

Anja Röcke, *Sociology of self-optimisation (Soziologie der Selbstoptimierung)*, Berlin:  
Suhrkamp 2021<sup>1</sup>

## English abstract

Work more productively, achieve more! Become fitter, more beautiful! The quest for self-optimisation is omnipresent in today's capitalist societies. It relates to areas such as fitness, nutrition, beauty, cognitive and physical performance, sexuality, and social relations.

Seemingly all aspects of the inner or outer body, of social relations or of the way to conduct everyday life can be optimised. But what exactly is meant by self-optimisation? Is it a new phenomenon? What are its individual and social conditions and consequences? Along these three questions, the book develops a concise definition of self-optimisation, discusses its historical roots and provides an analysis of the ambivalences inherent in this phenomenon, which is crucial for late modern societies.

The book is divided into seven chapters. *Chapter 1* introduces the overall subject and research questions of the book, gives an account of the international discussion on the topic, and presents empirical evidence on the diffusion of self-optimising practices. *Chapter 2* provides a conceptual-historical analysis of self-optimisation. It searches for the origins and meanings of the terms optimum, optimisation and self-optimisation and investigates the current uses of the term self-optimisation in public discourse, taking the weekly newspaper 'Die Zeit' as an example. The analysis highlights the cultural-critical approach to the phenomenon that is typical for the public debate in Germany. *Chapter 3* focuses on the practices of self-optimisation and offers a typology. It then starts discussing the question of whether such practices existed before the term was actually coined in the 1950s. The historical endeavour is explored in more depth in *Chapter 4* in focusing on the cultural preconditions for the idea of self-optimisation to emerge at all. Three fundamental concepts are examined more closely: Bildung (Wilhelm von Humboldt), Progress (Marquis de Condorcet) and Rationalisation (Max Weber). This is followed by a fourth section on "self-rationalisation", title of an advice book written by Gustav Großmann in 1927 that contains already many elements on the idea of an "entrepreneurial self". *Chapter 5* provides a systematic account of the German cultural sociological discussion on the topic for which a central impulse came from the biopolitical

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.suhrkamp.de/buch/anja-roecke-soziologie-der-selbstoptimierung-t-9783518299302>

writings of Michel Foucault. Four theoretical models on self-optimisation are presented: a contingency-theoretical genealogy of self-optimisation (Michael Makropoulos), the perspective of an “economisation of the social” (Ulrich Bröckling; Stefanie Duttweiler), a theory of mass-cultural subjectivation (Hannelore Bublitz) and a cultural-theoretical analysis of modern subject cultures (Andreas Reckwitz). *Chapter 6* develops an own analytical perspective. It starts by presenting Foucault’s account of the ancient “care of the self” as a contrasting example to self-optimisation. It pursues by specifying the analytical core of the idea of self-optimisation, based on its temporal, factual and social dimensions. After further clarifications on the concept of the self and on self-relations, self-optimisation is explored as practice, as form of subjectivation and as a way of life. *Chapter 7* summarises the book's key findings and discusses the role and significance of self-optimisation today.