"Self-optimization": a scandalous type.

On a trendy term that even academia uses in an emotionalized and functionalized way – as happened with "Waldsterben" (forest dieback) some years ago.

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In the 1980s, the concerned public in German-speaking countries believed that large parts of "our" forests would simply die off in the coming decades. The new German word "Waldsterben" to describe catastrophic forest dieback joined the ranks of "Angst" (deep anxiety or dread) and "Weltschmerz" (world-weariness) as a loanword in English and French. When the disaster failed to materialize, it was just what skeptics had been waiting for. Today, conservationists prefer to use more reserved phrasing, such as "new forms of forest damage".

Now, for a scene change: A university janitor recently said to me in passing: "We still need to optimize the distribution of space." Nowadays, it seems that everyone is talking about "optimization". Derived from the Latin term for "the best", the word "optimum" now refers to the best possible situation, the most favorable result in the given circumstances. However, because circumstances in everyday life are always open to debate, no one knows exactly what the optimum is. "There's more we can do", we might say colloquially. In such contexts, optimization is typically used to refer to something unspectacular. My computer "optimizes" at the end of a backup and describes the same process quite plainly as "cleaning up" in another menu – but "optimization" sounds trendier.

The term "optimum" only takes on a dramatic meaning if we interpret it to mean the maximum performance that can be achieved through existential effort. Then, "optimization" embodies the glittering chimera that is the promise of perfection, itself a (naive) utopia championed in the times of the Enlightenment. Today, advertising and coaching are the favored habitats of this optimization – of the fervent appeal to make "self-optimization" our aim in life. Too often, however, these industries earn their daily bread through empty promises or self-legitimizing platitudes rather than realism.

In stark contrast to positive "self-optimization", the last few years have seen the concept evolve into a fashionable term of abuse in journalistic articles critiquing modern society. Here, the term refers to a race to the bottom rather than the pursuit of perfection. It is used to lambaste the adverse effects of an unchecked meritocracy, a society focused on competition and enhancement, where everyone must constantly strive for perfection: at work, in sport, in relationships, and in their appearance. Above all, the new tracking technologies that quantify and document our lives are seen as the epitome of self-optimization's ills.

Such articles derive theoretical backing from a thought collective within the humanities that invokes Michel Foucault and exercises a certain discursive hegemony. Its proponents see self-optimization as a never-ending, extrinsic – and therefore governmental – form of compulsion by which modern societies coerce the individual to work "voluntarily" and relentlessly to improve themselves using technolo-

gies of the self, to strive for a goal that can never be achieved. Some of the researchers attribute this to post-Fordism or neoliberalism as the front to this drive – and point, specifically, to fitness apps. "Self-optimization" is the predominant model for interpreting modern phenomena such as the measuring and tracking of our own bodies and everyday lives.

Inasmuch as the concept of self-optimization could be useful in analyzing contemporary culture, the term has also been stripped of all nuance. For too long, I have searched in vain for authors who actually take the concept of self-optimization seriously. By that, I do not mean its rigid definition, but rather the objective efforts to explore its meaning and analytical scope. What interpretation of "optimum" – from which it is derived – does the term embody? The absolute best or the best possible outcome? In what circumstances? Where, how, and by whom is the optimum described? I suspect that there is no analytical interest in such questions. Optimization remains similarly undefined in the self-optimization of academia and can therefore be emotionalized and functionalized in the same way as the everyday cliché. Maybe the term is even deliberately used as a vague superlative because it sounds more sensational than mere "improvement". If the term were precisely defined and subjected to empirical analysis, it may well lose some of its notoriety as a dystopian – that is, anti-utopian – and never-ending concept, which serves to underpin a cultural pessimism and skepticism of technology that is sometimes subtle and sometimes explicit.

Max Weber drew a distinction between the "real type" and the "ideal type". The ideal type brings together the typical characteristics of a phenomenon in an extreme, exaggerated way. It creates a model to aid understanding. However, it must not be mistaken for a real type. Behind "self-optimization", I suspect, lies a third possibility, which could be described as a "scandalous type". This takes the developments presaged by the ideal type as a starting point and blends them with a current diagnosis based on extreme examples. The scandalous type is therefore the worst-case scenario transplanted onto the present situation. It causes the latter to seem, either subtly or explicitly, scandalous.

The scandalous type is fond of the deductive method. It is simultaneously a starting point and a preordained outcome. Selected examples confirm the assumptions. No thought is given to the possibility of falsification, nor is an attempt made to identify nuances, variants, alternative explanations or counterexamples. As a cultural anthropologist, I am fond of the opposite approach: the inductive method. This

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starts with an example. It asks questions and seeks out answers. The opposite is conceivable. Variants and alternatives are revealed by studying individual examples. The meanings and functions multiply. Those who use "self-optimization" as a sensationalist cliché evoke an extreme situation in which people unconditionally submit to the smartwatch on their wrist, quantifying and documenting everything, struggling from one personal best to another in a quest to emulate extrinsic ideals.

How many people do you know who actually adopt this puppet-like behavior, measuring every step, every calorie, every emotion, their pulse, blood pressure, and blood sugar level with a view to constantly bettering themselves? There may be a few cases. However, I know lots of people who have tried small self-tests using trackers and subsequently given up on them. They either get bored after a trial period or dismiss them as just a bit of fun. I also know people who use tracking productively from time to time and decide for themselves how seriously or lightly to take it. People who want to learn more about themselves, who want to engage with themselves – Foucault also had these people in mind with his concept of technologies of the self.

Thought collectives can facilitate or impede intellectual scrutiny in equal measure. For me, self-optimization has become a term that hampers understanding by resorting to "scandalmongering". It may well be just what the skeptics of critical self-optimization theory have been waiting for – exactly as once happened with "Waldsterben". ∎

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