10,000

1. Hallie Levine, “Master the Moment,” *Time: Special Edition*, October 2019, 18-22.

2. “The Magic of 10,000 Steps,” Fitbit News, 22 June 2010, <https://blog.fitbit.com/the-magic-of-10000-steps/>.

3. Cypress Hansen, “Traffic Noise Is a Silent Killer,” *Atlantic Magazine*, 21 February 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2021/02/how-noise-harms-heart/618091/>.

4. Bryan Robinson, “Marie Kondo On How Tidying Up Brings More Joy and Success In 2021,” *Forbes*, 1 February 2021, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/bryanrobinson/2021/02/01/marie-kondo-on-how-tidying-up-brings-more-joy-and-success-in-2021/?sh=2b5fe1136e80>.

5. Markham Heid, “Why You Should Start Weight Training,” *Time: Your Guide to Getting Healthy*, March 2021, 32-33.

steps per day, perhaps it would be better if people would devote their energy to “forest bathing” instead.⁶

Wellness—and in extension, self-improvement—is a central aspect of the modern American identity. It is written all over the newspapers and magazines that people read; it is touted on the pages of social media influencers; it has impacted the way that clothing is styled, buildings are designed, and gadgets are made; and it is even incorporated into the layout and culture of schools, workplaces, and prisons. It is a determining factor of how contemporary Americans work, shop, eat, study, exercise, care for their kids, use their free time, make decisions, relate to one another, clothe themselves, and organize their living spaces. Major newspaper publications—such as the *New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Los Angeles Times*—all have sections specifically dedicated to “wellness” where they regularly publish articles that range in topics from curbing illness and finding jobs to eating well and building healthy relationships to goal setting and exploring spirituality. Suffice it to say, wellness is an important aspect of contemporary American life and culture.

But what exactly *is* wellness?

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the way in which most Americans think about wellness today is defined as “the state or condition of being in good physical, mental, and spiritual health, especially as an actively pursued

6. Betsy Morris, “For Better Health During the Pandemic, Is Two Hours Outdoors the New 10,000 Steps?” *The Wall Street Journal*, 14 February 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/for-better-health-during-the-pandemic-is-two-hours-outdoors-the-new-10-000-steps-11613304002?page=1>

goal.”⁷ This way of thinking about wellness has been in circulation since at least the 1950s when Dr. Halbert L. Dunn—who is considered the father of the contemporary wellness movement—gave a lecture in 1957 before the Medico-Chirurgical Society of the District of Columbia imploring the public health and medical communities to research the ways in which individuals may cultivate higher degrees of “wellness.”⁸ At the time, Dunn argued that health should be thought of as more than just the absence of disease or death, it should be thought of as “a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being,” for even someone who appears generally healthy may not be “as healthy as he could be.”⁹ Therefore, health should not be framed as a state or condition, but as a process that strives “for maximum physical, mental and social efficiency for the individual, for his family and for the community.”¹⁰

Since Dunn gave this lecture over sixty years ago, the American health industry has expanded in all the ways that he was hoping it would—and more. Before the 1950s, the Google Books Ngram Viewer shows that the term “wellness” was hardly in use in the United States, but since 1957, its use, as measured by the indexed materials in Google Books, has increased by over 9,000%, with almost all of

7. "wellness, n." OED Online, December 2020, Oxford University Press, <https://www-oed-com.dartmouth.idm.oclc.org/view/Entry/227459?redirectedFrom=wellness> (accessed February 24, 2021).

8. Daniela Blei, “The False Promises of Wellness Culture,” *JSTOR Daily*, January 4, 2017, <https://daily.jstor.org/the-false-promises-of-wellness-culture/>.

9. Halbert L. Dunn, “Points of Attack for Raising the Levels of Wellness,” *Journal of the National Medical Association* 49, no. 4 (1957): 225.

10. Dunn, 225.

that growth taking place since 1980.¹¹ Furthermore, it is reported that the global wellness industry was worth 4.3 trillion dollars in 2017, a 13% increase from 2015.¹² Yet despite this growth, wellness is still thought about in a strikingly similar way to how Dunn defined it in 1957. In a comprehensive wellness guide published by *Time Magazine* in 2021, wellness is described as the following:

Getting healthy is a journey, and though the steps you take along the way may seem small, they all make a big difference. With this guide, you'll learn how to take a whole-body approach to personal wellness, one step at a time. Start by setting smart goals, which will help enrich your days with better habits. These aren't always major (and they don't even require a gym). Taking more breaks at work, cooking with an extra vegetable and calling an old friend are some of the science-backed ways you'll learn to get well—and stay that way.¹³

Although this passage reemphasizes Dunn's earlier assessment of wellness, its perspective is also notably different. No longer is wellness presented as an idea that is in need of being accepted; it is presented as a given: of course people should be striving to get healthy beyond the mere absence of disease. This shift in perspective stems from the way in which wellness has evolved in the United States. More specifically, it has developed contemporaneously with a cultural shift in the United States during the 1960s, 70s, and 80s in which the economy transitioned from being a regulated system to one that was decentralized and globalized, creating a slew of social, political, and economic changes. This ideological shift was the result of a

11. "Wellness," *Google Books Ngram Viewer*, https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=wellness&year_start=1800&year_end=2019&corpus=28&smoothing=3.

12. Statista, "Market size of the global wellness industry," <https://www.statista.com/study/13668/wellness-and-spa-statista-dossier/>.

13. Edward Felsenthal, editor. "Your Guide to Getting Healthy: The Science of Mind-Body Wellness," *Time: Special Edition* (Meredith Corporation, 2021), 1.

larger socioeconomic transition that took place in the United States during the twentieth century referred to by theorists as the neoliberalization of the West.

The Emergence of Neoliberalism in the United States

The term “neoliberalism” is notoriously difficult to define. It is social as well as political and economic; it is related to capitalism but not exactly the same thing; it is at times paradoxical in nature; and it manifests in seemingly disparate ways. In her book, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution*, political theorist Wendy Brown reveals the essence of neoliberalism when she writes that it reconfigures all spheres of existence into economic ones.¹⁴ This new economic reality has transformed the individual into “an intensely constructed and governed bit of human capital tasked with improving and leveraging its competitive positioning and with enhancing its (monetary and nonmonetary) portfolio value across all of its endeavors and venues.”¹⁵ The consequences of which have manifested in a variety of ways, such as the rise of public figures like Donald Trump, the increase in our cultural dependency on technology, the three million people living in the United States who self-identify as “doomsday preppers,”¹⁶ the deterioration of public school systems, and the onslaught of wellness apps reminding us to be mindful at various points throughout the day. Although these

14. Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution* (New York: Zone Books, 2015), 10.

15. Brown, 10.

16. Casey Ryan Kelly, “The Man-pocalypse: *Doomsday Preppers* and the Rituals of Apocalyptic Manhood,” *Text and Performance Quarterly* 36, nos. 2-3, 95-114 (2016), 95.

consequences may not seem related to one another at first glance, as Wendy Brown explains, they are all instances of neoliberalism in action, for neoliberalism is defined by “its unevenness, its lack of self-identity, its spatial and temporal variability, and above all, its availability to reconfiguration.”¹⁷

As the name suggests, neoliberalism is embedded in the philosophical and political tradition known as liberalism, an idea that was introduced to European countries during the Age of Enlightenment as both an economic and political choice, most commonly credited to John Locke, who famously made the argument that each man is entitled to life, liberty, and property—rights that governments must not violate. In Europe, liberalism coalesced into the larger historical framework of those governments, but in the United States, liberalism was woven into the inception of the country’s independence, establishing itself as an essential component of the United States’ overarching cultural values, like the importance of freedom and agency. The Founding Fathers of the United States believed in the importance of both human dignity and individual freedom, planting the seed for the “American Dream” and the belief that anyone can accomplish anything if they work hard enough and use their resources both efficiently and systematically to maximize their gains. By the end of the twentieth century, liberalism had evolved into a much more pervasive and complicated social and economic paradigm known as *neoliberalism*. Many of the overarching values of liberalism remained intact, but neoliberalism complicated them by constructing and introducing a less interventionist, less

17. Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 21.

regulated, and less socially-oriented view of the economy through which the global market could be guided.

During the twentieth century, major events such as the Great Depression and World War II provoked dramatic economic changes in both the United States and abroad. It was amidst these changes that neoliberal theory gained traction, largely in response to the interventionist economic policies of John Maynard Keynes. In 1947, the Mont Pelerin Society was formed, an academic group consisting of economists, historians, and philosophers who passionately advocated for neoliberal theory.¹⁸ During the following decades, neoliberal theory continued to gain academic respectability until eventually two members of the Mont Pelerin Society, Friedrich von Hayek and Milton Friedman, won Nobel Prizes in economics in 1974 and 1976, respectively;¹⁹ however, the watershed moment in which it transitioned more concretely from theory to praxis was not until the years 1978 to 1980. It is fitting that the term “wellness” began to gain traction in American culture at the exact same time. In the introduction to his book, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, David Harvey claims that historians will look upon the years 1978 to 1980 as “a revolutionary turning-point in the world’s social and economic history”²⁰ because a combination of world events occurred that changed the global economy: Deng Xiaoping took the first steps towards the liberalization of a communist-ruled economy in China, Margaret Thatcher was elected to be Prime Minister of Britain in

18. David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 60-61. Epub.

19. Harvey, 67.

20. Harvey, 16.

1979, and Ronald Reagan was elected to the Presidency of the United States in 1980.²¹

Ronald Reagan's victory over Jimmy Carter was crucial because it led to the deregulation of the economy, a reduction in corporate taxes, and attacks on trade unions and professional power,²² resulting in a dramatically different economy than what had existed during the prior decades. The Reagan administration was able to garner support for its neoliberal agenda because it promoted the new market as a "way to foster competition and innovation," while it was actually just "a vehicle for the consolidation of monopoly power"²³ that would benefit a few, while disenfranchising the rest. This can be exemplified by the fact that "the Federal minimum wage, which stood on a par with the poverty level in 1980, had fallen to 30 per cent below that level by 1990."²⁴ In addition, "corporate taxes were reduced dramatically, and the top personal tax rate was reduced from 70 to 28 per cent in what was billed as 'the largest tax cut in history.'"²⁵ The Reagan Administration also began to reform the welfare state by signing the Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act, transforming the tax structure to make distributive welfare benefits less manageable, and many government functions underwent a process of privatization.²⁶

21. Harvey, 16.

22. Harvey, 68-69.

23. Harvey, 75.

24. Harvey, 74.

25. Harvey, 75.

26. See David Stoesz and Howard Jacob Karger, "Deconstructing Welfare: The Reagan Legacy and the Welfare State," *Social Work* 38, no. 5 (1993): 619-628.

These changes were not restricted to the economic sphere either; they were also cultural. During the New Left social movements of the 1960s and 70s, more people shifted away from traditional American values in favor of a new kind of freedom that held the liberties of those who had been historically oppressed—like women, people of color, and gay and lesbian individuals—in higher regard. This cultural shift not only resulted in more rights for these groups, but it also changed the way in which individuality was viewed. For although individuality was an important American value long before the rise of neoliberalism, a different kind of individuality emerged from these social changes—an individuality in which people were seen as masters of their own domains. As a result, higher education was getting more expensive, people were working longer hours despite earning lower wages, and federal programs were being cut or privatized. But individuals were being framed as better off than ever before because more people, especially women and black people, had more individual rights than in the prior decades; new sectors were expanding the economy, like information technology, biotechnology, and media; and no longer were people and businesses as inhibited by the interventionist state government as they were before.

It was seen as a new, liberating era. However, with freedom also comes responsibility, and increasingly, the expectation was that, in a deregulated, highly individualistic economy, people are responsible for their wellbeing, and if anyone is to fall behind, either personally or professionally, it is considered a personal failing, not a systemic failure. If the system is barely visible, more like a general outline,

holding structures in place but standing far away from interventionist practices, how can unhappiness be anyone's fault except those who are experiencing it?

The Significance of *Homo Oeconomicus*

During the second half of the twentieth century, neoliberalism integrated economics into spheres that had not been historically considered economic, like raising children or finding a romantic partner, and through doing so, it established itself as not only an economic system, but also as a form of social organization, creating what philosophical thinker, Michel Foucault, calls *homo oeconomicus*, or the economic person, someone who organizes her life around the goal of maximizing her economic profitability and profit. Through the model of *homo oeconomicus*, economic analysis was applied to domains of behavior that were not initially considered economic, like, for example, a regular mindfulness practice or the acquisition of a new language. These social and economic changes altered the ways in which individuals viewed both themselves and their roles in society, but more importantly, it persuaded them to adapt their personal interests to be in better alignment with optimal economic outcomes.

In two lectures presented at Dartmouth College in 1980, "Subjectivity and Truth" and "Christianity and Confession," Foucault traces the genealogy of the hermeneutics of the self from Greek technologies to the development of self-examination in early Christianity, demonstrating that what he calls "technologies of the self"—or "techniques which permit individuals to effect . . . a certain number of operations on their own bodies, on their own souls, on their own thoughts, on their

own conduct . . . so as to transform themselves, modify themselves, and to attain a certain state of perfection, of happiness, of purity, or supernatural powers, and so on”—were being used as early as the first few centuries A.D.²⁷ However, part of his motivation for giving these lectures is to clarify that there is a significant difference between the techniques that were being used during early Christianity and how those technologies of self have developed since then. For although people have always been seen as separate from one another, the way in which *individuality* is understood today is a relatively recent phenomenon. For a majority of human history, most people were not considered individualistic monads capable of enacting change on the world—or themselves—but rather, their identities and actions were more closely bound to the positions that they held in society.

For example, in Plato's *Republic*, Socrates describes the self as someone who does not rise above or challenge their designated position in society, but rather, finds meaning through that role. In order to do this, Socrates highlights two important qualities of the self. First, the self is a reflection of its environment. In his theory of the “ideal city,” Socrates claims that the three classes—the guardian, auxiliary, and moneymaking classes—are analogous to the three parts of the psyche—the spirit, mind, and ego—arguing that the individual and the society are a reflection of one another. Second, the self is constructed by and dependent on its environment for meaning, and therefore, a “noble lie” must be used to justify the way in which the three major classes are distributed. According to Socrates, the goal

27. Michel Foucault, “About the Beginning of the Hermeneutics of the Self,” *Political Theory* 21, no. 2 (1993), 203.

of the noble lie is to “persuade first the rulers and the soldiers, then the rest of the city” that a god, or nature, decides who is competent to rule, mixing gold into the hearts of the guardian class, silver into the hearts of the auxiliary class, and iron and bronze into the hearts of the farmers and craftsmen.²⁸ Socrates’ noble lie exists in order to justify the stratification of class so that people will not only understand their roles, but they will also accept them without doubt.

The way in which Socrates conceptualized social structure—and the role that individuals played within that structure—is reminiscent of how people organized themselves during the pre-modern era. But when Nicolaus Copernicus proposed that the earth revolved around a stationary sun, rather than the sun and planets revolving around the earth, he changed the way in which the world was viewed, initiating dramatic social changes.²⁹ During this transition, strict social hierarchies began to collapse, and simultaneously, individualism rose in importance, coinciding with the growth of capitalism and a reevaluation of the technologies of the self.

This transition marks the beginning of an era in which the human body was no longer seen as a vessel that must be renounced or saved, but a machinery of power that, if cultivated correctly, could result in a “positive self,” or a subject who responds positively to the mechanics of power, resulting in behavior that is in pursuit of what one desires and with the “techniques, the speed and the efficiency

28. Plato, *The Republic of Plato*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1968), 94.

29. Sheila Rabin, "Nicolaus Copernicus," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Fall 2019 Edition, ed. Edward N. Zalta. <https://plato-stanford-edu.dartmouth.idm.oclc.org/archives/fall2019/entries/copernicus/>.

that one determines.”³⁰ The emergence of individualism transformed discipline from a monastic type, “whose function was to obtain renunciations rather than increases of utility,”³¹ to an art of the human body, “which was directed not only at the growth of its skills, nor at the intensification of its subjection, but at the formation of a relation that in the mechanism itself makes it more obedient as it becomes more useful.”³² Therefore, using confessional and disciplinary techniques reminiscent of early Christianity, the emergence—rather than the destruction—of the self became paramount.

Many social and political changes took place that influenced this trend, but for Foucault, one of the most important changes was the emergence of social institutions, like state-funded prisons, schools, and hospitals, that implemented coercive “techniques of domination” so as “to determine the conduct of individuals, to impose certain wills on them, and to submit them to certain ends or objectives.”³³ Alongside these social institutions, the individual was reevaluated as a governable subject who could learn to use technologies of the self to alter his behavior. As a result, both individuals and institutions began to operate in accordance with one another, fulfilling the needs and desires of the other. The interactions between the two coalesced to create governing bodies that would come to rely on a “subtle integration of coercion-technologies and self-technologies”³⁴ to regulate themselves,

30. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 138.

31. Foucault, 137.

32. Foucault, 137-8.

33. Foucault, “About the Beginning of the Hermeneutics of the Self,” 203.

34. Foucault, 204.

or in other words, people learned to behave in the ways the government wanted them to behave without the government having to force them to do anything.

Technologies of the self were introduced at the level of the individual, not en masse or wholesale, but through education and schooling, the penal system, the military, and other social institutions, gradually acclimating each human body to an environment of control and discipline.

In 1979, Michel Foucault delivered a series of lectures, known collectively as *The Birth of Biopolitics*, at the Collège de France. Although neoliberalism was not a widely understood term at that time, Foucault delivered a prescient account of the paradigm in these lectures. He was able to do this, in part, because he had already spent the majority of his career developing critical ideas around terms that are fundamentally in accordance with neoliberalism: governmentality, technologies of the self, and knowledge/power. In these lectures, Foucault explains how the emergence of *homo oeconomicus* is simply another step in the evolution of the human body as a governable subject. Since the eighteenth century, but more importantly, since the emergence of neoliberalism during the second half of the twentieth century, the mechanics of self-discipline have increasingly adapted themselves to both the psyches of individuals and the economic structure in which those individuals reside. Historically, individuals—like students in schools—were watched, guided, and coerced regularly so as to become more docile subjects, but those strict disciplinary models have now fallen out of favor, and children are instead encouraged to define themselves as self-driven individuals who have chosen, rather than been forced, to be efficient, productive, and motivated people.

This entrepreneurial self, or what Foucault calls *homo oeconomicus*, is an automaton of habit, a pliable machine, a calculated body who lives to achieve economic optimization. In *The Birth of Biopolitics*, Foucault explains how, during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, *homo oeconomicus* was not yet in existence because, at those times, social spheres were considered “non-market relationships and phenomena” that were separate from economic spheres, and although there was interaction between the two, they remained distinct categories.³⁵ However, during the twentieth century, this relationship began to change as non-market relationships were inverted from social to economic modes of valuation, leading to two central consequences: (1) human capital was introduced as a profitable resource, and (2) the social body was turned into a network of enterprises.

The Rise of Human Capital

Human capital, an economic theory that had been historically overlooked by economists, was introduced to the field of economics in 1971 when Theodore Schultz published a book called *Investment in Human Capital*.³⁶ Until this point, economists had only thought about the economy through the lens of three variables: land, capital, and labor; and the last variable—labor—was only thought about in terms of how many hours laborers worked, rather than thinking about the laborers themselves as forms of capital. Foucault clarifies that a laborer does not sell his labor, he sells his *labor power*, and the “work performed by the worker is work that

35. Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, ed. Michel Senellart, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2008), 240.

36. Foucault, 220.

creates a value, part of which is extorted from him.”³⁷ There is an inextricable link between the laborer himself and “the person who is skilled and who can do this particular thing,”³⁸ creating what Foucault calls an “active economic subject”³⁹ whose income is “quite simply the product or return on a capital,”⁴⁰ with capital being “everything that in one way or another can be a source of future income.”⁴¹ This means that the labor one invests in oneself *is* capital because it can be converted into a future form of income that can then be reinvested into the individual to produce *more* capital, creating what Foucault calls a “machine, but a machine which cannot be separated from the worker himself.”⁴²

The concept of human capital is essential to the neoliberal paradigm because it is the linchpin that ties the overarching economic goals of a given society to the behavior of individuals. The amount of capital that a laborer generates directly impacts his economic value, a value that can then be exploited by capitalists to further their own advancement. It is for this reason that capital is not strictly relegated to some activities and not others, as it was in the past. In the neoliberal paradigm, *all* activities are reconfigured as economic ones, and it is through this new economic lens that decisions and behaviors gain or lose value based on their economic profitability. As a result, people are inevitably drawn towards those actions, decisions, and behaviors that will *increase* their human capital, thereby

37. Foucault, 221.

38. Foucault, 224.

39. Foucault, 223.

40. Foucault, 224.

41. Foucault, 224.

42. Foucault, 224.

increasing their value in the eyes of the system. The result, as we will explore in more depth in the following chapter, is a sense of recognition for one's person, but a recognition that is wholly dependent on the maintenance of one's human capital.

In general, human capital is made up of all the physical and psychological components that constitute a person, components that can be broken down into different categories. Pierre Bourdieu, a relational sociologist whose work was influenced by Foucault, developed a theory about capital during his lifetime, claiming that there are two central forms of capital—economic and symbolic—and from these, symbolic capital can be divided into two parts: social and cultural capital. Although forms of symbolic capital cannot be immediately and directly monetized, they are economic in nature because they give value and sustenance to economic capital. Social and cultural capital are distinct categories, but they are related to each other in the sense that they are oftentimes inherited biologically, enhanced through social circumstances, or accumulated based on access to resources, making it difficult to track and quantify their value.

Social capital refers to the membership of an individual to a specific social group, either informally, like a member of a family, or formally, through institutions, and how these memberships provide “each of its members with the backing of the collectivity-owned capital, a ‘credential’ which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word.”⁴³ Cultural and social capital often operate in conjunction with one another, compounding each other's value, but they are not the same. Cultural

43. Pierre Bourdieu, “The Forms of Capital,” in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1985), 248-9.

capital refers to the educational qualifications of an individual, which can take shape in three ways: the embodied state, or someone's natural ability to carry oneself or talk in a certain way; the objectified state, or cultural goods that can be traded or collectively valued, like books or paintings; and the institutionalized state, or social institutions that give certificates or rewards to individuals so as to recognize their cultural competence and to provide them with "conventional, constant, legally guaranteed value."⁴⁴ Of these three, cultural capital in the institutionalized state, like graduating from an elite university or winning an Academy Award, is the most valuable one because it is embedded in a longstanding system that is not likely to change in value over time.

Symbolic capital is economic in nature, which is why someone who increases her symbolic capital is also increasing her human capital and, in turn, her ability to profit from her personal experiences, knowledge, and skills. However, in order for someone to derive value from her symbolic capital, the symbolic capital must also be embedded in a social framework that recognizes it as valuable. It is, after all, "symbolic." However, the social contexts that surround and enhance symbolic capital are not clear cut and discernable, but rather, nuanced, difficult to trace, subdivided, and diverse, creating what Foucault calls "enterprises," or integrative social, political, and cultural networks that people draw from to reward themselves and others with value. In *The Birth of Biopolitics*, Foucault explains how an individual must not only navigate enterprises, but also convert himself into one:

44. Bourdieu, 248.

The individual's life must be lodged . . . within the framework of a multiplicity of diverse enterprises connected up to and entangled with each other, enterprises which are . . . sufficiently limited in their scale for the individual's actions, decisions, and choices to have meaningful and perceptible effects, and numerous enough for him not to be dependent on one alone. And finally, the individual's life itself . . . must make him into a sort of permanent and multiple enterprise.⁴⁵

Enterprises, both individual and collective, are comprised of social value, personal experience, moral systems, and future actions, but most importantly, they are fueled by economics—their overall purpose is to turn a profit. They draw from the allure of one's cultural values to turn economic profitability and human capital into goals that appear personally relevant and meaningful: does an acceptance letter from Harvard University speak to the academic discipline, integrity, and personal merit of an individual or does it indicate that she is just a cog in a machine who has effectively sacrificed herself to the system, turning her mind and body into profitable human capital? Or to put it another way, what is more important, her individuality, or her existence in relation to the grain of enterprises? A line cannot be drawn between the emotional relevancy of her individuality and the profitability of her economic machinery—they are tied into the same package. The discipline, integrity, hard work, and personal responsibility that she has learned to cultivate—all forms of symbolic capital—are simultaneously honorable *and* economic, not only providing her with a sense of personal achievement and meaning, but also keeping her in alignment with a life path that is fundamentally economic in nature. In the age of neoliberalism, people are defined by their achievements to the extent to which their

45. Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 241.

accomplishments are not only activities that they enjoy, but constitute everything that they are.

Wellness as an Economic Pursuit

It is against this neoliberal backdrop that the sudden expansion of the wellness industry during the latter half of the twentieth century begins to make sense.

Viewed through this lens, the cultivation of one's wellbeing can be seen more precisely for what it actually is: the cultivation of one's human capital for the sake of economic profitability. Similarly to the person who is accepted into Harvard, pursuing wellness can feel enriching and personally relevant, but it is also important to note that the work someone invests into their own wellbeing often stems from a desire to be more focused, less anxious, and ultimately more productive. It is difficult to separate the work required to be well from the work required to be professionally successful; these have become interrelated forms of effort that inform, rather than displace, one another. Within the framework of neoliberalism, individuals are asked to invest resources into their bodies so as to increase their market value, and pursuing wellness is an effective way to do so. From this perspective, contemporary wellness practices can be seen as an upgrade from the technologies of self that emerged during the eighteenth century. Similar to how confessional and disciplinary techniques of early Christianity were appropriated to transform people into pliable machines, the contemporary wellness movement has also appropriated traditional religious practices for its own benefit.

During the 1960s, a combination of cheaper airfare and social disenchantment made it possible for new ideas to be woven into the fabric of American life, such as Eastern thought and practices. These ideas converged to create a countercultural movement that questioned aspects of reality that, up until that point, had been taken for granted. In particular, the philosophy and meditative practices offered by Buddhism served as a catalyst for the expansion of the hippie subculture, eventually culminating in what author Tom Wolfe calls “the Third Great Awakening.”⁴⁶ In his article for *New York* magazine, called “The Me Decade,” Wolfe argues that the hippies made religion look hip, “very few people went into the hippie life with religious intentions, but many came out of it absolutely *righteous*.”⁴⁷ During this time, a variety of spiritual practices were growing in popularity, such as the emergence of new age spirituality programs, like Erhard Seminar Trainings, also known as est [sic], and Scientology; the emergence and dissemination of yoga; and the large number of gurus who traveled to the United States from India, like Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, who started the Students International Meditation Society (SIMS) in 1965 and was a guru to the Beatles.⁴⁸

Initially, spirituality was thought to be a method of escape from the conventional social structures that so many people had grown to distrust or reject entirely; but in time, these religious movements were coopted by the wellness

46. Tom Wolfe, “The ‘Me’ Decade and the Third Great Awakening,” *New York Magazine*, April 8, 2008, <https://nymag.com/news/features/45938/>.

47. Wolfe, “The ‘Me’ Decade and the Third Great Awakening.”

48. “The Rush of Gurus,” The Pluralism Project, Harvard University, accessed March 26, 2020, <http://pluralism.org/religions/hinduism/hinduism-in-america/the-rush-of-gurus/>.

industry, and they were transformed from religious movements into what Wolfe calls “*Me* movements.” After 1980, not only did the economy begin to change, but the way in which people utilized spiritual practices also began to change. Rather than rejecting the physical body and social conventions for the sake of attaining enlightenment, as was traditional in these Eastern practices, spirituality-based wellness programs, like mindfulness and yoga, were being reevaluated as ways to enhance the performance and efficiency of individuals *within* the established social structure. The exploitation of these practices is strikingly similar to the observations that Foucault made of early Christianity, but wellness is even more evasive than strict institutional control because, as Carl Cedarström and André Spicer write in their book, *The Wellness Syndrome*, “the site of control is no longer a disciplinary institution we enter into and then leave again”⁴⁹—like schools, hospitals, and prisons—it is located within oneself.

This dramatic change in social organization has led to a culture obsessed with productivity, efficiency, achievement, and optimization; an obsession that has resulted in the emergence of the contemporary wellness industry. During the past fifty to sixty years, the wellness industry has evolved from what was once just an idea—that health should be thought of as more than just the mere absence of disease—into what is now a complex form of social enterprising that is primarily and explicitly designed to enhance individuals’ accumulation of symbolic and economic capital. Wellness is an ideological product that practitioners consume,

49. Carl Cederström and André Spicer, *The Wellness Syndrome* (Cambridge: Polity, 2015), 107.

most often at a cost, in order to increase their ability to perform well in other domains, like the workplace, in school, or even at home.

Its rise in popularity during the 1980s was not a coincidence either. The wellness industry entered the American scene at the exact same time that socioeconomic security was beginning to erode and fervent individualism was being celebrated. In *Can't Even: How Millennials Became the Burnout Generation*, journalist Anne Helen Peterson argues that the millennial generation—people born between 1981 and 1996 *and the first generation to have lived entirely inside the neoliberal paradigm*—inherited a socioeconomic system that views burnout as a contemporary condition:⁵⁰

We're not just paying off student debt, but figuring out how to start saving for our young children. We're balancing skyrocketing housing prices *and* child-care costs *and* health insurance premiums. And the promised security of adulthood never seems to arrive, no matter how hard we try to organize our lives, or tighten our already tight budgets.⁵¹

In a world defined by never-ending to-do lists, breakneck competition, and precarious job markets, wellness is offered as the way out—as the path to stability—but by imploring individuals to work just a little bit harder, to invest more time into themselves, it is also *contributing* to the burnout experienced by so many, for “self-care” is just another task that has to be completed along with everything else. Long gone are the days in which people would pursue a hobby or a curiosity for the sake of the hobby itself. Today, all activities—even laughter and leisure—are

50. Anne Helen Peterson, *Can't Even: How Millennials Became the Burnout Generation* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2020), xvii.

51. Peterson, xviii.

considered means to a more optimized end. This alienating way of living is not fulfilling, yet many people continue to pursue it anyway—why is this? Why is the entrepreneurial subject motivated to act in accordance with the economic system of which she is a part? Why does she willingly dedicate herself to pursuing wellness even when this decision is not primarily in service to her, but rather, to those who benefit from her productivity?

In *The Wellness Syndrome*, Cedarström and Spicer delineate the ways in which the contemporary wellness industry works, but like so many others who write on this topic, they fail to clarify *why* the wellness industry has gripped the psyche of so many. What is it about wellness that has created an almost religious fervor among its adherents? In the next chapter, I hope to provide an answer to this question in the form of social class, and by extension, social recognition—or the human desire to give and receive respect. I hypothesize that the wellness industry has been able to expand in all the ways that it has primarily because of its relationship to recognition. But more specifically, its relationship to *conditional recognition*, or a kind of recognition that is dependent on certain circumstances to exist.

Chapter Two

The Role of Conditional Recognition

In recent years, a trend referred to as “biohacking” has taken root within the wellness industry, encouraging people to track their behavior in order to make little tweaks to their biology. This has led to some rather extreme fads, like injecting oneself with vitamins, drinking human breastmilk, ingesting tinctures made from deer antlers, only consuming water for days at a time, cutting almost all carbohydrates out of one’s diet, embedding microchips under one’s skin, and so on. In the 1980s, during the early days of the wellness industry, self-optimization involved little more than Jazzercise and bran muffins, but today, the goal of many wellness entrepreneurs is to override the human body so as to increase one’s longevity, enhances one’s abilities, and overall improve one’s performance.

Aaron Traywick, one of these entrepreneurs, died in a sensory deprivation tank in 2018, but before his death, he ran a company that provided funding to “D.I.Y. citizen-scientists” who tested experimental biohacking technology on their own bodies.⁵² Although the company, known as Ascendence Biomedical, was originally viewed as “a potentially groundbreaking venue for invention,” it eventually lost credibility when Traywick proved to be a “secretive and aggressive” leader.⁵³ Despite the eventual demise of Ascendence Biomedical, its initial promise and

52. Jonah Engel Bromwich, “The Death of a Biohacker,” *New York Times*, May 19, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/19/style/biohacker-death-aaron-traywick.html?searchResultPosition=6>.

53. Bromwich, “The Death of a Biohacker.”

popularity is representative of a growing development in the world of wellness: the increase in people who are willing to put their own bodies at risk for the sake of optimization. The growth of extreme trends, like biohacking, raises important questions in regards to motivation. Why is it that people are willing to experiment on their own bodies for the sake of wellness? Moreover, what is it about the allure of wellness that makes it attractive to such a wide array of people?

From the perspective of capitalism, motivation is an important and powerful tool, for it is what leads people to create, and within a capitalist framework, creation equates to profit. In the contemporary United States, one of the most effective ways to motivate someone to do something is to convince them that a particular behavior or product will increase their symbolic capital, and in turn, lead to a higher class status. This certainly seems to be true in the world of wellness, for many people turn to wellness in the hopes that it will make them more competitive laborers. But if wellness itself is just another form of labor, as was argued in the previous chapter, then the more fundamental question is why are people so eager *to work*? Why are Americans motivated to work themselves to the point of burnout?

This chapter will provide an answer to this question in the form of conditional recognition. People are willing to work themselves to the point of exhaustion—and spend millions of dollars a year optimizing themselves—because they seek recognition, and as a supposed meritocracy, the most sure-fire way to attain recognition in the United States is by attaining a high class status. Recognition is a necessary ingredient for developing a healthy degree of self-respect, and therefore, it makes sense that people are going to work hard in order to attain it. But

in the contemporary United States, not all actions lead to recognition, and as a result, people are eager to cultivate the life circumstances that *do* lead to recognition. But this form of recognition, or what is referred to in this context as *conditional recognition*, ultimately proves to be problematic because it is dependent on certain circumstances to exist.

The Importance of Class

Throughout history, social class and position have both been important aspects of how humans organize themselves, influencing economic systems as well as cultural processes. In the late nineteenth century, Thorstein Veblen published an influential text, known as *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899), that shines a bright light on the relationship between material goods and class. In the book, he makes the case that the emergence of what he calls a “leisure class” came about when American society reached a particular point of economic developmental progress. As the name suggests, Veblen considered labor to be an important aspect of this class division. The leisure class is thereby understood by Veblen as the group of people within a given society who “are exempt from industrial employments, and this exemption is the economic expression of their superior rank.”⁵⁴ On the contrary, “manual labour, industry, whatever has to do directly with the everyday work of getting a livelihood, is the exclusive occupation of the inferior class.”⁵⁵ Therefore, a line is drawn between those who are employed industrially and those who are employed non-

54. Thorstein Veblen, *Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1912), 1.

55. Veblen, 2.

industrially, with those employed non-industrially—like the owners of the means of production—being the members of the upper classes.

This very basic structure can be seen throughout history and across cultures, expressed by those societies that have reached a similar level of developmental progress. Historically, the leisure class has been primarily defined by what Veblen calls “conspicuous consumption.” People have demonstrated their wealth by consuming extravagant, luxurious, and expensive goods, for “these more excellent goods [are] an evidence of wealth . . . and conversely, the failure to consume in due quantity and quality becomes a mark of inferiority and demerit.”⁵⁶ Therefore, wealthy people must not only consume freely, but they must also consume “the right kind of goods” that clearly mark their class status, like tailor-made suits, expensive watches, and fine china. These indicators of class status have historically separated the “haves” from the less fortunate “have-nots.” But within the past hundred years, the habits of conspicuous consumption described by Veblen have undergone a dramatic and decisive shift instigated by the Industrial Revolution of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and further problematized by the democratization of the twentieth century.

In *The Sum of Small Things: A Theory of the Aspirational Class*, Elizabeth Currid-Halkett describes these changes in class division, arguing that the conspicuous consumption described by Thorstein Veblen in 1899 is no longer as relevant as it once was. The reason for this, as she writes, is because “massive changes in technology and globalization have changed how we work, live, and

56. Veblen, 74.

consume. The Industrial Revolution and the sophistication of manufacturing both created a middle class and reduced the cost of material goods such that conspicuous consumption has become a mainstream behavior.”⁵⁷ The manufacturing changes of the twentieth century not only led to the emergence of a robust middle class, but these changes also made the goods that were once reserved for the cultural elite affordable to more people. As a result, conspicuous consumption is no longer as reliable an indicator of class status as it once was, and therefore, a new set of norms and values has evolved to fill the role that conspicuous consumption once played.

First and foremost, these new norms and values have all but destroyed the leisure class that Veblen observed in the nineteenth century, replacing it with what Currid-Halkett calls the aspirational class, or “an educated, self-made elite” that is defined by its level of *productivity*, not leisure.⁵⁸ Members of this class display their social status through their “shared cultural capital—they speak the same language, acquire similar bodies of knowledge, and share the same values, all of which embody their collective consciousness.”⁵⁹ Rather than revealing class position conspicuously through material goods, like the type of car someone drives, it is revealed more inconspicuously, like maintaining a regular mindfulness practice, showing up at a farmer’s market, or using beeswax wrap instead of plastic wrap. These new indicators of class do not necessarily cost money, but what they do require is knowledge, critical thinking, cultural and social awareness, and the ability

57. Elizabeth Currid-Halkett, *The Sum of Small Things: A Theory of the Aspirational Class* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), 5-6.

58. Currid-Halkett, 14.

59. Currid-Halkett, 18.

to make informed decisions. Therefore, this new cultural elite is not defined by economics, but rather, “is formed through a collective consciousness upheld by specific values and acquired knowledge and the rarified social and cultural processes necessary to acquire them.”⁶⁰ The aspirational class—or also known as the meritocratic elite—operates far differently from the leisure classes of the past because membership is not constricted to income level, but is instead based on affiliation and cultural awareness: a lawyer, an adjunct professor, and someone working in a coffee shop can all be considered part of the same class despite the fact that there is a large difference in their yearly incomes.

These changes in class division do not indicate that people have risen above the traditional social rules that Veblen observed in the nineteenth century, but rather, that the rules have simply changed. The destratification of class makes it look like people have the freedom to pursue anything—*be anything*—but in reality, the end goal still remains the same: to acquire recognition within a given social context by reflecting the values and aspirations of a particular class consciousness. In the past, people acquired this recognition by driving expensive cars, wearing corsets, and flouting diamond necklaces, but today, “rich oligarchs and the middle class both can acquire ‘stuff,’”⁶¹ and so, for the meritocratic elite, it is “members’ eagerness to acquire knowledge and to use this information to form socially and environmentally conscious values that sets them apart from everyone else.”⁶² Those who are

60. Currid-Halkett, 18-19.

61. Currid-Halkett, 18-19.

62. Currid-Halkett, 19.

physically, mentally, and spiritually in alignment with the contemporary upper class values are the ones who are recognized as part of this class, but unlike the leisure class of Veblen's time, being recognized as a member of the meritocratic elite does not necessarily equate to socioeconomic security.

The emergence of neoliberalism during the latter half of the twentieth century made it less certain that someone born into a middle-class family would be able to maintain the same level of income themselves when they entered the workforce. During the post-war boom that led up to the 1970s, many young people were able to out-earn their parents, but during the 1970s and 80s, this all began to change with the onset of neoliberalism. As a result of these changes, it became less certain that someone would be able to earn the same level of income as their parents, let alone a greater income. However, rather than blaming a broken system for this growing precarity, people turned towards themselves and their children, blaming lower incomes on lazy and unproductive individuals, not necessarily sociopolitical circumstances.

Therefore, even though jobs have dwindled, higher education has become more competitive, and a lot more work is part-time than it used to be, people are unwilling to admit that a stable, secure future is beyond their grasp, and so they work longer hours, optimize their productivity, and continually recommit themselves to self-improvement, all in the hopes that they will be seen and valued as an esteemed contributor to their community. If class status is increasingly about knowledge accumulation rather than conspicuous consumption, then it is easier for people to indicate their class status without actually possessing the material

resources necessary for them to feel safe and comfortable. In other words, if people can indicate a high class status through their minds and bodies, rather than through their material possessions, then people can be materially destitute and still considered a part of the meritocratic elite.

The maintenance of one's class status is important because it reflects individuals' *value*. As Thorstein Veblen writes in *Theory of the Leisure Class*, "the dominant incentive [in the accumulation of wealth is] the invidious distinction attaching to wealth,"⁶³ by which he means that people who accumulate wealth are more powerful—and therefore more respected—than those who do not accumulate that same amount of wealth. There is a distinction attached to those who attain a certain class status by way of their wealth accumulation, and as a result, they also gain repute and esteem, for as Veblen also writes, "the possession of wealth presently assumes the character of an independent and definitive basis of esteem."⁶⁴

Even though wealth is no longer as important an indicator of one's class status as *knowledge* is, wealth still plays an important role in the maintenance of class status because it is only through monetary resources that people are able to pursue and attain a quality education for themselves and their children. This helps explain why 43 million Americans currently owe 1.6 trillion dollars in student loan debt.⁶⁵ For if education is expensive but also a necessary requirement of class status, then people are going to go to great lengths to be educated, even if they cannot

63. Veblen, *Theory of the Leisure Class*, 26.

64. Veblen, 29.

65. Josh Mitchell, *The Debt Trap: How Student Loans Became a National Catastrophe* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2021), 3.

afford it. Therefore, those who *can afford it*—without taking out thousands of dollars in loans—have a substantial advantage over those who are unable to pay out of pocket, not to mention the other advantageous services that wealthy individuals can buy, like academic tutoring and test preparatory services, that further their ability to acquire advantageous knowledge-based skills.

The reason why people are eager to go thousands of dollars into debt for a college degree is that education is a necessary component of how invidious distinction works in the contemporary era, and invidious distinction is what makes elite status desirable. For recognition is a necessary aspect of the human condition, and acquiring more of it can result in higher self-esteem, leading to a more fulfilling life. It is therefore imperative that we better understand the importance of recognition so that we can see how the expansion of the contemporary wellness industry and the maintenance of class status are two sides of the same coin.

Recognition as Necessity

Although the concept of recognition has been around for as long as there have been people to recognize each other, the theory of recognition did not gain substantial popularity until the turn of the nineteenth century, when G.W.F. Hegel published *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. Before Hegel, political philosophers like Niccolò Machiavelli and Thomas Hobbes viewed humans as fundamentally egocentric beings who are only concerned with their own wellbeing, even if their own self-preservation results in the deterioration of others. For this reason, Hobbes viewed the social contract as an absolute necessity for the preservation of justice. Without

it, he feared that people would be destined to live in “continual fear and danger of violent death,” and furthermore, life would be “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.”⁶⁶ Hegel rejected Hobbes’s conceptualization of the state of nature and instead made the argument that intersubjective conflict is a struggle for recognition, not a struggle for self-preservation. Hegel believed that social conflict is a result of one or both parties believing that their particular identity is being insufficiently recognized, therefore leading to a struggle for recognition.⁶⁷

According to Hegel, recognition is both an important and necessary aspect of the human condition because it is only *through recognition* that self-conscious beings come to understand themselves as self-conscious in the first place, for as Alexandre Kojève writes in his *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, “it is only by being ‘recognized’ by another, by many others, or—in the extreme—by all others, that a human being is really human, for himself as well as others.”⁶⁸ In one of the most famous sections of *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, known as the “master-slave dialectic,” Hegel begins by writing that “a self-conscious being exists in and for itself in and through its existing thus for another self-conscious being: it exists only as a being that’s *recognized*” (emphasis in original).⁶⁹ In other words, it is only through recognition that reality comes to have any meaning at all, for without it, there would

66. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Edwin Curley, (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1994), 76.

67. Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition*, trans. Joel Anderson (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1995), 17.

68. Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, trans. James H. Nichols, Jr. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980), 9.

69. G.W.F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. By Peter Fuss and John Dobbins (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2019), 91.

be nothing from which to differentiate oneself from; one cannot exist as a being in and for itself if there is no one to compare oneself to—if there is no one else to *recognize* apart from oneself. Therefore, it is by way of recognition that individuals come to see themselves as self-conscious beings who are different from other self-conscious beings; the “I” is created by way of the “non-I.” It is this moment of recognition—the simultaneous recognition of self and other—that Hegel theorizes about in the master-slave dialectic.

In this hypothetical situation, two self-conscious beings come into contact with each other for the first time, leading them each to recognize their own humanity by way of the other. In this moment of recognition, each individual not only experiences the elation of existence—by way of its own sense of “I”-ness as compared to the “non-I”-ness of the other—but it also experiences the threat of negation. If another self-conscious being exists that is *not I*, then there is a possibility that *I* could also *not be*. Therefore, in order to avoid the threat of non-existence—and to further validate their own sense of “I-ness”—the two entities enter into a struggle for recognition. Axel Honneth expounds on the necessity of this struggle, writing that “an affirmative relation-to-self is dependent, for its part, on the confirming recognition of other subjects. Individuals can only identify completely with themselves to the degree to which their peculiarities and traits meet with the approval and support of their partners to interaction.”⁷⁰ Therefore, the necessity of this conflict is derived from the fact that both parties are dependent on the other for a positive self-understanding. Therefore, killing one another is not an option, for this

70. Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition*, 22.

would not only eliminate the source of recognition that one desires to affirm oneself, but it would also eliminate the very source of one's own sense of "I-ness," for without a "non-I" from which to compare oneself, the "I" cannot exist. As a result, the struggle for recognition simultaneously turns into a struggle for domination in which one consciousness becomes the master of the other, forming the "master-slave dialectic." In this struggle, the master's goal is to objectify the slave so that he can receive the affirmation that he desires without relinquishing any part of himself in exchange.

The problem highlighted by the Hegelian master-slave dialectic is not how one person may come to recognize or value someone else, but rather, how that person may secure the recognition of others so that they can develop a positive image of themselves.⁷¹ From this perspective, it seems like the master—or whoever acquires the upper hand in any given power struggle—has attained the better position of the two, for this person is recognized and can thereby develop a positive image of himself. But on closer inspection, the master's position is revealed to be less enviable than initially meets the eye, for even though he is able to move and live as he pleases, he is dependent on the slave for his conception of his own freedom—he is "free" only because the slave is not free. As a result, he cannot think of the slave as an equal without losing his conception of his own freedom, and because of this, the recognition that is conferred on him ultimately proves to be worthless, for it is not given to him by someone that he respects. This means that neither the slave nor

71. Avishai Margalit, "Recognizing the Brother and the Other," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes* 75, (2001): 129.

the master has received the validation that either of them had hoped to acquire when they initially engaged in their struggle for recognition.

The Politics of Recognition

Although the Hegelian master-slave dialectic popularized the theory of recognition, it was not until the 1980s and 90s that recognition theory gained substantial traction in social and political philosophy. When people were forced to reckon with the political, technological, economic, and social changes of globalization during the second half of the twentieth century, Hegelian intersubjectivity was reevaluated as an important aspect of those changes—and subsequently rose in importance. In response to the rise of multiculturalism and identity politics, philosopher Charles Taylor published an article in 1994 that would come to be seen as a canonical contribution to the theory of recognition. In this article, known as "The Politics of Recognition," Taylor takes a step back from the nuances of the cultural debates that were unfolding at the time and provides his readers with a lucid explanation of what is at stake in the Hegelian struggle for recognition.

In his article, Taylor makes it clear that the political struggle for recognition is an important and necessary endeavor because individuals' identities are in fact "shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the *mis*recognition of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible

picture of themselves.”⁷² When someone is or is not valued because of an arbitrary quality, such as their gender identity, race, or religious affiliation, then they are also susceptible to adopting a distorted worldview in which they equate that arbitrary quality with their self-worth. As a result, people either have an inflated or deflated sense of self-worth based on arbitrary aspects of themselves. Therefore, equal recognition, or what political theorists also call “mutual recognition,” is not only necessary for a healthy democratic society, but it is also necessary in respect to how individuals see themselves.

The reason for this, Taylor explains, is because it is not possible for people to develop firm identities without some sort of validation or recognition from others, for identity formation is dialogic, meaning that “we become full human agents, capable of understanding ourselves, and hence of defining our identity, through our acquisition of rich human languages of expression.”⁷³ In this context, language does not only refer to the words that people use to speak and write, but also to more abstract modes of expression, like gestures, art, and love.⁷⁴ It is through social interactions that people come to understand themselves and others, and therefore, it is also important for individuals’ unique qualities and attributes to be valued and recognized, for it is through these interactions that people come to establish an understanding of their own self-worth.

72. Charles Taylor, “The Politics of Recognition,” in *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 25.

73. Taylor, 32.

74. Taylor, 32.

However, in the contemporary United States, not all qualities and attributes, like being black, feminine, poor, disabled, or gay, *are* valued equally—hence the rise in the politics of recognition. Furthermore, those who belong to social groups that have been traditionally considered recognized, like those who are male, heteronormative, able-bodied, cisgender, or white, also struggle with recognition, for as the master-slave dialectic demonstrates, when someone’s recognition is dependent on the denigration of someone else, it is not ultimately fulfilling. In which case, there is a dearth of meaningful recognition in the United States, and as a result, Americans endeavor to fulfill their need to be seen as worthy on other ways. Although this can be exemplified in a myriad of ways, the most common among them is class, especially the way in which class operates today.

The Struggle for Class Recognition

The contemporary United States is viewed by many as a meritocracy, meaning that those who work the hardest and most diligently are rewarded with wealth and status—or in other words, *recognition*. This idea has been knit into the very fabric of what it means to be an American, known by most as the “American Dream.” But in more recent years, as the number of rewarding jobs have dwindled, elite colleges have become dramatically more competitive, and the gap between the very wealthy and the working middle class has widened, many people have started to question whether this elusive dream might in fact be an illusion. For although younger generations are working harder than ever before to enter the labor market and land rewarding jobs, they actually have less to show for it. In *The Meritocracy Trap*,

author Daniel Markovits reports that the suppression of working- and middle-class employment today is about the same as the employment suppression that women endured two generations ago as a result of sex discrimination, meaning that there are far fewer middle-class jobs available today than there used to be.⁷⁵ In fact, Markovits writes that “income growth [has] concentrated in the top 5, 1, and one-tenth of 1 percent” of the labor market since the middle of the twentieth century. This narrowing of the labor pool has led to a dramatic increase in competition, resulting in over-qualified and over-educated laborers who cannot find jobs, in turn preventing lower-skilled workers from also finding work.

Yet despite the loss of rewarding job opportunities and the increase in competition, people continue to strive for high-skilled jobs anyway, leading many to settle for temporary and part-time employment—like being an intern, working as an adjunct professor, or assisting at a nonprofit—that provide very little security or opportunity for advancement. This has resulted in a culture of burnout in which people are willing to sacrifice their health and wellbeing in order to get a step ahead of their competitors, contributing to the growth of the contemporary wellness industry, for wellness operates like a makeshift release valve that helps people deal with the mounting uncertainty of living in the contemporary era.

Although the quick fixes offered by the wellness industry do not provide long-term relief to those who use them, people are more than willing to engage with these practices because they offer the allure of recognition. In other words, those

75. Daniel Markovits, *The Meritocracy Trap: How America's Foundational Myth Feeds Inequality, Dismantles the Middle Class, and Devours the Elite* (New York: Penguin Press, 2019), 4.

who are able to successfully “hack” their biology and optimize their productivity improve their chances of succeeding in an increasingly precarious job market, and in turn, they improve their chances of being recognized. If recognition is only conferred on those who attain a certain class status, then it is understandable that people are willing to make dramatic sacrifices in order to attain this status, like sending their children to elite preschools, borrowing hundreds of thousands of dollars in loans to pay for higher education, or working sixty, eighty, or one hundred hours every week.

People are willing to make these sacrifices because they believe, however unconsciously, that their hard work will result in the recognition that is necessary for them to develop a healthy degree of self-esteem. If not all actions result in recognition, as the current meritocratic system demonstrates, then people are naturally going to gravitate towards the actions and behaviors that *do* result in recognition. However, it is important to note that there is a glaring problem with this form of recognition, or what is being referred to in this context as *conditional recognition*, for it is actually a form of *misrecognition*.

The Problem with Conditional Recognition

Although it is true that people who manage to attain a high class status are arguably more recognized than those who do not, the problem is with *how they are being recognized*, for they are not being recognized primarily for *who they are*, but rather, for *what they represent*. In the context of social and political philosophy, recognition has been historically thought about as something that some people have and others

do not, but here, I am arguing that even those who have been traditionally considered “recognized”—like members of the meritocratic elite—are only being recognized *conditionally*, meaning that the recognition being conferred on them is dependent on them *fulfilling* the conditions of their class status, like attending college or landing a high paying job. If they were to cease fulfilling these conditions—like working less, dropping out of college, *not even pursuing college*, disregarding the social rules expected of their position—then their recognition would also cease to exist.

Members of the meritocratic elite see themselves as being worthy because they are admitted to competitive schools, live in certain zip codes, or have access to niche healthcare benefits, like mindfulness classes, but the problem with equating one’s worth with these external markers of success is that they are dependent on some people having access and some people *not* having access. If everyone were to have access to a competitive education, it would no longer be meaningful as competitive, and the cultural capital associated with that kind of education would decrease. The current capitalist framework is reliant on meaning being equated with difference, creating distress and unease among individuals who participate in this system because it means that people who have capital—and therefore status—could potentially lose it; in which case, it is not only important for these people to continue believing in the system—and therefore the “worth” they have accumulated—but it is also necessary for them to subjugate those below them because, if they did not, their worth would disappear.

However, as the master-slave dialectic indicates, when those on top are reliant on those on the bottom for an understanding of their own worth—and freedom—this worth is not absolute, and as a result, it operates as a form of control, compelling people to strive for more even when “more” is never enough. But if conditional recognition is not beneficial to individuals, then why do people continue to pursue it? In other words, who does it benefit? In the following chapter, we will further problematize conditional recognition by analyzing *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* through a Marxist lens. By specifically focusing on Marx’s theories of historical materialism and alienation, it will be revealed that conditional recognition is ultimately in service to capitalism, not individuals.

Chapter Three

An Historical Analysis of Conditional Recognition

Although the way in which contemporary Americans think about wellness is more or less credited to a shift in thinking that took place during the 1950s, the ideas that led to this paradigm shift are much older than that. For as Michel Foucault argues, people living in Western societies have been attempting to enact changes on the human body since at least the inception of the ancient Greek philosophical schools, in which the goal “was the transformation of the individual . . . to give the individual the quality which would permit him to live differently, better, more happily, than other people.”⁷⁶ But the way in which the ancient Greeks thought about self-transformation varies greatly from the way in which people think about self-transformation today. These changes in thinking are largely credited to major socioeconomic shifts that have taken place over time. Therefore, if we want to better understand the way in which people think about wellness and self-transformation today, then it is important to take a closer look at the key socioeconomic factors that have led to its current conceptualization.

From all the people who have influenced the American ideal of self-transformation, Benjamin Franklin is perhaps the most famous. As an inventor, Founding Father, autodidact, self-made man, renowned scientist, and skilled rhetorician, Franklin has become a metonym for the American Dream. In his writing,

76. Michel Foucault, “About the Beginning of the Hermeneutics of the Self,” *Political Theory* 21, no. 2 (1993): 205.

Franklin continuously revisits the theme of how individuals can transform their lives by practicing self-control.⁷⁷ Therefore, if we are to better understand the contemporary obsession with wellness and personal betterment, then Franklin is a useful person to study, for as someone who was engrossed with bettering himself, it could be argued that Franklin was one of the first notable Americans to be afflicted by “the wellness syndrome.” Using *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, which Franklin completed in 1790, this chapter will investigate Franklin’s role in the construction of the American ideal of individuality, a value that has since become so commonsensical that it is taken for granted.

Franklin was writing at a time when new ideas—both cultural and economic—were taking shape in the United States, and as a result, his text offers a unique perspective from which to understand these ascendent values, such as the importance of individualism and the role of recognition. The argument being made here is that the ascendent values advanced by Franklin were not coincidental, but rather, fundamentally economic in nature, and by historicizing this text within the framework of Karl Marx’s theory of historical materialism, this chapter will demonstrate that the rise of individualism and its subsequent dependence on recognition are intimately connected with the blossoming economic circumstances of Franklin’s time.

Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* highlights a fruitful paradox in which individuality is revealed to be both a

77. Nian-Sheng Huang and Carla Mulford, “Benjamin Franklin and the American Dream,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Benjamin Franklin*, ed. Carla Mulford (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 147.

culturally and economically valuable asset, but its scope is limited by the rigid confines of conditional recognition, thereby making true individualism impossible to attain. Viewed through the lens of Marx's theory of alienation, the role of conditional recognition as an economic tool becomes clearer. In his autobiography, Franklin advocates for a number of virtues—like success, hard work, and discipline—because he believes that these virtues will lead people to better lives, but when placed in a Marxist context, these virtues are revealed to be fundamentally alienating in nature, for they are qualities that are to be pursued for economic optimization and respectability, not for their own sake.

The Theory of Historical Materialism

In order to understand how the values espoused by *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* are fundamentally economic in nature, it is important to first understand what is meant by historical materialism. During his lifetime, Karl Marx developed a large array of political and economic theories, but his theory of historical materialism is one of the most well-known. It is a teleological theory of history, or in other words, a theory of history that is evolving towards a certain ideal endpoint. According to Marx, the ideal endpoint of historical materialism is theorized to culminate in what he has labeled communism, or “the complete return of man to himself as a *social* (i.e., human) being—a return become conscious, and accomplished within the entire wealth of previous development.”⁷⁸ The framework

78. Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1978), 84.

for Marx's theory of history did not begin with Marx himself, but rather with Kant, and then more importantly with Hegel's theory of historical idealism, a theory that the "history of the world is none other than the progress of the consciousness of freedom."⁷⁹ Hegel argued that products of consciousness—like conceptions, thoughts, and ideas—shape the decisions of people, in turn leading to new ideas and concepts. Although Marx agreed with Hegel's general teleological structure, he rejected the idea that the human mind solely shapes experience, and argued that experience shapes consciousness.

More specifically, Marx argued that it is not just the human mind that structures experience, but it is also human action that shapes and changes the world to be in alignment with those concepts. Marx argues that human history began when living human individuals developed consciousness and started "to *produce* their means of subsistence," a change that meant that people were "indirectly producing their actual material life."⁸⁰ In other words, the structure of people's lives is created from the materials that are already available to them, and so the consciousness of people—their ideas, beliefs, and concepts—emerge as a result of the material conditions which people find themselves to be in. As a result, there is a strong relationship between Marx's material conception of history and human labor power, since it is the human capacity to labor and inflict change on his environment that ultimately shapes the ideological structure of his consciousness.

79. Peter Singer, *A Very Short Introduction: Hegel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 15.

80. Karl Marx, *The German Ideology*, in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1978), 150.

Historically, labor power has passed through various phases in which its organization has shifted, such as tribalism, state ownership, feudalism, and then finally, capitalism. Marx argues that the state of any given phase is dependent on “the extent to which each has developed its productive forces, the division of labor and internal intercourse.”⁸¹ More simply, as the productive forces become increasingly sophisticated, there is “a further development of the division of labor.”⁸² It is this relationship between the division of labor, human productive power, and relations of production that comprise what Marx calls the economic base of a society. The base operates as an economic engine that creates material products for human consumption, but it also corresponds to and constrains the ideological superstructure of the society. The superstructure is defined as the dominant legal and political schema of a society to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. It can include, but is in no means limited to, religion, cultural values, education, politics, legal policies, and the military.

The base corresponds to the superstructure in order to create a society in which the existing relations of production are reinforced by the overarching cultural values of the era. For example, before the collapse of social hierarchies, feudal societies considered honor to be an overarching cultural value. Through the lens of historical materialism, Marx would argue that honor and loyalty corresponded to the existing relations of production at that time between serfs and their lords. In other words, although honor appears to be a cultural value that exists independent

81. Marx, 150.

82. Marx, 150.

of its economic context, when analyzed more closely, it becomes clear that honor and loyalty reinforced the economic structure that they were a part of. Thus, at every point throughout history, people have been born into specific economic contexts that are precluded by preexisting relations of production that correspond to a definite stage of economic development.

An economic stage evolves into a new stage when there is a contradiction between the human productive forces and the existing relations of production. Eventually, every economic system reaches a point in which the human productive power is too advanced for the existing relations of production. During this transition, the relations of production become a hindering force to—not a catalyst for—economic development. When this happens, social revolution is inevitable, leading to a new economic system in which the relations of production parallel the force of the human productive power. For example, during the transition from feudalism to capitalism, the industrial revolution took place, transforming the way in which people related to each other. Instead of relations of production that were defined by serfs and lords, people began relating to each other in terms of laborers and employers.

During the transition from feudalism to capitalism, the ideological superstructure of society also changed. For example, the cultural significance of honor faded away as the modern notion of equal dignity gained popularity. As a result, all people became worthy of equal recognition, even if they had not been considered “worthy” before. According to Marx, this ideological shift was not a random coincidence, but rather, it was a direct result of the economic circumstances

of the time. Earlier, in feudalist societies, recognition and identity were not valued concepts; they were not only irrelevant to the relations of production between serfs and lords, but more importantly, if they had been valued, this would have actually been detrimental to the way in which those societies functioned. If serfs had sought out equal dignity and been cognizant of the social inequalities of their time, their circumstances would have been perceived as oppressive. In fact, during the transition from feudalism to capitalism, those inequalities *did* come to be seen as oppressive, which contributed to the change.

In summary, Marx's theory of historical materialism argues that people are going to "enter into definite relations [of production] that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces."⁸³ In other words, despite what people may desire or intend for themselves and others, based on Marx's theory of historical materialism, they will inevitably arrive at an ideology that corresponds to the underlying relations of production of their economic circumstances. With this context in mind, it is clear that when viewed through a Marxist lens, *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* can be seen as an ideological product of its time that is in service to its economic system. The concepts that Franklin values—like individuality, hard work, perseverance, and personal betterment—also coincide with the capitalist system that he was a part of.

83. Karl Marx, "Marx on the History of His Opinions," in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1978), 4.

However, as contemporary material theorists argue, like Iris Marion Young and Sally Haslanger, a strict correlation between relations of production and human consciousness suggests that humans are robots who lack autonomy.⁸⁴ Therefore, it is also important to emphasize the role that human agency plays in the reproduction of an ideology, for although people are limited by their material resources, they have freedom in the ways that they conceptualize those resources. The fact that some people value certain virtues—like individuality and hard work—is in no way a guarantee that other people will also value those same virtues. As a result, if an ideology is to have any chance of survival within a given social context, then it is important for it to have widespread social resonance.

It is from this perspective that Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1930) also becomes relevant. In this classical essay, Weber rejects Marx's theory of historical materialism and instead makes the case that capitalism has not only existed across cultures and in every epoch of human history, but that the way in which we think about it today is due to the widespread dissemination of what he calls "the spirit of capitalism"—a "spirit" that Franklin helped popularize. According to Weber, people have always had an "impulse to acquisition,"⁸⁵ and because of this, economic processes alone cannot account for the growth of the capitalist mindset in the Western world. In other words, why is it that economic habits that were once considered vices, like avarice, became virtues? If the

84. Sally Haslanger, "Ideology and Materiality," in *Critical Theory and Practice* (Assen, Netherlands: Royal Van Gorcum, 2015), 13-14.

85. Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1948), 17.

material opportunity to be greedy has technically always been available to people, then why have people not always been greedy?

Weber answers these questions by invoking ideology, claiming that the rational acquisition indicative of contemporary capitalism is related to a Protestant ethos in which everyone must submit to God's divine will. According to this ethos, people are permitted to pursue wealth if this opportunity presents itself to them because it is viewed as "directly willed by God."⁸⁶ According to Weber, there is a strong and legitimate connection between the cold detachment of the Puritans who adopted the ideal of predestination and the rationalistic thinking that now dominates Western culture. However, even though the spirit of capitalism can be derived from the "religious calling" espoused by Protestants, like Calvin and Luther, it would be incorrect to argue that these thinkers were somehow in favor of capitalism. In other words, Weber wants to make it clear that it would be "foolish" to claim that the spirit of capitalism "could only have arisen as the result of certain effects of the Reformation, or even that capitalism as an economic system is a creation of the Reformation."⁸⁷ Yet, according to Weber, Protestantism played an important role in popularization of the ideology of contemporary capitalism, in turn contributing to its widespread growth.

From this perspective, Franklin's autobiography can be seen as more than just an ideological product of its time. According to Weber, it also contributed to the actual shaping of the narrative of American exceptionalism. *The Autobiography of*

86. Weber, 171.

87. Weber, 91.

Benjamin Franklin does more than just state information about a person's life. Behind the simple prose and amusing anecdotes, Franklin is selling an idea about what it takes to be seen as valuable within an American context, leading to the current conceptualization of the American Dream. The overarching goal of Franklin's autobiography—and much of his writing, in general—is to teach readers that it is within their power to become materially successful, and in order to do this, he also persuades his readers to think that material success is a worthwhile goal in the first place. As a result, Franklin himself has become representative of an ideology in which individual freedom is equated with personal success.⁸⁸

The Theory of Alienation

In addition to historical materialism, Karl Marx also conceptualized a theory of alienation, and before further investigating the economic nuances of Franklin's autobiography, it is first necessary to introduce this theory. Unlike historical materialism, which is a general teleological theory of history, Marx's theory of alienation is more specifically targeted at capitalism. Like every other economic system, capitalism is defined by the way it structures economic power, or what is known under capitalism as the relationship between capitalists and laborers. In the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx offers a cultural critique of capitalism, claiming that "the necessary result of competition is the accumulation of capital in a few hands," leading to an economic system in which "the whole of society must fall apart into the two classes—the property-owners and the

88. Huang and Mulford, "Benjamin Franklin and the American Dream," 150-1.

propertyless *workers*.”⁸⁹ Marx argues that the fundamental relations of production between these two classes results in the worker becoming “all the poorer the more wealth he produces,”⁹⁰ which happens in two major ways: exploitation and alienation.

In a capitalist system, the fundamental relations of production are maintained through the exploitation of workers’ labor. In short, exploitation means that those “who employ the workers—the capitalists—build up their wealth through the labour of their workers. They become wealthy by keeping for themselves a certain amount of the value that their workers produce.”⁹¹ The capitalists earn surplus value by paying their laborers less than what their labor power is actually worth. If they were to pay the laborers what their labor power was *actually* worth, then the capitalists would not be earning a profit. Simply put, capital can be understood as accumulated labor: as workers increase their labor, they also increase their employer’s capital. In this case, the laborer who works ten hours a day will technically make more money than the laborer who only works for five hours a day, but he will be “all the poorer” because his labor power is being exploited—he is not receiving the value that his labor is worth. In addition to exploitation, the worker is “all the poorer” from working longer hours because the work itself is alienating, and the more time the worker spends in alienation, the poorer his “inner world” becomes.⁹² In general, alienation can be defined as “a state

89. Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, 70.

90. Marx, 71.

91. Peter Singer, *A Very Short Introduction: Marx* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 3.

92. Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, 72.

in which [laborers'] own creations appear to them as alien, hostile forces and in which instead of controlling their creations, they are controlled by them."⁹³

During Marx's lifetime, there was a large disparity in wealth between the capitalists who owned the means of production and the laborers who worked for them. Laborers, including children, worked long hours in industrial factories which had deleterious effects on their minds, bodies, and spirit. From what Marx observed, the work that people were doing was not only tedious and unfulfilling, but because of this, it was actively harming their ability to express themselves as enriched, creative individuals. In the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx criticizes capitalism's dependency on commodities, claiming that "the *increasing value* of the world of things proceeds in direct proportion [to] the *devaluation* of the world of men."⁹⁴ As a result, capitalism *objectifies* laborers and treats them as commodities rather than as people, leading to what Marx identifies as four major types of alienation: alienation from the product of one's labor, alienation from the laboring activity itself, alienation from one's species-being, and finally, alienation from other people.

In short, alienation is the separation of oneself from both one's internal and external environments. In the first type of alienation—alienation from the product of one's labor—laborers are alienated from what they create, or as Marx puts it, the product "is a *power independent* of the producer."⁹⁵ Workers will dedicate their lives to the creation of particular objects, but because these objects belong to the

93. Singer, *A Very Short Introduction: Marx*, 69.

94. Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, 71.

95. Marx, 71.

capitalists and not them, they will view them as objects alien from themselves.

When laborers are alienated from the objects of their labor, they are also alienated from the activity of labor itself. Labor, argues Marx, is a natural part of the human condition, but when there is no relationship between laborers and the objects of their labor, labor itself ceases to have any value to the individual. This leads to individuals who are not only alienated from the objects of their labor and the laboring activity, but they are also alienated *from themselves*, or what Marx calls one's "species-being" or "species character."

Marx argues that the entirety of one's character is "contained in the character of its life-activity; and free, conscious activity is man's species character,"⁹⁶ and so when people are barred from cultivating and fueling their life-activity, then they become alienated from their species-beings. One's species-being is inextricably linked to one's self-consciousness, and self-consciousness can only be developed when one finds one's subjectivity reflected in the objects and people that they encounter. If people are alienated from the objects that they are contributing their labor to—and in turn prevented from expressing their creativity—then their subjectivity will not be reflected back at them, and they will cease to be connected to themselves.

In the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx compares humans to animals in order to demonstrate how the freedom inherent to human creativity enables people to create art for the sake of art itself. They are not inherently bound to the creation of a specific object, like a nest or a hive, but can "produce in

96. Marx, 76.

accordance with the standard of every species.” Therefore, the laboring activity can either enable or disable people from embodying their individualized species-being. In the best case scenario, one labors in order to duplicate “himself not only, as in consciousness, intellectually, but also actively, in reality, and therefore he contemplates himself in a world that he has created.”

However, Marx argues, under capitalism people are unable to have this experience because they are alienated from the laboring activity, the product of their labor, and therefore, they are also alienated from their species beings, which ultimately estranges people from each other. Therefore, the overall consequence of alienation is that the product of labor is foreign to the laborers, meaning that they are deprived of their access to their fundamental life-activity, and thus, themselves. They are an object that functions as an isolated part of the whole rather than in relation to the whole. Instead of experiencing integration, the laborer experiences dislocation; they are what Marx describes as “a self-sufficient monad.”⁹⁷

The Emergence of Individuality

Buried within Marx’s theory of alienation is the idea that everyone is imbued with an “authentic” self, and if people could liberate themselves from the confines of alienation—and therefore capitalism—then presumably, they would be able to express themselves authentically. Although Marx contributed to the popularization of individuality, the concept of an authentic self was developing before his time. Jean

97. Karl Marx, *On the Jewish Question*, in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1978), 42.

Jacques Rousseau, who is a contemporary of Benjamin Franklin's, was one of the first people to embrace the emerging importance of the self. In *The Discourse on the Origin and the Foundations of Inequality Among Men*, or more commonly referred to as *The Second Discourse*, Rousseau describes the evolution of humanity, starting with the wandering, language-less "beasts" that existed at the beginning of time, and ending with the large-scale inequality—and inauthenticity—that he experienced in eighteenth century France. At a certain point in human history, Rousseau believes that a shift occurred—a fall from grace—in which people were led down a path of inequality, and therefore, pulled away from their inner selves. He identifies this tipping point as the introduction of private property.

According to Rousseau, a property-owning state "could have remained equal if talents had been equal and if, for example, the use of iron and the consumption of foods had always been exactly balanced," but as has been revealed with time, those who demonstrate more skill and inventiveness gain more attention and resources than those who do not, leading to an inequality in which "the differences between men, developed by their different circumstances, become more perceptible."⁹⁸ For Rousseau, these perceptible differences in value are the fundamental issue with inequality, for the existence of an "ideal" coerces people into denying their inner natures in order to strive for that ideal:

Here are all natural qualities activated, every man's rank and fate set, not only by the amount of goods and the power to help or to hurt, but also by the mind, beauty, strength or skills, merit or talents, and, since these are the only qual-

98. Jean Jacques Rousseau, *The Second Discourse*, in *Rousseau: The Discourses and Other Early Political Writings*, ed. and trans. Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 174.

ities that could attract consideration, *one soon had to have or to affect them; For one's own advantage one had to seem other than one in fact was. To be and to appear became two entirely different things*, and from this distinction arose ostentatious display, deceitful cunning, and all the vices that follow in their wake (emphasis added).⁹⁹

According to Charles Taylor, Rousseau represents a philosophical turning point of the self in which “our moral salvation comes from recovering authentic moral contact with ourselves,” not the contact people have with external figures, like God.¹⁰⁰ Taylor describes this transition as “a massive subjective turn of modern culture, a new form of inwardness, in which we come to think of ourselves as beings with inner depths.”¹⁰¹ As a result, individuals transformed from people who merely *reflected* their environments to people who *shaped* their environments.

One of the ways that Rousseau coped with the mounting inauthenticity of his era was to write an autobiography, aptly titled *The Confessions*, in which he attempts to regain moral contact with his inner self. This desire can be found in the opening lines of *The Confessions* where he writes, “I am commencing an undertaking, hitherto without precedent, and which will never find an imitator. I desire to set before my fellows the likeness of a man in all the truth of nature, and that man myself.”¹⁰² Quite ironically, Rousseau was initiating a modern autobiographical trend that would eventually become so popular that nearly everyone would participate in it,

99. Rousseau, 175.

100. Charles Taylor, “The Politics of Recognition,” in *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 29.

101. Taylor, 29.

102. Jean Jacques Rousseau, *The Confessions of Jean Jacques Rousseau* (New York: The Modern Library, 1950), 3.

indicating that his philosophical views were not as unique as they were representative of a wider cultural shift that was occurring at that time. As Charles Taylor argues, Rousseau was not important because he inaugurated a change, but because he verbalized a sentiment that was already in existence.¹⁰³

As a contemporary of Rousseau, Franklin was also concerned with the function of individuality, but quite unlike Rousseau, whose intention was to “confess” his inner self, Franklin’s goal was to construct a particular kind of self that would be representative of an ideal. As Stephen Carl Arch writes, many contemporary readers of Franklin find that he “always seems to be hiding his true inner self in the *Autobiography*,”¹⁰⁴ and as a result, people come away from it with very different impressions of who Franklin was: “Max Weber saw in him the incarnation of the spirit of capitalism. D.H. Lawrence saw an unemotional automaton. Others found the original ‘self-made man.’”¹⁰⁵ From this perspective, the argument can be made that Franklin’s autobiography represents a different kind of individuality in which rational self-interest is valued above and beyond Rousseauian “inner truth,” and as a result, Franklin ends up *reinforcing* the perceptible differences in value that Rousseau was so critical of.

As Weber argues in *The Protestant Ethic*, there is a strong correlation between Protestantism and the kind of individuality espoused by Franklin, resulting in an outcome that has been particularly beneficial to the growth of capitalism. In

103. Taylor, “The Politics of Recognition,” 29.

104. Stephen Carl Arch, “Benjamin Franklin’s *Autobiography*, Then and Now,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Benjamin Franklin*, ed. Carla Mulford (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 166.

105. Arch, 159.

earlier stages of economic development, individualism was less important because people were more or less bound to their life circumstances, but when an increase in social mobility made it possible for people to enact change on their own person in the pursuit of advancement, then naturally, individualism also became more relevant. From individuality, other cultural values, like equal dignity and recognition, also became important, for these values are precluded by difference. In other words, someone can only be as equally dignified as someone else so long as they are *different* from one another, so long as they each possess *individuality*. It is from this perspective that every person comes to be viewed as someone who has the capacity to make unique contributions to their communities—a view emphasized by Franklin in his autobiography.

Individuality as Imitation

It is important to emphasize that this burgeoning obsession with individuality and selfhood did not emerge out of thin air, but was rather a necessary component of the successful functioning of the evolving socioeconomic conditions of Franklin's and Rousseau's era. Therefore, the case can be made that these emergent autobiographers of the Enlightenment did not spontaneously develop an interest in human potential and the nature of selfhood, but that their views were reinforcing the overarching social trajectory of their era. Rather than "inventing" the self-made person, Franklin was simply popularizing an idea that—according to Weber and Rousseau—had been long in development. Using himself as a template, Franklin constructed an ideal that others could copy.

Franklin introduces this ideal on the very first page of his autobiography when he writes:

Having emerg'd from the Poverty and Obscurity in which I was born and bred, to a State of Affluence and some Degree of Reputation in the World, and having gone so far thro' Life with a considerable share of Felicity . . . my Posterity may like to know, as they may find some of them suitable to their own Situations, and therefore fit to be imitated.¹⁰⁶

There are two central takeaways from this passage. First, Franklin is making his position on individuality clear by implicitly arguing in favor of the equal dignity of all people, suggesting that, given the right circumstances, individual people—like himself—can rise above the poverty and obscurity in which they may have originated. Second, he introduces the importance of recognition, suggesting that “a State of Affluence and some Degree of Reputation” is a natural and desirable life goal. He even goes so far as to present himself as a model that others may imitate in order to attain this goal for themselves. In order to better understand the role of recognition in Franklin’s autobiography, it is first necessary to investigate the ways in which he argues in favor of an ideal of individualism, for recognition as a culturally relevant value is preceded by the existence of individualism.

First, Franklin devotes a significant portion of his autobiography to describing the various ways in which he has *shaped* his reality. For example, he was required to quit school at age ten in order to assist his father in his business as a “Tallow Chandler and Sope-Boiler.”¹⁰⁷ However, this did not stop him from pursuing

106. Benjamin Franklin, *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 43.

107. Franklin, 53.

an education on his own. He writes at length about the various ways in which he pursued knowledge despite the fact that he did not attend a school. Perhaps most impressively, the only times that Franklin could spend studying was before or after work and on Sundays. Later, when Franklin moves to Philadelphia, he shapes his reality in more influential ways, like through community projects, various inventions, and his engagement with others. Therefore, shaping one's reality is a necessary and important aspect of Franklin's ideal of individuality.

Second, Franklin implicitly argues in favor of the cultivation of a positive self, or to be in service to the ideal cultural values of his community. Franklin's role as an individual—as someone who has the capacity to shape his own reality—means that he has the capacity to create a reality in which certain virtues are valued above others. From a Marxist perspective, it is unsurprising that the values Franklin admires, like silence, order, frugality, industry, and cleanliness, are also qualities that are beneficial to the healthy functioning of capitalism. Franklin's devotion to the cultivation of a positive self is exemplified in part two of the autobiography when he describes the ways in which he has cultivated himself in order to arrive at what he calls "moral Perfection."¹⁰⁸

In order to do this, Franklin has made a list of thirteen virtues in which his goal is to "acquire the *Habitude* of all these Virtues" (emphasis in original) by practicing each one until they are mastered.¹⁰⁹ From Franklin's perspective, self-control is a worthy attribute, for the positive cultivation of the self is quite literally

108. Franklin, 148.

109. Franklin, 151.

in service to the moral righteousness of people and their communities, but on the other hand, and viewed through a Foucaultian lens, people who constrain their negative traits in order to attain “moral perfection” also become more docile subjects and laborers. Therefore, although Franklin espouses individualism, his individuality is rather limited in scope, for it is confined to the parameters of capitalism.

Finally, Franklin’s ideal of the self-made person is someone who is fundamentally hardworking. In order to rise above one’s station and cultivate a positive self, the individual must be someone who is willing to push themselves forward and work hard. Using himself as a model, Franklin presents the criteria of the ideal of individuality to his readers, and he popularizes this ideal by drawing a connection between his personal embodiment of it and the material success he has attained in his lifetime. Therefore, recognition plays an important role in the development of the “self-made” person as Franklin understands it.

The Role of Recognition

Before capitalism, recognition was not a relevant concept, but when individualism and the politics of equal dignity developed in conjunction with the rise of capitalism, recognition also became a highly relevant concept. In Franklin’s autobiography, recognition is accomplished vis-à-vis individualism. He values those who are upright, honest, and hardworking, for these people set the tone for their community, producing positive effects. Franklin’s account of individual integrity is compelling as it relates to capitalism because it is dependent on the way in which individuals

externally project themselves. He is someone who is not necessarily valued because of who he is or where he comes from, but because of what he does and who he has made himself out to be.

Therefore, recognition—and more specifically, *conditional* recognition—plays an important role in the way this system works. In other words, Franklin is valued by his fellow Americans not because of his lowly origins, but because he *overcame* those origins, thereby fulfilling the conditions of what makes an American valuable. However, the recognition conferred on Franklin throughout history has always been dependent on his accomplishments. Without those, Franklin never would have been remembered in the way that he is remembered today. The underlying message of Franklin’s autobiography is that if readers adopt qualities similar to his own, like self-education, industry, and frugality, then they will be able to be as successful as him, despite their origin. Not only does Franklin make this point in the opening page of his autobiography, but it is also reinforced by two letters that Franklin incorporates between parts one and two—from Abel James and Benjamin Vaughn—in which the importance of Franklin’s autobiography to future generations of readers is emphasized.

In Vaughn’s letter, he implores Franklin to continue writing, arguing that an account of Franklin’s life will be beneficial in “the forming of future great men.”¹¹⁰ In particular, Vaughn argues that Franklin gives “a noble rule and example of *self-education*” (italics in original) in which it is made clear that success “is in many a

110. Franklin, 135.

man's private power."¹¹¹ Furthermore, Franklin proves "how little necessary all origin is to happiness, virtue, and greatness."¹¹² Therefore, Vaughn believes that Franklin's autobiography will serve as "a sort of key to life, and explain many things that all men ought to have once explained to them, to give them a chance of becoming wise by foresight."¹¹³ In Abel James's letter, he quite simply writes, "I know of no character living nor many of them put together, who has so much in his Power as Thyself to promote greater spirit of industry and early Attention to Business, Frugality and Temperance with the American Youth."¹¹⁴ The fact that Franklin decides to include these letters in his autobiography suggests that he values the points being made.

He later reinforces these sentiments when he writes about an almanac that he began publishing in 1732 known as "*Poor Richard's Almanack*" (italics in original).¹¹⁵ According to Franklin, he views this almanac as "a proper Vehicle for conveying Instruction among the common People, who bought scarce any other Books."¹¹⁶ It is therefore reasonable to think that Franklin felt similarly hopeful about the role of his autobiography—that it would serve as a proper vehicle to convey instruction to those who would read it. In fact, in a letter he wrote to the Duc de la Rochefoucauld in October 1788, Franklin writes that he has completed part of his autobiography and believes "what is done will be of . . . general Use to young

111. Franklin, 136.

112. Franklin, 137.

113. Franklin, 137.

114. Franklin, 134

115. Franklin, 163.

116. Franklin, 164.

readers; as exemplifying strongly the effect of prudent and imprudent Conduct in the Commencement of a Life of Business.”¹¹⁷ Therefore, although it is difficult to state all of Franklin’s motives for writing his autobiography, it is clear that at least one motive was for his autobiography to be used as an instruction manual that people—especially young people—could use in order to cultivate the ideal of individuality.

From the first page of Franklin’s autobiography, it is made clear that he believes there is value in the fact that he rose from “Poverty and Obscurity” to a “State of Affluence and some Degree of Reputation,” and based on the letters from Vaughn and James, they also view this as a notable achievement, for otherwise they would not have suggested him as a model to others. The underlying idea present throughout Franklin’s entire autobiography is that individuality—or his ability to shape reality—is what led him to attain recognition from others, but the more accurate way of describing this would be to say that his ability to adapt to the economic circumstances of his time is what led him to be *conditionally* recognized by others. In which case, the model that he is offering to his readers is not as much a model of personal betterment as it is a model of economic docility. James emphasizes this point when he writes in his letter that Franklin’s autobiography has the potential to inspire the American youth to pursue “greater spirit of industry and early Attention to Business, Frugality and Temperance.” Or, in other words, Franklin’s autobiography will inspire America’s youth to be good laborers.

117. Benjamin Franklin, *The Writings of Benjamin Franklin: Volume IX (1783-1788)*, ed. Albert Henry Smyth (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1906), 665.

Therefore, rather than pursuing morality for its own sake, people are encouraged to pursue morality for a specific socioeconomic outcome, or in other words, class-based success. In order to achieve “some Degree of Reputation,” people are asked to neglect themselves—in a very Rousseauian sense—in order to develop the qualities that will result in conditional recognition. From the perspective of capitalism, it makes sense that people who have achieved class-based success, like Franklin, would be framed in a positive light, for his behavior is valuable to the economic system of which he is a part. Viewed through this lens, recognition is a useful tool, for it motivates people to pursue qualities that are fundamentally in alignment with a robust economy, like industry, honesty, and sobriety.

But when recognition is only conferred on those who adopt these qualities—and denied from those who do not—then it sends the message that people need to act in particular ways to be respected. Ironically, this acts in complete opposition to what it means to be an “individual,” for people are being asked to deny their individuality in order to adopt certain qualities, and as a result, they are alienated from what Marx would call their “species-beings.” Viewed through the lens of Marx’s theory of alienation, conditional recognition as an economic tool becomes clearer, for this type of recognition ensures that no one will ever attain the success that they seek—they are always left wanting.

When Marx’s theory of alienation is applied to the role of conditional recognition as it is portrayed in *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, it becomes clear that cultivated individualism for the sake of class-based success is ultimately a deleterious endeavor because it results in alienation from one’s species-being. If

readers were to respond to Franklin's suggestion by using his life as a model for their own lives, then they are in essence denying themselves in order to become someone else. They may eventually attain the success that they hope to acquire, but at that point, the people benefitting from a life of respectability are not themselves, but rather, who they have made themselves out to be.

From a Marxist perspective, people who deny themselves in order to attain conditional recognition are simply participatory aspects of a greater economic system, and the virtues lauded as essential to individualism, like hard work, discipline, and success, are actually modes of alienation. In other words, these virtues are adopted as a means to a self-limiting end. On their own, the liberal ideals of equal dignity, individualism, and recognition are noble goals, but when integrated into the economic superstructure of capitalism, their allure loses its sheen. As Marx argues in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, the gift of being human is that, unlike animals, people are not inherently bound to the creation of a specific object—they are free to relate to the world in a variety of ways.

Franklin limits the scope of creativity by presenting his life as a desirable model. If people deny their species-beings in order to imitate Franklin, then they will experience alienation. In which case, individuals in pursuit of class-based success will need to keep striving—and *laboring*—in order to be fulfilled in their endeavors. However, as long as they are caught in the web of alienation, any step forward will only take them farther away from themselves. Therefore, continuous striving is not the solution, but rather, the problem. But from the perspective of capitalism, the intimate connection between alienation and conditional recognition

is a rather beneficial relationship because it means that people will be valued for *what they do* rather than strictly for *who they are*, ensuring that people will remain motivated to better themselves and their environments, while in the process contributing to the economic health of their communities, despite never arriving at a state of sustainable satisfaction.

Chapter Four

Wellness as Performance

In the previous chapter, we investigated Benjamin Franklin's autobiography for its unparalleled insight into the way in which proto and early Americans thought about the relationship between individualism and conditional recognition. Since that time, these cherished American values have only grown more important, and with the expansion of neoliberalism in the second half of the twentieth century, they have attained a new level of deification. Ideally, the analysis of Benjamin Franklin's autobiography has made it clear that these are not only old ideas, but furthermore, they are a necessary aspect of the healthy functioning of capitalism. With the help of alienation, these values have propelled American capitalism forward by preventing Americans from attaining the very individuality that they are encouraged to pursue, making it necessary for them to keep striving—to keep *laboring*—in order to be seen as valuable.

Since Franklin began writing his autobiography in August 1771, the culture of the United States has changed dramatically. Perhaps most noteworthy is the way in which the alienation of labor has changed. The rise in knowledge- and skills-based work during the twentieth century has enabled many people to pursue work that is more intellectually stimulating than when people were more likely to be working in factories or other industrial settings. This is not to suggest that industrial work does not still exist, but that the rise of the Information Revolution during the 1990s and early 2000s led to the creation of other job opportunities that have

enabled laborers to be more connected to the products of their labor. Furthermore, the growth of the gig economy means that Americans today have more choices in terms of how and when they work than they used to. Similarly to how Karl Marx famously hailed communism by claiming that it would enable people to “hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, [and] criticize after dinner . . . without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, shepherd, or critic,”¹¹⁸ the gig economy has made it possible for people to drive for Uber in the morning, deliver for Grubhub in the evening, and tutor Spanish at night.

However, despite these “positive” changes, people are still alienated from themselves, and moreover, the exploitation and alienation that people endure is framed as a product of their own desire. Individuals are the ones who are choosing to go to college; to work sixty, eighty, or one hundred hours a week; to attend regular barre classes; or to abide by strict vegan diets. These behaviors are no longer framed as rules imposed from the outside, but rather, choices that arise from within. But how likely is it that millions of Americans are authentically choosing to live their lives in relatively similar ways, especially when those lifestyle choices are oftentimes related to their class status? Furthermore, why is it that so many elite Americans are willing to work themselves to the point of burn out when no one is physically forcing them to do this except themselves?

In the second chapter, I argued that recognition is the fundamental reason why Americans are motivated to continually optimize themselves, for without

118. Karl Marx, *The German Ideology*, in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1978), 160.

unconditional access to recognition, people are required to pursue the standards set by their communities in order to be seen as valuable, and within the contemporary United States, these standards are becoming increasingly difficult to meet. But ultimately, as both chapter two and three delineate, this way of attaining recognition is unsatisfying because it is recognition of one's performance, not the person. But what exactly is a performance, and moreover, what makes a performance more recognizable than the individuals themselves? In this chapter, we will use Erving Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1956) in order to better understand what constitutes a performance, and furthermore, by continuing to build from the ideological framework of Franklin's autobiography, this chapter will investigate how contemporary wellness practices are a performative act.

A Dramaturgical Reality

In 1956, Erving Goffman published a canonical contribution to the field of sociology—known as *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*—in which he makes the case that the interactions composing everyday life are in fact performances that require people to act out certain roles. In Goffman's own words, the point of his text is to consider how the individual "presents himself and his activity to others, the ways in which he guides and controls the impression they form of him, and the kinds of things he may and may not do while sustaining his performance before them."¹¹⁹ For Goffman, reality is similar to a stage, and therefore, every person can

119. Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Anchor Books, 1959), xi.

be thought of as an actor who is performing their identity to a participatory audience.

According to Jean Jacques Rousseau, arguably the first person to seriously question the performative nature of reality, people have been acting out particular social roles since at least the induction of private property. At that time, it became possible for individual people to distinguish themselves from others, and as I wrote in the previous chapter, this shift in social organization motivated people to either adopt or feign qualities that would lead to what Thorstein Veblen calls “invidious distinction.” People have since neglected their inner selves in order to find meaning through their material circumstances, leading to the creation of a socially constructed reality in which everyone has a role to play.

By framing social interaction as a dramaturgy, Goffman argues that “ordinary social intercourse is . . . put together as a scene is put together, by the exchange of dramatically inflated actions, counteractions, and terminating replies. . . . Life itself is a dramatically enacted thing. All the world is not, of course, a stage, but the crucial ways in which it isn’t are not easy to specify.”¹²⁰ This way of viewing reality can be exemplified in a myriad of ways, for in almost every area of life, there is an unstated expectation of how interactions are supposed to unfold, or what Goffman calls the “working consensus.” But in order to exemplify Goffman’s dramaturgical theory of social reality, I want to first revisit Benjamin Franklin’s autobiography, for Franklin was one of the first Americans to truly capitalize on the power of performance, and

120. Goffman, 72.

furthermore, there is a direct correlation between the performative reality created by Franklin and the contemporary wellness industry.

In the previous chapter, I made the argument that Franklin's autobiography is not only an ideological product of its time, but that Franklin actually *contributed* to the popularization of an ideology in which Americans came to see themselves as productive agents who could enact change on the world, leading to the creation of what we understand today as the American Dream. Franklin accomplished this, in part, by meticulously curating a public image of himself that led others to see him in a particular way. As Herbert Leibowitz writes in his book, *Fabricating Lives*, "Franklin *costumes* himself as a picaresque hero" (emphasis added),¹²¹ meaning that Franklin *performs* heroism, thereby using his autobiography to create a reality in which his readers—or rather, *his audience*—are led to see him as a hero. However, the way that Franklin frames himself in his autobiography is not actually congruent with who he was in reality. For example, according to Leibowitz, Franklin feigned morality in order to flatter his readers' common sense:

Franklin was not the drudge he commends others to be: He liked to loiter over a glass of sherry, to trifle, to play chess, to joke, to swim. In a similar vein, Franklin remarks that two hours after he finished dinner, he did not remember what he ate, whereas in truth he loved food and even kept a file of favorite recipes. . . . These insincerities, like his solemn jingle 'Deny self for Self's sake,' are for public consumption, while he went his own merry lenient way.¹²²

121. Herbert Leibowitz, "'The Insinuating Man': *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*," in *Fabricating Lives: Explorations in American Autobiography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989), 35.

122. Leibowitz, 49.

What Leibowitz's observations demonstrate is that Franklin was able to persuade people to see him a particular way even though this was not an accurate representation of who he actually was.

Unlike Rousseau's *Confessions*, Franklin reveals very little about his "inner being" in his autobiography, like his anxieties, terrors, or deep feelings. Edmund Morgan expounds on this point, writing that "for all of [Franklin's] seemingly spontaneous openness, he kept a kind of inner core of himself intact and unapproachable."¹²³ As Franklin writes at the beginning of his autobiography, his goal in writing is not to reveal the inner workings of his soul, but rather, to record the circumstances of his life in case his posterity "may find some of them suitable to their own Situations, and therefore fit to be imitated."¹²⁴ The distance that Franklin establishes between his true self and the persona that he writes about in his autobiography is what enabled Franklin to contribute to the ideology of the American Dream, for it is through this characterization that the myth of what it means to be a good American was able to take shape.

In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman draws a distinction between what he calls the "frontstage" and the "backstage." When actors are on the frontstage, they adopt a persona that is performative; it is not their "true self." For example, a server working in a restaurant may put on a front by smiling and complimenting her customers, but when she walks "backstage," the mask comes off

123. Edmund Morgan, *Benjamin Franklin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 30.

124. Benjamin Franklin, *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 43.

and she angrily criticizes the customers when she knows they cannot hear her. She is able to express her “genuine” emotions when she is freed from the confines of her role. But even while backstage, the sincerity of her anger is questionable, for it could just be another role that she adopts for the benefit of her coworkers. In which case, it can be difficult to know what is “real” reality, especially because, as Goffman writes, actors “can be sincerely convinced that the impression of reality which [they stage] is the real reality.”¹²⁵ In other words, they can become convinced of their own act.

In Franklin’s autobiography, he successfully curates a frontstage persona, or what Goffman simply calls a front, or “that part of the individual’s performance which regularly functions in a general and fixed fashion to define the situation for those who observe the performance.”¹²⁶ As Leibowitz clarifies in *Fabricating Lives*, Franklin’s front is not the “real” Benjamin Franklin, but rather an act that he performs for the benefit of his readers, convincing them of his moral righteousness. However, with time, Franklin’s front has also become what Goffman calls a “collective representation,” or an institutionalized performance that “tends to take on a meaning and stability apart from the specific tasks which happen at the time to be performed in its name.”¹²⁷ The front Franklin created vis-à-vis his autobiography is one of industry, self-transformation, frugality, and hard work, and by writing about these qualities from a distance, Franklin was able to turn his life experiences into a characterization, thereby providing his readers with an ideal. As a result, the

125. Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, 17.

126. Goffman, 22.

127. Goffman, 27.

concept of “Benjamin Franklin” has taken on a life of its own, becoming more than the front of a single man.

In “Benjamin Franklin and the American Dream,” authors Nian-Sheng Huang and Carla Mulford expound on the impact of Franklin’s role in American culture, arguing that his legacy has enjoyed widespread popularity “because the ethics he symbolically embodied and attempted to promulgate in public culture were construed to underscore the ideology of the American Dream.”¹²⁸ This popularity can be exemplified by the fact that parts of his autobiography were “reprinted piecemeal nearly one hundred and twenty times before the end of the 1850s.”¹²⁹ Furthermore, Franklin’s popularity “coincided with a growing availability of artifacts representing him, whether as sculpted busts or full-life figures, printed engravings or paintings, medals, or the numerous form of tender used, especially in the mid-nineteenth century and later, in the absence of coin.”¹³⁰ Even today, Franklin is featured on the one hundred dollar bill and his autobiography is regularly taught to American high school students. With time, the front that Franklin constructed during his lifetime has come to represent a collective ideal of what it means to be a good American, and by viewing this ideal through the lens of Goffman, we can see why it is still relevant over two hundred years later.

128. Nian-Sheng Huang and Carla Mulford, “Benjamin Franklin and the American Dream,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Benjamin Franklin*, ed. Carla Mulford (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 149.

129. Huang and Mulford, 150.

130. Huang and Mulford, 152.

Then Versus Now

In his book, Goffman argues that each performance is not only “‘socialized,’ molded, and modified to fit into the understanding and expectations of the society in which it is presented,” but moreover, each performance also typically exists in relation to an idealized view of it.¹³¹ Therefore, when individuals present themselves before others, their performances “will tend to incorporate and exemplify the officially accredited values of the society,” and as a result, these values come to be seen as facts, for they are represented homogeneously. For example, for most people, there is an ideal way to be either a man or a woman, and these differences in gender are consistently framed as facts even though there are compelling reasons to think of them as performative.

In a similar vein, people continue to pursue the American Dream despite the fact that it is becoming increasingly less accessible. Instead of reevaluating the enduring legitimacy of this elusive Dream, many people have simply doubled down on their commitment to what they believe it has to offer them. It is easier to believe in an outdated performance than to create an entirely new one. As a result, cultural release valves, like the contemporary wellness industry, have cropped up, offering people ways to achieve more with less time, money, and energy. Moreover, in a society where class is increasingly expressed through knowledge accumulation rather than conspicuous consumption, wellness has simply become another way that people indicate their class statuses. To put this in Goffman’s framework, wellness has become a front that people have adopted in order to perform a

131. Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, 35.

particular class status, for the ideal that underscores wellness is similar to the ideal that Franklin popularized nearly two hundred fifty years ago.

This is exemplified by what I wrote about in chapter one, or the fact that many wellness practices are a means to a more optimized end. Similarly to Franklin's pursuit of "moral perfection," contemporary wellness practices are a way to control one's mind and body in order to achieve a cultural ideal. By engaging in various practices—like dieting, exercising, sleeping, and meditating—people have the opportunity to discover mind-body wellness, but more specifically, they have the opportunity to achieve class-based success. As I argued in the last chapter, one of the overarching goals of Franklin's autobiography is to encourage people to invest in self-improvement for the sake of material success, and now, many years later, the contemporary wellness industry has adopted the same mantra. However, there are important differences between how Franklin contextualized success and the way it is framed today.

Most importantly, performance today is even more important than it was when Franklin was alive, for unlike Franklin, autobiography is now a ubiquitous genre that most people regularly engage in. In the contemporary era, people are expected to discover their true—and *best*—selves. For example, on the undergraduate admissions webpage at Dartmouth College, it is written that "every student we admit brings something unique to the community: a combination of qualities, experiences, and point-of-view that isn't duplicated by any other student.

So come to Dartmouth. Be extraordinary here.”¹³² A local yoga student in Hanover, New Hampshire hands out magnets to their patrons that read, “the mind is everything. What you think, you become.” In CVS, picture frames can be found that say “live your best life,” pencil cases and lunch boxes that say “be you,” notebooks that say “do your thing,” and compact mirrors that say “be your own kind of beautiful.” These messages are steeped in the allure of individuality, and what they are saying is: go inwards, work harder, connect deeper, become you.

However, increasingly, people are not only expected to discover their true and authentic selves, but they are also expected to market those selves to others through social media and other digital platforms. In the Information Age, it is not enough to simply cultivate individuality—this individuality must also be seamlessly packaged into a marketable brand that can be shared across multiple platforms. In this sense, everyone is now a Benjamin Franklin who is concerned with marketing themselves to the investigative eye of their real and imagined audiences. As Franklin’s autobiography demonstrates, people have been constructing fronts for a long time, but a major difference between the era in which Franklin was writing and the contemporary era is just how important construction has become.

In the past, putting on a front was reserved for when people were frontstage, but when they walked backstage, they could presumably stop performing, especially if they were alone. This was true for Benjamin Franklin. Although his autobiography

132. “Apply to Dartmouth,” Undergraduate Admissions, Dartmouth College, accessed August 6, 2021, <https://admissions.dartmouth.edu/apply/apply-dartmouth>.

has had far-reaching influence on the collective American identity, constructing it only constituted a small portion of his lived reality—he completed all of Part I during a two week visit to Twyford, England in August 1771.¹³³ Although the ability to walk backstage is still practiced, like when servers walk away from their customers and “take off” their serving masks, the option to completely walk away from one’s front is becoming increasingly difficult. Even when people are alone, they are still “watched” by social media, a place where there is rarely, if ever, a backstage.

The wellness industry has also contributed to the increasing demand to perform, for as a system that manifests in the appearance of one’s body, it is something that must be maintained at all times, even when people are alone. As Goffman argues, the best performance is the performance in which the performer “actually possesses the attributes he appears to possess,”¹³⁴ and so as a more or less stable entity, the body carries the power of what appears to be truth. It is not like a shirt that can be put on and taken off again—it must be nurtured and cultivated at all times of one’s life, even while people sleep. Therefore, it is a seemingly reliable source for judging the authenticity of one’s front. In *The Coming of the Body*, Hervé Juvin writes that “the body is becoming our truth system. It alone endures, it alone remains. . . . From it we expect a reality which elsewhere is leaking away.”¹³⁵ But

133. Leonard W. Labaree, Ralph L. Ketcham, Helen C. Boatfield, and Helene H. Fineman, “Introduction,” in *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, ed. Leonard W. Labaree, Ralph L. Ketcham, Helen C. Boatfield, and Helene H. Fineman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 21-2.

134. Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, 17.

135. Hervé Juvin, *The Coming of the Body*, trans. John Howe (New York: Verso, 2010), xi-xii.

ultimately, the body is no more authentic than the other ways that people cultivate a front, for it is ultimately pliable—a machine that can be bent by the disciplined will of its operator.

The contemporary wellness industry has emerged from a long American tradition in which one's economic performance is valued above all else, and today, this financialization has clawed its way into almost every aspect of American life, including the appearance of one's body. The rise of technology and social media has only perpetuated this system by surrounding people at all times, thereby preventing them from going backstage. The famous Tears For Fears song "Everybody Wants to Rule the World" summarizes this point well: "Even while we sleep/We will find you/Acting on your best behavior/Turn your back on Mother Nature/Everybody wants to rule the world."¹³⁶ Even while sleeping, arguably the most "backstage" activity of all, people are still called upon to "perform," for sleep has been coopted by the wellness industry, and now, droves of people engage in what is called "sleep hygiene," or the practice of monitoring and perfecting one's sleep habits.

In Conclusion: Goop

In 2008, the actor Gwyneth Paltrow founded Goop, a company that the *New York Times* has since called "the most controversial brand in the wellness industry."¹³⁷ In

136. Tears for Fears, "Everybody Wants to Rule the World," track #3 on *Songs from the Big Chair*, Phonogram, Mercury, and Vertigo Records, 1985.

137. Taffy Brodesser-Akner, "How Goop's Haters Made Gwyneth Paltrow's Company Worth \$250 million," *The New York Times*, July 25, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/25/magazine/big-business-gwyneth-paltrow-wellness.html?searchResultPosition=21>.

the beginning, Goop consisted solely of a newsletter that Paltrow dispersed from her kitchen, listing recommendations on what to buy and where to go. But overtime, her newsletter gained popularity, eventually evolving into a company that is now “a clothing manufacturer, a beauty company, an advertising hub, a publishing house, a podcast producer and a portal of health-and-healing information.”¹³⁸ Today, the lifestyle website is perhaps most well-known for selling expensive wellness products based on dubious health claims, like “balls in the air,” a \$90 antioxidant rich vitamin regimen that claims to benefit “people who function at an intense pace and want to keep it that way,”¹³⁹ or a \$169 core meditation trainer that is advertised as a “simple piece of tech [that] helps guide and deepen your meditation session.”¹⁴⁰

According to the *New York Times*, the company was worth \$250 million in 2018,¹⁴¹ and in 2017, it was reported that an average of 1.8 million people visited the site each month.¹⁴² How is it that a company that makes outlandish wellness claims and sells infrared mats for \$995 has managed to become a multi-million dollar company? Who is it that this company catering to? Goop is catering to the millions of Americans who engage in wellness practices not only to get and stay ahead, but also to indicate their class status.

138. Brodesser-Akner, “How Goop’s Haters Made Gwyneth Paltrow’s Company Worth \$250 million.”

139. “Balls in the Air,” Vitamins & Supplements, Goop, accessed August 6, 2021, https://goop.com/goop-wellness-balls-in-the-air/p/?variant_id=24241.

140. “Core Meditation Trainer,” Wellness, Goop, accessed August 6, 2021, https://goop.com/core-core-meditation-trainer/p/?taxon_id=1489.

141. Brodesser-Akner, “How Goop’s Haters Made Gwyneth Paltrow’s Company Worth \$250 million.”

142. Olga Khazan, “The Baffling Rise of Goop,” *The Atlantic*, September 12, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2017/09/goop-popularity/539064/>.

For as I have endeavored to demonstrate in this thesis, in the contemporary United States, Americans derive social status and perceived value from an arbitrary set of qualities and skills that are unevenly distributed across the population, such as the way they dress, the words they use, the schools they attend, the jobs they have, the texture of their hair, the mobility of their bodies, and so on. These are all performative aspects of how people indicate their class status in the contemporary era. In addition, people are valued for more nuanced aspects of their identity, like if they breastfeed their children, consume locally-sourced goods, drive a particular type of car, hold themselves confidently, or wear the appropriate amount of makeup. These are all forms of symbolic capital, and when individuals have accumulated the amount necessary to present themselves in the “right” ways, they are held in higher esteem, whether implicitly or explicitly, than those who do not demonstrate these same qualities, resulting in recognition.

The popularity of Goop is related to how people accumulate symbolic capital in the contemporary era. With time, indicating one’s class status has become more nuanced than simply accumulating things. Today, people demonstrate their class status by what they *know*, what they *do*, and who they *are*. But as Goop exemplifies, sometimes the *appearance* of something is even more important than the thing itself, for Goop does not just sell products, it sells a *lifestyle*. The lifestyle advertised by Goop is what Goffman would call a “collective representation.” Rather than representing the front of a single person, Goop is representative of an ideal, and it is this ideal that people are buying when they spend \$149 on a “rabbit-shaped” vibrator intended to cultivate one’s “sexual wellness.”

The urge to be well in the contemporary era has led to the emergence of a multi-billion dollar industry that is only growing in size. The success of this industry is due to the fact that it has harnessed the powerful allure of recognition. Wellness practices offer a literal opportunity to transcend the despair of obscurity. But at the same time, these practices exist within the framework of a socioeconomic system that benefits precisely when people *are not* recognized for who they are, but only when they are in alignment with an ideal economic outcome. Therefore, the modern individual is caged between the allure of pure embodiment and the conformity required of materialism. This failed transition creates a paradox in which people are expected to adhere to the wisdom of their bodies, but only when it reflects a desired material condition.

From the perspective of capitalism, wellness practices are positive when they alleviate someone's stress or anxiety, resulting in a more productive and optimized worker, but they are less positive when they result in women becoming satisfied with who they are sans makeup, threatening the sustenance of an entire industry. People may choose to externalize their authentic selves through their actions, attitude, and appearances, but they will still be scrutinized and judged within a system that is fundamentally opposed to any changes that may threaten its survival. In other words, within the framework of neoliberalism, recognition has conditions, and most importantly, it is meant to be sought, not discovered. From this perspective, conditional recognition is revealed to be not only a necessary aspect of the healthy functioning of contemporary capitalism, but in addition, it is alienation that makes it so that people will never be satisfied with the recognition that is

conferred on them, thereby ensuring that the capitalist system continues to be propagated.

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