

Ethnologie française

Call for contributions

« Optimization of the self »

Coordination

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Thesis

The promise of self-optimization has colonized our everyday life. Individuals are now exhorted to optimize their body, their food, their sexuality, their sleep, their physiological and cognitive performance, their biological and social life. In recent years this imperative towards maximization has made deep inroads into marketing discourse, public health programmes, personal development manuals and theories of how to age well. Transhumanist thinking, with its hyperbolic discourse on the inevitable transcendence of human nature, has emerged as one of the main centres of production and dissemination of an ethics of optimization. Transhumanist discourse is based on the premise that the process of biological evolution is suboptimal, thus legitimizing research into and implementation of new optimalities that are destined to save humanity. According to its adherents, human beings' necessary adaptation to their environment forces them to optimize life. The concept of optimization is thus normalized as a continuation of human evolution, the pharmacologization of cognitive performance becoming, in this view, no more than a sophisticated form of the practice of morning coffee [Dévédec and Guis, 2013]. This idea of the perfectible body [Dévédec, 2015], understood through the lens of disability and dysfunction [Katz and Marshall, 2004], reinforces and converges with the contemporary representation of the 'body project' [Shilling 2012], as analysed by anthropologists. Thus it is suggested that the normality of everyday experience of a "healthy" body has to be constructed through a set of activities of self-surveillance, self-control, and self-optimization.

The concept of optimization was originally applied in the field of economic calculation. Rational choice theory and its model of optimality have been subject to much criticism from within economics [Simon, 1959] and in other fields, including anthropology [Sahlins, 1969], sociology [Boudon, 2003] and political science [Green and Shapiro, 1996]. These criticisms relate to the model's failure to account fully for the complexity of the social, and to the implicit ideology revealed by its hegemony of economic reasoning. But it was in the field of

psychology that the concept of optimization was presented in the form that we focus on in this issue: as a *daily process* and a *moral frame of reference*, rather than an explanatory model. Abraham Maslow [1954], who articulated the aim of humanistic psychology as being to allow every individual to achieve self-actualization, through the identification and constant improvement of her/his capacities, opened up the field of '*health psychology*' [Maslow, 1962], and more generally that of 'personal development'. Some decades later, this positive psychology was to find fertile ground in normative theories of aging. The theory of 'successful aging' developed by Paul and Margret Baltes [1993], for example, is seen as a process of optimization that takes advantage of the *plasticity* of the human body. '*Optimization means that choices made in terms of projects and goals will be committed to in such a way as to get maximum benefit from them, in terms of both quality and quantity*' [Hummel, 2009: 47]. This moral frame of reference was also highlighted by early studies on biomedicalization: '*In the biomedicalization era, the focus is no longer on illness, disability, and disease as matters of fate, but on health as a matter of ongoing moral self-transformation*' [Clarke *et al.*, 2003: 172]. Optimality has definitively lost its role as a model, becoming instead a vitalist morality, in which the aim is not only to prevent illness but also to produce more life: '*our contemporary biopolitics is not defined by health and illness, or even by the parameters of sexuality and procreation. It is a space of problems concerning the optimization of life itself*' [Rose, 2007: 82]. In Nikolas Rose's view, the contemporary imperative towards optimization corresponds to one of the five great shifts which form the basis for his cartography of contemporary biopolitics. Rose emphasizes the normative aspect of the concept, and its close interrelation with neoliberalism. Technologies of optimization such as genomics thus carry implicit ideological assumptions about the existence of an optimal form of human life, on both collective and individual levels. Rose's choice of terminology is dictated by his aim of going beyond the binary that structures both bioethics and social sciences, between the therapeutic field and that of *enhancement*. In her writing on the commodification of the body, Céline Lafontaine reveals the breadth and diversity of a bioeconomics whose '*only perspective is the optimization of the productive potentialities of life itself (...), the final stage of globalized capital*' [Lafontaine, 2014: 122]. Anti-aging medicine, with its use of hormones [Dalgalarondo and Hauray, 2015] and its offer of holistic care, perfectly embodies this medicine of the optimal, centred on ensuring one's future well-being [Mykytyn, 2008]. Sociological studies in the arena of medication, and specifically the issue of cognitive enhancement [Coveney, Gabe and Williams, 2001; Maturo, 2013] highlight the effects of the pathologization of this promise, and the practices it gives rise to. By naturalizing physiological states previously considered *artificial*, the process of optimization deconstructs the normal [Collin, 2016]. These multiple separate shifts of boundaries, identities and normalities also have the effect of altering the relationship of meaning between the pursuit of health and the pursuit of well-being.

Aims of this issue

What is being optimized, how, and to what ends? Through these questions, we seek to highlight and to investigate the multiple ideologies that can be harnessed to the quest for optimization. We have seen that it operates as a moral frame of reference, as a normative injunction to maximize the use of the self in order to secure better performance, health, or well-being. By linking the fields of therapy and enhancement, the concept of optimization points to an original field of investigation, for its heuristics, on both the descriptive and the analytical levels, derive from its processual nature. Optimization, to adopt Gilles Deleuze's terms, is a journey without a predefined trajectory, a lived experience. While the concept of

enhancement is associated with the idea of the frontier, that of optimization retains a link with the normal. The contemporary promise of optimization thus slides easily along the continuum between the normal and the pathological, and depending on the terms used, shifts between the registers of care, enhancement, prevention and well-being. This flexibility, while it represents a challenge for research, allows actors on the market, governments and all those who might make use of this moral frame of reference to adapt their products and their discourse to the diversity of demand, to regulatory concerns, and to the state of debate on bioethics.

If this permanent injunction to strive for optimality is redrawing the boundaries of the normal, there is another question that needs to be asked: what does it do to individuals? The quest for ‘better’, which can be interpreted as the product of a society saturated with discourses of competition that force each of us to strive to perform and to outdo ourselves [Ehrenberg, 1994], has obvious links with eugenicist thinking, which in its contemporary manifestations places the individual at the centre of the system and invites her/him to engage in ‘intense self-exploitation’ [Rosental, 2016: 62]. A responsible individual who, through rational and daily grooming of her body and her feelings, manages to fit herself appropriately to our society, its values and its norms. On the other hand, through its reflexive effects the injunction to optimality opens a space for some play, for lines of flight, for decoding [Akrich, 1992], for deviant and potentially critical explorations. In addition to the injunction, therefore, we seek to examine the work of appropriation of the logic of optimization, which can manifest itself in the form of ideological positions (critical distance, forms of engagement) and daily practices (resistance, negotiation, experimentation). It also seems to us important to reflect on optimization as a *technique of the self* – from a Foucauldian perspective [Martin, 1998] – which contains at its heart a makeshift assemblage of norms and possibilities, injunctions and preferences. This process can also take the form of a political discourse of liberation when it is presented as a way of taking back control over one’s body and one’s daily life, in order to achieve an ‘authentic’ *way of life* [Macé, 2016].

Set within the context of a critical reading of the neoliberal logic of performance, our concern in this issue is above all to reveal the ‘other side’ of optimization. Observing individuals close-up, we shall consider how they appropriate the promises of enhancement, adopt or reject the moral injunctions of the market in performance, health and well-being, and organize individually and collectively to construct experiments on the self. It is in fact in this oft-neglected sphere of daily life that new relationships with the body and new modes of care (personalized or holistic) emerge, and that the boundaries between the normal and the pathological quietly evolve, beneath the constant stream of scientific marketing [Gaudillière and Thoms, 2015]. It is also in this realm of the ordinary and the everyday that alternative uses, diversions, misappropriations and nonconformities, at once discreet and instructive, are forged, in the privacy of personal experience and the discovery of new potentialities. The principal aim of this issue is to go beyond the normativity of the concept of optimization by examining the games, the stratagems, the negotiations and the resistances brought to bear by individuals faced with their inequalities of skill and knowledge. Attention will therefore be focused on socially differentiated capacities for such appropriation.

Key lines of investigation

This issue aims to bring together ethnographic studies that will shed light on the areas of everyday life in which forms of optimization are unfolding. Particular focus will be placed on three fields of social life in which optimality of the body seems to us manifest.

Food and eating: Food is a very useful frame of reference for considering social uses of the body [Boltanski, 1971] and its government [Fassin and Memmi, 2004]. A process of nutritionalization [Poulain, 2009] is today contributing to increased reflexivity at the individual level, with people taking into account the potential impact of food on their state of health, well-being and their body. This process is characterized by a dietary injunction orchestrated by governments through their health policies, by NGOs through their awareness-raising campaigns, and by the agri-food industry with its nutritional marketing. The aim here will be to identify, conversely, the ways in which individuals adopt, reject or appropriate these new ‘healthy eating’ norms in their everyday life [Coveney, 2006; Fournier, 2014], and ultimately adapt their relationship to food, whether by consuming new categories of products (functional foods, dietary supplements, etc.) or by co-constructing alternative, politicized and/or experimental, eating practices (vegetarianism, ‘free-from’ diets, palaeo diet, fasting, grape detox, etc.).

Sexualities and reproductive health: This second area sheds light on the introduction and normalization of an idea of a performing body in terms of sexuality (primarily for men) and a competent body in terms of reproductive health (primarily for women). The sexual performance market offers a prime arena for observing this optimization of the self, for example with regard to erectile dysfunction, more or less closely linked to the issue of aging. The stakes involved in this pharmacologization can also be seen in the use of synthetic and bioidentical hormones – and their potential misuses – for contraception [Takeshita, 2012], to suppress menstrual cycles [Sanabria, 2016], or to treat the menopause [Löwy and Guadillière, 2006]. More broadly, the aim will be to grasp the extent to which this injunction, implicitly borrowed from a gender order that assigns sexual performativity to men and management of health and reproduction to women, makes space for phases of experimentation, forms of appropriation and possibilities of *empowerment*.

Well-being: The moral injunction of self-optimization is at work in the contemporary quest for well-being, an area of research that has as yet been relatively little explored by the social sciences in France [Forsé and Langlois, 2014]. The personal development market [Requillé, 2008], in its form of ‘popular’ self-help books and professional training aimed at ‘self-actualization’ in work, thus emerges as a field for heuristic analysis of the dissemination of this moral injunction. In the same field, practices of ‘self-quantification’ or the *Quantified Self* [Meissner, 2016; Swan, 2013] and smart device technologies represent a new mode of ludic application of the process of optimization, for example through the constitution of virtual experiential communities (internet forums), as a medium for mutual motivation and comparison. The emerging use of these technologies in everyday life (for example with smart watches), during physical activity or at work, through the intermediary of ‘well-being at work’ or *Corporate Wellness* programmes, offers an opportunity for a revised analysis of the new spirit of capitalism [Boltanski and Chiapello, 1999] and its modes of government of individuals and their productivity.

Schedule

The deadline for proposals for contributions (title and abstract of 4,000-6,000 characters, including references) is **15 January 2018**. Proposals should state the main lines of argument as well as the source material (surveys and/or archives) used, and should be accompanied by an author biography (including publications).

Proposals should be sent to the issue coordinators, Tristan Fournier and Sébastien Dalgalarondo: tristan.fournier@ehess.fr and sébastien.dalgalarondo@ehess.fr. Authors will be informed whether their proposals have been selected in February 2018.

Final texts (between 35,000 and 70,000 characters, including spaces and references) should be sent by **31 August 2018**. Publication of this issue of *Ethnologie Française* is planned for **autumn 2019**.

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