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# Self-Realization Options

## *Contemporary Marching Order in the Pursuit of Recognition*

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**abstract:** On a descriptive level, the article points out that Western populations have experienced an increase in possibilities for self-realization, but also that the rise in options has led to a paradoxical increase in different forms of psychic distortion. On a more normative level, it has become clear that the neo-liberal idea of freedom, which seems to state that a free market will facilitate all forms of self-realization options, is incomplete. Application of the neo-liberal idea of freedom makes it clear in two ways that the recognition–graduation semantics are twisted in such a manner that individuals cannot cognitively make sense of what can and cannot be an object of recognition, and that intersubjective recognition relations are eroding to such an extent that commonly shared pathological development tendencies are in danger of being suppressed by the lacking ability to join in a collective will-formation. It seems that the neo-liberal idea of freedom is creating a cognitive discrepancy between a promise for more and more self-realization options through deregulation and the actual stable possibilities for individual self-realization. What is becoming evident is that no secure self-realization options are offered, but rather that the individual has to have options in order to gain recognition.

**keywords:** anomie ♦ Axel Honneth ♦ critical theory ♦ neo-liberalism  
♦ recognition ♦ self-realization

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## Introduction

Nobody seems to have any reservations about the many sociological diagnoses (*Zeitdiagnosen*) which, on the one hand, describe increased opportunities for individual self-realization and the social-psychological diagnoses which, on the other hand, describe paradoxical individual suffering such as depression and anxiety that apparently arise in conjunction with the increase in individual life-chances (Ehrenberg, 2000; Boltanski and Chiapello, 2003: 455). In spite of the diagnostic consensus, I will elaborate further on the often paradoxical, pathological development tendencies, which are juxtaposed to the increased opportunities for individual self-realization. As the title suggests, my thesis is that the acceptance of a person by society is granted when that person has the ability to handle self-realization options that make him or her worthy of recognition. Thus, the explanation should not only be found in descriptive accounts of the increased possibilities for the individual to create his or her own biography, but also in the demand to have more and more opportunities to realize oneself as a complete, authentic individual.

Initially, in the following, I give an account of the difference between opportunities and options, so that it becomes analytically possible to differentiate between a set of limited opportunities for self-realization and surplus of self-realization options. The purpose of the conceptualization is to identify some of the immanent pathological tendencies that are embedded in the expansion of self-realization options. Then, in a similar manner, I differentiate between the concepts of recognition and cognitive recognition. This clarification serves, in the next step, to identify the cognitive and intersubjective futures of the contemporary neo-liberal organization of work. However, before I continue, I briefly examine Emile Durkheim's useful anomic diagnostic, which once again becomes relevant in regard to the new conceptual divisions. After these accounts, I pose the more negatively loaded question of how the ruling neo-liberal demand for self-realization is of significance to the mental stability of the individual in relation to the outlined framework. Finally, I argue that the neo-liberal organization of work leads to an anomic state where the individual's mental conditions are being pushed towards a pathological abyss: on the one hand, it aspires to unlimited options for individual self-realization and, on the other, the neo-liberal organization of work keeps the vital recognition that ensures the individual's mental stability is kept at arm's length, turning the individual into a greyhound chasing the rabbit without ever receiving sufficient recognition for the mile sprinted.

## Opportunities and options

It is true that Western populations have more opportunity for self-realization, but this does not indicate that traditional class structures have broken down, nor that inequalities have not increased, but rather that there exists within each class of society a large number of varied possibilities from which the individual can construct his or her identity. The class analyses of our time – whether material or immaterial – practically all point to the fact that the upward and downward mobility between classes has not changed. However, what is evident to everyone, without any empirical validation, is that general welfare has increased within the total population of Western societies. This development not only means that the material conditions have improved the standard of living of each class, but also that within each class there are more possibilities to ascribe a special value to one's own identity. Thus, the lower to the upper classes are not tied down to a smaller set of self-realization opportunities in order silently to pass through the normative schematics of the class in order to reach recognition for their talents, skills and accomplishments: today, there exists within each class not only a larger demographic mobility, but also a larger supply of educational and work-related possibilities, just like the market offers more and more opportunities for consumption. All of these development tendencies are to a certain extent only positive. Western populations are no longer tied down in the same way as earlier generations, who were more or less forced to pursue a limited number of opportunities, but rather by the many options that force them to turn their eye to the surrounding world's contingent ranking of recognition.

In this alteration, despite the possibility to realize oneself as an authentic and original human being, a new line of paradoxical, modern illnesses supervenes. Where the earlier generations, generally speaking, suffered under a disciplined order preventing them from pursuing their own goals and preferences, the option generation, today, suffers under the demand to meet the marching order to administer the many unsure options. Throughout mainstream contemporary sociological literature, this change has been extensively covered in social-psychological terms, such as when Bauman (2000) speaks of insecurity and security, Sennett (1998) of flexibility and routine, or Giddens (1990) of ontological security and existential anxiety. However, to the best of my knowledge, no special attention has been drawn to the concept of opportunity and options. On the contrary, throughout mainstream sociology, the descriptions are generalized and played out in terms such as enhanced life-chances, increased

prospects and a variety of pluralistic possibilities. The same seems to apply to Peter Gross (1994), who has devoted an entire work, *Die Multioptionengesellschaft*, to this problem. The same confusion exists in our everyday language, where the terms opportunities and options also exist without conceptual differences. Therefore, when, in the following, I separate opportunities and options, it is from a pragmatic analytical perspective, because such a separation will, I hope, force a new diagnostic understanding. Hence, allow me, to some extent, to make an account of the differences between opportunities and options before we can see their relevance.

The reason for the greater reward in speaking of options rather than opportunities in connection with the demand of self-realization has to do with the fact, as already stated, that we can no longer speak of a set of limited opportunities, but rather of a definite surplus of options for self-realization. The surplus, or merely the enhancement of options, can of course be traced back to the beginning of early modernity, where the first formal conditions for individual self-realization were put in place, but there seems to be a contemporary historical agreement that the real epochal revolution was generated in the early 1970s. Due to this, I limit clarification to two types of self-realization horizon, namely one from before and another after the epochal shift.<sup>1</sup>

In etymological terms, and by definition, the concept of 'opportunity' is generally understood as a favourable juncture of circumstances, a good chance for advancement, progress, a time or condition for things favourable to an end or purpose. In terms of self-realization, these general futures of the concept of 'opportunity' can therefore be seen in instances where the individual is being given a break, a chance or an opening for self-realization purposes that were not previously accessible. Here it is therefore not related to a moral idea of 'equality of opportunity', i.e. equal chances and rights to seek success in one's chosen sphere regardless of social factors such as class, race, religion and sex, but rather to 'undersized opportunities', where the individual is not presented with ample opportunities. In a similar though slightly divergent manner, the concept of 'option' is habitually understood as a thing that is or may be chosen; an alternative, a free choice, which entails no difficult or strenuous action or decision: something that may be chosen, or simply an act of choosing. Thus, an option is a power, liberty or freedom to choose. In economic terms: the privilege of executing or relinquishing, as one may choose, within a specific period of time, a commercial transaction on fixed terms, or simply the privilege of demanding fulfilment of a contract on any given day within a specific period of time. In terms of self-realization, these futures can be equivalent to those of 'opportunity', translated into situations where the individual can choose from a wide spectrum of different forms of self-realization possibilities.

From these first lines of clarification it thus becomes clear that a demarcated number of opportunities is clearly a limited set of choices, yet still several choices, and therefore also a surplus, which could be regarded as options. This is not to say that there did not exist, in a majority of life-situations going back before the early 1970s, a cognitive horizon characterized by a plural scheme for individual self-realization; rather, the horizon was experienced as more unambiguous and comprehensible. Hence, I do not imply that the conceptual differentiation between a certain number of opportunities and options should not be upheld, but rather that each empirical phenomenon has to be re-examined for the choice palette. Contrary to a set of limited opportunities, further options are defined by their surplus character and function; for example, the limited right of a publicist to publish when he or she has secured the rights to authorship. These are opportunities to have opportunities or, more precisely, opportunities to maintain one's opportunities. They are thus played out as acquired rights which do not necessarily have to be put to use and are thus, in character, non-compulsory and non-obligatory. As opposed to a demarcated number of opportunities, options can thus be considered as reservations, where some are more consistent than others. They express an immanent supply, which potentially can be transferred into action for self-realization purposes. Besides this, a further

conceptual differentiation could be useful, since options are usually tied down to certain rights to reconsider, whereas opportunities – contrary to the fact that they also often stand in plural – are connected to opt-outs, which cannot be re-negotiated. Both opportunities and options are connected to the conditional ‘if’, which signals that they are conditioned by a future outcome.

One could say that opportunities are characterized by a weak ‘if’ within a relatively limited frame of action, since the choices for the most part seem easy to grasp, whereas options are tied down to a strong ‘if’, i.e. the choices seem difficult to grasp or exist in super-abundance. In a figuratively provisional manner, one could summarize the conceptual difference as follows: where the concept of option follows the figure of speech ‘it’s optional’, i.e. actions that may be done or left undone according to one’s will or pleasure, the concept of ‘opportunity’ follows the figure of speech ‘opportunity knocks, but only once’. In other words, the opportunity horizon of expectation is often ‘according to expectation’ or, simply, ‘contrary to expectation’ in the sense that the individual is being given a rare and exceptional opportunity. As opposed to the opportunity horizon, the option horizon of expectation is ‘in expectation of’ or, merely, ‘exceeding the individual’s expectations’. The significant difference thus lies in the peculiar nature of the options being a surplus of self-realization reserves, i.e. stored expectations of the future biography of the individual. It can thus be assumed that the individual who follows an opportunity horizon pursues a relatively transparent and stable vertical structure of expectation, while the individual subordinated under an option horizon has a wider, more complex and unclear horizon structure of expectations which increases simultaneously with the factual supply of still more options.

The cognitive horizon of options for self-realization is therefore often experienced as more uncertain, since the surplus and change of option prospects are constantly changing. In contrast to the more stable sphere of opportunities where the individual could, in most cases, turn to its structural limitations for explanation and gratification for a failed project, the option structural conditions involve more risk-taking for the individual since the overload of acceptable prospects for self-realization is constantly changing: the risk of not being granted recognition for the biographical road taken thus increases concurrently with the constant replacements of the socially acceptable normative demands. Under such optional conditions, the individual is the bearer of the responsibility for choosing. In contrast to prior, more stable, opportunity-horizons, where the individual could still rely on a life-long shared responsibility structure, the option-individual is faced with the sole responsibility for the options taken or not taken. Even though the option-individual will always have some reference to his background, the responsibility for a failed self-realization project is primarily directed at the individual.<sup>2</sup>

Options, just as opportunities, are obviously not endlessly open for realization and often cannot be prolonged. They are tied to an expiration date: the main difference between the concepts here is that opportunities are often experienced as long term, where the individuals are committed to, and familiar with, the particular biographical investment. Options are experienced as being short term and can be just as binding – albeit usually more contingent. These characteristics, since they are increasingly predominant, must be comprehended under a new form of biographical individual administration. As each new option is being picked up, it will have to be registered, recorded and carefully calculated owing to its expiry date. Two sets of options are at stake here: (a) options that are tied to a date of expiry, be they short or long term, and (b) options that are not tied to an expiry date. With such a range of options, logic dictates that it is up to the individual, single-handedly, to choose and take responsibility. Additionally, contrary to the opportunity-individual, whose stock of possibilities for individual self-realization can be limited, empty or out of equilibrium, the option-individual has a supply of options. They might not be the ones wanted or wished for, but they demand the capacity to handle, sort, hold and execute in order to get recognition. The individual is therefore not

merely free to choose but also obligated to choose from among the many options. Under such conditions individuals must, as Nikolas Rose has recently stated:

... interpret their past and dream their future as outcome of choices made or choices still to be made. Their choices are, in their turn, seen as realization of the attributes of the choosing person – expressions of personality – and reflect back upon the person who has made them. (1999: 87)

These clarifications of the conceptual difference between opportunities and options for individual self-realization demonstrate that options generally involve more individual insecurity, complexity, risk-taking, obligation to choose and responsibility for choices. Today, these difficulties face the Western individual and are part of the experience of living in a rapidly changing world in which the range of open options is considerably wider than the individual's capacity for action can effectively handle (Melucci, 1996: 19). The surplus of options available by far exceeds what can be utilized and coped with effectively – added to this is the fact that everyday life is choked with options that are impossible to seize. The traditional coordinates of the more stable opportunity palette for self-realization are thus eroding and the outcome is that the individual's uncertainty has become a stable component of our time. Alberto Melucci expresses this development as follows:

Consequently, the paradox of choice creates a new kind of psychological pressure, confronting us with new problems. Choosing among the multitude of possibilities is a difficult undertaking, and what we discard is always more than what we eventually choose. It is always accompanied by an inevitable sense of loss which itself stands in the background of numerous forms of depressive pathology. The endogenous depression of the psychiatry manuals is really the pure experience of loss without a distinct object. A different but complementary reaction to the pressure of choice can be observed in the attempt to secure all the options simultaneously. On one hand, the self may split as it seeks to deny the partial nature of every choice; disconnecting the fragments and recreating each of them in a separate totality allows the illusion of not having to choose – and lose – at all. One can pass from one fragment to another, denying the mutual exclusiveness of the alternatives present at any moment, all of them by definition partial. Or, on the other hand, we may come to know the manic syndrome manifested in the multiplication of our efforts to answer every call, forming into an endless spiral which eventually exhaust us. (1996: 45–6)

As the above clarifications have made clearer, an individual who is structurally subordinated under the opportunity horizon, however more secure, has a limited chance of self-realization and thus faces the possibility of not receiving full recognition for all of his talents and accomplishments. In such extreme cases, where the individual is missing all possible ways of seeing himself getting recognition, the risk of a pathological disorder is more omnipresent. For the individual subordinated under the optional horizon, there is an explanation for the contemporary pathological symptoms. He is faced with such a surplus of options, however insecure, for self-realization that he finds himself fragmented – without a clear object – and overloaded with the administration of reserved or accessible forms of self-realization projects. These paradoxes are nevertheless usually controllable and are successfully embedded in the individual's everyday teleological schematics and do not run the risk of a fixed pathological condition. In order to come closer to an explanation of the seeming increase in depressive symptoms of our time, additional clarifications need to be made. Before pointing to a more specific social sphere in which the pathological symptoms of our time can be uncovered, I briefly turn to another conceptual differentiation, namely that between recognition and cognitive recognition.

## **Recognition and cognitive recognition**

'Cognitive recognition' (*erkennen*) is the cognitive identification of another individual, and 'recognition' (*anerkennung*) denotes the expressive act by which another person is given

esteem. Briefly, each individual expects to be met on an elementary social level by some sort of recognition through a line of corporeal signals or gestures informing the individual that he is welcome in any space/time context. When met by recognition, it becomes relevant to speak of a visibility of the individual, and a greeting or a smile can be seen as an act of recognition of 'the other'. Thus, the individual is not only perceived cognitively as one in a hundred, but also as one who is outside the normative frame of reference of 'the other'. If the expected recognition does not come, an invisibility of the individual occurs, where the individual is transparent. In this case, the individual becomes invisible and suffers under the inner dispositions of 'the other'. The expressions can vary from anger to shame over not being included in an expected act of recognition. Thus, to be perceived in an ordinary cognitive sense means something else in this specific situation, because a deliberate choice to render the other invisible is made. To be perceived as an individual is therefore purely a social matter which falls under the act of recognition. The untainted recognition of 'the other' is thus not as neutral a phenomenon as one might think. On the contrary, recognition is a vital human need in order to make sense of one's self. The individual can therefore only become a member of society by developing, via the experience of mutual recognition, an awareness of how rights and duties are reciprocally distributed in the context of particular tasks (Honneth, 1998). The individual's chances for a positive relation-to-self thus depend on conditions that are social and stable in character, because they are normatively regulated forms of mutual recognition in which the individual can see his expectations fulfilled. In turn, a successful struggle for recognition in which established norms are questioned then depends on how well society supports the intersubjective conditions that enable the individual – autonomously in a circle of others – to change the organization and hierarchy of norms.<sup>3</sup>

More specifically, this means that the pure cognitive experience has been located in the phenomenon where there is no direct intersubjective contact between the individuals, as when the individual simply registers the identity of another individual in another time/space dimension.<sup>4</sup> However, these clarifications of the concept of recognition and cognitive recognition were first conceptualized by Axel Honneth, whom I have referred to in this context, in order to illuminate the epistemological and moral implications of the concept of recognition more than the concept of cognitive recognition, thereby giving the act of cognition second place. Secondly, the considerations related to the philosophical questions of what ought to be understood by the concept of recognition in epistemological and in moral terms are beyond this sociological undertaking of a diagnosis – concerned more with the question of what is currently recognized, i.e. which norms are being valued by the social world. I therefore do not pursue the moral reflections of Honneth further, but instead let the concept of cognitive recognition serve the category where the individual continuously experiences societal normative demands, and let recognition serve the category in which the individual experiences esteem from a group or an individual. From a diagnostic perspective, this must mean, in regard to the relations of recognition, that the research should evolve around how the cognitive normative demands have implications for the outcome of the recognition relations and vice versa. In other words: the cognitive dimension deals with the question of which empirical strains the individual is exposed to, i.e. which normative expectations he must screen in order to give meaning to his own biography. Obviously, the analytical differentiation between recognition and cognitive recognition often coincides in the intersubjective relation, where both subjects recognize the normative expectations or actions of each other. I have separated them so far so that we can better see the pathological characteristics that are connected with each concept. Cognitive recognition is thus a pathological condition arising from excessive cognitive dissonance – where the empirical world does not coincide with the experienced-based perception register of the individual.<sup>5</sup>

Formulated slightly differently, it is perhaps not so much the increased numbers of options which run freely through the secured formal minimum conditions for recognition – such as

the sphere of emotional recognition, right-based recognition or the principle of accomplishment, which has gradually been positively increased during the time of modernity – that have caused the paradoxical increase in depression and general anxiety, but rather the unregulated character of what can become an object of recognition. In other words, it is perhaps not so much the more or less free flow of individual self-realization options that troubles the individual's biographical praxis, but rather the unstable regulatory rules and prescripts for which options can be objects of recognition. Therefore, in order to give a more explicit account of the paradoxical, pathological developmental tendencies of our time, I first draw attention to a significant figure in Durkheim's work which originates from his classical study of suicide (1893). I turn to this study because Durkheim not only maps out the variable of suicide, he also manages to portray a fundamental anthropological figure, which can be employed as a diagnostic medium for the outlined conceptual differentiations between opportunities and options, and cognitive and intersubjective recognition – when in a state of deregulation, or simply lacking regulation.

## **Anomie**

Durkheim, as we know, pointed to several different types of suicide, but here I only briefly reconceptualize anomic suicide, which seems compliant with the current condition. Anomic suicide is characterized by outer circumstances where the normative collective balance of society shifts or becomes unstable, i.e. where regulatory laws, prescripts, habits and customs are eroding.<sup>6</sup> The fundamental anthropological assumption made by Durkheim is that the expectations of individuals become twisted, or they lose their orientation, because their needs are no longer in reasonable relation to the opportunities to be fulfilled.<sup>7</sup> However, the anomic condition cannot just be explained by the lack of, or unclear, norms, economic market fluctuations and the permanent competition must also be taken into account. In this sphere, Durkheim found the anomic condition omnipresent and chronic, because needs were limitless. According to him, reality seemed 'valueless by comparison with the dreams of fevered imaginations [. . .]. A thirst arises for novelties, unfamiliar pleasures, nameless sensations, all of which lose their savour once known' (2002: 216–17). In other words, the cognitive horizons of what can be rewarded and become an object of recognition are lacking fundamental stability because of the illusory aspirations for more and more individual self-realization chances without any form of established semantics for what can be graded, tested or judged, thereby placing the individual in perpetual anxiety.<sup>8</sup> Durkheim elaborates on the condition as follows: 'At the same time the struggle grows more violent and painful, both from being less controlled and because competition is greater [. . .] Effort grows, just when it becomes less productive' (2002: 214). When expectations grow or decrease in sync with economic fluctuations, the individual increases and decreases his demands, but when expectations are not met the individual feels dishonoured. Under an economic upturn, needs are increased and have to be continuously stimulated, hence a spiral of needs commences that reaches no finality. According to Durkheim, this boomerangs on the individual because 'even our glances behind and our feeling of pride at the distance covered can only cause deceptive satisfaction, since the remaining distance is not proportionally reduced' (2002: 208–9). It is from this passage that Durkheim makes the initial link to the concluding question: 'How could the desires to live not be weakened under such conditions?' (2002: 214). Thus Durkheim maintained that the mental condition deteriorates because the individual is in an illusory spiral of satisfaction. The result of the anomic condition, analysed further by Durkheim, is well known, namely the massive increase in suicides.

## The anomic character of self-realization

As we have seen, for Durkheim it was the financial movements which he regarded as permanent to our modern condition that placed the individual in an anomic condition, because the individual could no longer orient himself in relation to certain accomplishments which could grant recognition. Durkheim never used the concept of recognition, but instead the concepts of honour, pride and dignity.<sup>9</sup> It is also difficult to distinguish whether it is the cognitive or the intersubjective conditions of recognition that he turns to when explaining the normative violations with regard to the different forms of suicide. Indisputably, when looking more closely, Durkheim's explanations can be systematically categorized into the division between a cognitive and an intersubjective dimension, if only we think of which other sphere he used to explain the increase in suicides: the role of the family as an intersubjective emotional sphere of recognition, the regulation in the sphere of rights, or merely a regulation of the collective consciousness, and finally the division of labour in which each individual could see his skills met by recognition. To reconstruct each of these spheres would far exceed the space given to me here. However, it is quite obvious that it is the cognitive dimension which is at stake in the anomic condition. I therefore proceed in a reconstructive act to connect Durkheim's diagnostic model with the elaborated concepts, so that the anomic condition falls under the cognitive dimension of the marching order for self-realization options. In regard to the ongoing debate of the 'theoretical recognition turn', my focus is therefore not on the other various recognition spheres, such as the emotional, right-based, cultural or individual recognition spheres, although these could also prove useful for further analysis. Instead, I let the diagnosis be led by the anomic condition. The recognition sphere, which is the centre of my attention, is therefore closest to that of the accomplishment principle. The competition which Durkheim spoke of is presently to be found in the economic discourse of the neo-liberal network economy, which seems to have taken over the social field completely, and that gives me good reason to start off here.<sup>10</sup>

Today, there seems to be consensus in regard to the neo-liberal idea of a free market, where the state does not intervene, or, rather, where the balance between politics and economy has been twisted in favour of the economic discourse (Bröckling et al., 2000: 25). Generally speaking, the neo-liberal idea seems to insist on a notion of social justice (liberation) that Durkheim was strongly opposed to, where the market alone is able to regulate the social act (Bourdieu, 2000), and where more deregulation and privatization enhance the individual's options. More specifically, this entails implementation of the idea that a market in balance will partly supply the individuals with adequate options for self-realization – delivering untroubled lifestyle maximization – and that the competition between individuals will increase their self-esteem concurrently with recognition of their accomplishments. Here, neo-liberalism is presenting the idea that it can free the individual from the horizon of opportunity, that is, remove it from a limited horizon to an optional horizon through deregulation and privatization. In other words, a complete de-institutionalization should favour the individual's chances of seeing his own talents, skills and accomplishments realized without the surveillance of institutional regulation. Individual freedom is thus redefined: 'It is no longer freedom from want, which might be provided by a cosseted life on benefits; it is the capacity for self-realization which can be obtained only through individual activity' (Rose, 1999: 145). In a neo-liberal regime, autonomy is, as Nikolas Rose has convincingly shown, 'represented in terms of personal power and the capacity to accept responsibility' (1999: 269). The individual is here 'required to engage in skilling, re-skilling, enhancement of credentials and preparation for a life of incessant job seeking: Life is to become a continuous economic capitalization of the self' (1999: 161). Personal employment is ensured by encouraging individuals to capitalize themselves by promoting an 'enhancement of their own economic capital as a capacity of their selves' (1999: 161).

Under such conditions it no longer makes sense, as I have previously shown, to speak of opportunities and options merely as cognitive horizons outside the individual for prolonging or securing future self-realization projects. Commodification of the self must here be understood in a retrospective biographical sense, i.e. not just as an object of future constructions of the individual's teleological horizon, but also as part of the individual's past accumulation. In a similar manner, past options thus facilitate the pursuit of recognition because they can be realized in concert with more changeable market conditions: To each new demand from society, the stored options can be drawn upon and realized by the individual so that he obtains recognition. In more polemic terms, with regard to symbolic capital, the options span from literally 'the large closet' to the refined art collection, from the zealous personal horizon of experience to extensive wanderings in world literature, from family ties to a broad network of social contacts and, finally, in regard to material capital, the options span from accumulated personal property holdings to the maximum limit of a credit card. All of these options are part of ensuring the opportunity of the individual to obtain 'on time recognition', since they can be realized concurrently with the normative currents of what can be recognized by the market.

The problem with this idea is that the individual is trapped in an incomplete idea of freedom, prompted by the forced self-realization projects of neo-liberalism, where the individual is constantly forced to motivate, optimize and examine his own life in order to increase efficiency. Individuals are therefore caught in new demands of the new type of network management to view themselves as adaptable nomads who write off everything in order to be eternally available to the market, thus leaving themselves in the perpetual state of anomie described by Durkheim. Other significant conditions of the individual are abandoned because neo-liberalism has been elevated to some sort of moral truth. In a wide spectrum of sociological diagnoses, the point is that the individual is trapped in an illusory idea of self-realization through the market's values of efficiency and productivity. The analyses all end up in a totalitarian analysis, where there is no possibility to change the neo-liberal organization of work.<sup>11</sup> This is not to say, as Boltanski and Chiapello (2003) observe, that the norms and customs are becoming extinct, but rather that the past tests and trials, that is, stable regulation of what can and cannot be recognized, are eroding without any new ones being implemented (2003: 452). This has led to a general unstable condition with growing anxiety, uneasiness and restlessness, which in turn leads to an increase in insecurity with regard to action. The indicators of an anomic condition can be explained by the fact that the individuals have less possibility to influence their basic work-life conditions. On an elementary ontological level, this weakens confidence in the future as a safe haven – where oriented actions and expectations are given retrospectively meaningful content. According to Boltanski and Chiapello, the significant troubles in constructing a coherent future biography must here be seen in relation to the increase in the network organization of work. Since this organization of work is based on short-term contracts and overlapping projects, failure to prolong a work contract is seen as a personal catastrophe. In other words, a failed test or trial, corresponding to what they term the network polis' logic, is conceived as a lack of autonomy and a capacity to terminate individual self-realization demands. The failure is thus transformed into a loss of self-esteem which disables the individual in the next pursuit for new work projects, ventures and contacts, making individual isolation a permanent state of life (2003: 453). The new anomic indicators as shown here, i.e. the insecurity in a new form of visible biographical road, combined with an enhanced capitalism, a demand for individual self-realization and increased work-security, have led to a disabled individual incapable of constructing a stable biography (2003: 453). The lack of natural (*Selbstverständlichkeiten*) or even stable or regulated structures for individual self-realization has once again led to an increase in suicides, since even realistic and just expectations are not met with recognition (2003: 454). In other words, the struggle for recognition is unlikely to be concerned with a redefinition of what can be considered work. It seems that the

struggle is suppressed by way of a fear-based principle of organization (the fear of being let off, or not getting a work-contract renewed) and fixations on the responsibility of the individual himself, so that he does not see it immediately, compared to a general development tendency, where the self-realization projects of other individuals or groups are under pressure too.

Consequently, the individual stands alone with normative demands. Actually, the individual can only see himself in an instrumental relation to other competing subjects, whereby the precondition for a common will-formation is further impeded. It is in this lack of experience that we find an opening for more elaborate explanation of some of the mental health consequences of our time which arise in the wake of the neo-liberal organization of work. If an individual stands alone with normative demands without actual possibilities to make intersubjective experiences, the individual's positive practical relation to his own self is threatened. It is therefore not difficult to see that the sense of self-worth erodes in conditions which in part do not demand intersubjective experiences, and in part do not provide explicit guidelines for what can and cannot be recognized. Here, two explanations of the psycho-social consequences emerge.

First, the individual is prevented from struggling collectively for recognition and is thus unable to see any possibility of having his accomplishments recognized, i.e. of entering into intersubjective, experience-based work communities, where there is an opportunity to generate a collective will-formation. Second, what can be recognized in work changes so rapidly that the individual does not feel able to sustain its mental stability, or as Christoph Dejours expresses it:

[T]he individual seeks constant recognition, but the conditions for recognition are changing faster than the individual can make use of it, and the individual is therefore held captive in a fatiguing and 'almost there'-hunt for recognition. (Petersen and Willig, 2004: 347)

The first explanation, where the individual is prevented from entering the intersubjective experience-based work communities, leads to a weakening of the self-esteem of the individual, since he stands alone in facing the normative demands. Thus, a U-turn occurs away from the reciprocal intersubjective relations towards the individual's own self. This introspective movement, where the individual makes itself an object of the management strategies' demands of enhanced responsibility, is the first step towards an explanation of why all diagnoses speak of a fragilization of identity. To this extent, the introspective movement, where the individual tries to find his inner essential resources in order to conquer recognition, is the first sign of depression. The symptoms of depression, passivity, exhaustion, fatigue, etc., are intensified by an exaggerated introspective search for the individual's own defects and flaws. Consequently, the intersubjective experience based on potential will-formation is now turned to the individual's own potential introspective depression. The point here is that an exhaustion of the self occurs, when its inner normative tribunal drains it, where it has to judge its marketing, exposure, exhibition and option-portfolio of its inner resources in order to gain recognition. The recognition relations are here put under such pressure, since on the one hand the individual has to turn away from 'the other' towards his own self for consultation, and on the other hand the commonly shared values that make it possible for the individual to see himself in the reproduction of a shared work-community are eroding.

The second explanation, which is grounded in the rapid decrease of valid regulations, graduations, test and trials of the accomplishments, seems to indicate that the organization of work is changing so rapidly that the individual is losing his cognitive orientation of what can and cannot be recognized as work. The changes thus impel the individual constantly to familiarize himself with potential insecure possibilities of recognition. Individuals can no longer limit themselves to a line of limited opportunities, but have to keep all options open; we scout with

eyes wide open for options for a potential opportunity for recognition. Furthermore, the individual must be able to redeem former accomplishments to gain recognition. In this way, individuals are left with a demand to be adaptable to a new capitalized administrative biographical praxis, where they have to administer their option-recognition portfolio *and* its card index of recognition in default. Here we can see another reason for the exhaustion the individual suffers under the neo-liberal ideological wave. The individual manages the self to the point of exhaustion to such an extent that we can speak of depression. Here it is the cognitive competencies that are pressured, since the individual on one side constantly has to orient himself from competition-made horizons, and, on the other, suffers under the demand to administer the due date of acquired and accessible self-realization options.

Here, it seems that depression is the most useful denomination of all the pathological development tendencies, because it denotes a paralysed individual, one who is unable to choose and view himself as competent of action. In a sphere in which the neo-liberal organization of work is dominant, where options are a precondition towards gaining continuous recognition, depression can in normative terms be seen as a binary pole to the demands to have adequate self-realization options for recognition.<sup>12</sup> When neo-liberalism encourages the individual to be responsible and enterprising, depression can be perceived as a pathology, because it describes the situation in which the individual feels unable to take action on the many options, or simply does not have any; think only of the so-called bag lady on the street whose option-portfolio is far too easily read in the hand stretched out for help. It is the individual's responsibility, which is immanently present in the 'neo-liberal-option-society' and makes it possible for the self-proclaimed private examinations of the options in reserve to end in negative self-criticism. The inner self is objectified where the individual risks losing his or her ontological shape. The specifics about this active and responsible form of self-realization are that focus is directed against the self and not, as earlier, against a relieving or regulated order. The orientation of the individual is turned 180 degrees and is directed against the resources of the self (the above-mentioned U-turn). A failed U-turn and a failed definition of the inner resources can therefore be considered as one of the biggest threats to the individual's positive relation to its self, mainly because it is the same as not being option qualified. It is this option individual, who, figuratively speaking, sits with his administration of the option-portfolio – afraid of not being met with recognition, which, in my opinion, is more and more prevalent. From this reasoning it is not difficult to see the parallel to Durkheim's argument. Whether we are dealing with a transitional period – in line with Durkheim's study of the transition from a pre-modern to a modern period – or of the constant anomic condition of competition, is presently hard to determine. The first thesis is supported by Boltanski and Chiapello (2003), Wagner (1994, 2001) and Carleheden (2002), and points to a historical crisis within modernity itself, whereas the other is supported by the increasingly prominent neo-liberal colonization of the life-world. Yet, both theses leave the same impression: the normative horizon of the accomplishment principle is marked by an unheard of lack of stability and regulation. This means that the needs of the individual – if we continue with the reasoning of Durkheim and the more contemporary Melucci – end up in an illusory spiral of satisfaction of what can become an object of recognition, and, furthermore, that the enormous portfolio of options undermines the part of the social mass which cannot, cognitively, administer the contingent schematics for what can and cannot be given recognition. Therefore, the individual has to see his own self violated, since his expectations do not match the *fait accompli* of neo-liberalism.

So far I have pointed to depression and suicide as a binary pole to the normative demands of self-realization options. In conclusion, allow me to ask whether in our time there have been other and similar social-psychological examples of mental vulnerability which can be related to our new analytical typologies? How about performance anxiety? Is it not far too narrow to relate this just to limited phenomena, as for example final examinations, which have significant

meaning on the biographical curve of an individual? Is performance, and the related anxiety not to gain recognition, not proportionally increasing concurrently with the accumulation of contingent options? Is the individual not constantly being examined, tested in obscure ways, in a society where the grading of recognition is not transparent? What about panic attacks? Is this sort of anxiety an expression of an inexplicable event, or is panic related to the returning and constant demand to choose from still more options? Is this situation not closely related to what we denote as panic, i.e. the panic of the individual about making the wrong choices and therefore not receiving the deserved recognition? How about social anxiety, where the individual is nervous about negative judgements from other people, and where he fears situations and places, e.g. eating situations, canteens, cafés and meetings with other people? Is this anxiety just an expression of shyness and introversion? Is it not also an expression of an individual who will not expose his absent value of recognition measured in options? In connection with these types of anxiety, as we know, 'fear of anxiety' develops, where the involved party is conscious of potential outbursts of anxiety in connection with the many options which are no guarantee of gaining recognition. In such situations the individual experiences a violent sense of loss of control, especially in situations that are experienced as being 'in a deadlock' without any immediate 'escape routes' – where there are no adequately safe options available. As the suicide researcher Lillian Zøllner points out in connection with the increasing number of suicide attempts among adolescents, it is especially the youth who are attempting to make their own independent choices. Such a responsibility calls for an administratively competent individual, who must be able to direct himself according to his or her own horizons. Zøllner states:

The adolescents need to discover the options available to them, articulate their own goals and strategies to reach the articulated goals and state the reasons for their choices. They need to take responsibility for their own lives and be aware of the risk connected to making the wrong choice. The many options, which constantly appear in regard to education, ways of life, technological development, etc., on one side instigate high expectations, but on the other side their previous choices are put to debate. They are 'life-project-constructors', *who must keep all options open as long as possible and maintain the right to make new choices* [my italics]. (Zøllner, 2002: 24)

It is the uncertainty and confusion in this process that can be fatal, because the adolescent, who stands alone and without support in making choices, can experience feelings of loneliness (Zøllner, 2002: 24).

My aim has been to point to the fact that, at a time when there is a striking neo-liberal normative expectation pressure to have, and not least to be able to administer, the numerous options, there is a distinct danger of the creation of a new, mentally vulnerable, individual who suffers from the lack of being able to tell his biography as a coherent linear story, but rather has to see his life fragmented between more and more options. As Zøllner points out, the danger lies not just in maintenance of the right to make a different choice, but also in the circumstance that before we can even speak of an individual, who can experience himself as functional and meaningful, he has to be able to describe his own biography. If an individual is not able to present his or her biography narratively, in such a way that there is a beginning and an end goal, i.e. a reference to a unit which gives meaning or substance, then it also means that the individual often feels an existential meaninglessness, which, in the worst case scenario, can lead to depression and suicide (Honneth, 1995: 242) – and thus we return to the anomic dangers that Durkheim described all too well.

## Conclusions

At the outset of this article, I made clear, on a purely descriptive level, that Western populations have experienced an increase in possibilities for self-realization, but also that the rise in

options has led to a paradoxical increase in different forms of psychic distortion. On a more normative level, it also becomes clear that the neo-liberal idea of freedom, which seems to state that a free market will facilitate all self-realization options, is incomplete. The idea turned out to be deficient when Durkheim's anomic description was applied to the neo-liberal organization of work. The neo-liberal idea of freedom demonstrated in two ways that the recognition-graduation semantics are twisted in such a manner that individuals cannot cognitively make sense of what can and cannot be recognized, and that the intersubjective recognition relations are eroding to such an extent that commonly shared pathological development tendencies are in danger of being suppressed by the lacking ability to join in a collective will-formation. In retrospect, it thus seems that the neo-liberal idea of freedom/organization of work creates a cognitive discrepancy between a promise for more and more self-realization options through deregulation and the actual stable possibilities for individual self-realization. What becomes evident is that there are no secure self-realization options offered; rather that the individual has to have options in order to gain recognition. In neo-liberal network-based capitalism, the likelihood of achieving recognition depends on just how many options the individual has stored for the next extravagant promotion project. Since each project is momentarily in flux, the ability to construct and secure the next project becomes a value in itself. Project ideas, ventures and network connections present options that facilitate the reproduction of valid possibilities to gain recognition. Making the sphere of work the object of option capitalization means that each individual is given an extra unforeseen biographical task, since each option offers potential recognition, now placed in reserve. This praxis, in which the individual must build up a capitalized option portfolio in order to get 'on time recognition' within the boundaries of the market, explains the increasing prevalence of depression because it reveals not only a surplus of options for self-realization increasing the possibility of cognitive dissonance, but also a distinct, complex structure of the accumulation of reservations and execution of self-realization projects that makes dissonance an almost omnipresent condition. Neo-liberalism thus shapes individual responsibility, no longer 'sheltering people from real-world responsibilities' (Rose, 1999: 267) as under the old regime of outsize institutions. Individuals have to take responsibility for their own choices and flows of options, promoting a courageous, self-reliant and self-responsible personality. In metaphorical terms, it is almost as if the neo-liberal organization of work pushes the individual's mental conditions towards a pathological abyss with a twofold anthropological inspiration: on the one hand, the neo-liberal organization of work aspires to the unlimited desires, as uncovered by Durkheim, promising still more options for individual self-realization, and, on the other hand, the neo-liberal organization of work maintains the vital recognition conditions, as shown by Honneth, that enable the individual to remain in a practical relationship with its self, a foot-length out of reach, making the individual into a greyhound dog chasing the rabbit without ever receiving proper recognition for the mile sprinted. It thus seems that the neo-liberal combination of the two anthropological foundations has a centrifugal effect on the individual's inner self – by exposing it to a stressful administration of options in reserve and non-transparent out-of-reach-recognition-ends due to non-regulation – thereby emptying the individual's sense of orientation, future expectations and self-esteem.<sup>13</sup>

## Notes

1. Obviously, this dividing line cannot be determined from a positivistic perspective, but from a phenomenological approach from which the biographical option-description of the individual is examined historically. This, however, is a methodological problem which I will not address further.
2. This distribution from structural to individual responsibility seems to be laid out in the immanent logic of Western civilization, since it has succeeded in giving more options than any individual can realize within a life span.

3. Honneth's concept of recognition is differentiated into three separate spheres of recognition: (a) the private sphere, which we are familiar with from family and friendship, (b) legal matters known from our rights, and (c) cultural and political solidarity. Each mode of recognition constitutes an ontogenetic step in the development of the subject, because the subject must experience all ways of recognition in order to become fully individuated. Each mode of recognition is followed by three modes of practical relations to oneself, where emotional support triggers the prerequisite for the subject's basic self-confidence, the legal rights trigger the universal respect given in the way of rights, self-respect as a citizen, and finally the social esteem that is redeemed in social solidarity where common values are shared and constitutes a basic self-esteem for the subject. It is important for Honneth to understand that each mode of recognition in itself cannot constitute an independent parameter of a fully realized life. Each mode of recognition must be experienced in order to obtain the three basic modes of self-conduct. Basic self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem are all ontogenetic steps in the development inherent in the mutual relation of the idea of the good life.
4. Furthermore, in recent years there has been an entire natural science industry working with pattern technology, an industry aimed at our being able to scan the iris of the eye or the fingerprint of the hand in order to identify the unique singular characteristics of the human being – a technology which is mainly used by the security industry. This example proves an important point in regard to the ongoing determination mainly because it illustrates a purely mechanical recognition of the subject, i.e. as an object with certain unique characteristics.
5. Along these lines Melucci has stated: 'Other forms of psychological suffering arise from the sense of loss fuelled by an excess of symbolic possibilities. The exposure to an unlimited range of symbolic possibilities (goods, relationships, information) creates a clash between the imagined world and the actual access to these chances. People's actual experience, besides being limited by class, gender, race, and age boundaries, remains inevitably below the expectations and dreams fed by the overwhelming exposure to symbolic stimuli. Consequently, frustration and loss are experienced very widely and frequently, feeding new psychological troubles' (Melucci, 1996: 149).
6. Durkheim speaks more precisely of the anomic condition in the following terms: 'disturbance of the collective order or equilibrium', 'serious readjustments', 'sudden growth or unexpected catastrophes', 'painful crisis', 'abrupt transition', 'declassification', 'economic disasters', 'scale is upset', 'state of deregulation', and 'intermittent spurts' (2002: 206–15).
7. For an elaboration of Durkheim's anthropological argumentation in relation to anomic suicide, see Durkheim, 2002: 207–9.
8. Michael Walzer has a similar point in his chapter, 'Recognition' in *Spheres of Justice* (1983), where he writes: 'We run to be seen, recognized, admired by some subset of the others. If local victories were not possible, we would all be in despair long before we were done' (1983: 255).
9. There can be several reasons why Durkheim did not make any systematic use of the concepts of honour, pride and dignity. For one, he was so concerned with grounding sociology as a distinct discipline that any concepts resembling psychology were immediately disqualified. In addition, Durkheim's studies were always related to the transition to modernity that made his writings partly dependent on pre-modern concepts.
10. For Boltanski and Chiapello, it also once again makes sense to speak of an anomic condition from the beginning of the early 1970s. For them, social cohesion is disintegrating as norms and customs are becoming weaker and weaker during the last 30 years. For more elaboration on this argument, see Boltanski and Chiapello (2003).
11. For a more detailed analysis of the connection between work and recognition, see my article with Anders Petersen in *Acta Sociologica* (2004, no. 4).
12. When I limit the depressive symptoms to 'in some instances', this has to do with the insight that depression obviously is not just normatively, but also biologically, motivated.
13. The normative schematics of the Western teleological and universally shared values such as creativity, autonomy, authenticity and reason have consequently become 'price tagged' commodities in the pursuit of recognition. This paradoxical alteration of what at first was intended as sound teleological and universal horizons for individual self-realization points to the fact that any idea of the good or right runs the risk of improving the skills of the 'executioner'. However, it is also clear that the commodifications of moral values are perverse and therefore an evident object of critique.

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