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Re-Thinking Self-Optimisation: Power, Self, and Community in the Global South

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Abstract: »Selbstoptimierung neu denken: Macht, Selbst und Gemeinschaft im globalen Süden«. Our objective in this article is to expand established sociological conceptualisations of self-optimisation. We do so through an analysis of the complex histories and institutional uses of self-optimisation in the Anglophone Caribbean, with a particular focus on Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago. Self-optimisation, as a recent concept in sociological enquiry, has been bound up with research on therapeutic cultures in the Global Northwest and, to a significant degree, with critiques of neoliberal forms of power and governance of the self. Through two case studies, we move beyond this relatively narrow frame of reference in socio-geographic and historical terms. First, we look at the role of self-optimisation in the plantation system of economic production and political domination in colonial Jamaica. We then consider the contemporary role of discourses of entrepreneurship and self-optimisation in the organisation of gendered social inequalities in Trinidad and Tobago and the broader Caribbean. In doing so, we contribute, first, to the analysis of institutionally situated modes of subjectivity and underlying dynamics of social power in the Anglophone Caribbean. More broadly, second, we move debates on self-optimisation beyond their current focus on the Global Northwest and explore how self-optimisation may be bound up with the social, political, and economic organisation of power in the Global South.

Keywords: Self-optimisation, colonialism, slavery, entrepreneurship, neoliberalism, gender, Caribbean.

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1. Introduction

In this article, we re-think self-optimisation by looking at its histories and variegated institutional and individual uses and meanings in Trinidad and Tobago and Jamaica in the Anglophone Caribbean. Across the social sciences, there has been a recent surge of interest in self-optimisation, as a distinctive form of experience and governance of the self (Röcke 2021; Cederström and Spicer 2017). As a sociological concept and analytical perspective on social life, self-optimisation is closely related to the concept of “therapeutic culture” (Nehring et al. 2020; also see Brandt and Straub 2024, in this special issue). While the latter tends to focus sociological enquiry on the everyday uses of psychological and psychotherapeutic knowledge, i.e., on “psy culture” (Cabanas 2016), self-optimisation addresses a wider array of expert and lay discourses, from the psychological to the religious and spiritual (Cassaniti 2018; Purser 2019). These discourses are deeply implicated in the construction of the social self, historically and in the contemporary world (Maas 2020; Pagis, Cadge, and Tal 2018), of institutions from work to family (Hochschild 2012), and of institutionalised power relations (Huber and Hillebrandt 2019; Thévenot 2019). In spite of its analytical potential, however, recent research on self-optimisation has so far largely remained limited to a few societies in the Global Northwest, notably in Europe (Röcke 2021; Madsen 2015; also see Hampel 2024 in this special issue on processes of self-optimisation in contemporary China). Consequently, the concept’s empirical foundations and relevance have arguably remained limited. Here, we seek to address this limitation, re-thinking self-optimisation and its relevance to a society in the Global South.

In doing so, we pursue three research questions. First, we consider self-optimisation as an institutionally situated moral grammar for the conduct of everyday life,¹ and we ask how it is embedded in contemporary public discourses, institutionally situated practices, and power relations in the Anglophone Caribbean. Second, we look at the historical genealogies of self-optimisation in the Anglophone Caribbean, and we ask how, as a moral grammar for everyday life, it has varied over time and across different colonial and post-colonial historical periods. Trinidad and Tobago and Jamaica, as two major Caribbean nations with broadly comparable post-independence socio-economic and political histories, as well as their own differences, offer important insights and answers to these two questions

¹ In other words, self-optimisation, just as other cultural vocabularies, may furnish individuals with a vocabulary of beliefs, norms, and values that enables them to account for their experiences and actions in everyday life, in reference to socio-historically specific institutional constraints. For a more extensive explanation of the concept of moral grammar, see Nehring and Kerrigan (2018). On the concept of cultural vocabulary, see Swidler (2013).

against the backdrop of broader regional trends we discuss. It is for this reason that we have chosen to focus our analysis on the two countries. Third, we examine how our argument about self-optimisation in Trinidad and Tobago may contribute to a broader sociological analysis of its social, cultural, and political significance in the majority world.

Our attendant argument is divided into four parts. We begin by conceptualising self-optimisation as a moral grammar for everyday life and explaining its relevance for sociological analysis, vis-à-vis the more extensively developed concept of therapeutic culture. In this context, we highlight the current limitations of self-optimisation as a sociological concept and make a case for its further development through systematic research in the Global South. On this basis, we then turn our attention to the Caribbean and set out a brief history of self-optimisation and its institutional uses in Jamaica's colonial period, under British rule, from the late 17th century to the early 19th century. Against this historical backdrop, third, we explore contemporary neoliberal discourse and practices of entrepreneurial self-optimisation in Trinidad in the post-colonial era, in the context of shifting models of governance, social development, and modernisation, as well as persistent social inequalities. In the concluding section to our argument, finally, we revisit our findings to set out an alternative conceptualisation of self-optimisation relevant to the social realities of the Anglophone Caribbean, and we propose an agenda for future research with a broadly global focus.

2. The Sociology of Self-Optimisation

The papers in this special issue can be usefully read as indications of self-optimisation's salience as a moral grammar (Nehring and Kerrigan 2018, 5ff.) for the conduct of everyday life, in pursuit of the in some sense "best" imaginable version of themselves (see Binkley 2024 and Brandt and Straub 2024, in this special issue), their bodies (see Cabanas 2024; Zillien 2024; Krzeminska 2024; Fournier and Dalgarrondo 2024, all in this special issue), and their relationships with others (Lupton and Southerton 2024; King et al. 2024, both in this special issue; see also Röcke 2021). In this sense, self-optimisation, as an empirical social phenomenon and as a sociological concept, simultaneously refers to the cognitive and moral orientation of individuals and to institutionalised forms of knowledge and social structures for personal development, interpersonal relationships, the recognition of social problems, and responses to such problems (see Lupton and Southerton 2024, in this special issue). As an institutionally situated moral grammar, self-optimisation may be closely implicated in or define technologies and structures of social and political power that regulate individuals' experiences, feelings, beliefs, and practices in everyday life. As a moral grammar,

self-optimisation thus articulates socio-historically specific, institutionally rooted beliefs about selfhood and the relationship between individual and society, aspirations for personal development, and values and norms that may define the conduct of interpersonal relationships, as well as individual and institutional responses to social problems, individuals' biographical trajectories, and societal responses to social problems (Bartl, Papilloud, and Terracher-Lipinski 2019; also see Krzeminska 2024, in this special issue).

This constitution of self-optimisation as a moral grammar is evident in the now long-running academic debates about neoliberalism's political hegemony from the 1980s onwards (Harvey 2007) and the solidification of the "entrepreneurial self" (Bröckling 2015) as a yardstick by which institutions, from state to economy to universities to families, assess individuals' moral standing (Hochschild 1997; Couldry 2010; Brunila and Hannukainen 2017). Thus, writing about the "management of the soul" in neoliberal times and the work of the US psychologist Will Schutz on self-esteem, Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval argue that, in contemporary society, economic "problems are viewed as organisational problems and the latter, in turn, are reduced to psychic problems linked to insufficient mastery of oneself and one's relations with others" (Dardot and Laval 2013, 274). They go on to characterise attendant norms of self-management:

Economic and financial constraints are thus transformed into *self*-constraint and *self*-blame, since we alone are responsible for what happens to us. The self's new norm certainly consists in flourishing. To succeed, you must know yourself and love yourself. Hence the stress on the magical expression "self-esteem," key to all success. (Dardot and Laval 2013, 274)

Dardot and Laval (2013, 239ff., 258f.) go on to explore how such self-management is implicated in the social organisation of power in neoliberal society, for example by combining the ostensible freedom of self-motivated work with stringent performance management mechanisms in the neoliberal workplace. Their analysis resonates with numerous other contemporary accounts of management, work and power (e.g., Nehring and Brunila 2023). Dardot and Laval do not reference self-optimisation explicitly as an empirical theme or sociological concept. Rather, self-optimisation is implicit in their argument, and their notions of self-management, self-mastery, and self-knowledge are arguably integral to the cultural and political logic of self-optimisation in neoliberal times.

The body of scholarship we have referenced in the preceding paragraphs highlights historically contingent, socially, culturally, politically, and economically closely localised forms of self-optimisation. While neoliberalism has been globally dominant for a sufficiently long period to have come to constitute common sense in diverse institutional domains and in heterogeneous societies around the world, it nonetheless has concrete, specifiable

beginnings (Peck 2010) and an increasingly apparent, as yet incomplete, end (Gerstle 2022). As an empirical phenomenon, self-optimisation may therefore refer to a wide array of discourses and forms of social experience and practice that may only be faintly and distantly related. For instance, the 19th-century moral tables and practices of self-measurement that Harro Maas (2020) analyses have their roots in philosophical utilitarianism and the thought of Benjamin Franklin, while, as Amir Hampel (2017) shows, young Beijingers' efforts to optimise their rhetorical talents by taking part in public speaking clubs are in complex ways grounded in Confucian values and beliefs about "character" in contemporary Chinese society (also see Hampel 2024, in this special issue). As a sociological concept, then, self-optimisation is about far more than just the analysis of the neoliberal self, the ostensible resonance of the term with the moral economy of neoliberal life notwithstanding. Instead, the concept of self-optimisation enables the analysis of the historically diverse moral grammars for everyday life; of their grounding in heterogeneous spiritual, philosophical, religious, and scientific discourses; and of their implications for the social organisation of power and governance.

As an analytical focal point for the sociologies of moral life and self-identity, the concept of self-optimisation can therefore be notably broad. By this, we mean specifically that self-optimisation, as a sociological concept, may be usefully developed to analyse the social organisation of the self and moral life in a broader array of cultural and historical contexts than the related and more frequently used concept of therapeutic culture (Nehring et al. 2020). The sociological analysis of therapeutic culture has more specifically been concerned with the popularisation of therapeutic knowledge (Rieff 1987 [1966]), sometimes in confluence with spiritual and religious narratives (Csúri, Plotkin, and Viotti 2022), but, more often than not, with an emphasis on the socio-cultural consequences of the dissemination of academic and biomedical psychological knowledge across diverse institutional domains, from work to family, in the Global Northwest (Illouz 2012). The sociological analysis of discourses and practices of self-optimisation has also been used to understand the proliferation and personal and societal consequences of "psy culture" (Madsen 2015; Cederström and Spicer 2017; also see Binkley 2024; Cabanas 2024; and Brandt and Straub 2024, all in this special issue).

Therapeutic culture thus might be taken as one historically particular set of forms of self-optimisation, closely associated with the extraordinary success of psychology and psychotherapy as cultural idiom and the concomitant rise of what might be termed the "psychological imagination" from the early 20th century onwards (Rieff 1987 [1966]; Nehring 2021). However, we argue that the concept of self-optimisation can be extended further, to analyse heterogeneous moral discourses and practices geared towards the pro-

duction of in some sense an optimal self, for example, through processes of improved self-management, self-mastery, and self-knowledge that took place on Caribbean plantations as we look at in the next section – as well as the social, economic, and political underpinnings of these discourses and practices and their consequences for the social organisation of power. It is for this reason that, in this paper, we set out an original and analytical perspective on self-optimisation that both builds on and diverges from that in other papers in this special issue and prior publications on the subject (Nehring and Röcke 2023). Our objective here is to build on the analytical perspective of self-optimisation to examine historical and contemporary trajectories in the social organisation of power and subjectivity in (post-)colonial societies in the Global South. This perspective has largely been absent from debates about self-optimisation in sociology and related disciplines (but see Orgad and Gill 2022), and we argue that its systematic development may significantly enrich these debates.

At this point, it is important to consider how self-optimisation, as a moral grammar, participates in the social organisation of power. Arguably, the sociological significance of research on discourses and practices of self-optimisation lies, to a significant extent, in the ways in which such discourses and practices may be implicated in institutionalised structures of social power, as well as in their contestation. The classical Weberian definition of power and its conceptual corollaries, notably Weber's concepts of discipline and violence (Weber 2019 [1921], 134ff.), are useful to explore this point further. Weber defines power as "every *Chance*, within a social relationship, of enforcing one's own will even against resistance, whatever the basis for this *Chance* might be" (2019 [1921], 134; emphasis in original). Discipline thus may be understood as a particular modality of the exercise of power as "the *Chance* that, because of a practised disposition, a command will find prompt, automatic, and schematic obedience among a definite number of persons" (Weber 2005 [1930], 134; emphasis in original). Weber goes on to note that this concept of discipline specifically includes the "habituation' characteristic of uncritical and unresisting *mass* obedience" (Weber 2019 [1921], 135, emphasis in original). The exercise of power through discipline stands in contrast to its exercise through violence, which Weber characterises as "always the last resort, when other means fail" (Weber 2019 [1921], 136).

Self-optimisation, we suggest, can be thought of at once as a habituating discourse generative of discipline in the Weberian sense and the uncontested exercise of power, and as an array of discourses and practices through which institutionalised power may be contested and change be effected. Both modalities of self-optimisation cut across the papers in this special issue, as in Deborah Lupton's and Clare Southerton's analysis of the empowering effects of ADHD and Autism self-diagnosis on TikTok. Likewise,

both modalities of disciplinary power are implicit in the wider literature on self-optimisation, for example in Cederström and Spicer's (2017) much cited analysis of the self-optimisation movement or in Ole Jacob Madsen's (2015) important account of the socio-historical genealogies of self-optimisation in Norway. Curiously, though, the nexus between moral discourse and social power has tended to remain implicit in these texts, rather than being treated as an explicit focal point for their authors' argument. In this article, then, it is one of our central aims to foreground and systematically analyse the ways in which self-optimisation, as a salient moral idiom, participates in the exercise and contestation of social power.²

As a focal point for sociological enquiry, self-optimisation consequently draws attention to distinctive elements of contemporary moral life, to their historical genealogies, and to their implication in institutionalised structures of social power and their contestation (Fenner 2019; Gill and Orgad 2016; Nehring and Röcke 2023). As an empirical theme and as a sociological concept, it contributes in important ways, as we hope to show in the following, to the sociology of moral life and to the sociological analysis of the power relations in which moral discourses, experiences, and practices are embedded in any one society. Nonetheless, sociological research on self-optimisation has remained relatively limited in sociology and related fields across the social sciences and humanities. It has so far hardly been elaborated as a sociological concept, some recent interventions (e.g., King, Gerisch, and Rosa 2018; Röcke 2021) notwithstanding. These interventions have drawn attention to the moral significance of discourses of self-optimisation in contemporary societies (Sand 2022), and they have highlighted the heterogeneous cultural and technological roots of attendant experiences and practices, from self-enhancement through the application of neuroscientific knowledge (Fenner 2019) to the uses of psychotherapeutic knowledge in contemporary "carescapes" (Fiedel 2023). With the exception of the important work of Anja Röcke (Röcke 2021; Nehring and Röcke 2023), self-optimisation has so far hardly been elaborated as a sociological concept. In turn, the limited, albeit growing body of empirical research on self-optimisation (e.g., King, Gerisch, and Rosa 2018; von Felden 2020; Madsen 2015; Bishop 2018) has remained closely focused on more recent historical trajectories and contemporary practices of self-optimisation in the Global Northwest, often without problematising this narrow socio-historical remit. As a sociological concept, self-optimisation is consequently in need of further development and systematisation when deployed outside this specific setting. With this paper, we seek to highlight the social significance of self-optimisation beyond the Global Northwest, and to contribute to its elaboration as a tool for sociological enquiry.

² For a general discussion of theoretical approaches to social power and the implication of the social self in structures and processes of social power, see Clegg (2023).

3. Re-Imagining Self Optimisation as a Modality of Power

To further elucidate the Weberian definition of power and its conceptual corollaries, violence, and discipline, in the next two sections of this article we look at self-optimisation in the anglophone Caribbean – specifically colonial Jamaica and neoliberal Trinidad – as an element of moral grammar and discourse in the social organisation of power under different eras of global capitalism. Exploring the links between slavery in the past, the present struggles of women entrepreneurs, and the concept of self-optimisation demands a nuanced approach. While directly drawing such parallels might appear too broad, understanding the underlying themes and legacies reveals insightful connections and is generative of amended conceptualisations of self-optimisation. It is also one way to note, as many Global South scholars have, that the “historical residues of settler colonialism and racial slavery, in general, shape political practice and discourse” (Bogues 2023, 34).

Jamaica, with its population of 3 million people, and Trinidad and Tobago, at 1.6 million people, are relatively larger population-wise than most other anglophone Caribbean countries. Jamaica had a much longer history of chattel slavery and the plantation mode of production than Trinidad. In the post-colonial era both countries have been seen as political, cultural, and economic leaders in the region. Both today have also been shaped and scarred by global economic pressures and were pushed further toward the neoliberal model of production through formal programmes of structural adjustment in collaboration with the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank during the 1980s (Bynoe 2000, 1), “technology transfer” as the central pathway to economic development (Girvan 1978), and global economic processes creating dependency and underdevelopment (Girvan 2008). These economic pressures and processes have produced high levels of socio-economic inequality, large pockets of intergenerational poverty, and high crime and murder rates.

Traditionally in Western academia, self-optimisation has been linked to debates on transformations of self-identity under conditions of globalisation and neo-liberal capitalism (Orgad and Gill 2022; Nehring and Röcke 2023). This can be described as a predominately Euro-American based example. It is bound up with arguments about liberal individualisation, social atomisation, and the autonomous-atomised individual optimising themselves through recourse, in particular, to psychological and psychotherapeutic discourses of personal transformation (Madsen 2015). However, there is another more sensitive autonomous agent and less benign form of self-optimisation embedded in this definition too. This is a definition where the

self gets optimised in an ostensibly passive manner through the disciplinary instruments of the state, the dominant economic model of the era, or a combination of both.

This amended account of self-optimisation might seem to be of questionable relevance if the concept is defined narrowly, in terms of the modes of self-experience and practice resulting from the “psychological turn” (Madsen 2014) and associated broader processes of individualisation in the Global Northwest. However, its relevance becomes more readily apparent if we move beyond the Eurocentric focus the concept has acquired to date, and beyond its emphasis on “psy culture” under conditions of societal individualisation. Even under authoritarian socio-political conditions, in which individuals are expected to passively adhere in their beliefs and conduct to the doctrines of state, party, or ruling class, lest they face severe punishments, such apparent passivity has to be actively accomplished, through complex and deliberate processes of self-optimisation to the societal conditions at hand (Damousi and Plotkin 2012; Yang 2018). It requires specific processes of adaptation, and it is, in turn, reversible through the contestation of established authoritarian arrangements of power (Irwin, McCaughan, and Nasser 2003). Taken in this sense, self-optimisation, in response to or contestation of prevalent structures of social power, is a key capacity of the relational, socially constructed self (Gergen 2009), rather than a socio-historically narrowly specific mode of self-experience and practice under conditions of hegemonic “psy culture.” This is the core of the argument we seek to make in this paper, in the hope of extending the relevance of debates about self-optimisation beyond their current confines to the Global Northwest. We suggest this in reference to a modality of power not considered in the literature on self-optimisation currently. This amended perspective on self-optimisation can be illustrated by thinking through the example of Caribbean plantations in Jamaica in the 18th and 19th centuries from the point of view of the enslaved and it can be connected to the present through the shadow of Caribbean plantation history in terms of systemic oppression and how, despite this oppression, enslaved men and women found ways to resist and build community, albeit under dehumanising conditions. This might be thought of both as self-optimisation as a logic of freedom from domination, rather than a strictly proletariat/labour exploitation/human emancipation one (Bogues 2023).

In this section, we conceptually mine Caribbean social history and specifically the plantation mode of production in Jamaica, to explore and link transformations of self-identity and therapeutic narratives of personal development like self-optimisation to periods before neoliberalism. This can provide insight into how and why elements and precedents of self-optimisation in the present might be identifiable in the colonial past. By doing this we provide a way to start thinking through historical genealogies

of self-optimisation in the Caribbean, and how, as a moral grammar for everyday life, precedents for self-optimisation may be identifiable in resistance to dehumanising colonial servitude on the plantation. It can also demonstrate how personal transformations that are spoken of in individual terms are more closely shaped by larger economic systems than they may appear. Or as Eric Wolf once told it, “[S]earch out the causes of the present in the past. Only in this way [can] we come to comprehend the forces that impel societies and cultures here and now” (Wolf 1982, xv).

As noted already, self-optimisation today is often about a confluence of factors around personal improvement (Dalgarrondo and Fournier 2019; King et al. 2018). Resistance to slavery in Caribbean history seems quite disconnected from the lens, discourses, and practices of self-optimisation broadly defined in the 21st century. Resistance to slavery is not concerned with the pursuit of an optimal imaginable body and perfecting mental and emotional constitution (Nehring and Röcke 2023). However, it is concerned with a process of rehumanisation both of the oppressed and the oppressor through symbolic acts that transform the previous symbolic order and semantic field to improve an individual’s personal existence. Many of these symbolic acts much like symbolic acts of self-optimisation can be conceived as “a continuous process of permanently improving personal characteristics and competences via self-engagement, rational self-control and permanent feedback until one reaches the best possible constitution of oneself” (Fenner 2019, 11). However, when you read such a definition from the point of view of the enslaved on the plantation, such as in the writing of Bogues (2023) and Wynter (n.d.), as well as that of New World Caribbean political economists, such as George Beckford (1999), some of the practices and discourses of resistance to colonial power we look at now do sound familiar to process of self-optimisation such as self-management, self-mastery, and self-knowledge. Both self-optimisation and Wynter’s rehumanisation are a “politics of being.” They both reflect the imperative to become a better version of oneself. Bogues’ sense that rehumanisation on the plantation is a process of symbolic transformation and a logic of freedom from domination is helpful here (2023, 38).

4. Plantations in Jamaica

The language of optimisation emerged in the 1950s but did not develop the sub-term – self-optimisation – until the 1970s. From the 1950s onward, the term optimisation is linked

to the invention [...] of the method of optimisation (also known as mathematical programming), which is a collection of mathematical principles and methods used for solving quantitative problems in many disciplines,

including physics, biology, engineering, economics, and business. As to the term “self-optimisation,” it was very rare until the 1970s, when it comes to be used, for example, in relation to cybernetic ideas of self-regulating and self-controlling systems. Like optimisation, the notion is mostly linked to the sphere of management and production and only in rare cases relates to other areas. This only changes from the year 2000 onwards. (Nehring and Röcke 2023, 6)

The plantation system of the Caribbean and Atlantic world was driven by profits (Harvey 2007). This meant that over time the plantocracy needed to develop several methods to optimise “labour, time and space to make cash-crop production profitable” (Delle 2014). For example, much has been written on the improvements in accounting methods and systems in the Caribbean as a result of this need for capital optimisation in plantation production (Rosenthal 2019; Fleischman et al. 2011; Patterson 1982). C.L.R. James too made the point that “rationalized industrial techniques were largely developed on slave plantations, and much of the wealth that funded the Industrial Revolution emerged from the slave trade and even more from industries with servile work forces” (Graeber 2006, 80; James 1938). Viewed in this light, it is worth asking if the genesis of self-optimisation needs to be more clearly connected backwards more than 150 years. Beyond the Global North sphere of management and production in the 20th century, to the era where colonialism – in terms of the plantation mode of production – is developing its contradictions, and bleeding into the emergence of capitalism as the transition from slave labour to wage labour takes place (Craton 1992) when freedom from domination, rather than proletariat emancipation, is the driving logic of the masses. It was during this era in the Caribbean that plantation economics and business redefined industrial production as gradual structural changes around financing, accounting, production, processing, transportation, and distribution are optimised in an economic sense. Their impact changed the “patterns of labour management and migration, and in relations between labourers, landowners and employers” (Craton 1992).

There is more to this suggestion. While enslaved labour on the plantation was punished and disciplined, if we view the process from the bottom-up the enslaved were also educated on the running of a plantation and being entrepreneurially independent, with all the potential opportunities such disciplining might bring with it. The provision-ground system in the four Windward Islands of Grenada, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent, and Tobago during the last 50 years of slavery (1770s to 1830s) that Marshall (1991) described in his research illustrates the function of the provision-ground and internal marketing system in the context of plantation slavery in the late 1700s and early 1800s. In particular, it demonstrates how the enslaved participated in independent activities and that their attempts to take advantage of the potential of these activities to secure more freedoms inevitably led to fierce

competition between themselves and plantation owners and managers for labour services and land resources (Delle 2014).

In the transformation from slave labour to wage labour taking place in the period of mid-1700s to mid-1800s then, an internal contradiction of the plantation system emerged that is useful for shining light on how the process of business optimisation in the plantation mode of production also provided for and led to a disciplinary version of self-optimisation. As the plantation system went through processes of business optimisation to enhance capital accumulation, it began to influence those enslaved people subject to its disciplinary power “to create various hierarchical, classificatory schemas of the human” (Bogues 2023, 35).

As Graeber noted this lack of understanding of what a mode of production does in terms of social production contributed to the decline in the use of the term.

The key mistake of the mode of production model was to define “production” simply as the production of material objects; any adequate theory of “production” would have to give at least equal place to the production of people and social relations. (Graeber 2006, 69)

This is something Caribbean theorists, such as Sylvia Wynter (n.d.), did understand. Within colonialism in the Caribbean in all its shapes and forms, the reproduction of the “social relationships of production” was to generate conceptions and regimes of the human. “These schemas were about creating regimes of man. These regimes were constructed around who was human and who was not human.” She goes beyond the Marxist analysis of the modes of history and argues for modes of being human (Bogues 2023, 35).³

Coffee plantations in Jamaica – such as Clydesdale and Sherwood Forest (Delle 2014) – illustrate this contradiction and elucidate an alternative genesis story of self-optimisation in a context not often remarked upon:

At the start of the 19th century, plantation operations in Jamaica were complex. It was a web of social relations that defined the nature of class and gender relations, structured relationships between people of various social standings within the hierarchy of the island, and, more than anything, defined who would collect the surplus value produced on the coffee plantations. (Delle 2014, 108)

The central aspect of these relations was for the plantocracy to ensure control over the enslaved. Violence was often the main method to achieve such oppression and to force people to obey. There were other means too, as Delle notes, “including the creation of landscapes within plantations that allowed planters to create and maintain systems of surveillance over the labour force” (2014, 108).

³ One regime was inclusive – the human; the other regime only included people who fit the definition of “man.” Under capitalism, the latter came to dominate the former.

In Jamaica the plantocracy, while consciously rejecting the interests of the enslaved class, was also educating the enslaved in terms of their development of freedom, independence, and class interests. Violence and surveillance were not enough to stop these changes. As Delle notes, some planters did start to recognise the transformation the enslaved were experiencing in the sense of their own class interests. He paraphrases Edward Long and notes that

enslaved people, through the exchange of food produce and other small goods both to the white planters and between each other in Sunday markets, were controlling an increasingly large proportion of the islands' coinage. (Long 1774, cited in Delle 2014, 112)

At first, the plantocracy tried to limit the growth of any type of economic power amongst the enslaved. For example, in addition to violence, the planters passed laws prohibiting the enslaved to carry any goods or wares other than food, for sale without the written permission of their master. However, these attempts were not enough. Sophisticated transformations of self, in entrepreneurial ways, amongst many of the enslaved had begun in Jamaica well before the start of the 19th century:

In any given mode of production, the most important economic activity is the production and/or procurement of food, for without adequate sustenance, human existence is not possible [...] 17th century Jamaican planters had to make a choice when developing their first plantations; purchase imported food to feed to the enslaved workforce; compel the enslaved to work to produce food as a term of their enslavement; or require the enslaved to feed themselves. (Delle 2014, 145)

As Mintz and Hall demonstrated in the 1960s, using a Marxist anthropological approach (1960), the plantocracy in Jamaica made choices about the production and procurement of food. These set-in transformations that shifted slave labour toward wage labour, and the enslaved started to manipulate the system for their own individual benefit and self-improvement. For example, by the middle of the 18th century, the plantation mode of production integrated a provisioning system that incorporated elements of all the options mentioned by Delle. As this system grew, the last option of requiring "the enslaved to feed themselves" became the central means of feeding the enslaved. This choice, Delle suggests, was mainly because, to the planter class, it appeared that this option was the way to squeeze the maximum amount of labour and hence profit from the enslaved. As several researchers illustrate by the turn of the 19th century, enslaved Jamaicans had manipulated the provision ground system to their advantage (Mintz and Hall 1960; Bates 2017), despite being required by this system to work for themselves after completing their sometimes hazardous and often exhausting unpaid plantation duties. By selling products they produced on their own time in the provision grounds, including food items and handicrafts, en-

slaved people now had access to cash, as a thriving consumer market controlled by the enslaved existed across the island (Bates 2017).

In making the enslaved produce food to feed themselves in a quest to save money and better use their assets for profit-making, the plantocracy was part of subsequent additional transformations. Where the plantocracy perceived optimisation in a business sense, the enslaved experienced this business optimisation on the plantations as a space where there was an opportunity to transform themselves in terms of new freedoms that provided for their own humanity in a process distinct to self-optimisation in the 21st century; yet it still contained elements of “self-engagement, rational self-control and permanent feedback” as they improved their personal characteristics and competences in the area of growing provisions and making goods to sell in the market to improve and enhance their lives (Fenner 2019).

5. From the Colonial Plantation to the Neoliberal Present

While these types of processes alongside the growing unprofitability of the plantation system at the end of the 1700s and 1800s diminished the power of the plantocracy, it did not erase it. By emancipation in 1838, the British colonies in the Caribbean were well connected to “imperial political administration and the international capitalist system” and development was not in the interest of the local masses who were gaining too many freedoms in the eyes of the plantocracy (Girvan 1978, 161). As such, the expansion of the peasant domestic food economy in Jamaica and the production of domestic crops was not supported by the authorities. On the one hand, the plantation mode of production had disciplined the formerly enslaved to be more entrepreneurial, self-managed, and focused on individual profit making. At the same time, the non-development of domestic food production limited their abilities for real economic growth, which was connected to the export economy, something the formerly enslaved were cut off from (Girvan 1978, 162). This maintained their inability to access freedom from exploitation:

Long before the end of the period of apprenticeship (1838), Jamaican slaves were producing not only most of their own subsistence but also an astoundingly large surplus of foods, the bigger part of which ended up on the tables of free people, including the planters themselves. (Mintz 1985, 34)

Read through the collision of colonialism and capitalism, one way to interpret these changes is that they served the interests of a white European ruling class laying the path of capital exploitation as the legacies of imperialism and colonialism collided with global capitalist expansion. However, it

might also be true that the increasing agency and self-growth of the now free male labourers after their emancipation in 1834–1838, to shun their previous fieldwork, with labourers preferring to take on other working class employment, or none at all, was a consequence of a chain of events put in motion by the political economy of the planters and their desire for increased profiting making:

The now free male labourers migrating away from the plantation preferred “smallhold cultivation, jobbing, working in the sugar factory, picking coffee and cocoa, work as tradesmen.” The females “shifted to huckstering, retailing and domestic activity.” And “the children were sent to school or to ‘godparents’ whom they might assist in provision cultivation and marketing.” (Woodville 2003, 86)

In optimising their system for the enslaved food production, the plantocracy set in chain the transformation from slave labour toward wage labour, and in so doing the planters produced what we can describe as a Weberian habituating discourse generative of discipline that brought about much broader changes in the uncontested exercise of power.

While the pure wage relations of a capitalist mode of production would not emerge in Jamaica and the wider Caribbean until the early 20th century, in the first half of the 19th century the seeds of capitalist social relations at the base of a capitalist market economy were being sown. Such seeds it might be imagined grew in the soil of Caribbean social relations and were fertilised over the long period between emancipation to independence in the 1960s in a variety of ways. However, that growth was stunted and was dependent on the decisions made by first the colonial authorities and then the post-independence political class who followed a limited form of development suited more for the export market and not the internal development of Caribbean countries, much like during colonial times (Girvan 1978, 154). During colonialism, the now free-labourers had learned how to self-optimize for a domestic market but were instead made to toil for an export market that provided them with little and limited their individual and national development.

Caribbean plantation societies thrived on the dehumanisation and exploitation of enslaved people. This systematic exclusion and denial of agency laid the groundwork for centuries of economic and social disparities, hindering self-optimisation by limiting access to resources and opportunities for many. Despite oppression, enslaved men and women found ways to resist and build community. They practised traditional skills, cultivated informal economies, and nurtured spiritual traditions. This spirit of resistance, though born from struggle, can be seen as a form of self-optimisation too – a belief in one’s ability to overcome adversity and find ways to thrive. In addition, the historical wealth from the colonial era concentrated in the hands of privileged minorities can be said to have contin-

ued to limit economic opportunities for marginalised groups, including women and reproduced social hierarchies. Such practices of exclusivity for women within the labour market also served not only to marginalize the type of opportunities and sectors for which they participated, but also, that of how they managed structural and interpersonal barriers to ensure their own survival. This unequal playing field made, and makes self-optimisation today, more challenging due to systemic barriers and limited access to resources embedded in regional history.

Echoes of these individual gains but limited social transformations can also be seen in the same region 150 years later today under neoliberalism. The moral grammar of the plantation economy may seem quite removed from the self-optimisation embedded in neoliberal institutional power relations today, but when we look closer at neoliberal entrepreneurship in the Caribbean today, we can see Weber's argument about power, habituation, and uncritical mass obedience still provides relevance. We might also ask how it shapes political practice and discourse in the present.

6. Entrepreneurship and Self-Optimisation

In the contemporary era, the discourse and practice of entrepreneurial development also emerge as facets of self-optimisation with the reinforcement of individual pursuit and improvement as core aspects of the self-making project. This process unfolds as a cultural framing of self-management and advancement, with the push for self-empowerment within the neo-liberal society, but with some glaring contradictions (Bröckling 2015; Dardot and Laval 2013). Entrepreneurship, as a particular mode of self-optimisation in the context of neoliberal policymaking, has had decidedly mixed consequences for social inequalities in the Caribbean, often reinforcing rather than challenging them.

We see therefore that despite rising evidence of global inequalities, neoliberal thinking continues to advance socio-cultural mandates and narratives that promote expectations for rationalised action and self-sustained growth as part of creating neo-liberal subjectivities (Dardot and Laval 2013). This sense of rationalised capitalism (Weber 1961 [1923]), with changing patterns and instruments of power, has continued in the present period to create experiences for self-optimisation. This broader public discourse is surely evident in the language and promise of entrepreneurship as a panacea for social and economic advancements and for the commensurate framing of self-disciplined entrepreneurs (Altan-Olcay 2014; Lemke 2001). The projection of the self-made entrepreneur who works within opportunities for recognition, innovation, employment, new venture creation, and/or expansion, with tangible economic and social rewards, therefore becomes

consistent with this form of rationalised market alignment. The product of this rationalised capitalist process is what Dardot and Laval (2013) referred to as neoliberal subjects, who have been transformed by regimes of competitiveness (which is based on a web of market relations of power), and who have learnt to be self-motivated and driven (to ensure success within the market economy). In such cases, the narratives of the entrepreneur and of entrepreneurship both converge to reinforce the moral grammar of self-optimisation.

These representations of structure and action are now entangled within entrepreneurial imperatives to create discursive and political mechanisms for social reorganisation. This reality unfolds in this sense as a materialisation of changing power structures that both pushes and pulls already precarious groups of women, young persons, and those in rural communities into the individualised and unsupported spaces of economic activity (Inter-American Development Bank 2019). While strong criticism therefore is directed against the hegemonic connections that are being made between free markets, individuality, status enhancement, and wealth creation for women within the neoliberal economy (Ahl and Marlow 2021; Ogbor 2000; Marlow and Adam 2013), the narratives of self-empowerment and self-advancement are also positioned within this entrepreneurial imperative to direct and to encourage the pursuit of the entrepreneurial self. We see in particular a push for the use of entrepreneurship as a model of subjectification to empower women who operate in informal activities, but with growing apprehension for the intersecting relations and echelons of power that exist within the market and that negatively impact their experiences (Bröckling 2005; Dardot and Laval 2013). Of note is the objection to the continued promotion of women's participation as a missing link within entrepreneurial development efforts, but without needed interventions to address the web of power relations, which produce growing insecurities and ambiguities in the market (Zahra et al. 2014). The ways in which women are valorised through state initiatives that push for the unleashing of women's potential (Henry, Foss, and Ahl 2016) amidst ongoing constraints in the market no doubt places ongoing forms of pressure on their ability to create individual pathways and points of negotiations. One strength of this analysis is within the attention that it brings to issues of the alignment of the self with patterns of surveillance, commodification, and consumerism (Read 2009, Ahl and Marlow 2021).

The role and connections between the state, society, and the economy within broader narratives and strategies for self-government defined in relation to advancing the entrepreneurial self also cannot be ignored (Deloitte 2016). For countries in the Global South and more specifically for small island developing states, such as the Caribbean region, the threats of liberalised global markets, the push for the entrepreneurial imperative, and

the cultural framing of the entrepreneurial self also unfold as part of a complex web of relations that are institutionalised through situated practice and public discourse. At the macro level, this entrepreneurial imperative unfolds as a buzzword, a strategy for economic growth, and as a panacea to the challenge of development. Entrepreneurial development as a country specific goal therefore becomes a test of the extent to which economic actors can be creative and innovative within the negotiation of market logic and dynamics. Yet the assumptions related to the competitive potential of actors and economies (within the language and constructions of entrepreneurship) also minimise the structural challenges of countries like those in the Caribbean, where persistent inequities exist (Minto-Coy, Lashley, and Storey 2018). This lack of attention to the negative impacts of their structural location on their economic position and share within the global market (Girvan 1999; Arndt and Kierzkowski 2001) also becomes a demonstration of how neoliberalism advances a certain kind of social relations of power or form of existence that forces individuals and nation states to conduct themselves within the logic of competition (Dardot and Laval 2013). The inconsistent connections between entrepreneurial activities and the structural realities of the region (Acs, Desai, and Hessels 2008; Minto-Coy and McNaughton 2016) serve as a testament not just to the discrepancies between the entrepreneurial imperative and the political economy of the region but also between the neoliberal governmentality and self-alignment.

The state however is implicit within the framing of this entrepreneurial imperative and this type of self-directed economic action. This is evident, for example, in the establishment of the wholesome adoption of neoliberal principles to shape entrepreneurial policies and entrepreneurial ecosystems across the region and within broader assumptions, theory, and practice of growth-oriented models. The establishment of the Micro and Small Enterprise policy for Trinidad & Tobago, the national policy for micro, small and medium sized enterprises for Barbados, and the Micro, Small & Medium Enterprise (MSME) & Entrepreneurship Policy for Jamaica, all published within the last 10 years, solidify on one hand this entrepreneurial shift and growth centred model for development. Yet, the focus on markets, economic performance, profits, and growth within these policy instruments serve to reinforce a moral standard around what constitutes entrepreneurial activities and outcomes, with little possibilities for diverse representations and free engagements within that space. Where this type of unfreedom is enforced and learnt through more social regulation and entrepreneurial self-government (Dardot and Laval 2013), without any substantive attention to the power relations that exist within the sector, then women entrepreneurs remain particularly disadvantaged within this nexus (Esnard 2021, 2022).

Yet, the secondary reference within these policies to gender equality and the lack of gender sensitive social support systems across the Caribbean, as

a case in point, do not demonstrate a commitment to the empowerment of women. Examinations of the Micro and Small Enterprise entrepreneurial policy (2014–2016) and related state interventions in Trinidad and Tobago show increasing focus on the inclusion of women within this sector, but without needed sensitivities and interventions that address some of the challenges that they face within the sector. While there is mention of the push for “economic diversification and social transformation” within the policy for Trinidad and Tobago, there is repeated reference to wealth creation and economic development (GORTT 2014, 3), but with little detailing of the areas and plans for social transformation. The relative absence of dialogue between the state and existing women entrepreneurs across diverse socio-economic backgrounds also emerges as a continuation of historical power structures and relations between the state and the people (Esnard 2023). What unfolds therefore within the crafting and implementation of entrepreneurial policies within the region are normative assumptions and frameworks of entrepreneurship that are used to frame entrepreneurial actors and activities, but with little engagement to abolish the conditions that sustain disadvantage, the gendered positions, and constructions that women contend with, and of the still relative absence of voice and advocacy they have in that space. Women entrepreneurs therefore whether pulled or pushed into the entrepreneurial space are left to individually navigate the structural and cultural constraints that they face within a still masculinised entrepreneurial space (Amoros, Borraz, and Veiga 2016; Esnard 2022).

Within these entrepreneurial policies are also unchallenged notions of entrepreneurial engagement and success that privilege individual propensity, survivability (the length of time within the market) and the scalability of the venture (the ability to grow and increase the scope). As a practice, these indicators and measures of success create standards, metrics, and pathways that are so normalised to set apart the need for individual motivations but without a more systematic recognition of the multiple contributions and engagements of women in that space. This is surely evident within the central push for women’s empowerment through new venture creation and sustenance across the Caribbean. However, what remains missing even within the push for women’s entrepreneurial engagement is a gender sensitive focus that counteracts individualised spaces and experiences with systems and networks of support. This missing link is particularly relevant given the use of firm and individual units to assess the performance levels of these ventures, which do not render visible other critical social and cultural factors that force women to seek alternative and meaningful pathways for engagement and freedoms. These measures of entrepreneurial success also create standardised and universal ways of constructing and measuring how the individual has conduct him/herself within the competitive space. Without access to business networks, however, these efforts merely amount to

strategies that push engagement via individual pathways and representations of success, where the ability to compete becomes the yardstick for measuring behavioural alignment and responsibility within the entrepreneurial space. In such contexts, high levels of discontinuance, fear of failure, and replicative activities also emerge as inherent or individual failures for women entrepreneurs (Bailey et al. 2013; Kelly et al. 2013), and an inability to self-direct entrepreneurial success. The complex interplay of structural and cultural factors that impact the rationalisation of women's engagement within the market become minimized. What remains lacking within these strategic policy initiatives however is the situating of the structural and social embeddedness of entrepreneurship (Martinez Dy et al. 2017), with opportunities to advance more liberatory and empowering constructions and representations of women's contribution within the sector (Esnard 2022).

The profiling of women entrepreneurs in the contemporary period as small scale, informal owners with many barriers to growth (Lashley and Smith 2015) also fails to call out discursive representations of employability, whether historically or within the contemporary period; a reality which imposes self-regulated restrictions on the thinking and actions of women in the sector. What unfolds therefore is a more intense form of social inequality that is reconfigured through women's engagement within the regime of competitiveness but without the removal of the structural and relational barriers that undergird the realities for female entrepreneurs. Where perennial issues of gender stereotypes (Esnard 2016, 2021), race and ethnic divides (Ryan 2012; Hossein 2013), and the contradictions within racial liberal capitalism remain (Hossein, Wright, and Edmonds 2023), then these structures of power become differently advanced within new forms and relations of power that are being framed within the entrepreneurial space (Freeman 2014). This advancement of entrepreneurial agendas without attention to ongoing inequalities that are historically rooted within periods of colonisation only serve to institutionalise these relations of power and to disadvantage women's position within the sector (Esnard 2019, 2021, 2022). Such webs of power inadvertently work to produce self-regulation with alignment to needs of the market. Self-optimisation in such contexts becomes an outcome of this social and economic entanglement, with the positioning of women as active actors, whose self-management and self-directed skills become critical to their survival within the sector. Here, there is little freedom for emancipatory thought and practice that are connected to more diverse ways of knowing, doing, and relating within the market.

These patterns of influence emerge as an extension of what obtained within earlier historical periods, although with different configurations. We recognise therefore the diverse contributions of economic historians and feminists within the Caribbean who have worked to highlight the connec-

tions between wider global structures, changing social and economic conditions within the region, and the challenges for women actors. Much of that research has centred on women's economic activity to demonstrate the double binds within women's labour market participation. Early representations of women's work therefore point to some of the global and local forces that have pushed women into fragmented work arrangements with alternative sources of employment as housekeepers, market vendors, higglers, and traders (Momsen 1993; Craig-James 2008), but with increasing push to become self-sustaining and directed within that process. There is also evidence to suggest that patterns of worker disparities that were based on gender, race, and ethnicity (Reddock 1996; Abdulah and Singh 1984) with the opening of educational opportunities within the region (ILO 2019) also serve as critical points for examination of shifting social structures and forms of organisation that reinforce self-management and personal development. In such cases, self-optimisation as an analytical tool, helps to locate and connect these patterns of economic dominance and relations with practices of self-improvement as rationalised individual action. There are limited insights however for Trinidad and Tobago on the processes and structures through which neoliberal patterns have pushed forward self-created game changers, traders, and self-employed women who have worked to improve their lives. Carla Freeman's (2014) examination of Entrepreneurial Selves within a Barbadian context, however, offers a critical review of the emergent middle class and the changing methods and discourses for self-making. Through her work, we learn more of the ways in which social practices (related to identity and status as aspects of respectability) are intricately linked to and mobilised through constructions and representations of the neoliberal subject. This coexistence of entrepreneurial pursuits with this need for maintaining the social expectations and reputations of women emerge therefore as a point of tension. Through this line of research, we see some unpacking of the connections between global capitalism, individualism, and entrepreneurialism as major tenets of this post-feminist examination and relatedly, of the positioning of women as consumers, using strategies of self-governance and self-optimisation. This type of research, however, remains within an embryonic state with many examinations of the underlying forms of structuration and resistance within the entrepreneurial space.

7. Conclusion: Self-Optimisation and the Social Organisation of Power

Considering two disparate and yet connected socio-historical scenarios, this article has shown how self-optimisation may be embedded in public discourse, institutionalised forms of practice, and attendant power relations. First, we have shown how self-optimisation may be useful as a tool for the analysis of historical relationships of power, domination, and contestation. The ideology of self-optimisation may seem ill-suited and fitted when removed from the neoliberal present and turned toward the development of national transformations such as the end of the Jamaican plantation system, but by looking at the past we can perhaps better understand the genesis and development of where we have reached in the present in terms of re-making and enhancing the social self under capitalism.

Western self-optimisation is part of the neoliberal psy-culture and “psychological imagination” (Nehring and Frawley 2020) of individualised betterment through reinvention (Elliott 2013; Spreen 2015) which accompanies the present articulation of capitalism but does little to change the fundamental structures of capitalism and the unequal material conditions it produces. Self-optimisation can, on the one hand, be another in a list of moral grammars in support of atomisation, individualism, and psychologisation – self-help – that turns social development inward by individualising it. On the other hand, it may be the outcome of a modality of power such as the state or an economic development like the shift from slave labour to wage labour during the plantation mode of production.

In this sense, thinking comparatively about self-optimisation during slavery and during the present can illustrate that capitalism today is not completely removed and is more closely related to plantation slavery than we might imagine and many of its processes are repeated again under capitalism (Graeber 2006). Here, self-optimisation can be imagined as an element of the colonial plantation that moved beyond the plantation. As such, self-optimisation today is more accurately a modality of power connected to social structures and their reproduction than simply individualised choice and action. Our argument emphasises therefore the role that power plays in the context of processes of self-optimisation.

In the same geographical space, re-focusing on contemporary socio-economic development, the second scenario we have set out considers the gendered, societal, and personal impact of entrepreneurship and attendant policymaking in the Anglophone Caribbean. As we have shown, entrepreneurship, as a specific form of self-optimisation, recent neoliberal policies of promoting entrepreneurship have had mixed consequences for inequalities of gender, race, and ethnicity in the region, with some of their more

detrimental consequences being exacerbated by long standing structural inequalities. As a specific narrative of self-optimisation, notably, entrepreneurship may propel women in the region towards greater participation in public and economic life, while at the same time individualising attendant pressures and preventing collective and political responses to market dysfunction and barriers women may face when attempting such participation. In the neoliberal era, narratives of entrepreneurship have framed self-optimisation in terms of the acknowledgement of individual responsibilities and achievements in market-based competition (Peck 2010). As a centrepiece of narratives of development in the Anglophone Caribbean, the limitations of this model are clearly visible, in terms of their failure to uproot historically deeply grounded gendered inequalities of power and socio-economic and political opportunity.

Both scenarios show how self-optimisation, as a sociological concept, may contribute to macro-sociological analysis of historical and contemporary institutional structures, power relations, and processes of change. In extant research, self-optimisation has tended to be twinned with the concept of therapeutic culture – or with related terms – in the analysis of experiences and practices of self-identity in neoliberal times in the Global North (Dagiral 2019; Bishop 2018; Orgad and Gill 2022). Some recent research, most notably that of Anja Röcke (2021), has attempted to draw out self-optimisation's wider utility in the socio-historical analysis of moral life and the social organisation of power. Looking at Caribbean social and economic history, we have built on these efforts to highlight the importance of self-optimisation for the sociology of moral life and the sociological analysis of power, development, and change in the Global South. In doing so, we have sought to open up broader horizons for a globally focused sociology of self-optimisation.

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