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Postmodernity and Authenticity as an Ethical Ideal

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Abstract: The quest for authenticity as an ethical ideal can be observed throughout the intellectual history of modernity from the Renaissance to the mid-twentieth century. One of the objectives of this study is to support this fundamental claim with reference to the relevant works of certain writers and philosophers selected from different centuries to represent that long period called modernity. While the thinkers whose works are discussed to reach this goal are primarily Rousseau, Nietzsche, and Sartre, several other names are also included in this overview. Another objective of this article is to identify the common aspects of these theoretical and philosophical narratives titled "authenticity-thinking," and to underscore their conditions of possibility. Relatedly, the main question that this study tries to answer is whether these conditions are still present in postmodernity (F. Jameson), post-postmodernity (J. Nealon), or digimodernity (A. Kirby) that follows modernity. One of the most crucial elements in this study's assessment of contemporary societies is the figure of autistic subject that is claimed to have replaced the subject of authenticity.

Keywords:

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Postmodernlik ve Bir Etik İdeal Olarak Otantiklik

Öz: Bir etik ideal olarak otantiklik arayışı Rönesans'tan yirminci yüzyılın ortalarına değin modernliğin tüm düşünsel tarihinde karşımıza çıkmaktadır. Bu çalışmanın amaçlarından biri, kendisine temel oluşturan bu iddiayı bahsi geçen uzun tarihsel dönemi temsilen farklı yüzyıllardan seçilen belli başlı yazar ve filozofların konuyla ilgili eserlerine gönderme yaparak desteklemektir. Bu doğrultuda çalışmalarına değinilen düşünürler arasında başta Rousseau, Nietzsche ve Sartre bulunsa da başka isimlere de yer verilmektedir. Makalenin bir diğer amacı ise tarihsel anlamda izi sürülen ve "otantiklik düşüncesi" olarak adlandırılan bu kuramsal veya felsefi anlatıların ortak özelliklerini belirlemek ve bunları olanaklı kılan koşulların altını çizmektir. Bununla bağlantılı olarak çalışmanın cevaplamaya giriştiği esas soru, söz konusu olanaklılık koşullarının modernlikten sonra gelen postmodernlikte (F. Jameson), post-postmodernlikte (J. Nealon) veya dijimodernlikte de (A. Kirby) mevcut olup olmadığıdır. Bu tartışmanın günümüz toplumlarıyla ilgili yanını oluşturan en önemli unsurlardan biri ise otantikliğin öznesinin yerine geçtiği öne sürülen otistik özne figürüdür.

Anahtar Sözcükler:

Otantiklik,
Postmodernlik,
Dijimodernizm,
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Introduction

Before stating the main objective of this article, let us start with a pair of jeans advertised on amazon.com as being skinny-cut and having the color "authentic repair." On the webpage featuring this product, it is indicated that those jeans were "made in super stretch denim with slightly slubby character and soft hand. It's been washed down to an authentic, worn-in, look. The shades span from mid-indigo to warm bright blue, with areas that are almost white. Abrasions and repairs have been done with impressive craftsmanship, decorating thighs, knees and back pockets authentically" ("Nudie Jeans"). This study argues that the logic behind this product's design, and behind the production of many other commodities on the market, relates to one of the most persistent questions of modernity. Mentioning one specific term three times in just a few lines, the discourse used in the text above, and in the descriptions of many other consumer goods for that matter, exploits the desire articulated by that question, namely staying, being, or becoming "authentic" in a world that anonymizes human subjects and forces them to dissimulation. In this article, we will briefly trace the history of how authenticity has been theorized as an ethical or existential ideal with respect to several prominent thinkers from the Age of Enlightenment, the age of industrial capitalism, and the first half of the twentieth century. As one may readily tell, these historical episodes constitute a large part of the period that is generally called modernity. But today, we know that this period has been replaced by another one—postmodernity—which signifies a new political, cultural, and economic condition globally. Therefore, this essay will also consider the postmodern condition together with the new experiences of subjectivity and collectivity it has generated, and it will ultimately try to assess what may have become of that desire called authenticity, and whether it is possible to conceive of it in any meaningful way in the contemporary moment.

Yet, before moving further, it should be emphasized that we will not employ authenticity as a concept that has a positive, decidable, and homogenous content; nor will this study attempt to define or adjudicate the true meaning of authenticity. It will rather be used as an umbrella term that designates a set of family resemblances among various philosophical and existential issues cutting across the history of modernity, and these include the corruption or the recovery of an original state of being; the loss, restoration, or the construction of an identity unique to the subject; alienation or non-alienation; autonomy or heteronomy; bad faith (self-deception) and freedom.

A Brief History of Authenticity-Thinking in Modernity

The first part of this article will concentrate on the ideas of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Jean-Paul Sartre; however, it is granted that the overview of authenticity-thinking that it will present could be made longer with the inclusion, among

others, of Michel de Montaigne, Soren Kierkegaard, Karl Marx, and Martin Heidegger. After all, it is with Montaigne's 1580 essay "On Cannibals" (105–19) that Renaissance Europe starts questioning its identity from the viewpoint of authenticity. Having read the reports by the European colonizers of South America on the native Brazilian tribes (the Tupi) and their ritual practices of cannibalism against their enemies, Montaigne sets out to evaluate in a comparative way whether it was the European societies or the Tupi who lived in concord with the fundamental traits of authentic humanness. After careful and provocative deliberations which cannot be covered here, Montaigne argues that the Tupi are wild in the same way fruits are wild in their natural mode of existence, as nature itself has created them. Therefore, these tribes seem "barbarous in the sense that they have received very little molding from the human intelligence, and are still very close to their original simplicity. They are still governed by natural laws and very little corrupted by our own" (109). Montaigne, that supreme representative of the Renaissance mind, reaches a clear verdict: European culture has fallen into inauthenticity as a result of the elaborate and inhuman mechanisms of what it calls civilization, whereas the natives of South America are authentic precisely because they have preserved their original essence and natural ways of living. The sixteenth-century Europeans make up corrupt communities as they valorize wealth and power above everything else, whereas for the Tupi communal spirit and well-being are of utmost importance, and this vision makes them a society of gallant people.

In his 1843 work *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard (74–75) levels almost the same criticism against his own historical milieu, nineteenth-century Europe dominated by the values of industrial capitalism and money economy that strip every individual of the qualities that make them an authentic human being with a unique identity and vocation of their own. Kierkegaard's paradigmatic example in this context is the Old Testament prophet Abraham who obeys God's rather irrational and murderous command that he should sacrifice his only son Isaac to the divine with no apparent reason. But it is precisely by committing himself to this unfounded command that Abraham suspends the universal ethics applying to everyone within the anonymous masses of modernity, and thus he faithfully owns the vocation that makes him a singular, authentic subject (107–28). Arguably, Marx attacks the capitalist mode of production on much the same grounds. As he observes, in capitalism, humans are alienated from their labor power and capacity for conscious and meaningful activity (*praxis*), from the products of their labor, from the sense of being creative subjects, and finally, from their species life and fellow human beings (322–32). In this regard, Marx envisions communist society as an association of free producers in which alienation is overcome and individuals can reconnect with the authentic traits of their humanity. In a more existential sense, Heidegger also characterizes the state of the human subject (*Dasein*) in the technology-dominated world of modernity as one of estrangement or inauthenticity (236). He maintains that the "meaning of the Being of that being we call Dasein proves to be temporality" (60), and through the recognition of its own finitude (being-towards-death), the subject becomes

capable of dispensing with all that bogs it down in the everydayness of modernity ordinarily promoting idle talk, superficiality, and the denial of the self's potential of becoming authentic by choosing itself over against the standardizing processes and values of modern society.

At this point, it could be reiterated that the present study does not intend to provide a comprehensive account of the theories of authenticity—such an effort would certainly exceed the limits of an article. It rather tries to substantiate the aforementioned claim that authenticity as an ethical ideal has occupied a central place throughout modernity, and it wishes to do so by devoting more space to three major thinkers from three successive centuries starting with the Age of Reason. This overview will also highlight the common features and conditions of possibility underlying these different formulations of authenticity, and on this basis, it will be assessed whether the same conditions apply in postmodernity as well.

We would like to turn, then, to Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who, in his *Second Discourse* delivered in 1755 on the origins of social and moral inequality, speculates for a while on the meaning of the word "misery" and asks the following question: "[W]hat kind of misery can there be for a free being whose heart is at peace and whose body is in good health? I ask which of the two, civil or natural life, is more likely to become insufferable to those who live it?" (52) This rhetorical question presents us in a nutshell with the fundamental problem that Rousseau tackles in his work, and that is how to reestablish equality in all its forms within European societies that are deeply marked by a separation from an original state of equality and happiness. The natural life that Rousseau alludes to is a state in which the so-called "savage man" lives with no misery for he is free to fulfill his natural needs and is not forced to conform to a political and moral system that claims his mind and body in return for a fake contentment (46). Genuine freedom, a non-alienated mind and labor, true morality and a lost, original state of equality are the motifs that make Rousseau a thinker of authenticity—an umbrella term, as underlined before, that denotes various interrelated concerns.

Rousseau asserts that "[i]n instinct alone, man had everything he needed in order to live in the state of nature; in a cultivated reason, he has only what he needs to live in society" (52). Civil society and culture are what we have fallen into; they have been artificially imposed on the human constitution and have corrupted such essential human traits as solidarity, pity, sharing, and concern for others' wellbeing. In a striking example, Rousseau contrasts the types of behavior prevailing in civil society with those in the animal kingdom: "In fact," he says, "commiseration will be all the more energetic as the witnessing animal identifies itself more intimately with the suffering animal" (54). Then it is justified to argue that in the state of nature, the feeling of commiseration must have been much stronger, and if this is not the case in contemporary societies, it is because human reason now cares only about one's individual interests and gains as opposed to the common good. "Reason is what engenders egocentrism," Rousseau claims, "and

reflection strengthens it. Reason is what turns man in upon himself" (54). And this egotistical reason does not belong in human nature but is acquired through culture and civilization.

In a famous remark of his, Rousseau expresses what he thinks is the material basis of that egotistical reason: "The first person who, having enclosed a plot of land, took it into his head to say *this is mine* and found people simple enough to believe him was the true founder of civil society" (60). Private property is the source of the privileges some enjoy to the misery of their fellow beings, and it upholds the oppression and exploitation that are necessary to maintain those privileges. As a result of this inequality, large numbers of people composed of the poor and the propertyless find themselves under the domination of propertied classes, thereby losing their freedom and self-sufficiency. Closely linked to this loss and to the kind of competitive, conflicted society created by private property is the destruction of human virtues such as sincerity and being true to oneself and to others, and of human powers like autonomy and self-determination. In such a society, it is to one's advantage to pretend to be something or someone other than what or who one in fact is. As Rousseau concludes, in modern culture, "[b]eing something and appearing to be something became two completely different things; and from this distinction there arose grand ostentation, deceptive cunning, and all the vices that follow in their wake" (67). One must resist such deceptive kinds of conduct and try to harmonize what they are and how they appear or behave, and the ideal society should be constituted by such honest citizens and authentic individuals.

Rousseau's society generating dissimulation and complicity becomes "the herd" and its value system "slave morality" in Friedrich Nietzsche, against which the "will to power" that only noble souls can own and realize functions as the antidote. It is when he writes about creation and self-creation does Nietzsche reveal his concern with authenticity most clearly. In his 1886 book titled *Beyond Good and Evil,* Nietzsche makes a remarkable comparison between two imaginary figures that he calls "the scholar" and "the genius." While he attributes the qualities of begetting or giving birth "in their most elevated sense" to the genius, he asserts that "the scholar, the scientific average man, always rather resembles an old maid . . . [he] is not noble . . . [he is] a type that does not dominate and is neither authoritative nor self-sufficient" (125). That scholar type is the one who produces objective certainties and quantities for the modern masses and their indoctrinators. "He is only an instrument; let us say, he is a *mirror*—he is no 'end in himself'" (126) The scholar mirroring the mediocrity of their age is thus self-denying. The objective, scientific person displays "a dangerous unconcern about Yes and No," they are utterly incapable of affirming or negating life; consequently, they cannot engage in creative and impactful actions. As Nietzsche continues, "If love and hatred are wanted from him . . . he will do what he can and give what he can. But one should not be surprised if it is not much—if just here he proves inauthentic, fragile, questionable, and worm-eaten. . . . After all, he is genuine only insofar as he may be objective: only in his cheerful 'totalism' he is still 'nature' and 'natural'" (127). But this is not what being human is about. A person

"without substance and content," a selfless person who lacks the strength to create their own laws, values, and passions cannot avoid dissolving into the herd and they would be doomed to live an entirely dependent life shaped by slave morality. "Genuine philosophers," on the other hand, are the embodiments of authentic humans (or human potentialities) precisely because "their [non-scientific] 'knowing' is creating, their creating is a legislation, their will to truth is—*will to power*" (136). And this is the very power required to lead a life that is liberated from the corrupting and anonymizing values of the modern age.

Nietzsche's target here is the European culture of the nineteenth century, the Europe of closer international relations through capitalism and commerce, of universalized public opinion through such relations and newspapers, of debased mass education and mass democracy that establish a purely formal equality and sameness among the essentially unequal and non-identical. In short, that is the continental stage on which a hypocritical drama of mediocrity and leveling is played out. In this world of generalized pettiness, Nietzsche argues, "the concept of greatness entails being noble, wanting to be by oneself, being able to be different, standing alone and having to live independently" (139) It is only by recognizing and assuming one's will to power, by creating oneself and remaining autonomous, can one become authentic. There is no lost authenticity to be regained for Nietzsche; an authentic existence and selfhood should be attained through one's unceasing self-creation and self-governing. The much-debated figure of the *Übermensch* (Overman) signifies that individual who is committed to fashioning themselves through emancipation from the yokes of social and cultural value systems.

That notion of commitment takes us to existentialism, one of the most influential philosophies of the twentieth century, and to its foremost philosopher, Jean-Paul Sartre. Sartre's historical moment was not only the period between the two world wars, but also the broader era that witnessed the disappearance of religion from the areas of natural sciences, metaphysics, and ethics after the interventions mainly of Charles Darwin, Marx, Nietzsche, and Sigmund Freud. In that context, also to distinguish himself from thinkers like Kierkegaard, Sartre called his philosophy "atheistic existentialism," and claimed that the general premise of various existentialisms that existence precedes essence found its fullest expression in his own work. In the 1946 essay, *Existentialism is a Humanism,* Sartre discusses the fundamental attributes of a paper knife to illustrate what he means by that premise. An object such as a paper knife is designed and manufactured by someone in a certain way and with a definite purpose. The manufacturer of that object cannot have produced it without knowing what end it would serve. "Let us say, therefore," writes Sartre, "the essence of the paper knife—that is, the sum of formulas and properties that enable it to be produced and defined—precedes its existence. Thus, the presence before my eyes of that paper knife or book is determined" (21).

Atheistic existentialism maintains that there is no divine manufacturer in whose mind humans' essential characteristics and purposes may have been preconceived. Sartre writes that "if God does not exist, there is at least one being in whom existence precedes essence—a being whose existence comes before its essence, a being who exists before he can be defined by any concept of it" (22). That being is called human or human reality. Since human has no nature or essence as there is not a divine artisan to conceive of it, all that is known from the viewpoint of human reality is that the world is and we exist in it, but what or who we are is not pregiven to us. A tool such as a wristwatch has a predefined essence; it is made to show the time, and if it lacks the mechanism to fulfill that purpose, it cannot have the identity of a wristwatch at all. We do not have such a determinate function; nor can we tell what essential role makes human what it is. Instead, we are constantly obliged to choose what we are or what we will become; we are obliged to define ourselves by our successive choices and courses of action. As Sartre asserts, "[m]an is not only that which he conceives himself to be, but also that which he wills himself to be, and since he conceives of himself only after he exists . . . *man is nothing other than what he makes of himself*" (22).

In the absence of any unchanging, reliable divine, or objective set of values that define what we are or how we must act, we are free to choose who we are and what we ought to do in concrete situations. Through making choices (not making choices is a kind of choosing too), we project ourselves into the future in line with our ever-conscious conception as to what we will ourselves to become. Nothing exists before that free choice of ours and our sustained commitment to it. "Man is responsible for what he is," says Sartre, and the "first effect of existentialism is to make every man conscious of what he is, and to make him solely responsible for his own existence" (23). Abandonment is the name of the experience wherein we come to terms with the fact that there is not a hypothetical power to draw us to a moral path. Sartre states that humans are not defined *a priori* but by their actions, and that their destiny lies within themselves. "Consequently we are dealing with a morality of action and commitment" (40). However, the recognition that I choose my own actions in concrete situations and commit myself to those choices, and that I am free to choose from among a variety of possible courses of actions, places on me an enormous responsibility and anguish. I am always compelled to decide the meaning of my own being with no reference to my allegedly fixed circumstances, character, or any other deterministic factor. I am responsible to choose without denying my freedom; I am always free to decide what I am in the present or will become in the future; in this particular sense, I am "condemned to be free" (29).

Overwhelmed by the anguishing awareness of their abandonment, of the obligation to choose for themselves a course of action and to create an ethics of commitment, most people negate their fundamental freedom. They develop the attitude of *mauvaise foi* (bad faith) in an utterly self-objectifying and self-deceiving way, and such people "can be judged only on the grounds of strict authenticity" (49). Coming to terms with the ontological fact that our existence is remarkably pointless and that we must create our

own meaning through our deeds and commitments is the precondition for authenticity. So is bearing the responsibility for our choices, which must take individual and collective freedom as their end. As Sartre emphasizes in his 1943 magnum opus *Being and Nothingness,* the fact that humans are often inclined to deny their freedom by objectifying themselves "does not mean that we cannot radically escape bad faith. But this supposes a self-recovery of being which was previously corrupted. This self-recovery we shall call authenticity" (70). Accordingly, it should be possible for humans to live in good faith, authentically, by assuming the full burden of their freedom and the responsibility for choosing and making themselves into what or who they would rather be.

(Post-)Postmodernity and the Possibility of Authenticity-Thinking

Up to this point, we have overviewed some of the major representatives of authenticity-thinking in modernity. But, as noted before, that condition called modernity has morphed into something different in the post-WWII era, in the Cold War period, or during the passage from industrial to finance capitalism first in the West and then the world over with the collapse of the Socialist Block. Again, the present study has no intention to valorize any of the formulations of authenticity that have been addressed so far. Instead of deciding which notion is better than the others, it seems more interesting and productive to think about the fact that throughout the history of modernity, there did exist favorable circumstances or conditions of possibility for authenticity-thinking, which does not seem to be the case anymore. We would like to suggest that one such condition of possibility can be designated as the presence of an outside, real or imaginary. Second, that was accompanied by the element of distance, be it literal (spatial and/or temporal) or metaphorical. And last, all this went hand in hand with the existence of the Other, external or internal to the subject.

What enabled Rousseau to imagine the "savage man" that is one with his unspoiled nature as well as his quasi-communistic society was the colonial encounters Europe had started to have first with the South American indigenous tribes mostly in the early sixteenth century—and Montaigne is a glaring precursor to Rousseau in this context. These figures, the "savage man" and his nonalienated community, constituted the Other and the outside to the forms of subjectivity and sociality Rousseau wished to radically transform. Nietzsche's promotion of the figure of "the genius" as inhabiting the outside of the calculating, leveling, soulless European culture shows a similar imagining of distance. Or, one may argue, the bohemian artistic and literary cultures (or, countercultures) of the second half of the nineteenth century, as well as the Oriental sources of wisdom (Zoroastrianism or Zarathustra himself, for instance), were veritable figurations of an outside and distance in Nietzsche. Besides, in that period, nature itself, the domain of non-urban, non-industrial life, remained relatively intact until capital colonized it entirely. The three conditions of possibility noted above can be pointed out in Sartre's case, too. The recovery of good faith or authenticity requires getting outside one's self-objectified state by becoming other to oneself, by negating one's present, inauthentic existence through

critical self-reflection and self-distancing. On a different level, Sartre could draw on several socialist experiments as the Other of his capitalist, bourgeois society. For him, the latter signified a gigantic mechanism of objectification and alienation (as mentioned, Marx had diagnosed this about a century before Sartre), and the presence of such political alternatives enabled him to conceptualize acts and choices committed to human freedom and authenticity in social and political terms, as well.

These conditions of possibility are severely and irreversibly undermined in postmodernity. In his seminal study *Postmodernism, or, the Logic of Late Capitalism*, cultural and literary theorist Fredric Jameson argues that the postmodern condition is characterized by certain constitutive features, three of which are "a new depthlessness," "a consequent weakening of historicity," and "a whole new type of emotional ground tone" (6–25). According to this theory, in postmodernity, various depth models of the previous era come to be abolished or debunked both in critical thinking and in the experiences of individuals living in "a whole new culture of the image or the simulacrum" (6). These abolished depth models include the binaries of inside and outside, essence and appearance, authenticity and inauthenticity, and latent and manifest, which have been used extensively in fields such as cultural and literary criticism, political theory, existential philosophy, and psychoanalysis. Moreover, the sense of historicity gets eroded in our perception of History (written with a capital "H") and in our experience of private temporality. As a result of this weakening of historicity, we fail to grasp history as a more or less meaningful, coherent flow, nor can we make a coherent sense of our lives as the structured, unified unfolding of a life span and the flourishing of a self.

The last point about postmodernity that must be explained is the emergence of what Jameson calls "a whole new type of emotional ground tone" (6). This emotional tone is determined by a certain "waning of affect" (10) resulting from the disappearance of the depth model of personality or subjectivity, which has a significant impact on our relationship with ourselves. It is no longer the case that we feel alienated from a core, deep subjectivity that colors our perception of ourselves; nor do we seek anymore to reconnect with such an essence. This situation signals a kind of fragmentation and exhaustion far more severe than the separation from oneself that was experienced before. In modernity, it was presumably possible to abolish alienation through the kinds of strategies of conversion to authenticity proposed by Nietzsche or Sartre (and also Kierkegaard). In postmodernity, with the waning of affect, such existential commitments become impracticable as we feel thoroughly empty and fragmented rather than alienated. It must be obvious that the depthlessness or flatness experienced in postmodernity, and the disorientation felt in relationship to history and to one's subjective temporality, do not yield favorable circumstances for the imagining of authenticity in the way it has been discussed above.

Jameson notes that all these characteristic features of postmodernity are interlinked with "a whole new technology, which is itself a figure for a whole new

economic world system" (6). This new economic system is known as globalism or neoliberal capitalism with its new models of work and total integration of culture and economy. The technology Jameson evokes is now called ICTs—Information and Communication Technologies. In his now classic book *New Media,* Terry Flew designates six main attributes of ICTs and new media, which are digitalization, convergence, interactivity, virtual reality, globalization, and networks (17–30). It is possible to assert that these attributes have had a significant impact on the fate of authenticity-thinking in postmodernity as they denote the widespread integration of the technologies and processes that have given way to the global establishment of the Web 2.0 together with its blogs, Wikis, social media channels, digital economic activities, and virtual communities as the pervasive ecosystems of lived experience and subjectivity (76–162).

A more recent study building on Jameson's work, *Post-postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Just-in-Time Capitalism* by Jeffrey Nealon underlines that the new economy pointed out by the former has now created "a world of cyber-work, e-commerce, wireless communication, distance education, virtual markets, home health care, and . . . flexibly specialized labor" (39). These decentered, diffused, network-type structures signify the dismantling of their older counterparts such as "the office, the school, the bank, the trading floor, the mall, the hospital, the factory," with the last being the paradigmatic template for the organization of modern society (40). One may recall that although it was patterned on the factory, in the social structure of modernity certain depth models like inside and outside, and distances such as the one between work and leisure, were still in place. Work was not all-encompassing as it is now in (post-)postmodernity; there used to be such a thing as free, personal time as individuals were not expected to be accessible practically round the clock in the name of productivity. Parallel to this, home was not an extension of workplace or office, and we were more likely to be connected to our minds in a relatively unmediated way as they were not entirely occupied and controlled by the images, spectacles, and communication contents of the connected world. Similarly, in modernity, physical distances and cultural outsides were not yet eliminated or blurred by globalization and ICTs.

Besides, in the contemporary world, there is nothing outside culture since every aspect of our collective and subjective lives has been subsumed under the logic of money, which means that today nothing can escape commodification. This new economy produces not only material goods but also social relations, communication, languages, images, lifestyles, subjectivities—in short, it produces culture itself, and the latter in its turn produces capital (200). In this process, producer and consumer become identical; we produce and consume culture concurrently within the coordinates and mechanisms provided by present-day capitalism. In this model, we are three things at once—the producer, the consumer, and the commodity itself. As Nealon observes, the universal imperatives of the current system "ask you to produce yourself through consumption, which doesn't separate you from who you are 'authentically,' but is your only means to make yourself, period" (200). Both the dominant economic and social system, and those

willing to resist it look to the same dynamic for more profit and more self-creativity respectively, and that is the total process of commodification and consumption.

What happens to authenticity-thinking in (post-)postmodernity bearing the abovementioned characteristics? Where can authenticity as an ethical ideal be located in such circumstances? Or, in what shape and form can it be perceived in a world where the loss of depth, selfhood, and temporality holds sway? Among possible others, one answer to these questions would certainly be found in the product description of the pair of jeans with which this article opened. The authenticity marketed through that blurb is first related to the brand identity—these jeans are a pair of genuine "X" brand jeans and that indicates a kind of value in itself. The subjective gain associated with the acquisition of that identity and value is conveyed through the simulated visible effects of an intense, committed, rich, that is, a genuine or authentic life reflected by the worn-in, shaded, abraded, repaired look of the advertised product.

Digimodernism and the Autistic Subject

Before concluding, we would like to look into another answer which shows in a distorted form some of the main attributes of authenticity as an ethical objective theorized in modernity. This example is presented in Alan Kirby's striking examination of contemporary society titled *Digimodernism,* and it is epitomized by the figure of the autistic—not the alienated individual seeking to attain a non-alienated existence, nor the older kind of self in search of authenticity through a resilient commitment to a life-project as its paradigm of meaning, but the contemporary subject that displays or practices many of the major symptoms of that neurological disorder called clinical autism. Kirby argues that ours is an age of autism in that "we inhabit a society uniquely adapted to the frequent ascription of autism and the identification of autistic traits" (227–28). However, Kirby does not mean to suggest that autism is merely a social construct or that it does not exist clinically. He rather emphasizes that there is a massive increase in the number of individuals unwillingly developing autistic traits to be able to bear the structure, the workings, and the demands of (post-)postmodern society which he calls digimodernity.

The widespread use of new technologies and media such as PCs, the Internet, smartphones, and online video games has resulted in a situation where individuals can operate in different worlds or systems of reality without engaging in social interactions—a state qualified as "systemic desocialization." Kirby maintains that here is a pattern that extends to the "real world" as a "diminished capacity to relate to or to 'read' other people, a preference for solitude and a loss of empathy;" moreover, "such technologies . . . do little to stimulate language acquisition" (230). To this, it seems possible to add the paralysis of self-expression via language and the diminishing of communication skills, verbal and non-verbal alike. All in all, this condition reflects one major characteristic of autism that is described as "mindblindness," the lack of skills to view the world through the eyes of the Other (229)—something that did not previously have such prevalence and was not at all

valorized in the older theories of authenticity. What we face now is a state in which socialization and communication are seriously damaged, despite all those social media platforms as well as virtual interaction channels universalized first by Web 2.0 and vastly improved afterward.

In Kirby's words, autism "is produced as the exact contrary of hegemonic social forces in a variety of contexts" (231), and at this point, we may briefly examine some traits of contemporary society producing autistic behavioral and cognitive patterns as its diametrical opposite. One of them is the "shift toward global overpopulation, ever-growing urbanization, the spread of constant formal and informal surveillance, the disappearance of wilderness and the near-impossibility of solitude; this not as a fact but as a perception or experience, as noise pollution and light pollution" (231). Against this engulfing experience, the individual living autistically requires solitude and silence; they seek to remain free from any kind of interference, and they value physical integrity as an emblem of the rejection of that condition. Within this framework, it seems possible to couple physical integrity with temporal and cognitive integrity, thereby suggesting a much more complete denunciation of convergence and networking in their multiple forms made possible and even mandatory by ICTs and new media.

Another such pervasive trait is about production and labor regime as it involves "the economic tendency toward ever-greater flexibility, multitasking, ad hoc arrangements, job insecurity, rapid staff turnover, the felt commercial need constantly to update, restructure, retrain" (231). As opposed to this newly dominant economic structure and mode of work, autism requires that the coordinates and punctuations, as it were, of the subject's life remain the same and its past dealings be repeated safely. Whereas the consumerist society is profoundly amnesiac and prefers short-term memory, quickly disposable lives, and rapidly changeable activities, the autistic individual operates through their deep memory retaining as many habits and lasting details as possible. And the third trait that has to be considered for the purposes of this study is "the social shift toward an ever-greater valorization of social skills, of the ability to chat and come across, to accrue popularity and self-present, toward a fetishization of gregariousness and bonding with others through various manipulations and self-betrayals" (231). In contrast to these numbing and performative forms of daily conduct deriving from popular cultural elements like the incessant gossip taking place in reality TV shows or the idolization of celebrities, the autistic subject espouses the authentic, the tangible, and in-depth knowledge versus trivia; genuine facts versus shallow opinions; and problem-solving versus useless idle talk—and one may notice here a trace of Heidegger's attack on the everydayness of modernity threatening authenticity.

Nevertheless, the qualities born by the contemporary subject displaying such autistic symptoms make them an outcast, a loser. Unlike the existentialist hero or the cultural revolutionary promoted in the modern theories of authenticity, there is nothing heroic or commendable about the present-day autistic subjects. These individuals "cannot

be seen as 'rebels' against or 'martyrs' of contemporary society because they have not chosen their profoundly difficult relationship to it" (233). By the same token, the autistic subject seems to lack the conscious resilience to commit themselves to such ethical courses of action or life-projects as the ones affirmed by Nietzsche or Sartre. Yet, to the extent that it still bears several resemblances to the major aspects of authenticity theorized in modernity, autism figures as a distorted and self-defeating form of the quest for an authentic existence and identity. That is so because it forecloses the social and communicative dimension that was required for the imagining of authenticity even when it seemed to be a profoundly personal engagement. After all, not even Nietzsche's recluse did give up writing and speaking to the society they willed to destroy and recreate based on transvalued values.

Conclusion

One could suggest that somewhere in the passage from modernity to (post-) postmodernity or digimodernity, the notion of authenticity lost its original thrust as an ethical program for the overcoming of dissimulation, alienation, and apathy, and as the will to autonomy, self-creation, and self-expression. In this particular sense, authenticity once had a utopian aspect to it, which has now been mutated into a debilitating experience and market inauthenticity. We live in a society where there is no longer an outside to capital and culture precisely because they have collapsed into each other through consumerism. Even attempted authentic-looking resistances to the system are quickly integrated into the money economy, or it is soon understood that they were produced by that system in the first place.

Like a dead star, authenticity seems to have left behind the traces of its glorious life. Or one might state that it continues to exist as a kind of zombie—it is dead and undead at the same time. Apart from its shadow-self revealed in the autistic subject, one can see the zombie-like quality of authenticity in the product description of the pair of jeans discussed before. The singularity, originality, subjective intensity, and plenitude, the sense of self-worth, and the experience of self-fashioning—all that authenticity once valorized and promised, they seem to live on in various compartments of consumerist culture in a thoroughly commodified and drained form. Authenticity, one of the most deep-seated concerns of modernity, is still around but it is not recognizable anymore except in its sheer ideological representations alongside the figure of the autistic.

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