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The Endless Mesh: Life in the Societies of Control

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Abstract: This paper analyzes the structural and conceptual transition from Michel Foucault's "disciplinary society" to Gilles Deleuze's "society of control," examining its profound implications for the social production of subjectivity in contemporary digital environments. Grounded in Foucault's formulation of discipline as a mechanism that optimizes bodies through spatial compartmentalization and discrete institutional enclosures – such as the school, factory, hospital and prison – the study explores how Deleuze reinterprets this framework in light of evolving computational infrastructures and datafication. As foundational modern institutions face a crisis of legitimacy, power shifts from fixed physical molds to continuous, fluid modulations, transforming the governance unit from the unified "individual" into the datafied "dividual" – a subject decomposed into numerical codes and algorithmic data streams. The investigation details how this mutation erodes classic modern dichotomies (interior/exterior, public/private, self/Other) as physical public spaces are sublimated into politically inert virtual non-spaces governed by platform capitalism, predictive feedback loops and automated protocols. At the macro-level, the disappearance of a dialectical "Other" hollows out traditional state sovereignty, establishing the global market as the supreme diagram of contemporary power. Finally, the paper demonstrates how the carceral network transitions from physical confinement to a psychopolitical digital panopticon. Embedded within personal devices and notification loops, digital control operates through voluntary self-quantification and continuous engagement. The society of control does not dismantle disciplinary power, but rather digitizes and intensifies it, creating an omnipresent "endless mesh" that continuously generates subjectivity across every layer of daily existence.

Keywords: algorithmic governance; digital panopticon; disciplinary power; dividual; psychopolitics; societies of control; subjectivity

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1. Introduction – From Disciplinary Enclosures to Continuous Modulation

In the early 1990s, writing for L'Autre Journal, Gilles Deleuze laid the groundwork for interpreting a new organizational era in an essay titled Postscript on the Societies of Control. This interpretation stemmed, in analytical terms, from the work developed throughout Michel Foucault's entire philosophical project – the disciplinary society. For Foucault, "discipline" is a mechanism of power that seeks to regulate human thought and behavior through subtle means; that is, discipline always involves a set of power relations that are oriented but not necessarily imposed through coercion. The primary role of disciplinary power constitutes what Foucault calls the "disciplinary society." Todd May (2006, 73), in his reconstruction of Foucault's work, proposes a clear definition of how this society functions:

Discipline, as a Foucauldian term, is more specific than a simple mechanism of behavioral control over others. It can be defined as a project concerning the optimization of the body, turning the body into an optimally regulated machine through a deconstruction of its movements into their smallest components, followed by a reconstruction of them as a highly efficient whole. However, this project is not limited only to individuals. It also affects their relationships. Discipline ensures that space is properly compartmentalized, allowing individuals to relate to each other in an optimized and efficient manner. Furthermore, proper temporal coordination must be ensured between activities, as well as within each activity. It is a process that can be applied both to bodies and to the interaction between them.

Throughout his essay, Deleuze claims to build his project upon the characterizations advanced by Foucault, seeking to address, among other themes, the rise of the forces of capital, the consequences of the Industrial Revolution and permanent technological evolution. The symbiosis between the capitalist mode of production and the Industrial Revolution allowed for accelerated economic growth, as well as the creation of spaces with the sole purpose of creating goods and services

by a salaried working class. This new working class emerged as a direct consequence of two significant changes: 1) The urbanization of the population, which abandoned the rural environment – marked by an antiquated and limited mode of production, clearly incompatible with the increasing productive needs of a population growing both quantitatively and in terms of individual needs; 2) The importation of labor and the international division of labor, which required a worldwide and total dissemination of the disciplinary organization of the body, precisely to meet a trend of productive growth that, theoretically, would be ad aeternum. This era, for Foucault, was the cradle of the modern disciplinary society, in which disciplinary institutions and forms of exerting/manipulating power worked together to permeate agents, groups and governments.

The model of the control society attempts to move beyond the need for a disciplinary space to mold bodies and power relations. For Deleuze, contemporary society is characterized by a new form of violence and manipulation of power, accompanied by a restructuring of the operational dynamics of capital. In this essay, Deleuze attempts to predict and explain the consequences of this transition. Summarily, Deleuze constructs a vision that places the disciplinary society as a composition of enclosures and molds, essentially creating a society composed of numerous institutions and clearly defined spaces with which its members interact; they are molded by that space, subsequently moving on to other spaces that also contribute to the molding of the subject. By contrast, in a society of control, there are atomized modules in which the modeling and the exertion of power are carried out in a diffuse manner, creating an illusion of freedom and agency for the subject, fostered by the absence of a central and visible platform for the exertion of power – discipline thus transforms into control.

Although Deleuze claims that his construction of a control society derives directly from the disciplinary constructions of the Foucaultian project (Deleuze 1992, 3), there is no clear analytical basis in Foucault's work that directly addresses this transition. However, this statement can be understood as an attempt to clarify what Deleuze himself would consider deficiencies in the application of the Foucaultian project to a society that may not correspond to the one about which Foucault wrote. For Deleuze (1992, 3–4, 7), the institutions that most contributed to the creation of the disciplinary society – the school, the family, the prison, the hospital, the factory – are in a profound crisis of legitimacy: "(...) that is, the progressive and dispersed installation of a new system of domination." The foundations of these institutions are at a breaking point so significant that the underlying disciplinary logics have become inefficient in the constitution of the subject. Consequently, the molding of the subject becomes diluted and fluid across all layers of the social process: "Enclosures are molds, distinct castings, but controls are a modulation, like a self-deforming cast that will continuously change from one moment to the other, or like a sieve whose mesh will transmute from point to point" (Deleuze 1992, 4). The spatial compartmentalization of the disciplinary institution transmutes into an ocean of indirect, underlying and permanent control.

This mutation in power mechanics fundamentally alters the unit of social governance itself. Where the disciplinary society operated upon the concrete, unified "individual" – assigned a signature, a physical position and a personal record within discrete enclosures – the society of control operates upon the "*dividual*" (Deleuze 1992, 5). Human subjects are decomposed into numerical codes, sample sets, biometric profiles and algorithmic data points. Control no longer requires the physical confinement of a body to extract utility; rather, it tracks, predicts and modulates the fluid data streams of the *dividual* across open networks. The password replaces the signature, just as the digital code replaces the institutional mold, establishing an administrative infrastructure that governs through continuous access regulation rather than spatial isolation.

2. The Erosion of Modern Binaries

Assuming a collapse of the foundations of disciplinary institutions, the distinction between the intra-social and the extra-social becomes diluted. This dilution is accompanied by a holistic shift in the way power delineates space during the transition from (disciplinary) modernity to (controlling) postmodernity. On a macro level – such as that of Nation-State sovereignty – power is exercised over a defined territory (whether legitimately recognized or not) that is in constant contact with the exterior of that territory (other Nation-States). For modern social theorists such as Rousseau and Hobbes, civil order is limited to an interior space, which contrasts with the exterior space of the natural order (the state of nature). On a cultural level, the anthropological analysis of so-called "primitive" societies normally corresponds to an "Other" that defines the boundaries of civil society through a dialectical relationship (Hardt 1998). In this context, the process of "modernization" of any society is intimately connected to an internalization of the Other – that is, the cementing of the amalgamation of the characteristics of the state of nature into a civil state recognized by its constituent agents.

However, in the postmodern world, the dialectic between the interior and the exterior, between civil order and natural order, has become practically non-existent. Phenomena and forces exhibit an artificiality and hybridity unrecognizable to the moderns, transmuting into a game of relations, degrees, and intensities. The exterior and extra-social plane has also declined regarding the relationship between public space and private space. The public spaces of modern society – which, for liberal political theory, constitute the epicenter of analysis – are in decline, and their dissipation is expected during the development of the postmodern world. The liberal tradition positions the subject as an entity that differentiates between private space (one's home, for example) and public space (the school, the workplace, the hospital, etc.). The exterior (public space) is the *locus* of politics *par excellence*, where the subject renounces their private sphere and is exposed to others for the purpose of being recognized as a participating agent in the sociopolitical system.

Nevertheless, in postmodernity, public space increasingly becomes a privatizable space. The urban landscape is currently undergoing a transposition from the common square and the public encounter to an enclosed space filled with highways, gated communities and shopping malls. There is a growing tendency for the architecture and urban planning of large cities to be exclusionary to generalized public access and for every interaction (outside of a compartmentalized space) between its constituent agents to be marked by a near mere randomness that is temporally irregular. This, in turn, creates a primacy for interior and isolated spaces that mold the possibilities of interaction. Public space has been gradually privatized, reaching a breaking point in postmodernity that suggests any analysis attempting to understand the organization of society using the public space/private space dialectic is doomed to failure. If the public space of modern liberal politics has been disappearing, then the politicized character of the modern world disappears with it.

For authors such as Guy Debord (1994), postmodern society is a society of the spectacle which, currently, takes place in a virtual space or, more precisely, within a politically inert non-space. The images, institutions, and structures that bind the social fabric are – when applied to the postmodern virtual medium – an artificial and diffuse projection that blurs the barriers between the subject's interior and exterior, the natural and the social, and the private and the public. The liberal notion of "public space" – the exterior space where the subject acts in relation to others – has been simultaneously universalized (through a panoptic surveillance of norms, regulations, laws, etc.) and sublimated within the virtual spaces of the spectacle. The end of public space corresponds, therefore, to the end of the liberal conception of sociopolitical space.

In contemporary digital architecture, this sublimation of public space into virtual non-spaces manifests through platform capitalism and algorithmic governance. The continuous modulation that Deleuze anticipated is operationalized via platform interfaces – such as algorithmic feed curation, predictive engagement loops and automated labor tracking – which translate social, political and economic interactions into quantifiable data streams (Srnicek 2017; Zuboff 2019). Power no longer restricts access to space; instead, it optimizes the user's trajectory within digital non-spaces by anticipating desires and continuously adjusting choices in real time. The illusion of agency is thus intensified: the subject experiences digital platforms as arenas of personal choice and autonomous self-expression, remaining blind to the underlying algorithmic protocols (Galloway 2004) that enforce behavioral compliance and monetize every digital trace.

3. Geopolitics, Late Capitalism and the Market as Diagram

From a macro perspective – that is, within the scope of the contemporary world order – exterior space has also disappeared. When liberal authors such as Francis Fukuyama (1992) assert that the contemporary historical moment is marked by the end of history[1], the argument is based on the proposal that the era of great historical conflicts, characterized by clearly defined spaces or blocs, has come to its end. Consequently, the concept of "sovereign power" is hollowed out, given that there is no longer a hostility toward a visible "Other," but rather a ramification of countless conflicts and confrontations moving toward the (re)construction of a world order that is simultaneously homogeneous and self-replicating. What is at stake here is not whether this world order is that of Western liberal democracy, nor even whether, in fact, a homogenization in favor of a specific civilizational pillar exists – something that was, is, and will continue to be highly disputed within academic debate. It is, above all, the admission that the era of imperialism, inter-imperialism and anti-imperialism has ended, considering that these phenomena, in themselves, have already been deconstructed into a multitude of micro-phenomena acting independently of the phenomenon from which they originated.

All conflicts are now simultaneously local and global: a civil war will always find extra-state agents among its belligerents; police action against protesters will have worldwide ramifications; and the actors reacting to these events encompass others ranging from the common citizen to international organizations. These phenomena are no longer the center of modernity; they manifest merely as ramifications of a tendentially indefinite origin. In contrast to the Cold War world order – where conflicts in the "exterior" space were marked by two opposing blocs and where internal conflicts respected the same nature (all members opposing the actions of each bloc were seen as belonging to the other) – postmodernity dilutes all oppositions. It was this "Other" that guaranteed coherence and definition to the modern world and its conflicts. The binaries that defined the modern era are, therefore, more indistinguishable than ever. The "Other" that delimited the space of the subject (and the sovereign) has become fractured and indistinct. The current moment is characterized by an "Other" that is not visible and in which internal and external opponents permeate all layers of sociopolitical existence. The end of modernity has given way to a proliferation of numerous epicenters of indefinite crises within a society of control, which limits itself to defining localized spaces and the contingent norms and terms associated with them.

Finally, the triumph of late-state capitalism is the primary manifestation of the postmodern moment. Market capitalism, deriving from its immanent characteristics, has as its main prerogative the blurring of internal and external space. Subjects excluded from the global logic of the market are actively detrimental to the smooth functioning of the market, which prospers when the "Other" is transformed into an "I"; profits are generated only when there is contact, exchange and trade. The realization of a truly global market is the zenith of this trend, whereby, in its ideal form, no Other exists: the entire world must pay vassalage to the logics of capital. Just as Foucault (1977) recognized the Panopticon[2] as the diagram of modern power and the disciplinary society, the global market serves as the diagram for relations between sovereign powers and, simultaneously, for the internal dynamics of the society of control. Postmodernity represents an era in which the main phenomena lack legitimacy and identity due to the absence of an "Other" who might serve as a dialectical dance partner. Power (and its exertion) lacks a *locus* – it is everywhere, but simultaneously, it is also invisible and indivisible.

4. The Diffuse Production of Subjectivity and the Digital Panopticon

The progressive absence of a clear distinction between the interior and exterior planes during the transition from modern to postmodern society carries significant implications for the social production of subjectivity. One of the main theses of modern social theory regarding institutional analysis is that subjectivity is not something immanent or pre-conceived, but rather (at least partially) conceived within the field of social forces (Hardt 1998). The subjectivities that interact on the social plane are, in themselves, substantially created by the very society in which they are embedded. In this sense, these institutional analyses have progressively hollowed out any notion of pre-social subjectivity; the production of subjectivity is thus deeply rooted in the daily functioning of the primary social institutions of the subject's life, such as the family, the factory, the school or the prison.

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1 The "End of History" is the philosophical claim that with the global triumph of liberal democracy and free-market capitalism, the ideological evolution of humanity has reached its final form, resolving the great dialectical struggles of the past.

2 The Panopticon is a spatial and psychological mechanism of power that uses permanent visibility to induce a state of conscious and permanent subjection, causing individuals to internalize the "gaze" of authority and regulate their own behavior without the need for physical force.

It is essential to highlight two vital aspects of the production of subjectivity. First, subjectivity cannot be understood as something fixed or assumed. It is a process of constant generation and reproduction, which can even be easily identified in the most seemingly innocuous aspects of our lives. The social relationship between a student and their teacher, for example, creates a subjectivity from the practices, rituals and socializations that occur between the agents. In an almost reflexive manner, the subject is constituted and molded by their own actions. Second, the institutions of modernity provide discrete locations (such as the home, the chapel, the classroom, etc.) in which subjectivity is produced. The numerous institutions of modernity should be understood as an archipelago of factories of subjectivity (an idea Deleuze inherits from Foucault's concept of the "carceral archipelago" [Foucault 1977]). Throughout the life of any member of a modern society, it is expected that they traverse each of these institutions in an almost linear fashion (from the home to the school, from the school to the factory/company, among others), being molded at every stage of this constitutive process: "The individual never ceases passing from one closed environment to another, each having its own laws" (Deleuze 1992, 3). Each institution has its own set of rules, norms, and regulations that subjectify the experience of the subject. Nevertheless, the subject is (partially) protected from the inputs of other institutions – i.e., if an individual is in school, they are not being molded by the "family" institution in the same way they would be if they were in a "regime of exclusivity" with that same institution. The concrete separation between interior and exterior space is vital for the functioning of the institutions of modernity, as the delimitation of disciplinary space creates a stable environment for the exertion of power over the subject.

The transition to postmodern society maintains the creation of subjectivity within a space, perhaps even more intensely. The social construction of a reality becomes even more accelerated, coming to be recognized as entirely artificial. This transition, therefore, becomes not a dichotomic opposition, but rather an acceleration of subjectifying processes. The crisis of contemporary institutions has, as an immediate consequence, the dissipation of clear spaces of subjectification, allowing it to occur throughout the entire social sphere, rather than only affecting the spaces where discipline can be exercised (the school, the prison, among others). Consequently, interior space becomes indistinguishable from exterior space, affecting the way certain institutions legitimize themselves before the *corpus social*. The crisis of the concept of the "nuclear family," for example, cannot be understood as a weakening of the patriarchal narrative – on the contrary, discourses and practices related to "traditional values" are increasingly diffused throughout the social spheres of our daily lives. On the other hand, the crisis of the prison system – a target of active contestation by various segments of society – has manifested in a new social organization in which its immanent discourses and practices have spread, less visibly, to other fields of our daily existence. Discipline, therefore, becomes a constant agent in the subject's life, no longer conditioned to spaces where its exercise is expected *a priori*.

With the advent of complex computing and data massified harvesting, the production of subjectivity transitions from physical panopticism to a psychopolitical digital panopticon (Han 2017). Personal devices and notification feedback loops transform the intimate daily life of the subject into an uninterrupted factory of subjectivity. Rather than exerting external coercion through physical walls, digital control operates through internal psychopolitical motivation, encouraging subjects to voluntarily self-quantify and optimize their daily routines. The carceral network thus achieves its ultimate realization not by locking the subject inside an institution, but by embedding the institutional logic within the personal device, rendering the mesh of power completely seamless and inescapable. The subject continues to be molded in the school or the prison, but without the need to be physically present in either of these spaces. In their crisis of legitimacy, institutions disseminate but do not break, making their functioning more extensive and, possibly, even more intense. Deleuze's society of control corresponds, therefore, to an intensification and generalization of disciplinary power, acting beyond its original spaces in a corrupted form, yet always panoptically present for the subject.

5. Conclusion

The historical mutation from Foucault's disciplinary enclosures to Deleuze's societies of control should not be understood as a liberation from power, but rather as its fluid redistribution and relentless intensification. As the foundational institutions of modernity – the school, the factory, the hospital and the prison – suffer a profound crisis of legitimacy, power unbinds itself from physical walls to lodge directly within the digital infrastructures and continuous feedback loops of daily existence. In this emerging paradigm, governance no longer requires the physical confinement of a unified body to extract utility out of its subjects. Instead, it operates through the systemic decomposition of the subject into datafied "dividuals" – governed continuously through digital and immaterial mechanisms.

This structural shift fundamentally redefines the contemporary sociopolitical landscape. The collapse of classical modern binaries – interior and exterior, private and public, self and Other – has sublimated the traditional public square into politically inert virtual non-spaces. Within these spaces, managed by platform capitalism, the illusion of individual choice and agency masks an underlying architecture of behavioral compliance. At the macro-level, the disappearance of a visible, dialectical "Other" hollows out traditional state sovereignty, establishing the global market as the ultimate diagram of contemporary power. Power is no longer localized in a visible center or top-down sovereign; it has become indivisible, invisible and omnipresent.

In this light, the production of subjectivity reaches its most impactful phase. Moving beyond physical panopticism, contemporary control embeds itself within our personal devices, transforming the most intimate corners of human life into an uninterrupted factory of subjectivity. Under the guise of voluntary self-quantification and constant connectivity, the psychopolitical digital panopticon turns personal desire into a subtle mechanism of compliance. Disciplinary power does not vanish; it expands and permeates the entire social fabric, wrapping human existence within an omnipresent mesh. Navigating this reality requires recognizing that our digital tools do not merely facilitate interaction – they continuously produce who we are, shaping the very boundaries of thought, agency and resistance in the contemporary world.

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