

Authenticity and happiness: tensions between two contemporary cultural imperatives

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Abstract

Reflecting on the characteristics that saturate the subjects of our time, this article seeks to question authenticity and happiness as cultural imperatives. It seeks as well to perceive its connection with cultural practices and its consequences in the process of producing contemporary subjectivities, considering how these ideals can be perceived in the logic of spectacularization. Therefore, this article briefly goes through the economic, socio-cultural and political processes that were the foundation of contemporary subjectivity. Then, it seeks to define the concepts of happiness and authenticity, establishing, along this path, why and how they constitute social obligations. Finally, the spectacularization of life is argued as a consequence of those cultural imperatives and the way in which they are conducted in postmodern western societies.

Keywords: Happiness. Authenticity. Subjectivity. Spectacularization. Contemporary cultural practices.

Introductory words

The Brazilian self-help publishing market, which has long been filled with titles that point readers to alleged paths to high performance, has recently seen a boom in sales of books that are said to offer an alternative rhetoric. Driven by *The subtle art of not giving a f*ck* (MANSON, 2017), at the top of *Veja* magazine¹ bestseller list, these publications seem to want to occupy a place of uniqueness in this market – exploiting the rhetoric of authenticity: “throwing away the lists of who we should be is another act of courage. Loving ourselves [...] in the process of becoming authentic is perhaps the greatest gesture of living boldly” (BROWN, B. 2016, p. 108²). Apparently, the order is: be yourself, be authentic, desire without caring what others think.

The advice on the search for authenticity as a condition to be happy is not restricted to the market of self-help books: the triumph of “being yourself” has also been central in the elaboration of narratives and images of oneself in virtual social networks. It is a rhetoric that privileges the affirmation of individual desire over an *ethos* marked by guilt, as it was the case in Modernity, for example. It is, then, what leads us to the proposal of this work.

If authenticity has been pointed out by the self-help market as the place of truth, pleasure and happiness; if the narratives of claiming rights of some social groups appear systematically impregnated with this appeal to a presumed authenticity; if in social networks this speech seems to have preponderance and recognition; if even Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie³ revealed the editor’s demand for one of her books, in which, according to him, the “African authenticity” did not appear; it seems necessary to realize the nexus of this demand for a supposed authenticity with cultural practices and their unfolding in the process of production of contemporary subjectivities.

Therefore, it is vital to question how the ethos of authenticity, presented as the key to happiness, has important implications in everyday life and, especially, for the sociabilities that postmodern subjects establish with each other and with the objects of our worlds, so marked by mediatization.

The assembly of the new creature and its clothes

The policies – first economic and then social and cultural – that began with neoliberalism, whose implementation took place in Latin American countries with renewed strength after the Second World War, later constituted a rationality (FOUCAULT, 2008) that involves all spheres of life. As the French author indicated, the clarity of neoliberalism was to create a kind of subjectivity suited to its purposes.

1 *Veja* Best Sellers. Available at: <https://veja.abril.com.br/livros-mais-vendidos/autoajuda-e-esoterismo>. Access on: 09 may 2020.

2 All the references written in Portuguese used in this manuscript have been freely translated to English.

3 *The danger of a single story*. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D9Ihs241zeg>. Access on: 09 may 2020.

For the conception of this subjectivity, the *individual subject*⁴ is first created, who is later crowned as king and lord of creation. Once this “creature” was instituted, it was necessary to define his outfit, because the appropriate clothing for such a divine and newly assembled work could not be just any. Thus, he dressed himself with the freedom of choice, which allowed him his increasing autonomy, his systematic separation from the collective of yore; he put on equality-of-rights shoes, on which his steps would assert himself with the march of time. The competition cap was also put on, indispensable to guide his thinking, because, of course, this is a being of thought and rationality, obliged to control his emotions. He finally perfumed himself with the eau de cologne of efficiency and effectiveness.

Freedom of choice becomes a central issue in contemporary times, since, arising from the prevalence of the individual, the possibility of being and taking action lies in him. A subject with no past, no tradition, and no more history than the one he himself builds (EHRENBERG, 2010): a subject whose future is defined by merit.

This conception of freedom of choice involves several problems: it becomes a criterion in itself and becomes universal. As Taylor (2011, p. 561) warns, it is an “unbeatable argument”, a “primary value”, “unrelated neither to any concrete choice between two things nor to the scope of choice”. It involves, moreover, the pretension of no-limit, the impression that there are no barriers; as the metaphor made by the author about “the sensation of a child in the candy store”.

Taylor’s (2011) irony clarifies the argument, since to live in society, of course, some freedom of choice must be restricted, some authority must be respected and some individual responsibility must be assumed; the questions are *what are they*, and at *what cost*.

In turn, with the emergence of the human rights discourse, the notion of equality becomes generalized and massified; equality of the different subjects among themselves and before the State; supposed equality, for example, before the law. This notion of equality, which fallaciously erases differences (in access to resources, to possibilities), allows, on the one hand, the resurgence of social movements that claim their rights. On the other hand, it installs in us, complexly, the logic of competition, precisely because only among equals can the best win.

Regarding competition, it is possible to say that when the rules of capital permeate the various spheres of life and people start to think and evaluate almost everything from the cost-benefit rule (BROWN, W. 2015; COOPER, 2017), their being and relationships with the world become commodities (LAVAL; DARDOT, 2016). It is possible to suggest that capitalism and neoliberalism achieved their goals when this way of thinking, being and taking action in the world became natural⁵.

4 The reiteration seeks to emphasize subjection, singularity and individualism.

5 The scope of this article would not be enough to include a broader discussion about the characteristics of capitalism and neoliberalism, its phases, moments and contradictions, nor criticisms made, whether aesthetic or social – as we can see in the studies of Boltanski and Chiapello (2009), W. Brown (2015), Laval and Dardot (2016) and Cooper (2017).

Thus, the individual who is supposedly free to choose, autonomous and independent, becomes, additionally, a subject to competition, favoring a subjectivity marked by liberal individualism. According to Taylor (2011), this change is intensified from the 1960s onwards, when to the moral/spiritual and instrumental individualisms it was necessary to add the “expressive” individualism⁶.

In understanding of contemporary subjectivity, it is also essential to include a brief reflection on the western construction of affections, rationality and control of emotions. Descartes’ construction on the primacy of thought and the subordination of emotion is widely known. Especially from his ideas, that were systematically expanded and deepened, emotions were built in the West as part of the primitive human, the uncivilized ancestor. According to Ahmed (2014), three types of hierarchies are established: between thought and emotion, between types of emotions and between individuals who experience them. Consequently, it is created another structural component of this contemporary individual, who sees himself in the obligation to control the impulses, to lead with reason and control his heart.

Finally, it is understood that efficiency and effectiveness are also a consequence of capitalist and neoliberal rationality in the construction of this contemporary subjectivity. Legitimate daughters of the logic of cost-benefit, they are not limited to the work environment, but are also applied to other spheres of life: fatherhood, motherhood, affective relationships, sport and the relationship of each one with his body – surprisingly, even the school environment and childhood will be occupied by this market rationality.

The cultural imperative of happiness

All the people want to be happy. There seems to be no goal in life that leads to a high degree of consensus like this. This permanent presence of happiness gives an account of the role it played in Philosophy, and the amount of research carried out in the Social Sciences in the last six decades also illustrates this preeminence. Is it because happiness, as Ahmed (2010) shows, is constantly described as what gives purpose, meaning and order to human life? Is it because in each time and context it has played a pivotal role in the construction of a type of person, in the very construction of subjectivities?

Freud (2011a, p. 17) defended the impossibility of a project of happiness, since this would only happen in an episodic way; when prolonged, it would only translate to “a very tenuous feeling of contentment”. Inspired by Freudian thinking, Bauman (1998, p. 9) updated the theory of malaise, based on the idea of freedom as an individual value in postmodernity: the ideals of beauty, purity and order “must be pursued – and realized – through individual spontaneity, desire and effort”. In addition to happiness as a merit, the notions of self-esteem

⁶ This expressionism is not a recent invention. On the contrary, it was distinctive of Romanticism in the late eighteenth century and aspiration of the elites during the nineteenth century; the novelty, explains Taylor (2011), is its transformation into a mass phenomenon.

and well-being also participate in this scheme: in the name of these two goals, as widespread as vague, the individual launches himself into a venture of self-management that is a symptom of postmodern culture.

In this article, it is presented the argument that the specific characteristics happiness acquires in the contemporary are part of the proposal of being human of capitalist and neoliberal rationality. It was possible to identify four criticisms that Communication makes precisely about this contemporary construction of the happy subject, which appears as a concern for many researchers (FREIRE FILHO, 2010; VAZ, 2010; BAKKER, 2012; MAZETTI, 2014). That is, happiness as: (1) individual responsibility; (2) individualistic and competing; (3) universal right; (4) cultural imperative.

In order to arrive at the current idea of happiness, it was necessary, as explained, to place the individual at the center, to link his happiness to his attitudes, thoughts and especially to his actions. Happiness was designed as an absolutely personal choice (McMAHON, 2006). State and market disappear from the equation and what Ehrenberg (2010, p. 69) calls “the meritocratic virus” is established.

The fact that happiness is for postmodernity an individual responsibility brings with it several problems. On the one hand, the individual is increasingly alone to face life, weakening the social fabric in the possibilities of community ties. On the other hand, the demands overload his body and psyche: demands like those established by the market for optimization, the accomplishment of many tasks at the same time, the permanent connection, the extension of working hours beyond official hours.

The exclusive responsibility of the individual for his tasks and, consequently, for his success is a phenomenon that revisits the Foucauldian formulation of the individual as an *entrepreneur of himself*. By the logic of competition, each one must deal alone with the demands to fulfill the social expectations of success in the most diverse spheres of life, while the other appears as an opponent and contender.

For happiness to be thought of as a universal right, it was previously necessary to build this universality. The following three conjectures are artificial and fallacious: democracy, equality and the construction of a supposed scope of happiness (BIRMAN, 2010). In the current increasingly unequal societies, this idea of people’s homogeneity before the State and the law has been widely criticized. The same crisis that contemporary democracy experiences in its limitations of representing and protecting the rights of many people also happens with regard to happiness as a universal good.

These discursive constructions are especially dubious, considering that Latin America is the most unequal region in the world (OXFAM, 2016), characterized by constant migratory flows, where conservatism is intensified, the logic of consumption is imposed in all areas of life, the difference between public and private is shattered, corruption is built as a central theme (VAZ; VELAZCO, 2017) and the consequences of changes in the environment are faced. In Brazil, the situation is particularly alarming:

only six people have wealth equivalent to the wealth of the 100 million poorest Brazilians. And more: the richest 5% hold the same share of income as the other 95%. Around here, a worker earning one minimum wage per month will take 19 years to receive the equivalent of a super-rich's income in a single month (OXFAM, 2017, p. 6).

As paradoxical as it may seem, happiness seems to have become a *chronic disease* for contemporary culture (FREIRE FILHO, 2010), as it has become a cultural imperative that forgets differences and erases inequalities. This logic is consistent with the need to forget fragility, hide fear, eliminate vulnerability – or present vulnerability as a problem – as if they were not structural conditions of the human.

Authenticity in contemporary times

According to Taylor (2007), it was after the second half of the twentieth century that a culture based on the values of equality, happiness and authenticity emerged. For him, the 1960s were the key moment of this “cultural revolution” that has been developing in the recent decades and that has as its center the idea of “expressive individualism” mentioned above.

Taylor (2011, p. 23) describes this imperative of authenticity as a “right to develop one’s own way of living” that each individual would have, with the only condition of not causing harm to the other. Thus, it should be the goal of each individual to seek a way of being in the world that meet their desires, as well as meeting this inner truth inherent in each person, affirming the attitude of a “self-determining freedom” (TAYLOR, 2011, p. 37), resisting and breaking with external impositions: “there are no barriers to my desires” (TAYLOR, 2007, p. 478), what Ehrenberg (2010) calls the *galaxy of autonomy*.

Satisfaction and personal fulfillment are directly related to the concept of happiness as authenticity. Being happy is a state in which the person finds himself in fullness by performing some action or deed (BIRMAN, 2010). Concerned about happiness at work, Bakker (2012) highlights how the choice of profession and job has been associated with *true happiness*. More than a source of fixed income, work has been presented as a place for personal development and professional self-fulfillment, which refers to the conception of a subject who is faithful to himself (BAKKER, 2012). Different media products, from self-help books teaching how to find success to digital influencers, will link the individual’s professional life to a subjective dimension: work is, at the same time, a way of realizing one’s presumed “essence” and achieving a kind of happiness fantasy – just think of the well-known self-help jargon “work for what you love and you’ll never have to work again in your life”.

In this logic, in order to be happy, the contemporary individual is called to be authentic, imagining rejecting the rules externally imposed by his society, seeking a supposed interiority to which he needs to be faithful and privileging pleasure here and now. The place of this presumed

transgression that the discourse of authenticity proposes to occupy is, however, dismantled, keeping in mind that “no one acquires the necessary languages for self-definition by himself”, since “the genesis of the human mind [...] is not ‘monological’, it is not something that each one conquers alone, but dialogic” (TAYLOR, 2011, p. 43). As Freud suggested,

In the psychic life of the individual being, the Other is, as a rule, considered as a model, object, helper and adversary, and therefore individual psychology is also, from the beginning, social psychology, in an expanded but entirely justified sense (FREUD, 2011b, p. 10).

Both Freud (2011b), in his analysis of the construction of identity (of the self), and Taylor (2011), through the argument of authenticity, argue that behaviors are necessarily socially created and sanctioned, which dismantles the ideal that we would be fully capable of living in a self-sufficient, monological and self-centered attitude; as if one would be self-sufficient within their own truths and desires. A “radicalism of subjectivity”, as Ehrenberg (2010, p. 74) ironized. Founded as a demand from the other, as a form of moral demand, what is understood as authentic practice in our culture would not be the realization of true authenticity (TAYLOR, 2011).

Being spectacularly happy and authentic

This idea of authenticity is even more controversial, considering the new regimes of self-exposure, identity construction and subjectivity production in the logic of digital social networks⁷.

Debord (1997, p. 14), in his book-manifesto published in 1967, argued that “the spectacle is not a set of images, but a social relationship between people, mediated by images”. Since then, between the 50 years of cultural, political and social transformations, including the consolidation of cinema and television, for example, thinking about communicational dynamics based on Debord has been a valid effort. The work is relevant to contemporary discussions because it criticized the signs of a universe moved by the “appearing”, a tendency of “making visible”, in which vision becomes the most privileged human sense (DEBORD, 1997). “Articulating images and narratives of reality, the plots and images of the media will be absorbed in the daily lives of thousands of people and will become the interpretive codes with which they guide the world and build their own personal narratives” (JAGUARIBE, 2007, p. 30).

The point is that the spectacle has become not only a way of spreading narratives, but the spectacle itself is the way in which life takes place. The events of an individual’s life, the attributions of meaning to the experiences and the forms of sociability take place in the very space of this spectacle: a form of subjectivity engendered by a permanent mediatization that

⁷ The identity-authenticity-visibility triad, studied by the French anthropologist in the analysis of the *performance cult* (EHRENBERG, 2010).

dissolves the boundaries between public and private. Moving away from a regime of interiority, Western mediatized contemporary cultures seem to happen, then, in what would be a “public performance of extimacy” (SIBILIA, 2016, p. 346): intimacy as a virtual spectacle, or the “theatralization of self” for Ehrenberg (2010). Although they are presented as a discourse of questioning norms, a supposedly authentic attitude, the visibility and the gaze of the other are inevitably fundamental parts of this dynamic.

Therefore, there is a link between the images of the world produced in the media and the subjectivities engendered in this process, in which it is intended that happiness could be realized in the very instant it becomes public. Now, in a culture that, as we have seen, points happiness and individual well-being as main goals, what kind of narratives do individuals produce about themselves?

Giroux (2015, p. 156), when questioning the *selfie* culture for being “a need to make the self as an object of public interest”, highlights that “the vision of good society has been replaced by visions of individual happiness characterized by an infinite search for instant gratification and self-recognition”. The core of the author’s criticism concerns the obstacle that this way of being, driven by images and self-narratives, poses to reflection and questioning, when the ideal of happiness and freedom is linked more to self-management and less to a debate about social responsibility.

Concluding remarks

Generically, we describe the contemporary sociocultural landscape as a scene deeply marked by individualism and freedom of choice, a world organized by the primacy of the logic of competition, efficiency and effectiveness. Logic that, by demanding an optimization of everything that exists – even what would be the most sensitive – devalues emotions. Moreover, it attributes to the individual the potential of any and every achievement: by betting that the events that happen to someone depend on their actions and their work, they believe in a fallacious assumption that all individuals start from a position of equality.

This same neoliberal landscape that is designed in contemporary times will place happiness and authenticity as imperatives: the individual must be happy and authentic, self-sufficient to reach this place. This manuscript tried to show, thus, a concern about the links made in this equation. While this assertion of authenticity and happiness circulates in contemporary discourses, its goals seem very little achievable. Beyond the widely unequal social context presented, both happiness and authenticity are controversial concepts that do not account for human plurality: what would it be like to be “yourself”? What is the “essence” of an individual? What does it mean to affirm “authenticity” if everybody is crossed by sociabilities? What is this project of happiness that gives the individual and his “authenticity” the power of realization? These notions of happiness and authenticity seem to be in tension with the very society in which they are inserted.

In fact, this centrality of the individual in culture is perhaps the central concern of this reflection, especially of discourses that favor individuals who are self-absorbed and shielded from their own emotions, in the name of optimizing their existence. Perhaps there may seem to be in our words a certain nostalgia, a subtle desire, but still present, of searching for a time when the collective was a priority, where magic and enchantment were commonplace. Decentering this individual, almighty, self-entrepreneur, from the contemporary neoliberal *ethos* seems like a monstrous political proposal (in its size it is), but it needs to be thought from the Social Sciences in an interdisciplinary perspective. Communication must be, therefore, part of this discussion because the media plays a fundamental role in the construction of this neoliberal subjectivity: the individual and contemporary sociabilities take place in these postmodern mediatized dynamics and share the values imbued by these discourses that circulate in the culture.

In this sense, how to think of a true/authentic attitude when making a curation of life that is exposed online? Or that the relationship of the individual with this curatorship follows the order of the investment in itself? If the modern individual saw in the authenticity form of transgression, subversion of values, this form of authenticity seems to conform to the demands of the market, which will guide this neoliberal culture. How to endorse the discourse of authenticity when the performance seeks to arouse the desire and recognition of the other? How to believe in this presumed inner authenticity if the subject himself is complexly created in a social broth that mixes biology, personality, bonds, interactions and relationships with others in this world where the objects of the world are named in advance their existence and change over time? Apparently, this rhetoric in favor of an authentic *ethos* reinforces an already dominant discourse at least in the last fifty years. The identity that presents itself as authentic and transgressive, at the same time that it is built in an attitude concerned only with its own desires, shows itself to be dependent on this place of visibility and approval of the gaze of the others, present in contemporary surveillance schemes.

Thus, pointing the way to happiness through self-affirmation and individual desires only leads us to question the unrealizable content of this project: in the dynamics of views and likes, in the economy of the online spectacle of authenticity and happiness, there is no possibility of self-sufficiency, even less of transgression. Authentic happiness seems to be a project that is promoted discursively, but that falls apart as it is constantly performed as an individual investment on itself and under the regime of curation and surveillance. A model of happiness that, precisely because it is constituted of incompatible and unattainable ideals – authenticity and external approval – has no other perspective than the frustration of the individuals who bet on it.

Finally, questioning this ideal of self-determination happiness leads us to ponder what kind of social engagement is promoted in this culture. As a nexus between authenticity and happiness is established, who is this project for? The discourse of authenticity, which has already represented an attitude of rebellion and insubmission, is consolidated through the

exaltation of the individual and its self-exposition: instead of a social and collective policy, a discourse that will be guided by the happiness of the individual, their well-being and self-esteem. Thus, it is a discourse more concerned with the recognition of a glamourized daily life and the individual satisfaction resulting from it, than effectively with an attitude of true questioning with about the prevailing cultural and moral beliefs, as well as the reflection of the subject about his place and participation in a permanently shared world, at the same time spectacular and cruel.

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Authors' contribution

Lisbeth Araya Jiménez and Nicole Sanhotene actively participated in all stages of the manuscript's preparation.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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