# Chapter 5: Social networks and serendipitous desire

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On the TED Talk stage, an illuminated figure pierces the darkness. Psychotherapist Meg Jay is delivering her lecture, 'Why 30 is Not the New 20.' When starting out as a clinical psychology PhD student, Jay recounts, she was initially relieved that her first client was a woman in her twenties who wanted to talk about 'guy problems'—surely an easy case to handle. Soon, however, she realised that she hadn't handled it. She had been too swayed by her patient's own narrative, that '30 is the new 20'—that it was okay to kill time in an unfulfilling relationship, to remain undecided about one's career path, and to procrastinate on major life decisions, because (so the common wisdom went) all these things happened later in life nowadays. Jay counters the tendency to trivialise one's twenties as if they were part of an extended childhood, urging twentysomethings to make the most of their defining decade.[1] First, she advises, 'forget about having an identity crisis and get some identity capital. By identity capital, I mean do something that adds value to who you are. Do something that's an investment in who you might want to be next.' Secondly, 'the urban tribe is overrated. Best friends are great for giving rides to the airport, but twentysomethings who huddle together with like-minded peers limit who they know, what they know, how they think, how they speak, and where they work.' Opportunities 'almost always come from outside the inner circle. New things come from what are called our weak ties: our friends of friends of friends.' And finally: 'the time to start picking your family is now;' even though, on average, people settle down in committed relationships later than they used to, the best time to work on your marriage or long-term partnership is before you have one. This advice can profoundly change one's course in life—as it did for Jay's client Emma.

At 25, Emma was in a bad relationship with a boyfriend she lived with because it was cheaper than living alone. She wanted to work in art or museums, but she wasn't sure, so she continued waiting tables. Jay encouraged Emma to look through the list of contacts in her address book, where she found a former roommate's cousin in another city who worked in a museum; this contact helped her get a job there. Moving cities to take the job gave her a

reason to end her unfulfilling relationship. The move set her on a fulfilling career path, and through her new life, she found a far more suitable partner, to whom she is now happily married. 'Twentysomethings,' Jay opines, 'are like airplanes just leaving LAX, bound for somewhere west. Right after take-off, a slight change in course is the difference between landing in Alaska or Fiji. Likewise, at 21, or 25, or even 29, one good conversation, one good break, one good TED talk can have an enormous effect across years, and even generations to come.'[2]

Jay's TED talk has been viewed over 11 million times online and has 'hit a nerve' with viewers, garnering both high praise and heavy criticism. Critics have questioned whether Jay draws enough attention to class privilege as a key source of opportunity for twentysomethings (since those with more valuable 'weak ties' in their social networks are bound to receive better opportunities), and whether she makes heteronormative assumptions about what adults ought to want. (Jay has defended herself against both charges, arguing that weak ties are important for people of all economic backgrounds, and that her advice holds for anyone wanting a long-term partnership, no matter their sexual orientation.)[3] On TED—the American conferencing and media platform that disseminates research talks to a wide audience with the tagline 'ideas worth spreading'—her talk reaches millions. Yet it also, perhaps unwittingly, contributes to TED's rather sensationalised conception of research impact—its reinforcement of the assumption that research must be inspiring, uplifting, entertaining, and linked to a narrative of personal growth in order to count.[4] But let us think through and with this talk, in all its sensationalism, as a poignant staging of self-actualisation for a wide audience, at a turning point in how social networks are instrumentalised and understood.

Jay's former client Emma was leafing through an address book, filled out by hand; but Jay's talk, delivered in 2013, lands squarely in the social media age, when hand-written address books have largely given way to smartphone contact lists, online friends, and followers. For anyone on social media, desire must navigate relentlessly mapped social networks. Social media provides seemingly endless access to social contacts, and, thus, an abundant (if strange and strangely exhausted) sense of social possibility and potential. Potential dates scroll by, by the dozen; 'friend counts' reach into the hundreds and thousands. *There are so many people to choose from*. On the other hand, in a moment of climate crisis, wage stagnation, increasing wealth inequality, and widespread economic dysfunction, a pervasive sense of diminished potential (at once personal, social, economic, and ecological) prevails. Subjects encounter a world of social networks that invites participation by

promising that one can turbo-charge one's contacts. Yet late-neoliberal desire must also reckon with an erosion of the landscape of what-could-be-desired, a world in which many western subjects know that their life and career prospects will not be as good as their parents' might have been.[5] At this critical juncture, what might narratives of 'social network self-help' tell us about how understandings of desire shift within these new social and ecological parameters for potential? What does 'self-actualisation'—that elusive object of self-help, accessed through social networks—look like in a moment of persistently inflated, yet broadly diminished potentials?

Jay's talk, I argue, articulates an imagery and logic of *life paths,* which is fundamental to how understandings of desire are shifting in this late-neoliberal moment. In a landscape of abundant 'bumps in the road,' a semi-flexible imagery of desired life trajectories takes hold. Desire comes to be recoded according to the temporal, narrative, and proprietary category of the *life-path*: one's own, singular trajectory through the challenges of 'manifesting' one's family, career, or 'best life.' The desire to connect with others and discover potential steers and actualises the life-path. Its residue is 'identity capital,' as Jay puts it—investments in what one would like to become next, which have *left their mark* on the subject. As a much-replayed, theatrical moment of staging self-help for a wide audience, Jay's aviation-inflected life path imagery—her interest in supporting the actualisation of a meaningful and productive life trajectory—answers to the exhaustion of desire in a moment of widespread social death coinciding with hyped-up capitalisation on 'the social.' Like those who hedge financial portfolios, Jay's addressees are called to actualise their life paths by happy accidents that accrue around who-knows-what edge of their social networks. The life path imagery that Jay proffers (which echoes many other depictions of the late-neoliberal life path) unwittingly envisions serendipity itself as something whose value can be expropriated and effectively managed, through social networks. One can self-actualise by harnessing serendipity: that is, by learning to *seek out what one wants*—and thus become who one desires to become—*through what one wasn't looking for*. This amounts to a *desire for abstract potentiality itself*, more than an object of desire as such.


**In the realm of the weak tie**


Jay's talk highlights the importance of weak social ties: acquaintances or friends of friends at the edges of social networks, who ferry new information and opportunity into our lives. A

friend of a friend mentions an upcoming opportunity at a new company, and you get the job; a former roommate's cousin helps you get your foot in the door, in the field you always hoped to work in; an acquaintance invites you to a party and that's where you meet a friend of a friend, with whom you fall in love.

Jay's account extends prior sociological work on weak ties in social networks. Her key point of departure is Mark Granovetter's ground-breaking 1973 article 'The Strength of Weak Ties.' One of the most cited social scientific papers of all time, Granovetter's article explores the differing roles of strong ties (roughly, close friendships) and weak ties (roughly, acquaintanceships) in social networks, and posits social network analysis 'as a tool for linking micro and macro levels of sociological theory.'[6] At the time, it was already known that personal contacts help people find jobs. Those who know someone at a company to which they're applying tend to have far better chances of success than those who respond to a job advertisement 'cold.' Investigating this phenomenon further, Granovetter demonstrated that most job opportunities come from weak ties in social networks, not strong ties—for instance, an 'old college friend or a former workmate or employer, with whom sporadic contact had been maintained.'[7] Most often, such ties were weak to begin with, and reactivated by 'chance meetings or mutual friends.'[8] The wealth of opportunities that come from weak ties, Granovetter posited, was due to the fact that weak ties act as 'bridges' between social networks, and thus tend to add more novel information to our lives than do our closest friends and associates. Weak ties, for Granovetter, are most powerful as sources of job opportunity when they are just strong enough to maintain some power of influence, while also being weak enough to introduce novel information and opportunity.

Granovetter did not overly intend for his research to be used as self-help. Indeed, while acknowledging that his advice might be useful to people to a certain extent, he has criticised widespread attempts to instrumentalise his research as advice, quipping that those who 'go on a course' where they are told to make three new contacts each day are likely to send others running in the opposite direction, since their attempts at networking seem so instrumentalising.[9] Nor could Granovetter have imagined, in 1973, that social media platforms would one day pervasively map social networks in real time. And yet, his kind of thinking on social networks seems to have been generalised in both directions: as a means for tech companies to instrumentalise 'the social,' by promising to turbo-charge users' social contacts while boosting platform engagement; and as a mythologised site at which the desire for self-actualisation unfolds. Networked thinking has been extensively operationalised and instrumentalised within many forms of contemporary thought and practice that emerge at the

interface between subject and network. For instance, the hugely influential theory of 'nudging' within behavioural economics describes how one can exercise 'libertarian paternalism' by modifying 'choice architectures': allowing subjects to do what they like, but 'nudging' them to take the best option by making it the easiest or default action.[10] 'Social physics' uses big data's 'digital breadcrumbs' to understand how ideas and behaviours spread through social networks.[11] Critical geographer Mark Whitehead and colleagues identify a 'neuroliberal' policy shift, which mobilises 'cognitive strategies, emotions, and pre-cognitive affects as a way of securing preferred forms of social conduct while ostensibly supporting liberal orthodoxies of freedom.'[12] Such policies are sensitive to 'the *lifespan* dynamics of context, particularly in relation to recognising how particular moments in life (such as moving home, having your first child, or going to college) provide opportunities for behavioural modification.'[13] As Wendy Chun has argued, networks (which have been endlessly mapped and researched in a wide range of contexts over the past few decades) form a perfect practical and conceptual corollary to neoliberal governance.[14] They preclude the genuinely collective, Chun argues, and make it easier to envision a world in which 'there is no such thing as society' (as Margaret Thatcher infamously put it); instead, there are just network *nodes* and *edges*. Networks privilege individuals over communities and map in real time the connections between nodes—the 'YOUs' at the heart of new media, as Chun puts it—while remaining unable to envision a 'we.'[15]

Research on weak ties also accrues its own popular mythology, associated with what we might call the *realm of the weak tie.* This realm consists of the narratives and desires that form around weak ties, as they come to be seen (in ever-shifting ways) as fecund sites of social and personal possibility. How has the realm of the weak tie shifted, in the forty years between Granovetter's 1973 paper and Jay's 2013 TED talk?


**The vitaminisation of coincidence**

Jay's talk recasts weak social ties. She portrays them not only as abundant sources of opportunity, but also as constitutive of a *life path* imagery. Weak tie life path imagery envisions an out-of-tune subject, on the 'wrong path' in life, whose life turns around, *leaps forward*, thanks to a chance encounter. Sure, perhaps this subject is processing their stumbling blocks, working out, working on thinking positive, working through whatever's holding them back. But what's needed, in order to activate all that good, self-actualizing

work, is a good coincidence: someone who acts as a gateway to an event, through which the subject's wisdom manifests. Weak tie life path imagery 'turbo-charges' the life path with a pinch of luck. In that sense, it is a subjective form that readily reconciles itself to a present marked by the 'slow cancellation of the future.'[16] Facing feeble job prospects, worsening storms, fewer safety nets, and no chance of buying a house, the youngish adult (unless rich) faces a diminishing future. In response to this widespread loss of potential, they must seek the good life by accessing the amped-up social potentials that supposedly thrive in tightly mapped, tracked, instrumentalised networks. The networked subject must subject herself to the fabled 'strength of weak ties' in order to self-actualise, stumbling upon some connection that (with luck) just might produce a valuable *turning point* in life. Serendipitous encounters with soon-to-be-significant others set life on *trajectories*: career paths, families, callings. This form of thinking entrains desire toward the canny use of social networks and a form of self-actualisation resilient enough to weather difficult circumstances. It is a *vitaminisation of coincidence* via social networks: a subtle shift in understanding social potential, such that weak ties come to be seen as a rich source of serendipitous possibility—just as a particular food might be viewed as a rich source of vitamin D. In a sense, attending to the serendipitous edges of social networks becomes akin to 'taking one's vitamins.' It proffers an abstracted conception of 'social nourishment' as that which fuels the flourishing life path—just like eating nutritious foods fuels the body and taking one's vitamins supports good health.

At the same time, Jay's conspicuous airplane analogy—her account of the twentysomething as a plane just taking off—inaugurates the 'life path' as a petropolitical construct.[17] Jay brings in fossil fuel 'through the back door,' by analogy only. Yet doing so invites reflection on the relation between short-term nourishment and long term impoverishment within late-late-capitalist life path imagery. It evokes what Marx referred to as the metabolic rift: a rift in 'the metabolic interaction between man and the earth' within capitalism. For instance, what capitalist agriculture takes out of the soil, it never returns. Thus, capitalist agriculture progresses 'in the art, not only of robbing the worker, but of robbing the soil; all progress in increasing fertility of the soil for a given time is progress towards ruining the more long-lasting sources of that fertility.'[18] While Marx was once regarded as a thinker unconcerned with ecology, recent scholarship situates his metabolic rift as a key early concept linking capitalism with ecological depletion.[19] Today, such depletions extend far beyond the soil, in many directions: deep into the earth's crust—and deep into the earth's past—via the extraction and consumption of fossil fuels, derived from ancient plant and animal matter; and deep into the social fabric, by reimagining social networks as a site of

social media extraction. Fossil fuel consumption, too, temporarily improves lives, but in the long-term diminishes the earth's fecund potentials. Silicon Valley empires relentlessly assetise social networks, offering short-term measures that ramp up the 'fecundity' and productivity of the social, while diminishing, as Marx put it, the 'more long-lasting sources of that fertility.' Jay's airplane analogy unintentionally reveals how social networking has entered the metabolic rift, positing that, to access the good life in an impoverished landscape, it is necessary to add more nourishment.

The pervasive imagining of weak ties as more or less *nourishing* reconciles two seemingly incompatible aspects of social network imaginaries in an age of both heavily instrumentalised social networks and diminished social potential. On the one hand, this network imaginary envisions a certain fungibility of social desires. If weak ties are, more or less, *generally* nourishing, then such nourishment can be derived from many different sources; in the face of one 'missed connection,' one might as well find another. On the other hand, there is a precise and delicately calibrated calculus of social nourishments. There are many kinds of social 'vitamin,' as it were; different aiders and abetters of social potential, of which each potential connection might be a source. This duality of social network potential in the realm of the weak tie lubricates a certain defensiveness that lurks in the 'social nourishment' narrative, revealing a sense in which its orientation of desire proffers a fungible yet precise 'nutrient-defence' against the widespread diminishment of life potential. While, in general, so the narrative goes, the future might be a wee bit cancelled, *you*, the canny initiate of social networks, can escape this general condition of diminishment, though the saving grace of network-savviness. In the face of severe storms, redundancies, market dips, stagnating wages, wealth inequality, and the still relatively early signs of climate catastrophe (any of which may be more or less immediate to those currently seeking to plot the course of their newly adult lives), subjects learn to steel themselves against any number of storms—and with them, the pervasive sense that *any particular connection might get cut short*—with a fungible, yet carefully calibrated desire for 'social potential' in its abstract, vitaminised sense.

Vitaminised social networks incite their own form of 'cruel optimism.'[20] They offer subjects a stylised pragmatics of hope that revels in *all one can do with one's new, networked tools.* How users transform hyper-mappable social networks in unimagined ways! In a world of diminishing potential, what unexpected riches they find there! Confronted with a general condition of *bumpiness*—of more and more bumps in the 'life path'—one consults one's network, as a means of *taking off*. From abstracted imaginaries of 'social potential' emerges a *network astrology of life paths*: an alienated reimagining of 'the social' as vast, distributed

quasi-psychological advice system; a subject suspended in a changeable constellation of friends and followers, through which they self-actualise by chance encounter. Social networks come to be seen as abstracted maps of 'life path' potential. They become vitaminised sources of serendipitous 'right time, right places:' moments when, perhaps, a small exchange might lead to a big change: a life turning point. Rather than having constellations of stars as the imagined authority (as in astrology), these relentlessly fertilised constellations of social ties themselves take on the supplicative quality of stars in the horoscope: you may not know your future, but, in a sense, *your network knows it for you*. And so, the subject's paradoxical task is to seek out the serendipitous, to artfully wield the network's power by being available to chance encounters—and able to skilfully cultivate these into opportunities

## Networked opportunisms

The social network and its attendant practices of governmentality inaugurate a strangely supplicative form of networked opportunism, extending the condition that Massimo De Carolis described in 2010 as a moment of emergent opportunism in American culture. De Carolis argues that

> the desire to make oneself a subject, to acquire full consciousness of one's own identity, has been replaced by the need to insert oneself successfully into social structures, even at the cost of rendering identity fluid, malleable, and elusive.[21]

This new opportunistic subject understands freedom as 'practical power' and aims to 'suppress every detachment, or confuse in a more or less profound way the subject and the environment, and dignify the interaction with the world without which, by definition, practical power cannot exist.'[22] Of course, it remains an open question whether the 'autonomous' subject De Carolis envisions as having come prior to the opportunistic one simply embodied the opposite problems: suppressing one's every *attachment*; over-estimating one's degree of separateness from their surroundings. Nevertheless, De Carolis usefully registers a shift in the orientation of desire: from the 'autonomous' subject's desire to know itself, separately from circumstance, to the opportunist's desire to *find a place* from which to take off. Opportunism, finally, is characterised by the unselfconscious 'will to

*belong* to one's own world, to move through it like a fish through water.'[23] The opportunist's actions blend into the network's logic. Belonging to the world involves negotiating access to the possible, in a world that offers many chances, but scant guarantees that these can be accessed. This, in turn, involves an enmeshment of human action with both the concept of possibility and the idea of a network: "When human action itself becomes just one possibility among others, and as such always already forms part of the network of interactions in which it operates, it shares that network's rules and modes of being and becomes substantially indistinguishable from it."[24] The opportunist's desire is to usefully align with available opportunities and continue accumulating abstract potential as such, while avoiding spiralling loss. 'The world,' De Carolis writes, 'becomes no more than a supermarket of opportunities empty of all inherent value, yet marked by the fear that any false move may set in motion a vortex of impotence.'[25]

Of course, nostalgia for 'autonomous' subjects and 'inherent value' will get us nowhere. Surely, the 'autonomous' subject is a problematic construction in itself, insofar as it risks repeating a patriarchal disavowal of connectedness to one's social and environmental surroundings—not to mention long-standing global patterns of colonial violence that enable the illusion of autonomy and self-determination in the first place. Nor is it fine-grained enough, I would argue, to call the 'supermarket of opportunities' *empty* of 'all inherent value.' Though a subtle shift, it would be better to say that opportunism seeks to resolve the tension between 'inherent value' and 'fungible value' via the vitaminisation of coincidence. The particularity of opportunities' value becomes akin to that of a vitamin; it is inherent to that particular opportunity, and yet a similar sort of value might also be extracted from others. Nevertheless, what I call the vitaminisation of coincidence builds on De Carolis' account of how opportunism takes on new significance in light of a widespread cultural emphasis on *finding one's place* in the world. Networked opportunism seeks to unlock potentials proffered by ubiquitous networked tools, affording savvy subjects means to amplify audiences and reputations, to expand temporalities of acquaintanceship, to play with networking at scale.

**The network's options and the network's call**

Jay's talk evinces an invitation to answer the call of opportunism. She asks the listener to gain a reflexive understanding of her positionality in relation to opportunity and possibility— which is to say, her place within a web of overlapping social networks, which in turn might

allow her to produce her own, new networks of families, colleagues, and friends. To master the realm of weak ties—to navigate the flows of social networks and make oneself one of the ones who *can* make something come of these fleeting connections—is a predominant style of hope in an age of compulsive, often automated mapping of social networks. To skilfully ride the waves of social networks involves embodying a paradox: obeying the call to self-actualisation by serendipity. Jay asks the listener to see herself as one who harnesses horizons of potential within social networks, in service of a potential life path: a path that *calls* the subject. The social-networked formulation of the calling, we might say, echoes and extends the Althusserian account of interpellation.[26] Now, in a sense, it is not ideology, but rather the network, itself, that calls—*'hey, you!'*—while the subject hears, turns, and answers *'yes, me!' I am meant to—made to—answer the network's call.* The idea of the life-path calling the subject also builds on Max Weber's treatment of the calling—or the *beruf*—in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.[27] Weber famously argued that the Protestant idea of a spiritual calling had become secularised within capitalism, turned into vocational calling. In its networked-opportunistic form, the secularised concept of a 'true calling' is not restricted to one's career. It freely blends career and 'life' goals (a dream job, a nice side project, a good house, a husband and two children), and fashions them into an overall trajectory. The trajectory takes the form, not of a calling to a particular vocation, but instead to an abstracted quality of *abundant potentiality itself,* driving the smooth, fruitful unfolding of a meaningful life-path; the abundance of one's half-desired-half-imagined, if cruelly optimistic, life; the skilful avoidance of those snags that many others will, unfortunately, get caught on; and above all, an abstracted quality of the *subject's willingness to hear the network's call*, to cultivate the life-path's coming into being at the edges of a social network.

The networked-opportunistic call understands weak ties as sites of potential luck, where serendipity seeps in; where one finds what one wasn't looking for; and where any number of relationships, families, and career opportunities could spark from just 'one good conversation, one good break.'[28] Weak ties are mythologised as sites of luck—in which neoliberal 'self-appreciating subjects,'[29] seeking to fulfil their personal and professional potential, become 'participants in the culture of chance.'[30] Weak ties emit the scent of variable futures: possible life paths, inflected with a form of social network governance that envisions a set of branching potentials emanating from chance social encounters. One navigates weak ties almost as if to imagine one's future as variable, via everyday acts of hedging—*if I don't find a future path through this weak tie, then perhaps I'll find one through that tie, or that one.* The vitaminised social network thus becomes a hedged portfolio

of personal and social potential.[31] An emphasis on 'horizon scanning' for possible futures within one's social networks instantiates a 'politics of optionality,' (to borrow Ed LiPuma's term).[32] It enacts at the level of the lifespan what Randy Martin has called a 'social logic of the derivative'—that is, seeing one's life as a compilation of possible moments of uncertain investment (when one might meet a new partner, or find the perfect job opportunity), in which the hope for a lucky, life-changing chance encounter is hedged by social networks (if not a new path via this contact, then perhaps via that one, or that one).[33] One can hedge one's bets for oneself—and perhaps even profit from the vitaminised social network—as if to take back, in however small a portion, just a fraction of the resources extracted from social life by capital under its new regime of 'data colonialism:' a condition that Nick Couldry and Ulises A Mejias describe as one in which 'social life all over the globe becomes an "open" resource for extraction that is somehow "just there" for capital.'[34]

**Networked astrologies**

Theodor Adorno once wrote a lengthy content analysis of the *L.A. Times* Astrology column. Focusing on the outputs of 1952-53, Adorno unpicked how the astrology column addressed its readers, hailing them as those whose decisions were important enough to matter, while, at the same time, reconciling readers to 'the feeling of being "caught," the impossibility for most people to regard themselves by any stretch of imagination as the masters of their own fate.'[35] The astrology column often advised a 'shrewdly meek attitude' towards higher-ups, which Adorno read as a neo-feudal attitude of 'general reconciliation, particularly of placating opponents, of "playing up" to them.'[36] The astrology column abstracted family relations, while emphasising the role of the friend as the 'messenger of society,' enforcing social norms.[37] Occasionally, 'the figure of the stranger, strongly affect-laden' would appear; Adorno thought that strangers 'may play a magical role and may help somehow to overcome suspicion of irrational promises by making their source as irrational as the promises themselves are.'[38] The astrology column proffered an abstract authority of timing—today is a good day to impress a higher-up with your attention to detail; tomorrow is best reserved for increasing personal charm. Ultimately, Adorno read the column as aligned with authoritarian tendencies in American society at the time and symptomatic of 'eras of decline in social systems' more generally.[39] In a moment overshadowed by the atomic and hydrogen bombs, an impending 'mood of doom' prevailed—even (and especially) amongst those who

professed the most optimism.[40] Astrology, Adorno argued, 'takes care of this mood by translating it into a pseudo-rational form, thus somehow localising free-floating anxieties in some definite symbolism,' while also giving 'some vague and diffused comfort by making the senseless appear as though it had some hidden and grandiose sense while at the same time corroborating that this sense can neither be sought in the realm of the human nor can properly be grasped by humans.'[41]

Jay's appeal to twentysomethings weaves a different flavour of futurity and promise for a different moment of decline. It speaks the temporality of social media subjectivity: rhythms of vitaminised expectation, potential, and promise set into the background of social media life, where the biopolitical governance of subjects becomes social network governance by life path. And it speaks to a different species of doom. There may well be nuclear threats to come, but unlike Adorno's A and H bombs, climate disaster is a slow, at first almost undetectable burn; an irreversible unpicking of prior, taken-for-granted Holocene harmonies. Jay's weak tie imagery unwittingly adapts some of the 1950s astrology column's interpellating tasks to these new existential threats, emitting a sense that temporary measures to increase fertility and inflate potentials will not work for much longer, and yet, for now, still must be tried. When this coupling of short-term nourishment with long-term diminishment of potential reaches a crisis point, the *realm of the weak tie* harnesses hopefulness in the rationalisation of social networks, and in their capacity to capitalise on serendipity, to make luck just that little bit *luckier*, by mapping and making use of social network peripheries. The realm of the weak tie's configuration of *subject-desire-world* symptomatises a sense of separateness and abstraction from the world, a transformation of singular instances into abstracted, fungible, yet tightly calibrated understandings of potential. Yet it is also the shape of a pragmatics of diminished potential: a way of orienting oneself toward a diminished world, using life path imagery as a means to imaginatively *take off*, while sidestepping questions of collectivity or politics. Now, more than ever, we need conceptions of desire that try to think of collectivity beyond nodes and networks, and to understand that previously abundant, readymade, and disavowedly petropolitical readings of the 'good life' (life partner, family of 2.3 children, big house, fluffy pet, fulfilling career path, nice vacations) are increasingly ill-suited to a moment of ecological, financial, and social catastrophe. Acting, in this moment, without blindly repeating the desires of another era necessitates learning to question the subtle yet crucial role that life path and network imagery play in reshaping and singularising desire. Such imagery expresses and exacerbates the very metabolic rift, the mitigation of which is perhaps this moment's most crucial demand.

**Notes**

[1] Meg Jay, *The Defining Decade: Why Your Twenties Matter and How to Make the Most of Them Now* (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2016).

[2] Meg Jay, 'Why 30 Is Not the New 20,' https://www.ted.com/talks/meg_jay_why_30_is_not_the_new_20?language=en.

[3] Morton Bast, From Appalled to Applauding: Reactions to Meg Jay's Controversial Talk about 20-Somethings,' *TED Blog*, May 17, 2013, https://blog.ted.com/from-appalled-to-applauding-reactions-to-meg-jays-controversial-talk-about-20-somethings/.

[4] This problem with the TED format has been well diagnosed in Benjamin Bratton's own TED talk, for example. Benjamin Bratton, 'New Perspectives: What's Wrong with TED Talks? Benjamin Bratton at TEDxSanDiego 2013 – Re:Think,' December 14, 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yo5cKRmJaf0.

[5] On increasing wealth inequality and its consequences for neoliberal subjects, see for instance, Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017); Annie McClanahan, 'Serious Crises,' *Boundary 2* 46, no. 1 (2019): 103-32; Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

[6] Elliott Green, 'What Are the Most-Cited Publications in the Social Sciences (According to Google Scholar)?' *LSE Blog*, May 12, 2016, https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2016/05/12/what-are-the-most-cited-publications-in-the-social-sciences-according-to-google-scholar/.

[7] Mark Granovetter, 'The Strength of Weak Ties,' *American Journal of Sociology* 78, no. 6 (1973): 1371.

[8] Ibid., 1372.

[9] Mark Granovetter, 'The Strength of Weak Ties Revisited,' *YouTube*, October 1, 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9l9VYXKn6sg.

[10] Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein, *Nudge: Improving Decisions about Health, Wealth and Happiness* (London: Penguin, 2009).

[11] Alex Pentland, *Social Physics: How Social Networks Can Make Us Smarter* (New York: Penguin Books, 2015).

[12] Mark Whitehead, Rhys Jones, Rachel Lilley et al., 'Neuroliberalism: Cognition, Context, and the Geographical Bounding of Rationality,' *Progress in Human Geography* 43, no. 4 (2019): 633.

[13] Ibid., 641, emphasis added.

[14] Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, 'Networks NOW: Belated Too Early,' *Amerikastudien/American Studies* 60, no. 1 (2015): 37-58.

[15] Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, *Updating to Remain the Same: Habitual New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), 1-23. While this argument is compelling, it is worth noting that Granovetter has argued against the idea of 'more or less atomised individuals' in what he terms 'undersocialised' accounts of economic action. Further, Deleuze's late-career emphasis on the 'dividual' subject might offer an alternative frame to Chun's emphasis on the singular/plural 'you' of networks. See Mark Granovetter, 'Economic Action and Social Structure: The Problem of Embeddedness,' *American Journal of Sociology* 91, no. 3 (1985): 482; Gilles Deleuze, 'Postscript on the Societies of Control,' *October* 59 (Winter 1992): 3-7.

[16] Franco Berardi, *After the Future*, ed. Gary Genosko and Nicholas Thoburn (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2011), 13; Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2014).

[17] On petropolitics, petroculture, and energy humanities, see, for instance, Imre Szeman, *On Petrocultures: Globalization, Culture, and Energy* (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2019); Sheena Wilson, Adam Carlson, and Imre Szeman, eds., *Petrocultures: Oil, Politics, Culture* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017); Imre Szeman and Dominic Boyer, eds., *Energy Humanities: An Anthology* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017).

[18] Karl Marx, *Capital: Vol. 1*, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1976), 638.

[19] See John Bellamy Foster, 'Marx's Theory of Metabolic Rift: Classical Foundations for Environmental Sociology,' *American Journal of Sociology* 105, no. 2 (1999): 366-405; Mindi Schneider and Philip McMichael, 'Deepening, and Repairing, the Metabolic Rift,' *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 37, no. 3 (2010): 461-84,

[20] Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*.

[21] Massimo De Carolis, 'Toward a Phenomenology of Opportunism,' in *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*, ed. Paolo Virno and Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 38.

[22] Ibid., 39.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Ibid., 48.

[25] Ibid., 40-41; I hear, in this, an echo of Lacan's remark in Seminar XX: 'We live in an age of supermarkets, so one must know what one is capable of producing, even by way of being.' Jacques Lacan, *On Feminine Sexuality: The Limits of Love and Knowledge*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1999), 98.

[26] Louis Althusser, 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation),' in *The Anthropology of the State: A Reader*, ed. Aradhana Sharma and Akhil Gupta (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2009).

[27] Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (Abingdon: Routledge, 2001).

[28] Meg Jay, 'Why 30 Is Not the New 20.' On serendipity and its histories, see Allen Edward Foster and David Ellis, 'Serendipity and Its Study,' *Journal of Documentation* 70, no. 6 (2014): 1015-38.

[29] Michel Feher, 'Self-Appreciation; or, The Aspirations of Human Capital,' *Public Culture* 21, no. 1 (2009): 21-41. Feher describes the 'self-appreciating' subjects as those who view themselves in terms of appreciation: both in the sense of being esteemed, and in the sense of the value of their self-investment appreciating.

[30] T.J. Jackson Lears, *Something for Nothing: Luck in America* (New York: Penguin, 2004), 10.

[31] See Ivan Ascher, *Portfolio Society: On the Capitalist Mode of Prediction* (New York: Zone Books, 2016), 81, 59.

[32] Edward LiPuma, *The Social Life of Financial Derivatives: Markets, Risk, and Time* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 352.

[33] Randy Martin, *Knowledge Ltd: Toward a Social Logic of the Derivative* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2015).

[34] Nick Couldry and Ulises Mejias, 'Data Colonialism: Rethinking Big Data's Relation to the Contemporary Subject,' *Television & New Media* 20, no. 4 (2019): 337. See also Nick Couldry and Ulises Ali Mejias, *The Costs of Connection: How Data Is Colonizing Human Life and Appropriating It for Capitalism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019).

[35] Theodor Adorno, 'The Stars Down to Earth: The Los Angeles Times Astrology Column,' *Telos* 1974, no. 19 (1974): 83.

[36] Ibid., 80.

[37] Ibid., 75.

[38] Ibid., 76.

[39] Ibid., 90.

[40] Ibid., 84.

[41] Ibid.