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Employability

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Table of Contents

Notes

Reviews

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Giving notice to employability

Ekaterina Chertkovskaya, Peter Watt, Stefan Tramer and Sverre Spoelstra

Introduction

The notion of employability has risen to prominence over the past 20 years, having gained remarkable traction in policy-making, organizational life, and society more generally. The term has become popular as an antipode to the policy goal of 'full employment' (Finn, 2000) and the conceptual lynchpin of a new career covenant that claims to supplant long-term organizational career bargains (e.g. Kanter, 1989). It is in this capacity that 'employability' gestures to a new arrangement, wherein the state and employers are no longer committed to nor deemed responsible for providing those they govern and/or employ with lasting and secure jobs. Instead, individuals' capacity to take the initiative, relentlessly update and improve their knowledge and skills, and to be flexible and adaptable, i.e. to constantly work on their employability, has come to be understood as the crux of national, organizational and individual prosperity.

With employability becoming such a pervasive preoccupation, 'protean' and 'boundaryless' career models (Arthur and Rousseau, 2001; Hall, 2002) have been eagerly promoted. These, in turn, articulate a high premium put on individuals to be in a constant stage of development and to revamp their skill-set to seamlessly negotiate their perpetual shift from one job or organization to another. At the same time, demand-side labour market policies have been viewed as outdated (see Peck and Theodore, 2000), rubber-stamping work's ephemerality and precariousness in an era which keenly acclaims employability as *the answer* to many of society's ills. It is against this background that Hawkins (1999: 8) maintains that, now, 'to be employed is to be at risk [and] to be employable is to be secure'. However, this notion of 'security' is in terms of employability; a condition which, as many have argued, can never be fulfilled (Costea et al., 2007; 2012; Cremin, 2010).

Resonating with this, individuals' responsibility for their 'marketability' in the labour market is posited to outshine the earlier arrangement of job security. In the light of employability, this figures as having seriously hampered individuals' self-realization and socio-economic progress. Perhaps, one could even say that 'work', too, has begun to be outshone by 'self-work' and 'self-management' (see Beverungen et al., 2013; Heelas, 2002; Lopdrup-Hjorth et al., 2011). Not only are individuals invited to realize themselves by becoming (ever more) employable, their realization as selves has turned into a prerequisite for their employability *per se* (Andersen, 2007; Heelas, 2002). This would go some way to explain the rise of coaching services and 'self-help' discourses, which resonate with these developments.

To all appearances, the rise of employability as a central feature of working-life has put the 'unleashing' of human resourcefulness on centre stage. Individuals, whether employed or not, are called upon to develop new and innovative ways to outstrip others in the pursuit of, what in all likelihood will be, an unrealizable, ideal 'employable self' (Southwood, 2011). Moreover, 'employability' has been invoked as a path towards social integration, with 'immigrants', 'women', 'the elderly' and people with various disabilities being invited to self-determinedly step out of their 'marginalization-cum-idleness' (Peralta Prieto, 2006).

In all these contexts, 'employability' continues to hold largely positive connotations. It is not only positioned as the key for one's own well-being in the labour market, but also, and somewhat ironically, as the very condition for employment (Cremin, 2010). It is seen as something that individuals inevitably strive for and manage throughout their working lives. However, this attractive picture of employability, as used by employers, recruitment agents, policy-makers, mainstream research, universities, and the media, says little about how concerns with employability interlink with broader societal changes and the ways in which individual subjectivities are affected. As a result, the key focus of this special issue is to *give notice to* employability. By critically engaging with the topic of employability – via exploring and challenging its resonance and scope – we hope to bring attention to what we deem to be worth 'noticing' and previously unnoticed. In doing so we have aimed to provide a platform for a broader audience to consider and engage with its implications.

Employability's employment

The term 'employability' itself is not new. It has been used since at least the 1880s (Welshman, 2006), though its meaning has changed throughout the twentieth century. From the late 1980s onwards, its rhetorical formation has

come to be understood through the expression 'initiative employability' (Gazier, 1999). This term emphasizes the way that employability has come to signify how 'employable subjects' are required to constantly develop and assert themselves as, and to remain employable. Within this section, we take a look at some examples of earlier engagements with employability, followed by a more detailed discussion of 'initiative employability', the dominant way the term is understood today.

In the UK from the 1880s to the 1940s 'unemployability' was the term in use, referring to those unable and/or unwilling to work (Welshman, 2006: 578). The relationship between 'unemployment' and 'unemployability' is remarkable here. Mid-Victorian reformers equated the two, claiming that 'defects of character automatically caused people to be unemployed' (see Komine, 2004: 257). However, a distinction was later drawn between them. The unemployed were considered to be often able and willing to work, but being in temporary unemployment, while the unemployable were a permanent social feature (Webb and Webb, 1897, cited in Welshman, 2006). It was William Beveridge (1904) – the supposed 'Father of the Welfare State' after the World War II – who proposed a reverse-causality between unemployment and unemployability. He suggested that it was unemployment itself that was creating unemployables (Komine, 2004). Gazier (1999) identified this type of (un)employability as 'dichotomic' due to people being classified as either employable or not; with the 'ability' to work, such as having no physical/mental impairment or family constraints, being key to not being 'unemployable'. The huge number of human losses in World War II led to smaller workforces and the need to recover production at the same time. As a result, the understanding of what being 'able' to work means changed, with 'socio-medical employability' becoming one of the widespread ways to refer to employability at the time (*ibid.*). This use of the term was focused on the labour supply side, which was largely geared towards getting a portion of people previously defined as unemployable into the labour market through rehabilitation.

Since the late 1980s, the dominant way in which employability has been referred to, it seems, is through 'initiative employability'; an understanding that has also become central to the relationships between employers and individuals, as well as governments and citizens. This notion implies a very different relationship between employability and employment, as well as a different role of 'ability', in comparison to the previous conceptualizations of employability. Within 'initiative employability' individuals are positioned as being responsible for labour market outcomes they find themselves in while employers and governments become 'enablers', making 'it possible for the individual to make necessary choices to

become employable' (Fejes, 2010: 99), but not guaranteeing employment. Furthermore, it is the individuals' perpetually maintained 'initiative', rather than the ability to do the job, which has become central to this understanding of employability.

As such, the rise of initiative employability is usually explained by organizations having to be more flexible in order to compete in the global market and governments not being able to build their labour market policies around stimulating demand for labour. Even though this makes it arguable that the rise of employability is a result of unavoidable changes, the intense positivity of the rhetoric is still striking. As we will argue shortly, it is on this rhetoric that much of the detrimental social impact and material changes brought by employability are based.

The emergence of initiative employability in organizations often meant a loss of job security for employees, but was presented as giving 'employability security' (Kanter, 1989), as a result of which employees would only be better off. 'Employability security' was presented as 'empowering' the employees (Clarke and Patrickson, 2005), allowing them to exercise choice in the labour market (Bagshaw, 1996). As a consequence, work has arguably become something that one can consume, in the sense that employers offer a set of tangible and intangible benefits in addition to the monetary remuneration, on the basis of which individuals are expected to 'choose' who to work for (see Brown et al., 2003; Dale, 2012). Employment itself has been reinterpreted as 'a temporary state, or the current manifestation of long-term employability' (Arthur and Rousseau, 2001: 373). This emphasis on employability 'displaces [the] orientation of the subject from their current job onto the longer-term goals of [employability] advancement or continuing employment *per se'* (Cremin, 2010: 136; amended).

Another central way in which initiative employability has engendered a positive rhetoric since the late 80s is in labour market policies. For example, in the UK the New Labour government first emphasized 'job security' as a labour market policy priority, but after a number of unsuccessful attempts to influence labour demand, their rhetoric shifted to constructing job security as employability (Levitas, 2005). Demand-driven changes were regarded as the prerogative of the 'very bad old days' (Layard, 1998: 27, cited in Peck and Theodore 2000: 729). Similar trends have been noticed in other countries across Europe (Jacobsson, 2004; McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005) and elsewhere (see Moore, 2010).

As others have shown, this notion of initiative employability downplays the influence of structural issues on labour market outcomes, access and inequalities (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005; Moreau and Leathwood, 2006; Morley, 2001)

and individualizes social problems (Holmqvist, 2009). Individuals are made responsible for their employment: being unemployed is seen as the result of not trying hard enough. We may even see a link between the present notion of 'initiative employability' and the mid-Victorian understanding of 'the unemployable' mentioned above: in both cases the individual is inherently blamed for their unemployment. The difference is that the mid-Victorian view did not have any infrastructural grounding in Britain at the time, whereas today there are programmes and practices provided by governments, employers and (increasingly) educational institutions, which purport to 'enable' (Fejes, 2010) people to become employable. If these programmes and practices do not materialize in one's ability to find employment, more and more people might draw the conclusion that this must be the result of a person's 'defects of character'. Of course, this is rarely the case as unemployment is often the result of structural problems, which are masked by the notion of employability. Trying to cover structural problems in the labour market by a rhetoric that is exclusively positive (as embraced by governments, employers and other organizations) is one clear issue we have with employability. However, it is not the only one. In the next section we will address a few more issues that employability raises, by focusing on some of the ethical implications of the use of this term.

What is worth 'noticing' with employability?

Employability purports to overcome distinctions of class, gender and ethnicity, as being more or less employable would cut through these existing social categories. However, in practice this is rarely the case. Rather than *overcoming* these distinctions, employability rhetoric simply ignores them by celebrating individual initiative and development. The problem, however, is that these social distinctions do not magically disappear when they are not addressed. Characteristics such as age, social background, gender, disability and ethnicity make some groups much less likely to be employed than others (e.g. Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005; Brown and Hesketh, 2004; Morley, 2001; Smetherham, 2006). The first way in which employability can be challenged, then, is on the ground that it promotes social exclusion rather than overcomes exclusion. Through a rhetoric that places an increasing demand on the individual, marginalized groups are more likely to be excluded from labour market positions than the non-marginalized, as the social mechanisms that contribute to their exclusion are silenced. When the problems of social exclusion in connection with employability are emphasized, it is often implied that there is nothing wrong with employability as a concept, but rather 'unequal access' to employability that is the problem (e.g. Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005). This we do not agree with, as we see the very concept of employability as being part of *the problem*. This

becomes especially clear when one looks at governmental programmes that seek to get these 'problem groups' into work, which is the focus of some of the contributions to this special issue (Diedrich and Styhre; Garsten and Jacobsson; Simms; Vesterberg). These cases show, for instance, that the jobs that these groups are targeted towards are often precarious or low-paid, and that the support is usually offered in extreme situations of labour market inequality, like long-term unemployment. Not focusing on the structural nature of unemployment risks problematizing these groups even further, at times in a colonial language (see Vesterberg, this issue).

Second, the overall agenda of employability is one that requires a very particular ideal notion of 'self' from individuals. This ideal can be understood as operating through the 'self-work' ethic (Heelas, 2002) or through self-government (Knights and Willmott, 1990). Being 'skilled' (Chertkovskaya, 2013; Williams, 2005), 'flexible' (Fogde, 2007) and a 'learner' (Fejes, 2010; Williams, 2005), as well as 'sellable' (Elraz, this issue; Fogde, 2011) and 'enterprising' (Berglund, this issue) may be identified as some of the key features of an 'employable self'. The failure or refusal to identify and correspond to what employability promotes through this rhetoric is likely to result in becoming unemployable or not getting a job (e.g. Bergström and Knights, 2006). This results in individuals having to conceal the characteristics that do not fit into what is deemed to be employable, like shyness or mental illness (e.g. Elraz, this issue; Fogde, 2007), and conforming to whatever employers demand in a particular context (Chertkovskaya, 2013). However, not getting a job is not the only possible negative outcome. In Sweden, for instance, a country where the rhetoric of employability is particularly strong, not living up to the demands of employability has also resulted in finding employment at the price of being labelled as disabled (Garsten and Jacobsson, this issue). In this case, employability can be seen to set the standards of normalcy (*ibid.*). Furthermore, through employability's denial, or 'derecognition' of limits (Costea et al., 2007; Cremin, 2010), it can be understood as a never realizable 'project of the self' (Grey, 1994), where work and life outside work, whether in employment or not, are mobilized in its name. The 'principle of potentiality', which is in 'the exhortation that every individual ought to see itself as always capable of "more"', is inherent to employability (Costea et al., 2012: 35). This, as Costea et al. (2012) and Bloom (this issue) argue, may result in tragic consequences for the individual, as the constant striving for 'more' goes hand in hand with a permanent sense of failure.

Third, employability rhetoric has gone beyond the area of labour market policy and employer-employee relationships. A particular issue that we would like to highlight is that it has become central to education policies and practice. Employability, and hence the attempt to convert people into 'employable selves',

now enters individuals' lives long before they enter the labour market, sometimes even at school (Berglund, this issue; Komulainen et al., 2009). So the statement that '[t]he project of employability begins at the cradle, if it has not yet been extended to the grave' (Levitas, 2005: 121) is not too exaggerated. The problems that this 'project' leads to are perhaps most visible within the area of higher education. Even though employability has only recently become a central focus of university life, it is already having a great impact on the ways that universities operate (Taylor, 2013; this issue). For example, employability is today widely used as an evaluation criterion for universities' performance and it has also become a criterion on the basis of which further financialization of the university (Beverungen et al., 2009) is justified (e.g. see Browne Review, 2010). The consequences for education are particularly worrying as the increasing focus on employability shifts the students' focus from education *to* employability.

Finally, it must be considered that employability is a promise arguably empty of any substantive meaning (Cremin, 2010, Moore, 2010); and one that empties all it touches. In its constitution as a 'potentiality' (Costea et al., 2012), the various categories that it purportedly claims to grasp and account for (e.g. skills, lifelong learning, being entrepreneurial, sellable) take different shapes in different contexts, often overlap or cannot be found. For example, the 'excellence' of one's (transferable/soft) skills is often positioned as key to getting into graduate jobs, but on closer inspection they either turn out to be mundane or not central to the activities they claim to enable people to do (Chertkovskaya, 2013). The problem is that the measure of each person's employability is judged on an individual basis, and that it therefore is easily used (rhetorically) at the expense of equality, responsibility, and the very ideals it is understood to embody. Furthermore, employability is also potentially emptying for the areas it becomes central to and people who attempt to navigate their way around its claims. It displaces people's attention from work and education to promulgation of itself (e.g. see Taylor, this issue), at the expense of the content of these activities. Ultimately, employability may be destructive for the subject. People do not only have to mobilize their (overabundant) individual qualities in its name (Costea et al., 2012), but to adapt to whatever employability demands. This very adaptation to the constantly changing context and demands, trying to re-craft the self around them, we think, may drain these individual qualities that were mobilized, and result in emptying the subject.

Employability: Hard to resist?

The rhetoric of employability is tempting (while the practice is hardly avoidable), which is perhaps why resistance against it is not so easy to find. It seems all too

easy to unwittingly succumb to employability's rhetoric. For example, individuals may find themselves using the logic of employability to explain their failures in the labour market (see Sharone, 2007).

It would be encouraging if resistance were to be found among those who are supposed to enable others to become more employable. But, perhaps unsurprisingly, little resistance is found here: while there has not been much research on this theme, it seems that counsellors and employability advisors often choose to justify employability-driven practices as ones that ultimately 'help' individuals, and therefore refrain from communicating their concerns about employability to those *they* are employed to 'enable' (Chertkovskaya, 2013).

Even in potentially more 'likely' places, notably the protest movements that have taken place around the globe in 2010-2011 (see Mason, 2012), we find little evidence of resistance against employability. Indeed, despite the regular presence of anti-capitalist rhetoric, it may be argued that some of these protests have been demanding what capitalism has created and the lack of what seemed most strong in the aftermath of the global economic crisis. This has proved the case with employability, as some of the requests for change are embedded in its rhetoric (Valenzuela, this issue; Vlachou, this issue; Williams, 2013). For example, the student protests against the rise in higher education fees that took place over the UK in 2010, as well as much of the public debate on this issue, has primarily been challenging education becoming less accessible for all, but not necessarily the employability-centred education as such (Williams, 2013). In Chile, the largely left-wing student movement for 'quality' in higher education can also be associated with quality *in terms of* employability (Valenzuela, this issue). From this, it is clear how the concept that was framed as a result of a previous labour market insecurity (in the 1980s) has been recently fought for following another labour market insecurity (in the 2000s and 2010s). However, such fighting, even if supposedly anti-capitalist, fails to challenge employability directly.

However, there is some evidence of resistance to employability among academics and teachers (e.g. Kalfa and Taksa, 2012; Komulainen et al., 2011). Indeed, many academics see employability as an intrusive managerial challenge to the traditional ideals of higher education, which one frequently hears in daily conversations. However, even in the context of higher education institutions, the picture is not *that* hopeful. While employability may be lamented loudly by some, aspects of employability, such as the rhetoric of skills and future prospects, are often actively embraced by the same people. As Taylor (2013; this issue) points out, '[employability] has become a standard mode of discourse – not only for the media and government ministers, but also academics marketing their institution on parent-centred University Open Days'. It must also be considered that with

higher education being positioned as a central site for the development of one's employability, resistance (and indeed critical thought itself) is increasingly subjugated. With students 'investing' increasing amounts of money for the promises bound up in educational accreditation, the mere suggestion of resistance runs counter to the ethos many bring to university in the first place.

Overall, active resistance to employability has hardly been noticed in research (see Fogde, 2011; Sharone, 2007). This may have something to do with individuals' lack of power in the labour market: where actively resisting employability rhetoric, i.e. challenging what employers require, is likely to result in not getting a job (e.g. Bergström and Knights, 2006), losing it, or falling short on future prospects altogether (promotions, etc.). However, passive resistance to aspects of employability's rhetoric is more often observable (e.g. Chertkovskaya, 2013). For example, the culture of overstating one's actual achievements (particularly by graduates during processes of recruitment and selection), and conforming **to** employer-requirements, are often done in the knowledge that this is a rhetorical necessity to 'get in'. However, this kind of resistance – if indeed it can be considered resistance at all – is likely to be 'decaf' (Contu, 2008); at best challenging the rhetoric in very minor ways and at worst reproducing it (Fleming and Spicer, 2003).

Nevertheless, the ubiquity of employability, combined with the fact that it is premised on the requirement for individual action, responsibility and autonomy, suggests something of particular importance for resistance. With these two factors in mind, direct resistance to employability (it would seem) can only come from a private resistance that (in its collective manifestation) challenges the very neoliberal consensus that has posited employability as a right and requirement for all. It is a revolution of conscience that is needed; and it is certainly on educators who lay claim to the promotion of critical thought to provide the means of developing such a reflection. The contributions to this special issue, we think, provide an important step in this direction, and will now be introduced.

Contributions

The papers in this issue give notice to employability in three ways. First, by adding to the ongoing discussion of ways in which employability has become colonizing. Second, by exploring the type of self that employability requires. And finally, by discussing the consequences of having to engage with employability.

We start the special issue with the article by Karin Berglund, which engages with all of these three themes. The article positions the 'entrepreneurial self' as central

to employability rhetoric. It looks at the case of school education in Sweden, where under the guise of entrepreneurship education children are taught to become 'enterprising selves'. There is much emphasis on positive thinking, the joy of creativity, and awareness of the value of their own interests and passions. However, according to the author, the consequence of living up to this ideal enterprising self is never being satisfied with who we are. Furthermore, the excitement and amusement that is portrayed to be associated with being entrepreneurial also involves fighting against all odds, which, as Berglund shows, is not so much fun.

The following two contributions look at another way in which employability has become a colonizing rhetoric, namely by trying to convert everyone into employable subjects. The articles by Viktor Vesterberg as well as Andreas Diedrich and Alexander Styhre look at how employability rhetoric addresses immigrants in Sweden.

Viktor Vesterberg shows how unemployed immigrants from Somalia are constructed as the opposite to an ideal-type citizen of 'advanced liberal societies'. Even though their 'entrepreneurial' abilities are acknowledged, which might help them to become employable, they are also constructed as patriarchal, idle and likely to engage in illegal activities, as well as unwilling to work in general. This construction takes place in contrast to the 'advanced liberal subjects' required by employability. Vesterberg demonstrates this by drawing on works of Edward Said, Michel Foucault and Nikolas Rose. In particular, he shows how the concepts of 'problematized Others' (Said) and 'advanced liberal subject' (Rose) help us in understanding how employable subjects are problematized as ethnicized un/employable Others.

In their contribution to this issue, Diedrich and Styhre focus on a labour market programme in Sweden, which aims to validate newly arrived immigrants' prior learning as part of their settlement support aimed at promoting their 'employability'. Specifically, the paper draws attention to the programmes' consequences, which stand in stark contrast to its purported aims. Instead of easing entry into the labour market, the validation tools help to construct immigrants as deviant *vis-à-vis* the Swedish norm and serve to question immigrants' prior learning. Moreover, rather than providing these individuals with the education and certificates needed, they are directed towards self-reflection, invited to regain confidence and to embrace their own responsibility for development. Thus, under the banner of such validation, Diedrich and Styhre alert us to ethnic divisions in the labour market that are reinforced and formalized rather than broken up.

The following three articles look at the consequences of employability. In his paper 'Fight for your alienation!', Peter Bloom establishes a link between employability and self-alienation. Whereas employability is often seen as a way to overcome a distanced relation to one's self, Bloom, drawing on Lacan, argues that it has the opposite effect: by constantly being encouraged to work on one's employability, one creates an unattainable fantasy of full self-realization. However, this fantasy of work without alienation does not put an end to exploitation. On the contrary, Bloom argues that the constant striving to maximize one's employability results in forms of self-exploitation.

While Bloom has looked at self-exploitation as the inherent consequence of the notion of employability, the next two articles look at the consequences of not living up to employability's rhetoric.

In Hadar Elraz's article the 'sellable self' is positioned as central to employability. For her, the failures to live up to the sellable self, while employability still needs to be maintained, result in a 'semblance' of the sellable self that needs to be demonstrated to those who make decisions about one's employability. A particular case of an individual with a mental illness is analyzed, where to maintain employability, he decided to conceal his health condition. While this seemed to help him to remain employable, at the same time it was associated with anxieties, which were shaping his relationships with colleagues and his behaviour at work in a certain way; a way that would not have been chosen had he not had to comply with employability's demands. As such, Elraz's example illuminates the struggle for all (working) individuals in the employability-centred labour market, not just those with mental illnesses.

In their paper, Christina Garsten and Kerstin Jacobsson show how being non-employable may become a disability, while being disabled can make one employed. They look at the practices of helping people considered marginally employable into employment in Sweden. For these individuals, it is through being coded as 'disabled' that they get employment. In the case considered, employability sets standards of normalcy in the labour market, determining what the acceptable and desirable individual characteristics are. The administrative categories, in their turn, work as 'technologies of government' and make these standards 'legible'. Moreover, the categories through which the individual moves are plastic and pliable, i.e. being coded or not coded as 'disabled' depends on political predicates and labour market fluctuations.

The two notes in this special issue reflect on employability in the context of neoliberal higher education; an area that has been increasingly colonized by employability. By reflecting on a series of cultural observations, Paul Taylor

addresses how 'the employability agenda' has become *the* central discourse of university and academic life. As this staunchly pragmatic and hopefully 'impactful' orientation of educational value becomes the norm, Taylor suggests there are two consequences: 'managerialism' and 'academic self-hatred'. Both combine towards an ultimate end of an institution that once gained its legitimacy from culture, and now from its marketed ability to create employable citizens. Taylor's note manages to consider the wider implications for the fate of universities, as they increasingly gain their legitimacy through an 'anti-intellectual, employability-friendly' ethos. In doing so academics are in danger of conforming to a new order that comes at the expense of critical thought, the life of the mind, and theory itself.

Francisco Valenzuela's note brings the thematic concern of employability and higher education into a focus on the promises made by universities through 'graduate employability'. Through a Lacanian-inspired assessment, the 'powerful complementarity' of higher education policies and the free-market are addressed through the notion of 'quality' as the central idiom through which 'employable human-subjects' are developed. To illustrate his conceptualization, Valenzuela brings attention to the student protests in Chile, where the demands for better access to quality education gave way to a strange and paradoxical inference. Despite these protests being anti-capitalist, by conceptualizing their demands through the neoliberal rhetoric of 'quality', the protesters are seen to mobilize a resistance that both reproduces and reinforces the very source of their affliction.

The first book review in this special issue brings up exactly this point. Reviewing Paul Mason's widely discussed *Why it's kicking off everywhere* (2012), Maria Vlachou argues that the student protests in many places across the globe may have been protests *for* employability. As a result, even though these protests and student movements might question capitalism, they do not challenge it and potentially even help to maintain it.

Nathan Gerard's and Sam Dallyn's reviews of Carl Cederström's and Peter Fleming's book *Dead man working* (2012) point us to the tragicomic consequences of modern work. With employability being one of the key aspects of today's understanding of work, the reviews also help to project some of the consequences of living up to employability's demands.

The two final contributions to this special issue bring us back to what we have suggested employability began as; namely, a structural issue of the labour market that continues to shape people's (working) lives. Such shaping may be through the seemingly infinite number of internships individuals have to go through, as Joanna Figiel's review of Ross Perlin's book *Intern nation* (2012) highlights. Or,

this may be in what Melanie Simms looks at in her review of Shidrick et al.'s (2013) most recent book, which focuses on Teesside, a region with high unemployment in the UK. Here, short spells of precarious and often low-paid employment become the most that a lot of 'employable' people are able to get. So crafting oneself to what employability requires, imposing a certain self on individuals with often dramatic consequences of not living up to it, in no way guarantees secure employment or having work.

Conclusion

As the collection of papers in this special issue demonstrates, employability is a notion that rears its head in a diverse number of places. Employability is not only a positively presented response to changes in the labour market that have come to define the relationship between employers and employees, governments and citizens; it is also a practice so deeply engrained in everyday aspects of life that the extent of its impact can easily go unnoticed. As such, this 'Trojan mouse of managerialism' (Taylor, this issue) can be understood as colonizing all it touches, emptying that which once determined its own value – be that 'policy', 'institution', or 'person' – of all but the principles employability puts forth. The contributions to this special issue call our attention to the way the contemporary preoccupation with employability tethers questions of equality and human development to an instrumental capitalist obsession with growth and renewal that may aggravate marginalization, exploitation and stigmatization.

Despite this rather bleak picture, we see this special issue first and foremost as an expression of hope. We hope that the issue's notice to employability reaches individual readers, who can think about employability in light of this special issue, and decide how to act upon it in their respective circumstances. We also hope that this issue will help preventing employability from spreading even further, to parts of the globe that so far have been unaffected by it. Most of all, we hope that this issue will help in re-channeling the vitality that employability aims to kindle, focusing on equality and human development without rooting them in capitalist progress and renewal.

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Fighting against all odds: Entrepreneurship education as employability training

Karin Berglund

abstract

In this paper the efforts of transforming 'regular' entrepreneurship to a specific kind of 'entrepreneurial self' in education are linked to the materialization of employability. It will be illustrated that schoolchildren, under the guise of entrepreneurship education, are taught how to work on improving their selves, emphasizing positive thinking, the joy of creating and awareness of the value of their own interests and passions. This ethic reminds us that we can always improve ourselves, since the enterprising self can never fully be acquired. The flipside of this ethic is that, by continuously being encouraged to become our best, it may be difficult to be satisfied with who we are. Highlighted in this paper is that, with all the amusement and excitement present in entrepreneurship education, also comes an expectation of the individual to fight against all odds. Recruiting students to this kind of shadow-boxing with their selves should involve critical reflection on its political dimensions, human limits, alternative ideals and the collective efforts that are part of entrepreneurial endeavours.

Prologue

> 'I have never needed to look for a job. I found my own way.'

It is an evening when dinnertime has been delayed due to one of those deadlines that most academics continually seem to struggle with. The TV is on in the background and I am just about to get the dinner ready when I hear a woman talk about how she made it as an entrepreneur in life, never having to search for a job, but carving out a life path of her own. I quickly recall that a real estate entrepreneur is this evening's celebrity-in-the-news interview on the 'My truth'

(*Min sanning*) show on Swedish public TV [1]. I reach for the remote control to increase the volume and find myself subsumed by a scene where the host, Kristina Hedberg, is asking a neat, middle-aged, well-dressed woman about the sacrifices she had to make during her entrepreneurial journey in life. The entrepreneur, Wonna I De Jong, explains her success:

> Hedberg: You've written that *everything* depends on how you think – your relations, your health and even your finances are a result of how you think.
> De Jong: Absolutely, absolutely... absolutely [*she nods several times to emphasize the meaning of the message*]. We are who we think we are.
> Hedberg: But what does that say about those who didn't succeed the way you have, did they just think the wrong thoughts?
> De Jong: Yes, in those cases, their thinking was wrong.
> Hedberg: But what about people who are unhappy with their lives? Is their thinking wrong too?
> De Jong: I've been unhappy in my life too; I've even tried to commit suicide. There's misfortune everywhere. I've experienced wealth and poverty, and I believe I found my self from there... For sure, I've been at the bottom several times.
> Hedberg: But wasn't it just external circumstances? Can't something just hit a person?
> De Jong: Yes, misfortune can hit a person – disease, death...
> Hedberg: But, we can't think that away.
> De Jong: You can think away pretty much. You can do that. I know. When you really love life, then you'll find a solution... When we hit the bottom and get back up – that makes us stronger, it builds who we are. Because life is a fantastic adventure, after all.

Billionaire entrepreneur Wonna I De Jong was born in 1960 in Przasnysz, Poland, the youngest daughter of an entrepreneur and a garden-loving mother. By the time she was four, she was taking care of the family's food purchases so her mother could look after their garden. At six, she was selling parsley and chives at the market, since these products were the easiest to carry and made her the most money per kilo. At thirteen, as an outstanding student, Wonna was awarded a school trip to the former Soviet Union, where she realized she could exchange her clothes and make-up for gold (wedding rings and jewellery). This trip thus evolved into a business activity and led to several further trips where she went undercover as a dedicated communist in order to get access to Soviet communities interested in doing business. At seventeen, she decided to go to Sweden, a choice of destination she evaluated carefully after having met a group of Swedish engineers who were constructing the largest building in Warsaw. In Sweden, the student counsellor ridiculed her when she talked about her dream of becoming a businesswoman. Instead she was advised, with her top marks, to go for the medical program at Karolinska Institutet. After three years, however, she

1 The TV show 'My truth' with Wonna I de Jong was first broadcast 1 May 2012 at 8 pm. It has also been possible to see this show on the Internet website SVT Play.

changed her mind and started at law school, but soon changed her mind again to finally decide to go for what she wanted from the start: to become a businesswoman.

At this point, she would go into any kind of business she could make a living from, ranging from technical solutions to selling butter, beer, or porcelain. She bought her first real estate in Holland and, as is often said in these kinds of stories, the rest is history. Today she owns – privately – a real estate empire worth a billion Swedish kronor. It is symbolic that she owns Yxtaholm Castle, fulfilling her dream of living in a castle from when she was six years old. However, as illustrated in this dialogue, her journey was not always easy or free of friction, but followed a hard, tough life of poverty, disease, divorces, lost relations and several other setbacks.

The moral of this story seems to be that, with positive thinking, the game is yours to win (cf. Ehrenreich, 2009). The underlying message is about suppressing (bad) feelings so that they do not interfere with the self-fulfilling dreams of a person's life. No matter how hard you get hit, you need to get back on your feet, again and again and again. Fighting against all odds. This quite amazing story can be easily read as a new kind of Cinderella story of our times. Rather than turning into the passive princess – waiting to be rescued by a prince – Wonna I de Jong turns herself into the self-made businesswoman, which by the way makes up a story-line that is often provided these days in cartoons for girls such as the Barbie films. Nevertheless, in the TV interview she is depicted as one of the few who has managed to create an empire. Just as Joseph Schumpeter, often referred to as the founding father of entrepreneurship theory, once described what entrepreneurs do. Referring to Schumpeter, Elliott (1980: 49) states that 'the successful Marxian capitalist, like his Schumpeterian entrepreneurial counterpart, presumably embodies a significant '"will to found a private kingdom", a "will to conquer", and a "joy of creating" (Schumpeter, 1961: 93)'. Whilst de Jong's story initially revolves around the joy of creating and the host asks questions about the private kingdom and how it was conquered, the story about fighting against all odds turns out to be the real outcome of the interview.

At the end of the interview, the host asks de Jong what she will do with her fortune. Enthusiastically she talks about how she would like to work with young and exposed people to inspire them to make a similar journey as she did herself and to fight against 'Jante's law'[2] – a cultural norm that is seen to permeate Swedish society with its 'Don't ever believe you are someone!' Her idea is not to

2 'Jante's law', made popular by Danish-Norwegian author Aksel Sandemose, was to criticize individual success and achievement as unworthy and inappropriate.

donate any of her fortune to a particular charity, but to start her completely own foundation to specifically address initiatives that promote the entrepreneurial ideals she endorses. With all due respect for Wonna I De Jong's achievements, I want to keep the focus here on how young people – students, pupils, children – relate as entrepreneurial, creative, active, positive thinking individuals with unique interests and passions, to a story that stresses the joy of creating. The flip side, however, of fighting against all odds, is present also but remains as subtext.

It will be argued that schoolchildren, under the guise of entrepreneurship education are taught how to work on improving their selves, emphasizing positive thinking, the joy of creating and awareness of the value of their own interests and passions. This training accentuates the need to work on one's self in order to be attractive to future employers – unless, that is, you 'choose' to start a company yourself. That might as well be what you need to do because there are no other options available. Or you may consider the entrepreneurial path as something that suits you, as Wonna I de Jong did. In entrepreneurship policy research, this distinction is often referred to as 'push' and pull' (Audretsch et al., 2007). No matter if you are pushed or pulled into starting up a company, you are expected to work on your self in order to manage in the market. The entrepreneurship discourse does not seem to escape anyone but accentuates, and presupposes, an enterprising self, whether you are looking for a new job, have a job, or are about to set up a new business.

Hence, entrepreneurship education and employability are tightly linked, since they both centre on the 'enterprising self' (Peters, 2001; Down, 2009; Komulainen et al., 2009; Korhonen et al., 2012). In this paper, I will illustrate how entrepreneurship education takes the shape of employability training in schools. The article proceeds as follows: First, the entrepreneurship discourse is discussed regarding how it has broadened from focusing on only the heroic entrepreneurs to include everyone. This is followed by an elaboration of the links among entrepreneurship, employability and the enterprising self and a section where entrepreneurship education is examined. The concluding discussion concerns possible future consequences with regards to how entrepreneurship education fosters the enterprising self. Because if the 'joy' emphasized in Wonna I de Jong's story comes at the cost of fighting against all odds, how much fun is that?

From the Entrepreneur to personal entrepreneurs

Much of the strong legitimacy of entrepreneurship in modern society rests upon the general notion of entrepreneurs as creative and energetic frontrunners that

undertake innovative action that in the end will mean prosperity and development for all of us (Ogbor, 2000). Joseph Schumpeter (1883–1950) saw the entrepreneur as an individual who carries out new combinations (innovations) that bring the market out of equilibrium. Accordingly, not many within a human population have this quality, and often this action is limited to a certain period of time, while 'those who follow the pioneers are still entrepreneurs, though to a degree that continuously decreases to zero' (Schumpeter, 1934: 414). This reasoning implies that there are Entrepreneurs – those with capital E – and there are entrepreneurial followers. The relevant question to ask from a Schumpeterian perspective is 'Who *is* an entrepreneur? – which also led to the desire to map the actual traits of The Entrepreneur.

The efforts to nail down a particular kind of person appear to have been unrewarding. Nevertheless, this research can be seen as very successful in constructing the traits that remain central to the entrepreneurship discourse (Jones and Spicer, 2005; Berglund and Johansson, 2007a). The critique of the trait approach that dominated entrepreneurship research for a long time led to a new and dominant stream of research, instead turning towards studying new business creation, attaining a slightly more inclusive notion about who may be included in the herd of entrepreneurs (e.g. Gartner, 2001). The initial question thus changed in the direction of looking at practice: 'What should a person do in order to become a successful Entrepreneur?'. Accordingly, many entrepreneurship and management textbooks today emphasize how to develop successful business ideas, how to recognize opportunities, how to build an entrepreneurial team, how to write a business plan and how to manage a growing entrepreneurial firm (e.g. Barringer and Ireland, 2006). The idea of the Entrepreneur – the one with capital E – remains, but it is now acknowledged that the rest of the population can train their entrepreneurial competences in order to develop successful businesses.

Recently, entrepreneurs are portrayed not so much in relation to starting a business, as in relation to making their (dream) life come true, as 'personal entrepreneurs' (Olsson and Frödin, 2007). Personal entrepreneurs denote a new era of mankind comprising all those people who make things happen and who discover how they – themselves – can create new energy by discovering that much of what they previously believed in was not true (ibid.). Accordingly, with this attitude to life, it is argued as being much more possible to fulfil one's dreams and to have fun whilst exploring one's ideas. The joy of creating is emphasized and entrepreneurship is depicted as a personal adventure.

This version of entrepreneurship thus fits well with ideas on personal development. In relation to the previous two business-related questions, this

version unfolds a new question in relation to the entrepreneur, namely: 'How can people (in general) take on entrepreneurial traits in order to develop their immanent selves?' In this vein, many other books – such as self-help books – provide a rich source for how we can become more entrepreneurial, more enterprising, by searching for our immanent selves, teaching us how to affirm the parts of ourselves that are seen as valuable and enriching, as well as modifying the parts that interfere with our search for a 'deeper, truer self' (see also Bröckling, 2005; Costea et al., 2012). This runs well with ideas on self-management, where self-development is tightly linked to the employing organization, which in terms of personal entrepreneurship can be yourself. Consequently, employment and personal development are united. The more personal development, the more you work on your employability, becoming the sought-after person – just as Entrepreneurs have always been sought out (Jones and Spicer, 2005).

The process of rewriting the Entrepreneur to the entrepreneurial possibilities of us all has coincided with an (academic and public) struggle for ascribing to entrepreneurship something more specific (or general) among different entrepreneurship discourses, for instance, stressing communal, social, ecological and egalitarian values (Berglund and Johansson, 2007b). Entrepreneurial traits, however, emphasizing someone who is totally committed to a task, takes risks, and creates something completely different, remains central to both the entrepreneur and the enterprising individual (Ahl, 2002; Berglund, 2007). Despite all the richness of 'entrepreneurial' and 'enterprising' identities that have been invented in contemporary society (e.g. Cohen and Musson, 2000), it has been illustrated that entrepreneurship discourses are highly gendered (e.g. Bruni et al., 2004), positioning women as less entrepreneurial than men, thus making up an antithesis to the entrepreneurial man (Ahl and Marlow, 2012; Holmer Nadesan and Tretheway, 2000). For this reason, among several others such as economic bias (see Hjorth and Steyaert, 2004), there have been attempts to create more justifiable entrepreneurship discourses. This has concurrently created a seedbed for various entrepreneurial discourses since they all draw upon the idea of the creative human being (Berglund and Johansson, 2007b; Sørensen, 2008), in which God is replaced by an immanent Self to be explored. The Entrepreneur with the capital E is still discernible, but now is subsumed in the Darwinian masculine stereotype that Ogbor (2000) speaks of and against whom enterprising selves are judged in terms of a flexible subject, sensitive to market signals.

The entrepreneur is also an ideal that operates well with contemporary neoliberal ideals, since this person is her/his own capital, her/his producer and who becomes her/his own source of property (Foucault, 1978). According to du Gay et

al. (1986: 170), the entrepreneur can no longer be 'represented as just one among a plurality of ethical personalities but must be seen as assuming an ontological priority'. The enterprising self is obviously at the centre of entrepreneurship discourses and has come to inform individuals to work, not only on their businesses, but also on themselves. Whilst the former is still described in terms of entrepreneurship, the latter is described in terms of employability, stressing how people are expected to relentlessly update and improve their knowledge and skills, trying to feel good about themselves while satisfying the Big Boss, a composite of all potential future employers (Cremin, 2010). Accordingly, entrepreneurship and employability have at least one thing in common: they both assume an enterprising self. In the next section, entrepreneurship and employability are further elaborated as discourses on the enterprising self.

Entrepreneurship and employability: discourses on the enterprising self

The enterprising self is at the centre of entrepreneurship and employability as both invoke the idea of infinite personal development. According to Costea et al. (2012), the principle of potentiality lies at the heart of employability, and one highly potent figure is the entrepreneur her/himself, the one who creates (Berglund and Johansson, 2007a). Thus, discourses on employability and entrepreneurship emphasize individuals as borderless, always open for development, advancement and progress. This is how Rose (1996) sees the enterprising self –as occupying contemporary ideas on the individual:

> Become whole, become what you want, become yourself: the individual is to become, as it were, an entrepreneur of itself, seeking to maximize its own powers, its own happiness, its own quality of life, though enhancing its autonomy and then instrumentalizing its autonomous choices in the service of its life-style. (*ibid.*, 1996: 158)

Like entrepreneurship, employability has in recent decades come to be cast as the solution of individual, organizational and societal success. Whilst traditional entrepreneurship discourse has accentuated the already resourceful individual (e.g. Ogbor, 2000), employability speaks of the exploration of infinite human resourcefulness (e.g. Costea et al., 2007), which invokes the subject of self-management (Heelas, 2002), giving shape to individuals who have everything to 'win' and nothing to 'lose' from working to improve their selves. It is suggested that through becoming enterprising we can be in control of both our work and our lives. As Rose (1996: 158) put its, we fulfil ourselves 'not in spite of work but by means of work'. Becoming enterprising seems to offer a lot at first glance, but may also convey some disastrous consequences:

> Just as companies are supposed to best increase their profitability by organizing their internal procedures to be market-compatible, transforming themselves into a multitude of 'companies within the company' and ultimately promoting every employee to a subcontractor, the individual is supposed to be able to fully develop his [*sic*] entrepreneurial virtues only by applying the principle of intrapreneurship to himself and splitting himself up accordingly: as 'customer of himself', he is his own king, a being with needs that are to be recognized and satisfied by the 'supplier of himself'. If the latter ignores the demands of his internal business partner, this partner will chasten him with lethargy, exhaustion or other forms of energy deprivation. If the exchange works well, however, both profit from it. (Bröckling, 2005: 13)

The emphasis on the enterprising self (and entrepreneurship/employability) goes hand in hand with a state that has been redefined from being a distributor to an offeror of services (Jacobsson, 2004), or, as Rose (1999) put it, with the shift from a social state to an enabling state, where individuals are free to make active choices. Accordingly, employers in general, including public sector employers, are positioned in such a way that they are expected to make it possible for 'the individual to stay employable in relation to the workplace in which she/he works' (Fejes, 2010: 100). And vice versa, 'the individual is positioned as responsible for making use of the opportunities offered as a way of transforming her/himself into an employable citizen' (*ibid.*).

The enterprising self is not only accentuated in relation to employers, employees and citizens in general, but is also discernible in the educational system. Peters (2001) traces how the 'enterprise culture' in the UK, which emerged under Prime Minister Thatcher´s administration, took the form of 'enterprise education' and 'enterprise curriculum' in education, and shows how the 'responsibilization of the self' was invoked in the educational context:

> The duty to the self – its simultaneous responsibilization as a moral agent and its construction as a calculative rational choice actor – becomes the basis for a series of investment decisions concerning one's health, education, security, employability and retirement. (*ibid.*: 61)

Komulainen et al. (2009) report on the same movement in Finland, where entrepreneurship has been introduced in education, and where the action plan above all stresses 'inner entrepreneurship' – a general enterprising attitude to be taught in schools. Examining narratives written by students in comprehensive school for the yearly competition 'Good enterprise!', they find that the hero entrepreneur is rare in the students' stories, which they argue is at odds with the growth-oriented action that is pursued in the policy documents. Instead, the entrepreneurship narratives highlight the moral virtues and qualities of respectable citizens, stressing diligence, honesty and self-responsibility. What is more, these stories are classed as well as gendered, favouring boys in the

competition since they better match the culturally valued representations of the autonomous, risk-taking entrepreneurial individual. This may not be a surprise since the entrepreneurship discourse – portraying the hero Entrepreneur – is itself gendered.

Holmer Nadesan and Tretheway (2000) further the reasoning on the gendered enterprising self by illustrating how popular magazines encourage women to embrace the entrepreneurial ideal, striving for success. However, simultaneously, they confront 'subtle remarks that they as women can never hope to achieve it' (*ibid.*: 224). They argue that women's discourse offers a paradox, in the sense that success is contingent on developing an enterprising self that is ultimately held to be unattainable because of 'unsightly (feminine) leakages that always/already reveal their performances as charade' (*ibid.*). Nevertheless, 'inspiring stories', 'self-help sections' and 'improve-yourself articles' dominate women's magazines (Bröckling, 2005) and can be seen as a motive to the fact that women must work harder on their enterprising selves.

The enterprising self thus has ambivalent and contradictory dimensions since it approves some personal properties and one set of personal properties and defines others as deviant (Komulainen et al., 2009: 32). What is required to reconcile its heterogeneous element is not any authoritarian dictatorship, but partaking in an 'inner' decision-making dialogue. Following Bröckling's (2005: 13) reasoning, 'the self, unlike a "real" business, can neither choose its staff members nor fire them for unsatisfactory performance'. This is what children are taught under the heading of entrepreneurship education. Now let us see how entrepreneurship education has been introduced in the education system.

Creating the entrepreneurial generation

It is a frosty morning in the midst of fall in Reykjavik, Iceland, 11 October 2007. Around 120 people have gathered from various nations of the European Union to discuss 'Entrepreneurship in vocational education – a key to social inclusion and economic development in Europe'. As a researcher interested in the EU program 'Equal', I am identified as one of the academics who could contribute to the dialogue at this conference. My experience from the Equal projects falls back on participators' mutual efforts to turn entrepreneurship into subversive action by way of addressing – and trying to subvert – discriminating and excluding structures. Making a long story short, this was my background, and I therefore expected discussions on structural obstacles, power regimes, and how these could be overcome.

Imagine my surprise when the initial guest on the conference program was a young male entrepreneur who had started a war game on the Web. He had an hour at his disposal but took much more time, to the other presenters' frustration. But the audience was completely amazed by his story; albeit every other sentence was judgmental (for instance, dismissing women since they were not interested in Web games, ridiculing different ethnic traits and so forth). Except for this presenter – who turned out to be a kind of a role figure for the conference (as if the goal would be to turn all youngsters on the edge into Web game designers), three boys from an Irish school participated on the merits of having won an entrepreneurship competition. When the moderator asked the boys about their dream, they shared the vision – once they had become real entrepreneurs some time in the future – of coming back to their old school in a red helicopter to inspire future students that 'it really is possible to achieve something when you want to'. How the organizers stitched diversity and inclusion into this program remains a mystery; however, this occasion served as an awakening moment illustrating how young people – in very diverse ways – are recruited to fantasize about themselves and share their fantasies with the public whilst being rewarded with warm applause.

These examples, depicting the Entrepreneur almost as some caricature, are nonetheless commonly contested or renounced by teachers involved in the practice and development of entrepreneurship education in Scandinavian countries (Berglund and Holmgren, 2013; Korhonen et al., 2012; Skogen and Sjövoll, 2010; Komulainen et al., 2009). These kinds of 'hero versions', embodying the raw economic ideals of an exploiting capitalist, are rejected in favour of another kind of entrepreneurial ideal that is seen to embrace, include and develop students. In the Finnish version, 'inner entrepreneurship' is called for, which Komulainen et al. (2009) refer to as a 'new basic skill and competence for every citizen'.

In Sweden, an 'entrepreneurial approach' has gained acknowledgment, stressing that the school will encourage students to develop an approach that promotes entrepreneurship in the sense of stimulating creativity, curiosity and self-confidence in order to solve problems, try out ideas and take initiative and responsibility (Curriculum, Lgr 11, 2010:6). This approach will be promoted throughout schooling. Even if daycare centres are not directly referred to (in the curriculum for these centres, enterprise and creativity are emphasised), there are also day care centres working with entrepreneurship as a project (Berglund, 2012). And, even if there are still teachers who resist entrepreneurship, the idea of becoming entrepreneurial as an individual has received wide acceptance.

As early as 1997, Johannisson and Madsén voiced how citizenship could be fostered among students by introducing an enterprising approach, stressing the commitment that can be discerned among small business owners. In 2006, Leffler highlighted how an enterprising discourse, based on student activity that encourages students to take initiative and responsibility, had become part of teaching, which she contrasted to an entrepreneurship discourse that referred to 'core' business creation (Leffler, 2006: 223). Furthermore, in a 2007 study, the entrepreneurial approach was verbalized by committed teachers, many of whom saw themselves as initiators of entrepreneurship education, emphasizing students' ability to be creative, active, take initiative and to reflect on their selves and their relation to society and to life itself (Berglund and Holmgren, 2007).

Whether 'inner entrepreneurship' or 'entrepreneurial approach' is highlighted, they both refer more to encouraging a broad approach to life itself among children than to a process of setting up a new company. This approach stresses being active, seeing opportunities (in life) and exploring them. It is how discovering one's personal passions and dreams, taking initiative, daring to try new things, learning to fail and to never give up have become integral parts of teaching entrepreneurship in schools. Arguably, this fits well with the ideas Olsson and Frödin express in their book Personal entrepreneurship:

> Start a company, find a dream job, realize a volunteer project or do whatever you find worth doing in life. You can use your personal entrepreneurship to do exactly what you want. So what are your dreams and passions, small and big? (Olsson and Frödin, 2007: 15)

Entrepreneurship education has indeed come to embrace more than knowledge on how to start a company, and it has opened up for a market for new 'products' – teaching material, teacher's guides and associated courses – that have been introduced to support teachers as they take on entrepreneurship, as an approach to life itself, in their education work. In a knowledge survey edited by the Swedish National Agency for Education in 2010, titled 'Skapa och våga: Om entreprenörskap i skolan' ('Create and dare: About entrepreneurship in school') entrepreneurship is discussed as a panacea: 'entrepreneurship, in its widest sense, ascribes to each individual a potential in life, studies, work and in society to deal with problems, see opportunities and be energetic' (p. 63). In this publication, eleven different concepts are presented. The premise in all concepts is that entrepreneurship is more than running a business. According to one of the concepts, entrepreneurship is about creating 'an arena with a space to make what is fun in life; to create a life situation that feels meaningful' (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2010: 21). Mainly, these concepts are directed at primary and secondary school, where the entrepreneurial approach is more prominent in the lower grades, while business creation is addressed more often

in the higher grades. Johansson and Rosell (2012), however, found that the entrepreneurial approach was also part of higher entrepreneurship education, both at a university and in a folk high school (*folkhögskola*) and concluded that this kind of education is more about personal development than starting a business. In the folk high school...

> [t]he education program began with a period where the students and the SIP staff got to know each other personally. This was done through various social events. One important activity was that the students all got the opportunity to perform their own lectures to the rest of the class on subjects that they were particularly interested in. Just to mention a few examples, students have lectured on the Brazilian dance, Capoeira, how to make a tattoo, medieval games, or the design of a chair included in the product range of a small business. (*ibid.*: 249)

In this case, students' interests are part of an education where they are encouraged to make more out of their interests, since those interests set a ground for personal development. Moreover, the fun part of education – and of life – is highlighted, though the 'fun' bears on the ability to try something out, to fail (and try again) in order to be able to succeed. The 'fun' is also emphasized in the sequel book to *Personal Entrepreneurship* with the subtitle 'Feel good while you succeed', which is advertised this way on their website:

> Personal entrepreneurship is the bridge between thought and action. Your ability to make your ideas into reality. Ideas on how you want to live your life and the things you want to create in your life... Personal entrepreneurship is about realizing dreams, making things happen and feeling good while you're doing it. It is an approach to life with a focus on opportunity, power, desire and willingness to do what you want, right now. It's about daring to try, daring to fail and daring to succeed. (Frödin and Olsson, 2013)

In general, 'fun', 'excitement' and 'adventure' are recurrent words describing the activities in entrepreneurship education. It is easy to envisage that these courses get high marks on 'customer satisfaction'. The approach runs all the way through school, from small children in preschool (with stories and playful exercises) to more ambitious enterprise competitions that are introduced in the higher grades. Through these activities, children are expected to turn into innovators, find their own potential (exploring their interests and tastes), and then become extroverted storytellers to communicate their ideas.

In one of the concepts, 'Flashes of genius', directed towards children six years old, positive thinking is emphasised by way of a number of different stories. In one of the stories, the fairy-tale characters No-no and Yes-yes are introduced to help train young children to relate to themselves in a certain way. Where Yes-yes sees opportunities to create new ideas and solutions, No-no is the figure that makes us think before we do anything wrong, so that nothing goes amiss.

Referring to Bröckling's (2005: 13) description of the enterprising self, No-no and Yes-yes make up the dialogue between the customer and the supplier of one's self. This kind of exercise emphasizes that there may be pitfalls to consider and that children must learn to balance positive and negative aspects to make choices about what to go for. In the teacher's guide to these stories, the need to train this balance is distinctly expressed. Hence, this illustrates the need to exercise an 'inner' dialogue in order to reconcile the heterogeneous nature of the enterprising self.

So, if business creation is not the common denominator in the concepts launched under the umbrella of entrepreneurship education, then 'fun', 'own interests' and 'finding one's passions' certainly are. They tie together what is recognized as entrepreneurship education. This direction is echoed in a book written by 18 students during an entrepreneurial program at a high school. One of the stories in the book is how they came to get to learn about each other's dreams during this year, and how they had to search within themselves to do so:

> We had to dig deep within ourselves, and to bring forward passions we did not know were there when we started working on our individual projects. (Påtända osläckbara själar, 2007: 81)

Thus, the entrepreneurial approach can be trained and is considered vital in order to explore the enterprising selves of children. In these education activities, they learn that everything is possible and that if one fails – whether it is about starting a business or getting a job – it is just a matter of getting back on your feet again. To try again and again and again. To have dreams to fulfil is the most important part. Whether those dreams can be realized depends on if one has the right approach – to fight against all odds. This illustrates some of the ways that entrepreneurship education has turned into employability training in schools. The question is: what are the implications of this emphasis on having fun and learning to never give up?

Fostering the enterprising self

That entrepreneurship has come to be connected with the 'good' (and often God-like) is hard to deny. Entrepreneurs are worshipped as saviours of our times and entrepreneurial-making initiatives have found their way into organizations where they would have been unthinkable only 10 or 15 years ago. Swedish schools are just one example; there are many other contexts to look into, such as the state agencies promoting this discourse, the public sector promoting its employees to become more entrepreneurial (e.g. Fejes, 2010), the foundations created by

retiring entrepreneurs who want to leave behind a legacy, or the universities that we academics ourselves are a part of (Costea et al., 2012).

Returning to the introductory story of Wonna I De Jong, after going into depth about how she had to fight against all odds, she finally resolved the heterogeneous parts of her life: '...life is a fantastic adventure after all'. Entrepreneurial features are increasingly promoted in the institutions I have mentioned here, promising coaching advice in our adventurous journey of life. However, this coaching advice is no longer optional through newspapers and books – it has become central to educational policies and is now part of the curriculum.

Entrepreneurship education aims at fostering the enterprising selves of children, training their employability and creating conditions for future entrepreneurship. This fits well with how we as inhabitants of a neoliberal society increasingly become part of an 'enterprise culture' (Wee and Brooks, 2012) by which notions of employability, flexibility, project orientation and individual responsibility are made central to our way of justifying ourselves and our actions (e.g. Chiapello and Fairclough, 2002; Cremin, 2011; du Gay et al., 1986). The enterprising self can be seen as the invisible role model against whom individuals are judged, and judge themselves, in contemporary society. The recurrent watchwords for this subject seem to be 'Achieve more!' 'Perform!' 'Fight against all odds!' and 'Have fun in the meantime!'

The flipside of De Jong's story is not so much about having fun, but struggling against the odds. Likewise, entrepreneurship education challenges students to see opportunities, to work on their potentialities and to become 'more' (cmp. Costea et al., 2012). Students are no longer just in search of knowledge, but are also encouraged to search for their selves. These are particular selves that are expected to be developed, namely the enterprising selves. They are never sufficient as one can always become 'more entrepreneurial'. Being entrepreneurial, as well as being employable, has no limits. According to Costea et al. (2012: 33), advancing oneself – becoming 'more' – places the self in a position to be in 'permanent antagonism with itself'. By failing to recognise human limits and making false promises about absolute freedom, 'more' is not the path to happiness and success, but rather a tragic path where individuals need to fight, not only against all odds, but also with themselves (*ibid.*).

The narrative of Wonna I de Jong illustrates that it has been hard work to accomplish the success that became the ticket to the interview show. However, this hard work is not described in the sense of (traditional) physical labour and long hours of work, with tough assignments and challenging tasks, but is

emphasised more as training oneself to think in a certain way. As in Pavlov's conditioned reflex, she explains how she trained herself so that whenever she met resistance, she would think positively about herself and challenge herself to get on her feet again and to fight against all odds. In other words, her story is all about her – the individual – who should accept a situation in order to adapt to new circumstances and situations. Adversity is not constructed as a loss of something, but as a journey, which paves a way for life as a fantastic adventure. What is missing in this story is the collective part – about those who have played a part in creating her success – as well as the difficulties and structural conditions that may not have been that easy to just 'think away'. Nor is the 'destruction' part of the story (a concept central to Schumpeter, by the way), for all those words that denote 'loss', 'damage', 'harm' and so forth are suppressed.

Finally, I should comment that this paper situates its point of departure in the story of a woman who was brought up by an admired entrepreneurial father. Entrepreneurship is indeed a gendered discourse, but when this discourse changes from tracing 'Entrepreneurs' to promoting 'the entrepreneurial', it may have unexpected consequences. My apprehension is that it twists gender in sophisticated ways. Whilst 'boys' remain pinpointed as the 'real entrepreneurs'– in school they often turn out to be the mischievous boys (e.g. Berglund and Holmgren, 2008; Korhonen et al., 2012) – 'the girls' are introduced to acquiring their enterprising selves by finding ways to 'be good' and to continually improve themselves. This pursuit of an enterprising identity requires for women, according to Holmer Nadesan and Tretheway (2000: 245), a 'constant vigilance and the expenditure of both time and resources in the pursuit of disciplining what is articulated as an unruly psyche and an overflowing body'. This would not subvert gendered structures then, but retain them, keeping them even more invisible and thereby hampering the potential of collective and feminist action. Thus, whilst the search for a 'true' enterprising self is seen to secure economic and political well-being in contemporary times, it not only leaves prevailing unjust and unequal structures intact, but reinforces them.

Summing up, entrepreneurship education offers the exercise of a work ethic that reminds us that we can always improve ourselves, and that the enterprising self can never fully be acquired. This is because our enterprising self is always escaping us, teasing us to keep on moving, to take one step further, to become 'more' (Costea et al., 2012) in order to improve our lives. Ironically, however, the flipside is that by chasing to become our best we can never be satisfied with who we are or feel content about our selves. Recruiting students to this kind of shadow-boxing with their selves should involve critical reflection on its political dimensions, human limits, alternative ideals and the collective efforts that are part of entrepreneurial endeavours.

Even if de Jong seems to be reaping the fruits of her success, she wants to move on to new endeavours: helping poor and exposed young people on their entrepreneurial journeys and simultaneously freeing the state from direct intervention. She talks about the 'fun' and enjoyable part of her journey and how she wants to introduce individuals – in particular, young people – to the 'fun' of life. But what I have highlighted in this paper is that with all this amusement and excitement comes the expectation of the individual to have to fight against all odds.

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Ethnicized un/employability: Problematized Others and the shaping of advanced liberal subjects

Viktor Vesterberg

abstract

This paper suggests some analytical tools for theoretically informed qualitative research of the nexus of employability and ethnicity. A governmentality perspective, inspired by Michel Foucault and others who have elaborated on his thoughts, constitutes the analytical approach of the paper. This approach directs the analytical focus towards problematizations and how the conduct of the governed subjects is guided. The analytical tools and approach are then employed using an empirical example. The analysis shows how a certain disadvantaged group – unemployed Somalis in Sweden – is problematized in the context of a labour market project co-funded by the European Social Fund (ESF). The paper discusses how different techniques, such as resume-writing, personal action plan, guidance and job interview training are deployed in order to reshape these problematized and ethnicized Others into advanced liberal subjects, or 'employable' individuals.

> To find out what our society means by sanity, perhaps we should investigate what is happening in the field of insanity. And what we mean by legality in the field of illegality. (Foucault, 1983: 211)

Introduction

How should we approach the concept of employability? One way of investigating what is meant by employability could be to scrutinize what is happening in the field of *un*employability. In line with this idea, the aim of this paper is to analyse the problematization of ethnicized un/employable Others. The material analysed

consists of a labour market project in Sweden, co-funded by the European Social Fund (ESF), which targets unemployed Somalis. The project is owned and run by the Swedish branch of IOGT[1] international. Somalis, as a group, is exceptionally disadvantaged and often considered as problematic in relation to the labour market due to high rates of unemployment (Thörnquist, 2011). I discuss this through the overarching question of how ethnicity is constructed and problematized in relation to conceptions of un/employability[2]. Specifically, the paper seeks to address the following questions: How are the ethnicized Others problematized, and in relation to what? What techniques are deployed to address the problems constructed? What are the normative qualities and characteristics of the employable subject? In what kind of practice does the fostering of employable subjects occur? These questions will be discussed in analysing the management of *problematized Others* and the shaping of *advanced liberal subjects* – i.e. individuals perceived as employable in contemporary advanced liberal societies.

The concept of problematized Others is inspired by Edward Said (1979) and his influential work on Orientalism. Throughout Western discourse, the Orient has been described and discursively produced as 'backward' and 'static' – an antithesis of the progressive, modern West. The Orient, under Western hegemony, emerged as an object of knowledge and hence was constructed through practices of power and knowledge (Hall, 1997). Throughout history, the inhabitants of the Orient – the Others – have been depicted as lazy and unreliable (Said, 1979). I use the term 'problematized Others' in order to grasp how Otherness (based on notions of ethnic differences) is constructed as problematic in relation to contemporary Western norms of defining which individuals are employable subjects. The un/employability of problematized Others is, so to speak, ethnically marked.

Furthermore, I have chosen to conceptualize the subjects who meet contemporary normative standards of being employable as 'advanced liberal subjects'. This notion of advanced liberal subjects is inspired by the work of Nikolas Rose (1999) and his discussion of contemporary Western societies in terms of advanced liberalism. One of the pertinent features of such societies is to create and maintain a functional market economy. Rose argues that in advanced liberal societies:

1 International Organization of Good Templars

2 I use the term un/employability as my objective is to focus on the whole spectrum, from those regarded as not employable to the ideals and norms of what/who constitutes an employable subject.

> [s]ocial government must be restricted in the name of an economic logic, and economic government must create and sustain the central elements of economic well-being such as the enterprise form and competition. [...] All aspects of social behaviour are now reconceptualized along economic lines – as calculative actions. [...] All manner of social undertakings [...] can be reconstructed in terms of their contribution to the development of human capital. (Rose, 1999: 141)

The ideal inhabitant of such a society is characterized by the will to make an enterprise out of his or her own life. Rose (1999: 142) continues his argument by concluding that the 'powers of the state thus have to be directed to empowering the entrepreneurial subjects of choice in their quest for self-realization'. The contemporary advanced liberal subject can be seen as being driven by economic reasoning (such as entrepreneurial attitude and competition), seeking to maximize himself/herself in order to provide for both his/her own well-being and for the economic growth of enterprise. Under advanced liberal rule, the individual becomes responsible for his/her own welfare, through the powerful discourse of individual free choice. Citizens of advanced liberal societies are socialized to perceive their lives as the outcomes of rational choices. As a consequence, they are made responsible for the outcomes of their free choice (Miller and Rose, 2008). Politicians exhort individuals to take responsibility for their own security (Rose, 1999: 160) such as preventing unemployment through strengthening their employability (Rose, 1996). The state still has a responsibility to provide opportunities for such activities through the funding of both private and public experts that stand willing to help and guide citizens in maintaining their employability.

The problematized Others are often subjects categorized as 'immigrants' or 'ethnic minorities'. The advanced liberal subject, on the other hand, is not necessarily a native (although that may often be the case). The prominent feature of the advanced liberal subject is rather that the individual has adopted an attitude and a sense of self that is in accord with the prevailing norms of advanced liberal societies. The advanced liberal subject could be thought of as a subject position which is *potentially* reachable for each and all of us.

The two categories of advanced liberal subjects and problematized Others are used in the empirical analysis of this study to render a vision of those who are perceived today as employable citizens and those who are not but instead are problematized as unemployable. This conceptual dichotomy is not to be understood as a set of neat clear-cut categories but rather as a starting point for thinking about the issue of ethnicized un/employability.

The paper is structured as follows. First, I provide an overview of contemporary studies of employability, noticing that qualitative studies concerned with

relations between employability and ethnicity are relatively rare. Second, I suggest an analytical approach drawing on governmentality that could be used in analysing relations between employability and ethnicity. Third, the paper engages with an empirical case, exemplifying how this approach may be put to work. The conclusion recapitulates and elaborates on the empirical findings and analysis.

Studies of employability

Employability discourse has both intensified in the political arena and generated increasing interest in academia during the past decade (Berglund and Fejes, 2009; Brown et al., 2004; Garsten and Jacobsson, 2004; Weinert et al., 2001). In studies on employability, attention has been drawn to various fields and phenomena. One common theme in these studies is the relation between employability and education. For example, Doyle (2003) investigates how economic and democratic values compete in discourses of higher education in policy texts from New Labour in the UK. Another study, Boden and Nedeva (2010), argues that higher education in the UK is becoming more neoliberal and that this is accompanied with a shift in defining employability. Although universities in the UK have a tradition of producing productive citizens, the neoliberal emphasis on employability affects power relations in the labour market in favour of employers. This adversely affects pedagogies and curricula of higher education. Boden and Nedeva (2010) conclude that some universities may become devoted to producing 'docile employees' whilst other produce employers and leaders. Within the Swedish context, Carlbaum (2012) analyses how representations of problems, goals and purposes are produced in Swedish educational policy and how this constructs ideals of the good citizen. The good citizen is depicted as employable and entrepreneurial and devoted to enhance business and growth. Another theme, related to education, is how employability relates to the notion of lifelong learning. Nicoll and Fejes (2008) explore how this notion figures in policy discourse and it constructs governable subjects.

Other studies have focused on the experiences of students. For example, Nilsson (2010) investigates how engineering graduates perceive employability. He discusses employability in terms of soft skills (interpersonal skills and personal characteristics) and hard skills (formal and actual competence) and concludes that the engineering graduates consider the hard skills less important in relation to their individual employability. Fogde (2009) employs a governmentality perspective when examining how a Swedish union gives career advice to university students. She concludes that students are encouraged to work with themselves in order to become sellable, flexible and employable. Furthermore, employability in the light of the knowledge economy has been studied by Brown

and Hesketh (2004). They analyse how university graduates use their employability when competing for prominent positions in multinational companies and public sector organizations. Focusing on the hiring process, they reveal the socially constructed nature of employability.

Employability has also been studied in relation to age. Nielsen (1999) examines the association between employability, workability and age and concludes that there is a strong relationship between these categories. In relation to gender, Carlbaum (2011) has analysed the gendered constructions of future workers in Swedish educational policy. How disability and employability are related has also been investigated. Holmqvist (2009) examines labour market policy programs targeting those regarded as hard to employ, often impaired people, by offering 'dirty' and stigmatized work tasks in order to strengthen their self-confidence and rehabilitate their working capacity.

In relation to what has been called 'the age of migration', research on ethnicity has also increased during recent decades (Castles and Miller, 2009). However, research on how these two concepts – ethnicity and employability – intersect is rarely investigated. For instance, Ashcraft (2009) argues that organizational and management studies in general have neglected ethnic aspects, and Nkomo (1992) stresses that reading mainstream organizational research would lead one to believe that organizations are ethnically neutral. This, of course, is a worrying situation.

Although under-researched, relations between employability and ethnicity have previously been investigated, commonly in relation to higher education and immigrants' prospects in the labour market (Morley, 2010). Studies focusing on ethnicity and employability tend to engage in quantitatively describing the disadvantage of immigrants in the labour market (e.g. Leslie and Drinkwater, 1998; Conley and Topa, 2002; Carmichael and Woods, 2000).

What seems to be a distinguishing feature for quantitatively oriented studies on ethnically marked un/employability is a tendency to treat ethnicity as something 'essential', something that *is* – as a variable – rather than something that is *being done*. The concept of ethnicity is not problematized as such. The same goes for the term 'employability', which is conceptualized as 'human capital' that could be measured, and not as a problematic and normative category in need of critical investigation. As Brown et al. (2004: 7) put it, 'A major problem confronting researchers interested in issues of employability is the lack of theoretically informed studies'. They argue that previous research on employability is dominated by large-scale surveys which fail to grasp qualitative aspects and that policy discourse on employability is dominated by an employer perspective.

From a research perspective, one fruitful strategy to outline different approaches to employability is to ask the question whether one is conducting research *for* employability or *of* employability (cf. Alvesson, Bridgman and Wilmott, 2009). Each of these two approaches will lead to different research questions and perspectives. The latter will lean towards a more critical understanding of the term employability – taking into consideration the continuum, stretching from what is constructed as unemployable to normative ideals of what constitutes an employable individual. This opens up the analytical scope to a broader view of how ethnicity and un/employability relate.

The study *for* employability could be seen as interested in 'solutions' to a political problem, namely how to make the population more employable. Migration, integration and employability are prominent areas in policy making, not least within the European Union (COM, 2005). The study *of* or *for* employability could therefore be understood in relation to what Martiniello (2010) discusses in terms of policy-relevant and policy-driven research. On the one hand, the study *for* employability would imply a more policy-driven research. The research questions would then be formulated with policy making and problem solving in mind. Policy stakeholders are often interested in quick solutions to the problems they are addressing (Martiniello and Rath, 2010); hence, the research would ideally function as a remedy to unemployability. On the other hand, the study *of* employability is concerned with developing a critical understanding of what employability could mean. The study *of* un/employability is relevant to, but not driven by, policy making. I will here conceptualize an approach concerned with the study *of* employability and ethnicity.

Governmentality and un/employability

The approach I outline here is inspired by Michel Foucault and those who have elaborated on his thoughts on governmentality. Foucault's work on governmentality illuminates the dynamic and complex ways through which societies are governed (Foucault, 2007; 2008). This perspective evokes a broad approach to governing, ranging from government of ourselves and of others as well as states or organizations (Walters, 2012). Since the 1990s, Foucault's concept of governmentality has attracted increased interest among scholars, mainly in the Anglo-Saxon world. The study of governmentality has become a 'powerful current in the social and political sciences' (Walters, 2012: 1), including organization studies, and can today be regarded as a field of research in its own right.

Foucault argues that since the eighteenth century, a specific mentality of government, targeting populations and their 'wealth, health, longevity, its capacity to wage war and to engage in labour' (Miller and Rose, 2008: 27) has been predominant in Western societies. Foucault (1997: 80) describes this particular governmentality as 'techniques and procedures for directing human behaviour'. Governmentality, in short, can be seen as a way of linking the problematics of government of the state (Rose and Miller, 1992), the economy, populations and the individual (Dean, 2010). The meaning of governmentality is often boiled down to the 'conduct of conduct' which indicates a focus on how people are led, guided and directed, and/or encouraged to lead and guide themselves. This conduct of conduct always implies norms and standards by which the behaviour of the governed subjects can be measured and calculated (Dean, 2010).

A starting point for analysis of governmentality is to identify and examine problematizations within the specific 'regime of practices' that one intends to analyse. A regime of practices refers to a 'fairly coherent' way of doing things within a particular institutional setting at a certain time and place (Dean, 2010: 31). Practices also have a discursive character: language is mutually constitutive in relation to practices and techniques (Miller and Rose 2008: 29ff). Hence, there are no practices 'free' from discourse and no discourses 'free' from practice. To analyse a regime of practices also indicates a focus on 'programmes of conduct' (Foucault, 1991: 75) and how certain subjects are problematized within the regime one is investigating. In the case of employability training, the supposed lack of employability of people with a foreign background is being problematized. A focus on both constructions of *un*employability and norms of employability provides a starting point for thinking about problematizations in this context. The experts engaged in practices of employability training (re)produce knowledge about what constitutes an employable individual.

Hence, governmentality can be understood in close relation to the production of knowledge – since any 'effective power is [...] a power that *knows* the objects upon which it is exercised' (Gordon, 1980: 248). This 'close relationship [...] between techniques of power and forms of knowledge' (Bröckling et al., 2011:2) constructs governable subjects. In the practice of employability training, specific techniques for governing and shaping the problematized Others are deployed. From this perspective, the crucial question to ask is *how* power is exercised (Foucault, 2000) within the specific practice one is investigating.

Techniques of power are thus an important aspect of such an analysis. In *Discipline and punish* (1979) Foucault investigates how, from the seventeenth century onwards, new and productive techniques of power became widespread.

These modern forms of power aim at enhancing the productivity of the 'population' – hence they need to target both the population as a whole and 'gain access to the bodies of the individuals, to their acts, attitudes and modes of everyday behaviour' (Foucault, 2000: 125). A focus on the techniques of government pays attention to how 'authorities of various sorts have sought to shape, normalize and instrumentalize the conduct, thought, decisions and aspirations of others' (Miller and Rose, 2008: 32).

Foucault, employability and ethnicity

Research that mobilizes Foucault within organization theory in a broad sense usually focuses on discipline and 'visibility', making use of Foucault's analysis of Bentham's Panopticon as a model of disciplinary power (McKinlay and Starkey, 1998; Barratt, 2008). Studies that elaborate on Foucault's thoughts in order to investigate employability tend to focus on governmentality and processes of constituting subjects. For example, Fejes (2010) has conducted research on what types of subjects are produced as employable and who is constituted as responsible for the employability of citizens. Furthermore, Dean (1998) investigates how programmes targeting long-term unemployed can be perceived as a way to 'rework the ethical life' of the unemployed citizen. In the anthology *Learning to be employable* (Garsten and Jacobsson, 2004), a wide range of cases including EU policy (Jacobsson, 2004), the temporary staffing business (Garsten, 2004) and public employment service (Thedvall, 2004) are investigated through discourse analysis and Foucauldian approaches. Fogde (2009) discusses how university students are the target for career guidance given by trade unions in order to enhance their employability. Through a governmentality approach, she investigates how 'the jobseeker' as a subject is positioned within discourse. I shall draw upon such lines of thought as I investigate ethnicized un/employability. However, before I exemplify how this governmentality approach may be used in empirical investigation, I will first discuss how the concept of ethnicity can be mobilized in studies of governmentality and un/employability.

The term 'ethnicity' derives from the classical Greek word *ethnos*, which throughout history has had a variety of meanings – but always connoted around ideas of origin and the sense of 'a people'. *Ethnos* has often referred to 'foreign people' in contrast to the majority, who are presumed not to be 'ethnic' (Fenton, 2010).

In more contemporary academic debates, the question whether ethnic groups ought to be understood from a primordialist or constructivist perspective has

been highly debated (Gil-White, 2001; Fenton, 2010). Fenton (2010: 72) suggests that the question whether one views ethnic groups as real or as socially constructed should be answered in order to conduct a coherent analysis. One way of answering this question has been put forward by Brubaker (2006: 9), who argues that 'ethnic common sense' (i.e. an essentialist view on ethnicity) is part of 'what we want to explain, not what we want to explain things *with*'. Following a constructivist view on ethnicity, I find this answer useful as it directs the analytical focus towards how ethnicity is produced. Ethnicity is not produced out of context but is always contextual and relational. Stuart Hall (1991) has argued that ethnicities could be understood as *relations of difference*. I conceptualize these relations of difference as discursively produced and imbued by power. However, not all kinds of differences are of relevance when analysing ethnicity. Ethnicity in a broad sense connotes issues of race, nation, culture and religion. With a governmentality approach as point of departure, ethnicity may be analysed as a particular way of problematizing certain groups and individuals.

Instead of fixing the term ethnicity into a static definition and using it as a self-evident and descriptive category (Dahlstedt, 2009b), I find it more useful to conceptualize ethnicity as discursive practices of *constructing* difference (within social relations) based on ideas of ethnicity (including culture, race, nation and/or religion) – as practices of *ethnicization*. My aim with this strategy is to avoid a universal definition of ethnicity. The analytical focus will be directed towards how ethnicity is formulated as a specific problem in relation to un/employability. What I refer to when discussing problematized Others in this paper are subjects marked as ethnically different from a perceived 'us'.

How do these practices of constructing difference relate to the concept of un/employability? I would argue that we need to focus on the conjunctions when these two categories encounter each other, when un/employability and ethnicity are constructed as meaningful in relation to each other. The outlined approach suggests that one could focus on how the making of ethnicity and un/employability are intertwined in different practices. Now it is time to turn our attention to the empirical analysis concerning this nexus.

Ethnicizing of un/employability by the European Social Fund

This analysis highlights how un/employability is constructed in relation to a particular 'group' I have called 'problematized Others'. The empirical case consists of material relating to a labour market project in Sweden targeting unemployed Somalis. Traditionally, Sweden's integration policies have not pinpointed any specific ethnic 'groups'. However, Somalis' low participation in

the labour market[3] is seen as an argument to engage with integration measures targeting this specific group (Thörnquist, 2011). The project in question is co-funded by the European Social Fund (ESF).

To contextualize the project, I shall first outline a brief discussion of the ESF in Sweden and the main policy prioritizing the fund's means. ESF is a major initiative when it comes to supporting the EU's social policies through its member states. During the period 2007-2013, the fund will have distributed 75 billion euros in total. The aim of the fund is to strengthen economic growth, competition and social inclusion (EC, 2006).

ESF is an interesting case for examining employability and ethnicity because of the fund's focus on 'people with a foreign background' as a specific target group, and the EU's general embracing of employability as a way of governing labour markets.

The policy aimed at prioritizing ESF's means in Sweden is named the 'National structural fund programme for regional competitiveness and employment (ESF) 2007-2013'. Policy analysis from a governmentality perspective is not concerned with whether a particular policy is successful or not. Rather, policy production is seen as a characteristic of the mentalities of government itself (Rose and Miller, 2008: 29). Hence, policy becomes relevant to analyse as a way of governing different groups.

During the 2000s, the fund's main goal was to realize the Lisbon strategy, making EU 'the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy' (ESF, 2011) by the year 2010. The main policy for the 2010s is the Europe 2020 (Com, 2010) strategy. This policy includes giving EU citizens better skills and job opportunities and promoting entrepreneurship. In Sweden, a specific goal for the fund is to 'increase the supply of labour' as it is stated in the National Structural Fund Programme (ESF, 2007: 5). The target group for ESF in Sweden is described as being those who are 'far outside the labour market' (ESF, 2007: 5). Two groups of people are described as in especially precarious positions in relation to the labour market: young people and 'people with a foreign background' (ESF, 2007: 26). Regarding the latter, it is stated that the 'integration of immigrants' should be realized through 'innovative and experimental methods of working' (ESF, 2007: 7). The high rates of

3 In 2010, Somalis' participation in the labour market was 21 percent, in contrast to the population as a whole, where the degree of participation in the labour market was 73 percent (Carlson, Magnusson and Rönnqvist, 2012).

unemployment among people with a foreign background are perceived as a problem when seen through the lens of economic growth:

> Amongst immigrants to Sweden, there are many whose skills and expertise are not utilised.
>
> These people could contribute to economic growth if they had gainful employment. (ESF, 2007: 26)

'People with a foreign background' are thus constructed as a problematized 'group'. Hence, they will receive 'special priority' in order to make it easier for them to 'establish themselves in working life' (ESF, 2007: 50). This statement connotes a 'responsibilization' (Rose, 1999) of the unemployed target group. They are supposed to 'establish themselves' – although with the helping hand of employability experts[4] such as job coaches and educators.

This demarcated target group is seen to be in need of change. As Rose (1999) remarks, contemporary unemployment is seen as a phenomenon which has to be governed not only on the macro level by providing more jobs, but also on the micro level. With a focus on the supply side of labour and the individuals' employability, this strategy involves acting upon the conduct of the unemployed through various governing techniques such as job coaching, guidance and education. Hence not only *unemployment* but also *the unemployed* are perceived as problematic.

The ethnically-marked unemployed subject is seen as a particular kind of being, in need of 'reconstruction of their subjectivities' (Rose, 1999: 162) in order to be employable in an advanced liberal society. The population as a whole can be seen as divided between those who are able to live up to the 'demands of the labour market' and those who are not. Dean (2010: 195) discusses this division in terms of *active citizens*, meaning those who are deemed able to managing themselves and *targeted populations*, who are perceived as in need of some sort of intervention in order to be able to become active in the labour market.

The European Social Fund and its pinpointing of 'people with a foreign background' can be interpreted as such an intervention. This categorization of the population enables differentiated problematizations and specialized governmental techniques targeting specified segments of the population.

4 Following Rose (1996: 39), I define experts as authoritarian subject positions 'arising out of a claim to knowledge'.

The case of unemployed Somalis in Sweden

Those referred to as 'people with a foreign background' are often lumped together and described as more or less homogeneous, giving no consideration to the obvious heterogeneity within the 'group'. However, one group is often distinguished and described as especially unfortunate and problematic in the context of the Swedish labour market – the Somalis (Thörnquist, 2011).

The labour market project that this empirical investigation has as its focus is called 'Somalis go into business'. In the project description on the ESF website (ESF, 2010) it is stated that:

> [t]he members [of the Somali group] are frustrated over long time in unemployment, lack routines for a structured everyday life and have a weak belief in the future. [...] They also meet cultural, social and economic obstacles, which is part of the family tradition they carry. Their cultural codes often contradict the codes of the Swedish society. They have difficulties to incorporate the routines and rules of Swedish society and labour market. (ESF, 2010)

In this quote, it is clear how Somalis are depicted as 'different' and 'problematic' in relation to a normative conception of Swedishness. Later it is explained that the aim of the project is to 'effectively reduce the exclusion of a group that has major difficulties getting into the labour market and hence has specific needs' (*ibid.*).

The Swedish ESFs official website, in describing its own projects, identifies Somalis as one of the 'foreign-born ethnic groups' who are defined as the hardest to 'integrate within the Swedish labour market' (ESF, 2013). One particular problem this group has, according to the article, is the widespread use of the drug khat. The explanation given in the article as to why this group uses khat is that they do not 'have a job or anything else to occupy themselves with' (ESF, 2013). This idleness, sitting around and chewing khat, is clearly in stark contrast to ideals of the 'active citizen' (Miller and Rose, 2008) in advanced liberal societies, such as Sweden (Dahlstedt, 2009a). Khat is a bush grown mainly in East Africa and is mostly chewed in countries such as Somalia, Eritrea and Ethiopia. For some, then, chewing khat is considered a social activity and part of one's identity, while in Sweden it has been classified as an illegal drug since 1989 (Osman and Söderbäck, 2011). This tension between the practice of khat-chewing considered as a social activity or as an illegal drug abuse is one part of what constructs unemployed Somalis as ethnicized and unemployable in the eyes of the project.

The project also has a focus on 'entrepreneurship', which is described as an 'aspect of Somali culture' (ESF, 2013). In the project description on the ESF

website (ESF, 2010) it is stated that 'entrepreneurship is the foundation of the whole project'. It is a widespread conception that 'Somali culture' is imbued by an entrepreneurial spirit. In a newsletter (IOGT-NTO, 2011) from the project, it is stated that 'Somalis are entrepreneurs in their home country' and that it would be 'natural' to start businesses even in Sweden if it would have been easier and not such a complex bureaucratic process. This shows that culture is not always depicted as problematic, but can also be regarded as a positive resource. However, once again we run into trouble since the target group is described as 'mainly Muslim' and as the 'Koran prohibits interest' (ESF, 2013). To get a loan without interest is as hard as to start a business without a loan, the article concludes.

ESF's evaluation of the project (Wallin, 2012) concludes that actions and methods need to be better adjusted to the specific target group and their particular needs. The evaluation report also signifies that the project offered education in 'norms for behaviour in Swedish society'. This indicates a will to direct the aspirations and behaviours (Foucault, 1997: 80) of the target group towards becoming more 'Swedish'.

The project leader produced a 'handbook' (Rolfson, n.d.) on Somali culture and customs, sharing in this way a fund of knowledge acquired during the project. The handbook was intended to be used by government officials at the public employment office to improve service to Somali clients. It indicates a will to govern through knowledge – if there is sufficient knowledge about Somalis and their cultural specificity, they can be governed more appropriately. From the handbook we learn that the project participants have written job resumes and practiced simulated job interviews. Presenting oneself and appearing as an employable individual towards potential employers is a widespread technique in the practice of employability training (Fogde, 2009). The group is described as having had a difficult time producing job resumes that were deemed adequate, experiencing trouble 'handling the computer', writing down the names of former employers and stating the dates and locations of previous employment.

Another aspect which is problematized in the handbook is how the Somalis prioritize and balance work and family commitments. In contrast to Swedes, Somalis are said to give family a higher priority than work. The explanation given is that Somalia is a patriarchal, nomadic society, with Islam as its religion and the Koran as 'the source of belief'. An effort has been made to solve this problem through the projects' education in gender equality. Gender equality and democracy are part and parcel of a predominant self-image in Sweden. This discourse is also produced by other Western intellectuals who, as Pred (2000: 6) has argued, for a long time have stereotyped Sweden as 'a paradise of social

enlightenment, as an international champion of social justice, as the very model of solidarity and equality'. In this context, it becomes clear that ethnicized Others are frequently problematized through images of not being properly democratic or adequately fostered in gender equality. Hence, the participants in the project will attend 'scheduled equality education' (ESF, 2010) and learn 'the meaning of democracy' (IOGT-NTO, n.d.) as it is stated on the project owner's webpage.

Yet another problem associated with the particular target group and described in the handbook (Rolfson, n.d.: 2) is 'difficulties of showing up in time' for meetings and appointments – something deemed important in the context of contemporary Swedish working life. The handbook states that 'it took enormous effort from the project employees to get the participants to the right place at the right time' (Rolfson, n.d.: 2).

The handbook also contains a list of 'code-words' based on the participants' 'needs' and 'characteristics'. Code-words describing the participants include 'distracted', 'lacking motivation to work', 'in need of personal support', 'bad health', 'depression' and 'slow' (Rolfson, n.d.: 5).

Furthermore, the handbook asks the question whether Somalis 'want to work' (Rolfson, n.d.: 4). The project employees had noticed that when some participants were offered a job, they declined it or quit the job soon after starting, explaining that it was too stressful or that the job required them to wear unacceptable clothing.

One aim of the project was to 'understand how Somalis think and act' (Rolfson, n.d.: 5) and then to motivate and mentor the participants towards getting a job or starting a business. Techniques used to reach this goal consisted of personal motivation talks, daily telephone contact to get the participant to show up on time at the project, personal action plan, education and offering of psychological help.

The Somalis are described as coming from a society in 'total decay', lacking a functional government, judiciary, school system and 'all that we in Sweden take for granted' (Rolfson, n.d.: 5). The 'group' is obviously problematized through different ethnicized markers such as religion, culture and clothing. But what can the 'Somalis go into business' case tell us about ethnicized employability?

Discussion

Practices of reshaping problematized Others into advanced liberal subjects are informed by relations of power and production of knowledge, as we have seen in the handbook – written to spread knowledge about Somali culture in order to

govern the group in a manner deemed proper and effective. Within this practice of managing the unemployable, problematized Others, the objective is to make them adapt to the image of advanced liberal subjects. The 'employability experts' know how one should think and act in order to become employable in this context. In this section, I recapitulate and discuss the questions posed at the beginning of this paper.

How are the ethnicized Others problematized? In the case of unemployed people 'with a foreign background' in general, and unemployed Somalis in Sweden in particular, we have seen different aspects of problematization. In the policy focusing on 'people with a foreign background', a 'they' is distinguished, ethnicized and represented as a problem. 'People with a foreign background' are constructed as a particular group in need of specific measures in order to enhance their employability and contribute to economic growth.

In the project for unemployed Somalis, problematizations are made through the lens of religion, clothing and the use of recreational drugs. In addition, this group is thought of as coming from a society described as the opposite of the advanced liberal society. Somalia is depicted as a chaotic place which lacks all of the 'modern' institutions taken for granted in 'the West'. In general, the Somalis are depicted as lacking desirable competences and characteristics that are valuable in the context of advanced liberal societies. This 'discourse of lacking' is something often identified in descriptions of 'the Other' (Mattson, 2001; Osman 1999). Somalis are described as lacking computer skills, lacking skills in the Swedish language, lacking motivation, having the 'wrong' priorities in choosing between work and family commitments, not being able to take financial loans with interest, chewing khat, being in need of personal support, slow, with bad health, depression and distraction. The participants are also described as not capable of 'arriving on time'. These characteristics of the participant group are constructed from the experience and knowledge of the employment experts working on this project.

In relation to what are they problematized? A governmentality perspective renders visible the linkages among the government, the population and the individual (Dean, 2010). In the ESF policy, unemployed 'people with a foreign background' are problematized as an untapped, potentially productive resource that could strengthen economic growth. Somalis are constructed as a particularly excluded part of the population with extremely high rates of unemployment and thus considered in need of special treatment in order to become productive and contribute to economic growth. The target group is also problematized in relation to gender equality – 'they' are assumed to come from a patriarchal society and thus in need of gender equality education. This problematization of 'the Other'

stands in stark contrast to the self-image of Sweden as a progressive nation where the discourse of gender equality occupies a prominent position (Johansson and Klinth, 2008).

What techniques are deployed to address the problems constructed? The practice of employability training for the unemployed Somalis consists of techniques such as resume-writing, personal action plan, guidance and job interview training. These techniques can be interpreted as a will of the employability experts to direct the mindset, aspirations and behaviour of the target group to become more aligned with the norms of advanced liberal societies – to conduct the conduct of the problematized Others.

What are the qualities and characteristics of advanced liberal subjects? We have seen in the empirical analysis how project participants need to be able to write up their own job resumes. This practice of resume-writing is a way of constituting oneself in order to appear as employable as possible in accordance with predominant norms; to define and 'market' one's abilities and personality is an important aspect of the technique of writing job resumes (Fogde, 2009). The ability to think and act as a rational, calculating homo economicus, guided by values such as competition and entrepreneurial spirit is part of the norms of advanced liberal societies. The Somalis are described as 'having an entrepreneurial culture'. However, this spirit runs into trouble since 'they' are 'guided by the Koran' which prohibits financial loans with interest – an assumed necessity in the Swedish context.

As Miller and Rose (2008) argue, Western advanced liberal societies socialize humans to seeing their lives as the outcome of rational acts and choices. Hence, the advanced liberal subject is fostered to make the 'right' choices from the myriad of available options and to accept the consequences of his or her *own* choices. In contrast, the problematized Others are seen as lacking this basic socialization and are constructed as in need of reshaping themselves in order to approach the coveted position of advanced liberal subject. In the empirical investigation, we have seen that the choice to chew khat is not legitimate since it is both illegal and assumed to go hand-in-hand with idleness – opposite to the ideal of active citizens in advanced liberal societies.

In what kind of practices does the fostering of employable, advanced liberal subjects occur? Labour market projects are similar to school and education. McDonald and Marston (2005) also highlight school and kindergarten as metaphors suitable for describing the employability practices targeting unemployed people in advanced liberal societies. There is a group of participants (students) and there are 'leaders' (teachers) who are employed in the project.

These employees come with different titles such as project leader, job coach, pedagogue or career counsellor[5]. Practices of employability training thus have a clear affinity to 'learning activities'. Learning has become a central theme for contemporary advanced liberal societies. Politicians and practitioners deploy learning activities in order to 'upskill the population' (Fejes and Nicoll, 2008). The spread of learning activities and ideas of lifelong learning are directed to the population as a whole, but the learning activities that I have discussed in this paper are particular to a specific 'group' and therefore should be investigated as such.

Conclusion

This paper has focused on a particular aspect of employability studies which has been scarce in both theoretical discussions and empirical investigation – namely, ethnicized un/employability. The first aim of this paper has been to suggest some tools for analysing ethnicized un/employability. A focus on the continuum between those deemed unemployable and normative ideals of what constitutes an employable individual enables us to nuance the analysis more than would be possible if the focus were on only one of the two positions. This contrasting analysis has been carried out through the elaboration of two concepts: *problematized Others* and *advanced liberal subjects*, and discussing these concepts along with governmentality and constructivist theories of ethnicity. One way of framing the activity of transforming problematized Others into advanced liberal subjects is to understand such practices as learning activities. Such processes of re-socialization have as an objective that the target groups should internalize specific norms regarding what is seen as constituting an employable individual in a given time and place.

The second aim of this paper has been to use these analytical tools in discussing an empirical case. As we have seen, the construction of ethnicized Otherness becomes crucial in the government of unemployed Somalis. Somalis are, in many aspects, constructed as a group that is the direct opposite of the ideal citizen of advanced liberal societies. 'They' are constructed as patriarchal – in contrast to 'us' who are gender equal; 'they' are constructed as illegal and idle due to the habit of chewing khat; 'they' are described as distracted and unmotivated to engage in labour. Although 'their' culture is seen as a potential resource regarding entrepreneurialism, this aspect is seen as hindered from flourishing by the Koran's prohibition of interest.

5 An umbrella term that I have used to capture such positions in this context is 'employability experts'.

The project to work with unemployed from a Somali background is permeated by discourses of Otherness. The participants are being Othered – seen as 'different' in terms of ethnicity. Nevertheless, the objective of these learning activities (to internalize prevailing norms of advanced liberal societies) may be the same for all participants engaged in employability training of different sorts. However, in order to reach this goal of producing employable subjects, the techniques used and problematizations made may differ across groups. Those regarded as 'ethnically different' often have other starting points than indigenous unemployed. The path to employability looks slightly different for different types of problematized groups, be they youths, the disabled, women, drug addicts or people with a foreign background. Regarding unemployed Somalis, I have pointed out the idea of gender equality and democracy, which in the project operates both as markers of Swedishness for 'us' and Otherness and difference for 'them'. This is one nexus that would be of interest for further exploration.

We should keep in mind that different kinds of problematizations intersect and build up numerous potential target groups with complex relations to each other. The nuances, differences and intersections of employability training targeting problematized Others are clearly in need of more rigorous empirical investigation.

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Constructing the employable immigrant: The uses of validation practices in Sweden

Andreas Diedrich and Alexander Styhre

abstract

This paper examines the Validation/Integration (V/I) project, a labour market initiative aimed at developing methods of validating the prior learning of recent immigrants to Sweden as part of their settlement support aimed at promoting their 'employability'. This study places the V/I project within its social and economic context and uses a constructivist perspective on organizing in order to problematize how ideas regarding employability are translated into practice within the project. The study proposes that the V/I project, notwithstanding its laudable intentions, by focusing on the bureaucratic requirements of employers and public organizations, promotes specific forms of employability and may thus formalize and reinforce the ethnic division of Sweden's labour market.

Introduction

Employability, often defined as an individual's potential to become employed, has gained renewed attention in political debate over the last two decades (Berntson, Sverke and Marklund, 2006; Brown and Hesketh, 2004; Forrier and Sels, 2003; Finn, 2000; Garsten and Jacobsson, 2004; Gore, 2005; McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005). It has emerged as a signifier that has replaced previous vocabularies for describing the workforce. In the existing literature, employability is often conceived of as a stock of individual resources that constantly need to be attended to and renewed and are strongly connected to ideas concerning education and training, lifelong learning, and work practice (Garsten and Jacobsson, 2004; Berglund and Fejes, 2009). Also, the concept of employability is constantly being broadened to include more and more qualities, resulting in increased demands

on the individual when it comes to his/her personal development and learning, simultaneous to these demands often being less clearly stated (Garsten and Jacobsson, 2004).

One area where the concept of employability has been seen as particularly beneficial is the context of the social inclusion of marginalized groups such as immigrants (Dahlstedt, 2009). As contemporary society is characterized by the growing mass displacement and migration of people – from so-called third world countries to so-called developed countries – increasing efforts are being made by many countries to manage this migration by means of measuring and evaluating the skills and knowledge of migrants upon arrival in order to promote their employability and support their entry into the labour market (see, for example, Andersson and Fejes, 2010; Diedrich and Styhre, 2008; Diedrich, 2013). Such efforts are often summarized under the heading 'the validation of prior learning[1]', i.e. a set of methods and procedures which include, among other things, questionnaires, personal interviews, and practical assessments all aimed at identifying, assessing and documenting skills, knowledge, and experience with the help of vocational experts or other educational specialists.

While there has been much support for the validation procedure, and many projects have been conducted in order to develop and implement its methods and tools (Andersson and Fejes, 2010; Andersson and Osman, 2008; Diedrich, Eriksson-Zetterquist and Styhre, 2011; Diedrich, 2013), the results so far have largely been disappointing. Recent immigrants have failed to become employed to any greater degree than before. Even proponents of the system have found it difficult to link up any long-term positive results, including in relation to employability, with the procedure[2].

There is, therefore, a need to further understand how employability is translated into practice as a part of organizing. Thus, drawing on the sociology of translation in organization studies (Czarniawska and Sevón, 2005; Czarniawska, 2004), this paper reports an in-depth case study of a labour market project organized by the County Labour Board of Western Sweden and aimed at validating the skills and knowledge of recent immigrants to Sweden in order to promote their employability. It seeks to explore the question of how the idea of employability is translated into practice as a part of such organizing. More

1 In other countries, this is also referred to as the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), or the Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL), or Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR).

2 Presentation by the Director General of the Swedish National Commission for Validation (Valideringsdelegationen) on "The Swedish Model of Validation" in Stockholm, Sweden, in October 2007.

specifically, the study addresses how the employable immigrant is constructed and enacted in the context of the settlement of recent immigrants in Sweden. Similar to Garsten and Jacobsson (2004), we identify both the norms of employability and the techniques employed in the construction of an employable individual. Furthermore, by employing a translation perspective, attention is paid not so much to a given essence of employability, but on how it is constructed through organizing processes.

Organizing employability

Labour market reforms (Glyn, Howell and Schmitt, 2006; Peck and Theodore, 2000; Gregg and Wadsworth, 1995), employment and employment relations, including temporary work (Smith and Neuwirth, 2009; MacPhail and Bowles, 2008), agency work (Hoque and Kirpatrick, 2008), and what has more broadly been referred to as contingent employment (Bergström and Storrie, 2003; Purcell and Purcell, 1998) have all garnered significant attention from social scientists and management scholars. More specifically, employability, has gained renewed attention in political debate over the last decade (Berntson, Sverke and Marklund, 2006; Garsten and Jacobsson, 2004; Forrier and Sels, 2003). Replacing previous vocabularies for describing the workforce that spoke about the shortage of employment opportunities, and described people as being either employed or unemployed, the recent vocabulary speaks about degrees of *employability*, with individuals increasingly being portrayed as employable or not employable (Garsten and Jacobsson, 2004), or being in need of employability skills.

The shift away from an employment perspective, whereby society and the employers are held responsible for the job supply, towards an increased 'responsibilization' of the individual is part of the shift towards a neoliberal ideology (see, for example, Jarvis, 2007; Miller and Rose, 2008), in which individuals are expected to assume responsibility for their own lives and economic situation (see, for example, Adamson, Doherty and Viney, 1998; McKinlay, 2002; Roper, Ganesh and Inkson, 2010). Subsequently, in Sweden and many other countries, labour market authorities have been quick to embrace ideas concerning continuous education and training, lifelong learning, and the idea that individuals must constantly 'upgrade' their skills and knowledge (Garsten and Jacobsson, 2004; Dahlstedt, 2009), including 'soft skills' such as decision-making, communicating, and having a positive attitude towards working life. In this new regime, an individual is expected to be capable of evaluating his/her own situation, to be prepared for all eventualities, and to embrace change (Garsten and Jacobsson, 2004). Policy rhetoric refers to these

kinds of individuals as 'lifelong learners' who run their lives as an enterprise and continually invest in education and learning in order to have the most updated skills and knowledge in relation to the changing needs of the labour market (Jarvis, 1999; Berglund and Fejes, 2009; Fejes and Nicoll, 2008). Such policy rhetoric implies that individual freedom and agency is unlimited.

Rather than empirically investigating the complexities of how employability is constructed in practice, researchers have often adopted a managerialist, essentialist perspective, treating employability as an array of traits and/or attributes, e.g. formal and informal skills and knowledge, and looking for the best methods and procedures for supporting and/or measuring people's employability (see, for example, Harvey, 2010).

Critical researchers have used discourse analysis to examine how discourses on employability are mobilized on a transnational level, such as the EU and the OECD, in order to influence national labour market policy (Garsten and Jacobsson, 2004), or how they put people in various contexts in terms of being responsible for their own employability (Fejes and Berglund, 2010). Others have examined the relationship between the discourses on employability and lifelong learning and the difficulties of translating these concepts into practice within organizations (Fejes, 2010). Such discourses provide direction for day-to-day practice; they also prescribe and encourage certain types of behaviour, sometimes supported by various types of practices, e.g. practices of organizing, assessment, and reward. Garsten and Jacobsson (2004) argue that the discourse on employability has established the 'employable individual' as a normative category and that this category of employability, like other administrative categories, may function to legitimize measures directed – or not directed – at actors who fall under the category, as well as their position in the labour market. However, such generalized discourses are always *translated* into local contexts where existing practices, traditions, and institutionalized ways of seeing and acting transform and reformulate ideas in specific ways (Czarniawska and Sevón, 2005).

Translating the concept of employability into practice

The translation model has been made sense of in organization theory in terms of the 'travel of ideas' (Czarniawska and Sevón, 2005), a broad four-step process through which (1) an idea is separated from its original context and translated into an object such as a text, a model or some other representation, (2) the idea *qua* object travels in time and space until, (3) it is translated further within some other time/space on the basis of the local context and practices, and finally, (4) the new activities and practices are repeated and become institutionalized and eventually taken for granted.

While ideas, once they have been transformed into objects (e.g. a policy document outlining the new lifelong learning strategy of the municipality), can more easily circulate in and between organizations, from one time/space to another (see Latour, 1986; 1987; 1996; Czarniawska and Sevón, 2005), they do not become entirely 'objective' and unambiguous. Instead the translation is characterized and governed by different interpretations of the idea *qua* object. Furthermore, when actors seek to translate an idea, they may encounter other actors who have competing interests and who seek to interrupt this process. This means that they need to negotiate interests and actions with others. Subsequently, there are continuous struggles to stabilize a given translation, against various efforts to destabilize it. In this sense, local practice talks back at discourse (Garsten and Jacobsson, 2004). In other words, what employability becomes is determined by the local context.

While the prevalent literature on employability tends to only focus, with some exceptions, on what exists in an essential manner – employability as a set of specific and measurable attributes which a person needs to possess, and which can be created using the correct tools and techniques – the translation approach focuses on both what exists and what is created; the relationship between humans and ideas, ideas and objects, and humans and objects (Czarniawska and Sevón, 2005). These relationships are characterized by various contingencies and attempts to control these, and are mediated by actors in search of meaning as a part of their work of enacting employability. In this paper, we argue that paying attention to all of these is required in order to understand what is usually referred to as employability.

The study's setting and method

Swedish Immigration policy and practice

The structure of immigration into Sweden has changed in a fundamental way over the past four decades. During the 1970s, the share of skill-based labour immigration from other Nordic countries, and directly linked with industrial demand and labour shortages, dropped to around 5% of overall immigration, while the number of refugees from other parts of the world, without any documented skills and knowledge, increased significantly (Lundh and Olsson, 1999). A number of official and academic reports have echoed the widespread belief that non-native residents of Sweden[3], especially those coming from

3 In 2007, 1,592,326 foreign citizens were registered in Sweden of a total population of 9 million. The majority is of Finnish descent, with other large groups consisting of

countries outside Europe, have a weak position on the Swedish labour market and are unable to find employment matching their skills and competence[4]. In Sweden, as in many other European countries, this weak position is attributed both to 'structural' and everyday discrimination and to structural changes on the labour market, where low-skilled jobs have largely disappeared and been replaced by moderate to high-skilled service jobs (De los Reyes and Wingborg, 2002; Swedish Integration Board, 2006; Rauhut and Blomberg, 2003; Swedish Government Official Reports, 2003: 75; 2004: 21; 2006: 59). Other reasons that have been voiced concern perceptions among the host population regarding cultural distance from what is considered to be the Swedish norm, as well as the time immigrants have spent in Sweden (De los Reyes and Wingborg, 2002). In response, and in line with an activation focus, Swedish policymakers have focused their attention on supporting immigrants into employment shortly after their arrival in the country through industry-specific, or otherwise specialized, Swedish language courses, career counselling, job-seeker courses, and activities aimed at assessing skills and knowledge, generally referred to in Sweden as validation.

Data collection and analysis

One of the authors undertook an ethnography-inspired study over a two-year period from 2006 to 2008. The study included interviews, observations, and document analysis. Forty-one interviews were conducted with immigrants (6) and representatives of various municipal, state, and private organizations (35) who are involved in the assessment of the skills and knowledge of recent immigrants to Sweden. These included the Swedish Migration Board, the Public Employment Service (PES), the Refugee Units, the Social Security Services, the Municipal Adult Education Administration, the municipal administration of one of Western Sweden's largest cities, and various providers of educational services.

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individuals (or their family members) born in the former Yugoslavia, Iraq, Iran, Poland, Denmark, Norway, and Germany.

4 The better the educational background of immigrants, the higher their rate of employment will be. The highest employment rates are to be found among immigrants from Germany and Finland, and the lowest among Somalis, who are deemed poorly educated (Statistics Sweden, 2009: 44). What is interesting is the fact that the employment rate is relatively low amongst immigrants from Iraq and Iran although members of this group usually have a background in higher education (Statistics Sweden 2009: 44). One important factor, which is often mentioned when it comes to employment, is the time that immigrants have spent in Sweden. Between 1997 and 2007, immigrants who had been in Sweden for shorter periods of time also had lower employment rates. (Statistics Sweden, 2009: 64; Segendorf and Teljosuo, 2011).

The interviews were open-ended (Silverman, 1993; Kvale, 1996). They were recorded on minidisc and then transcribed in full.

The fieldwork focused primarily on observations of assessment activities. Over a period of ten weeks, one of the authors observed a group of ten recent immigrants as they took part in the 'qualification portfolio' activity. This was a daily, four-hour course aimed at documenting their past personal and vocational experiences and, using various job-seeking activities, making them more 'job ready' for the Swedish labour market. The group consisted of four women and six men aged between 20 and 50. They had come to Sweden from Iran, Thailand, Russia, Somalia, Syria, and Djibouti. Most had fled from war and persecution in their home countries while a few of them had come to Sweden for personal reasons.

In addition, meetings were observed that involved management representatives and caseworkers facilitating the collaboration between the various organizations participating in the project. They painted a vivid picture of how the project participants talked about and made sense of their work with these recent immigrants. Throughout, field notes were taken, which included both comments made by the participants during the meetings and the researcher's comments regarding the setting and organizing of the meetings. These field notes later formed the basis of the field stories written about the meetings.

During the conversations and interviews, the interviewees described events that had taken place prior to the researcher's arrival on the scene, as well as the experiences of co-workers not being observed by the researcher. Different types of documents, e.g. government reports and statistics, agreements, memoranda, and documents from web pages, e-mails, and letters, enabled the identification and analysis of a number of these events.

The analysis focused on organizing practice. The analytical premises were that: (1) practice is difficult to understand simply by examining its products or outcomes; (2) practice involves joint efforts over time and is processual; and (3) meaning is continuously negotiated and mediated in a context. The analysis was influenced by a grounded theory methodology (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Using an iterative process, the first interview was compared with the second, then the first and second interviews with the third, and so forth. In parallel with this, the notes from the observed meetings were compared to the interviews. It then became possible to identify categories and sub-categories in the material. The reading of the material was based on the pre-understanding of the researchers, who originate from a particular cultural setting, and it is inevitable that they will use classifications, which are in accordance with this understanding.

Subsequently, the material was categorized according to the constructions of the idea of validating prior foreign skills and knowledge, the ambitions of the project and its materializations in practice, and the construction of employability (as related to the efficiency of the administrative procedures and to the heterogeneous and ambiguous experiences of the immigrants). A final category concerned the results of the project. We are aware that this is not an exhaustive list of categories; however, given the limited scope of this paper, we will focus here on the above categories only.

Validation practices and the employable immigrant

The idea of validating prior learning in Sweden

In Sweden, the notion of validating prior learning appeared in connection with the *Adult Education Initiative* (*Kunskapslyftet*), an elaborate education programme run by the Ministry for Education from 1997 to 2002 (see, for example, Swedish Govt. Reports 2001:78). Its intention was to 'improve every citizen's participation in social progress, employability and opportunities for further education (Government Bill, 1995/1996, p. 222). Validation had existed in Sweden prior to this (see Andersson and Fejes, 2010), but now it was being packaged in a more explicit way; it was positioned as a vital part of a process whereby the prior experience of every citizen is recognized, and followed by flexible and individual formal training (Andersson, 2008, p. 133). According to the Swedish government, validation is:

> [a] process that involves the structured assessment, valuation, documentation, and recognition of the knowledge and competence that an individual possesses, independently of how this knowledge and competence was acquired. (Swedish Ministry of Education, 2003, p. 19, authors' own translation)

Validation is carried out against the formal criteria of upper secondary school or university courses in only a limited number of occupations (e.g. the healthcare sector). In most areas, the focus is on validating skills and knowledge on the basis of industry requirements, with the procedure not leading to the issuing of formal grades. Over the past few years, the government has increasingly been highlighting the value of validating 'the competence of people of a foreign background to facilitate their integration with society and their entry into the labour market' (Swedish Integration Board, 2006). Mirroring Sweden's tradition of pursuing an active labour market policy, and collaboration between municipality, state, and other actors in labour market projects, a range of regional and national projects have thus recently been conducted in order to establish methods and processes of validating prior overseas learning (see, for

instance, Andersson and Osman, 2008; Andersson and Fejes, 2010; Diedrich, 2013, for more examples).

The Validation/Integration Project - validation translated into a tool for integration

The Validation/Integration project (V/I project) was launched in 2006 by the (now defunct) County Labour Board (*Länsarbetsnämnden*) in one of Sweden's largest counties. It was aimed at improving collaboration between municipal and state actors providing recent refugees and other immigrants with settlement support and establishing and maintaining a procedure for assessing the prior learning of immigrants in order to better facilitate their integration into both the labour market and society. To do so, the County Labour Board sought to 'adapt' the existing validation methods for professionals with work experience from Sweden to the target group of 'recent immigrants with non-Nordic backgrounds' who participate in the settlement support process and possess 'skills and competence that cannot not be verified in any other way' (Internal project report, 2008-04-30). This target group was constructed as particularly being in need of assistance in order to enter the labour market. As part of the project, the prior overseas learning of 500 recent, non-Nordic immigrants was to be validated, with the aim of getting at least 70 per cent of them into jobs, or into training and education programmes, as well as other activities eventually leading to employment. The project did not focus on vocational training or educational activities and no resources were allocated for this purpose. It focused on developing the assessment procedure, the results of which could be used as a basis for further supplementary training. The project thus had a quantitative goal that had to be achieved within a specific timeframe.

The target group for the project was recent non-Nordic immigrants, who, during the settlement support activities, moved from one organization to the next, along the line 'from arrival to employment'. Each time they came into contact with a new organization, the caseworkers asked them about their personal and professional backgrounds, an activity referred to as 'mapping the immigrant'. Based on this 'map', the caseworker then decided how to support the person in finding employment. An important part of this mapping consisted of placing a person in an occupational category on the basis of the Swedish National Labour Board's Occupational Classification System (referred to using the acronym AMSYK in Swedish). Senior municipal administrators had criticized this mapping on the basis that caseworkers lacked the technical knowledge required to produce a 'good and correct' map of the person. Because the caseworkers' mapping was deficient, it was said, immigrants ended up in the 'wrong' occupational categories and, as a result, did not end up in jobs or in the correct

validation or training activities. One vocational training expert performing validations explained:

> They [the immigrants] have been to the Migration Board and the Public Employment Service before and have been listed as carpenters. And they've remained like that for 8-10 years. And then they came to us and we saw that they weren't carpenters. And it isn't that strange that they don't get jobs. [Vocational expert MK081201:1]

The training expert regards the PES caseworkers' assessments to be insufficient because they do not 'correctly' identify the immigrants' skills and knowledge. He also describes the V/I project as a solution to the problem: via the project's activities, the immigrants are to be efficiently sorted into the 'correct' categories; via validation, caseworkers and employers will finally know what their clients and potential employees know and are capable of accomplishing, i.e. their skills and knowledge. Two validation activities were proposed as part of the project: the 'occupational assessment' (*Yrkesbedömning*) and the 'qualification portfolio' (*Meritportfölj*) described above. The procedure involved working in the following way: A PES caseworker met the client and documented his/her experience, skills, and knowledge. If the caseworker judged the immigrant to possess overseas occupational skills and knowledge, then he/she would register that person for an occupational assessment, i.e. a brief conversation and practical assessment by a vocational expert in order to determine whether or not the person indeed had an 'occupational identity' within the occupation in question. If the caseworker deemed the person to be lacking qualified occupational skills and knowledge, then he/she would register the immigrant with the educational services provider for a qualification portfolio course, i.e. a ten week programme intended to support the person in terms of reflecting on and documenting his/her professional and personal skills and competence in order to see if that person possessed any skills and knowledge that could be connected to some or other occupation. Figure 1 below summarizes key elements of the validation procedure that has been described.

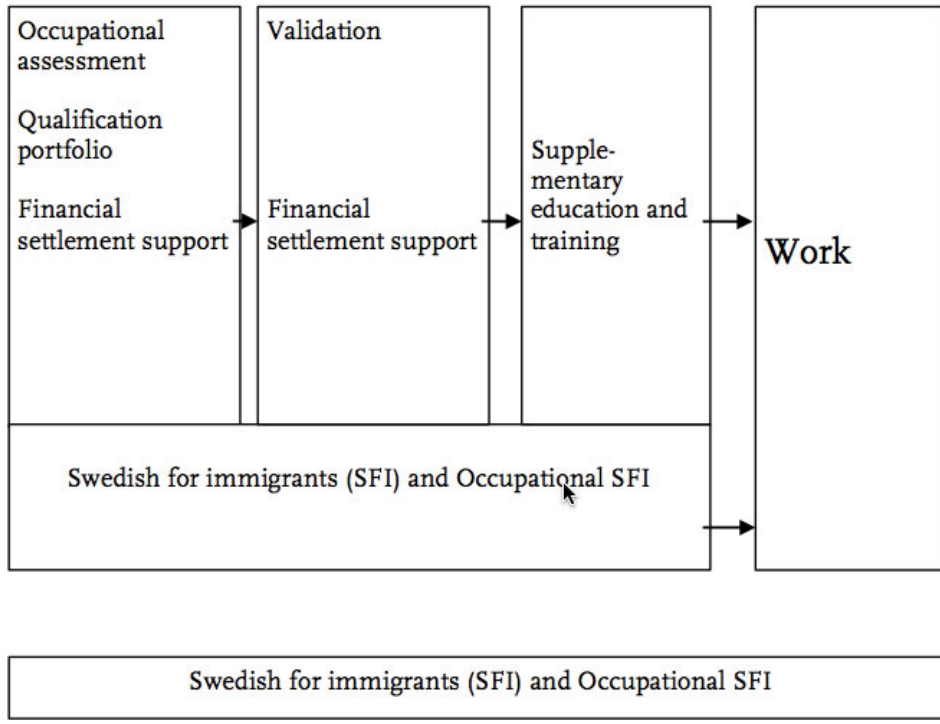

Figure 1: *The validation procedure of the V/I Project* (Source: Presentation material of the project representatives, Autumn 2006)

The results of these activities determined whether or not the person would be eligible for a 'full' validation, i.e. an assessment of skills and knowledge against the formal requirements of the labour market or the upper secondary schooling system. After a full validation, the immigrant would either be issued with a certificate or a diploma within his/her occupation. In cases where the assessment established that there was a 'knowledge gap' – i.e. a gap between the knowledge identified via validation and the knowledge and skills required in order to work in a certain occupation in Sweden – then he/she would be registered for a supplementary training/education programme aimed at closing this gap. This was, at least in theory, how the process should work and how it was presented to caseworkers and other public officials at the start of the project.

In sum, the employability of recent immigrants was directly linked to the inability of caseworkers to correctly identify their skills and knowledge. This was seen as the result of a fault in the administrative, bureaucratic procedure of settlement support. The recent immigrant was expected to become employable once his/her skills and knowledge had 'correctly' been identified and, if applicable, once gaps in skill and knowledge bases had been removed through educational interventions. Employability was, thus, operationalized as an

administrative outcome. If the administrative process works well, the individual becomes employable; if not, his/her employability is not advanced.

The validation procedure as a tool for rehabilitation

Caseworkers and heads of department were enrolled in the project on the basis of their work within the settlement process. Participation in the project was voluntary. As the caseworkers represented different organizations, and worked in different parts of the county, they did not have habitual meeting spaces. The project called for regular (monthly or bi-monthly) meetings in four regions within the county. At each of these meetings, one of the two project leaders informed the caseworkers about recent developments. The caseworkers also exchanged experiences of their day-to-day work with immigrants and of their work with validation.

Below, we present a conversation that took place at an early stage of the V/I Project at the offices of Educorp, a large private-sector educational services provider commissioned by the project leadership to develop validation methods to be used within the project. The meeting brought together the project leader and representatives from the refugee units, the PES, the ValCenter – a public-sector educational services provider – and two coaches from Educorp. Educorp had recently developed a procedure called the 'Qualification Portfolio' and wanted to check if it could be used as a validation tool. On their website, the company presented the qualification portfolio as follows:

> The goal of the qualification portfolio is to make explicit, reflect on, and document learning, grounded in a consciousness of the importance of lifelong learning. The process thus strengthens your confidence and provides insight regarding your responsibilities for your own learning and development. A complete qualification portfolio includes an individual's combined knowledge and competence within the formal, informal, and non-formal learning he/she has acquired up until today. It includes an occupational identification and competencies possible to validate. Every participant creates his/her own personal portfolio. [Educorp website, accessed 061015; authors' own translation]

Thus, adhering to the general discourse on employability in Sweden and other European countries, the qualification portfolio was presented as a tool for promoting the responsibilization of the individual with regard to his/her own learning and personal development.

The Educorp coaches had asked the refugee counsellors working with the resettlement of refugees to choose two cases that could serve as examples of the future target group. The question was what *type* of person should be sent on a qualification portfolio course? The refugee counsellors began by presenting their

activities and their cases. They had brought along the case files of their clients, the 'social map' they produce during the initial meeting with the person. This part of the meeting went as follows:

> *Refugee Counsellor 1:* Our task is to plan the settlement period for the refugees. They stay with us for a maximum of two years and there are many practical issues that need to be taken care of. That's why we have the 'social map'. It's a two-page standardized document. We fill in the information concerning our clients' financial and personal situation, including health issues, accommodation, insurance, and travel expenses. We also describe the short and long-term goals of the person to be achieved before the end of the settlement period. When we meet the client again, the social map is the basis for our discussion: Have the goals been achieved or not? Has the client's personal situation changed in any way? If yes, how do we need to change our plans for this person?
>
> *Refugee Counsellor 2*: ... and, based on what the social map tells us, we make different demands of the person.
>
> *Refugee Counsellor 1*: Yes, and if a person doesn't achieve the goals, we need to check why. At most, we get the chance to follow up on the social map every six months. It's also important to realize that those who come to us are often in really bad shape, both physically and mentally. It's quite a problematic group we're talking about.
>
> *Project Leader*: And this is exactly where I think this whole business of focusing on the skills and knowledge that they [the immigrants] bring with them from their home countries can have a rehabilitating effect, allowing them to get on with their lives.
>
> [Observation of meeting at Educorp, October 12, 2006:4]

Here, the project leader echoed the widespread opinion in the public debate that validation can solve a number of broad problems related to social inclusion. However, the problem was constructed as one concerning 'rehabilitation', and not as an administrative problem. By focusing on their knowledge and skills, immigrants could be rehabilitated; they could return to being *normal* from a state of abnormality. Immigrants were seen in a homogenizing fashion as deviations from the Swedish norm. The notion of making skilled people employable by transforming the administrative procedures by introducing validation is translated here into the activities of rehabilitating, or making people who are thus considered 'abnormal' normal.

The meeting served as a platform for connecting the actions of the educational services providers with the actions of the caseworkers involved in settling refugees and other immigrants. As part of this work, the category 'recent immigrants' was constructed as the target group of the project. However, these immigrants were not present in person at the meeting. The assumed identity of

the envisaged objects of the validation process was negotiated, and mediated by the social plans representing the immigrants. In this setting, the immigrant was constructed as a deficient person in need of 'rehabilitation'.

The validation procedure as a diagnostic tool

Ahmad, a middle-aged man from Iraq, is scheduled to undergo an occupational assessment at 9 am. We are just outside the city, at one of the larger vocational training facilities in Western Sweden. Ahmad has attended Swedish language courses and speaks the language well. The vocational expert tells me that Ahmad had been classified as a carpenter by his PES caseworker and that he currently works as a cook in a restaurant; a job Ahmad does not care for. During the assessment the following dialogue takes place:

> [...].
> Trainer: In my papers, it says you're a carpenter? When I think about carpenters in Iraq, I think about furniture...
> Ahmad: It's like in Sweden, the same...you work with windows, doors....
> Trainer: But, do they build wooden houses in Iraq?
> Ahmad: Hmm...it's almost the same as in Sweden...
>
> [Field notes from an occupational assessment at a training college, November 17, 2008].

Two things are evident here: First, while Ahmad has been classified as a carpenter by his caseworker, he has nevertheless been registered for validation during which he is questioned in ways that carpenters who have been trained and who work in Sweden would not be. Secondly, when Ahmad is asked whether people build wooden houses in Iraq, his prior experience is further called into question. As wooden houses are common throughout Sweden, and ever since the publication of Astrid Lindgren's children's books – not least the adventures of Pippi Longstocking - and their subsequent filming became a trademark of the country, a question mark is set against Ahmad's experience as a carpenter by relating it to something considered essentially Swedish (for more on essentialization, see Zanoni, 2011). Sara Ahmed (2012: 177) refers to this type of questioning attitude as 'making the stranger', something which she compares to the questions usually asked of strangers when inquiring about where they are from. Ahmed found such questions to be more like saying: 'you are not from around here', thus questioning their experiences in the local context.

Thus, while initial intentions enacted validation as a way of assessing skills and knowledge in a 'better' way in order to remove defects from administrative procedures and, in doing so, promote immigrants' employability, it becomes

translated into a diagnostic practice that questions the prior experience of recent immigrants. Later on during the assessment, the following dialogue ensued:

> T.: What were your duties at work?
> A.: Everything.
> T.: Casting a foundation?
> A.: Casting a foundation? [...]. No, others do that. [In Sweden casting a foundation is the work of concreters, not carpenters.]
> T.: If I understand you correctly, you've worked a lot with formwork [the construction of the temporary wooden moulds used when casting a concrete wall]
> A.: [pauses, does not seem to follow]
> T.: If you cast a wall (concrete in a mould), where is the risk of the wall collapsing greatest?
> A.: At the bottom...
> T.: Correct.
> [The trainer proceeds to ask questions about the work of casting concrete foundations and walls.]
> T.: It states 'carpenter' in your papers, but would you be interested in working as a 'concreter'?
> A.: I don't understand.
>
> [Field notes from an occupational assessment at a training college, November 17, 2008]

It is evident that the assessment of Ahmad is being guided by the trainer's understanding of the situation on the labour market where, according to the trainer, there is an overabundance of carpenters and an undersupply of concreters. While Swedish immigration policy is not linked to the idea of catering for the needs of the Swedish labour market through skill-based immigration, in practice, we see how the vocational expert instrumentalizes the validation procedure by putting it at the service of the Swedish labour market; more specifically, the construction industry, which has identified skills shortages concerning concreters. During the process, the expert acknowledges that Ahmad possesses skills and knowledge, but decides what these skills are, i.e. he decides that Ahmad is a concreter, not a carpenter. While this example of an occupational assessment could be interpreted as supporting the construction of Ahmad as employable, this construction is based on the trainer's (limited) understanding of what it means to be a carpenter in Iraq, as well as his (more accurate) understanding of the Swedish labour market. In line with this instrumentalization of the validation procedure, Ahmad's chances of staying in the category of carpenter diminish, regardless of his own will, expectations, and actions. Thus, the trainer does not facilitate Ahmad's responsibilization; on the contrary, the trainer actively engages in the decision-making.

Validation and afterwards – what happens to the gaps?

The project representatives hailed the outcome of the V/I project as a success. As stated in the project plan, over 500 assessment activities were performed. Seventy per cent of the participants ended up in work, studies, or other activities such as internships, possibly leading to work or further studies. However, most of the activities performed were qualification portfolios, described in one educational service provider's information material as the basis for a *future* competence assessment (see Table 1).

Occupational assessment (Total number)	**247**
Construction	132
Health Care	35
Restaurant	14
Automotive Engineering	64
Transportation (Truck drivers)	22
Welding	24
Qualification portfolio	**315**

Table 1: *Number of 'validation activities' performed as part of the project.*

In the past, qualification portfolio classes had been made sense of as a means of improving the job-seeking skills of people who had professional experience of working in Sweden and who had been made redundant, or were simply looking for a change of career. The qualification portfolio's core idea was to give participants the opportunity to reflect on their own past experiences, first under the guidance of a coach, and then in a *real* work setting, so that they could then document their skills and competence with the help of a supervisor at the workplace:

> Well, and when these guys had been here on the course for a short while and I could see that they were network technicians, programmers... that they could work with hardware and change memory cards etc., I went to the companies and told them about validation and about what the company could expect [when temporarily taking on a qualification portfolio participant], and they thought that was great. They could get a 4-8 week validation... and most of them wanted 8 weeks... and then they had a person who was competent within the field. The only requirement we had was that this person would be given a supervisor at the

> company, a person who would be responsible for him and follow him while he was at the company. [Coach]

This documentation could then be used to draft job-seeking documents, e.g. the Europass CV or a job application letter. In the V/I project, the method was adapted 'as far as possible' to the target group, i.e. 'newly-arrived non-Nordic immigrants'. As the project progressed, Swedish language skills were increasingly cited as the most dominant explanation as to why recent immigrants could not be properly assessed, and thus subsequently failed to gain employment. The focus of the qualification portfolio sessions thus shifted away from job-seeking activities towards self-reflection on competence and qualifications. The participants were encouraged to do so under the guidance of the coach, and then share with one another their previous work and other experiences – the documentation of these skills and knowledge was increasingly being deemed difficult, however. But, the 'qualification portfolio' was not only adapted to the target group, it was also adapted to the project's clearly-defined conditions, with regard to the financing available and its duration. Under these preconditions, qualification portfolios at a workplace under the guidance of expert supervisors were seen as unviable, entailing consequences for the legitimacy of the portfolio as it was enacted in the V/I project. One educational expert explains:

> Well, the qualification portfolio isn't controlling because it's based on the individual's input. It would be more controlling if... I know the idea was previously about also giving those who went through a qualification portfolio the opportunity to show their skills at a real workplace. And that would've made it more controlling because we could really have seen whether these people really function in that specific occupation. But it hasn't worked that way. One could say that the qualification portfolio is the activity least related to any clearly defined levels of requirement. Most other activities are coupled to some form of trade and industry requirements, very often in the form of different certificates, or sometimes to upper secondary education. [Educational expert]

Consequently, while the qualification portfolio activities were intended to motivate participants and give them a sense of pride in their accomplishments, their value as a means of integrating immigrants onto the labour market and into society remained questionable. Even qualification portfolio enthusiasts acknowledged that employers were not inclined to hire a person based on the written documentation produced after these sessions. They stressed, however, that the real value of the qualification portfolio lay in the processes that it triggered 'inside the person's mind'.

Even more importantly, right from the very beginning, the project did not make any provisions for supplementary education and training to be given to

immigrants based on the results of their validations: As one education specialist explained:

> For example, last Friday, I followed up the transport sector... people who had been validated against the requirements for truck drivers. And there was this one guy who the employers liked very much... I mean, he was a very competent professional, but needed some additional training – one or two weeks – in order to get some more qualifications, in order to be more employable. And, I can understand the employers for wanting that because there's a bunch of certificates that you need in order to drive trucks with hazardous loads, or a forklift, or whatever. But, I can only recommend this [further training]. I can't tell the PES that it has to pay for this training. I don't have the power to do that. I can simply recommend that this person needs this training in order to be more employable. But, then it's up to the PES to make its own decisions... if they have the money to pay for this training.... [Educational specialist]

Here, the educational specialist does not connect employability solely with the validation activity, but more specifically with validation *and* supplementary education and training activities based on the results of assessments. She is alluding to the notion that immigrants do not become employable merely by having their skills and knowledge assessed and documented. Given the situation on the Swedish labour market, and the requirements of employers, they need to be given the opportunity to make choices and participate in activities in order to close identified knowledge and skills gaps (as validation of the prior foreign learning of recent immigrants has generally resulted in the establishment of such skills gaps – be it with regard to language or other skills).

The PES' activities, on the other hand, are governed by other rules and regulations, which are not always conducive to the outcome of validation projects, as we can see in this case. The educational specialist alludes, here, to the fact that, while the project sought to establish methods of validating prior foreign learning, it was not intended to focus on what would happen to immigrants once they had been validated; no resources had been allocated to supplementary training and education in order to close knowledge and skills gaps established through validation, and no resources, in terms of time, had been allocated to the caseworkers of the various organizations to deal with the results of the validation activity. Thus, it was left to the PES to decide how to use the results, and what to do with its clients, on the basis of the outcome of validation.

In sum, the increasing focus on the qualification portfolio method (as opposed to occupational assessment) as a meaningful tool regarding the performance of the recent immigrant as employable, as well as the lack of focus on supplementary training, should be called into question given the strong focus of the Swedish labour market on formal documentation (certificates, grades, diplomas, work life experience being formally accounted for, etc.). Information on the immigrant

collected through the qualification portfolio is questionable as language difficulties do not fit well with self-documentation of skills and competence. Furthermore, while the produced documentation is sent to the participants' caseworkers at the PES, to be used by it when making future decisions about how to support immigrant employment, there is little follow-up regarding how this information will be used in the future to advance immigrant employability.

The results of the project were similar to results from validation work in other parts of Sweden: achievements vis-à-vis advancing employability and/or better integrating recent immigrants into Swedish society have been somewhat disappointing to date. Immigrants have not usually ended up in permanent employment any quicker, or on a larger scale, and the role of validation in integrating immigrants into Swedish society has proven difficult to assess. Nevertheless, the work of establishing and maintaining a validation procedure continues unabated.

Discussion

Previous research into employability has shown the positioning both of employers and of state and municipal organizations as *enablers*, ensuring that employees make choices and participate in activities which contribute to their construction as employable (see, for instance, Fejes and Berglund, 2010). Our study shows that the concept of employability is translated, in practice, on the basis of the interests and administrative and bureaucratic needs of the participating public and private organizations and agencies.

The work of validation followed the broad four-step process outlined by Czarniawska and Sevón (2005). Subsequently, we were able to see how the idea of employability was separated from its original context, as a means of making the Swedish education system more inclusive, and translated into a tool for integration. The idea *qua* object then travelled in time and space until being further translated into the V/I project in Western Sweden and into a concrete validation procedure, based on the local context, practices, and interests. Finally, the new validation activities and practices were repeated locally as immigrants were assessed. However, these activities and practices have not yet become institutionalized and, up until the present time (2013), there is no well-established and taken-for-granted validation procedure for assessing and documenting the skills and knowledge of recent immigrants, on a regular basis, in Sweden.

In the absence of an institutionalized validation procedure, our study shows how the concept of employability is performed as part of the continuing translation processes, and how it is both informed by and constrains the activities of the project. While employability is seen, at the outset of the project, as being connected with inefficiencies in the administrative and bureaucratic procedure of settlement support, it becomes linked to the problematic nature of recent immigrants' prior foreign experiences once it has been translated into concrete assessment activities: the initial translation alludes to the notion that recent immigrants *are* not employable because of the inefficient workings of the administrative system of settlement support; the subsequent further translation of this idea, and its re-embedding in local contexts, sees defects in the prior (foreign) experiences of immigrants.

The study thus highlights important problems as regards arguing for the extended responsibility of the individual for his/her own employability. First, since the meaning of employability is translated and re-translated as part of everyday organizing and is, as such, always context-dependent, a person cannot surely know that the qualities deemed necessary in order to be employable, at one point in time and in one place, will still be required in order to be considered employable at another point in time and in another place.

Second, while the literature traditionally describes the role of employers and state organizations as neutral *enablers* of employability, this study has shown that, rather than simply enabling the decision-making of employees or job seekers concerning their employability, such organizations are implicated in the construction of the employable immigrant.

While there are studies examining the norms and means governing the creation of 'the employable individual' in various contexts (see, for example, Garsten and Jacobsson, 2004), this study provides an in-depth case study of how the term *employability* is constructed as a part of the settlement of recent immigrants. In the present regime, too much emphasis is placed, arguably, on the value of documentation when it comes to meeting the bureaucratic and administrative routines both of employers and of state and municipal actors, and too little on the heterogeneous experiences of immigrants – on their requirements and expectations.

The literature on employability has generally underlined the responsibility of the individual for his/her own employability – everyone should ensure that he/she is attractive and employable on the labour market. Contrary to such a position, which renders a social problem amenable to individual solutions and practices, this study shows that, instead of empowering recent immigrants to be

responsible for their own employability, state and municipal organizations, in line with the shift in Sweden's labour market policy towards 'activating' individuals, has become responsible for (re)presenting recent immigrants as employable on Sweden's labour market, i.e. (re)presenting them as knowledgeable, skilled and competent.

Conclusions and implications

Validation practices that push performance metrics as the key indicator of success invite educational service providers and municipal and state organizations to pay for and/or support activities that produce the quickest results in terms of favourable metrics, and not the most favourable outcome for either the individual or for the labour market and its employers. One consequence of this may be the accentuation of the trend concerning the establishment of 'ethnic niches' on the Swedish labour market, i.e. occupations and/or work activities predominantly performed by immigrants (De los Reyes and Wingborg, 2002).

The study also contributes to the literature on careers during the contemporary era by emphasizing the career prospects of subaltern groups, rather than those of the middle-classes which are examined on a regular basis (see, for example, Hassard, Morris and McCann, 2012; McCabe, 2009), suggesting that recent immigrants are subjected to bureaucratic validation practices that only marginally allow them to enter the Swedish labour market. Their failure to fit into the predefined skill categories and work life experiences lowers their possibilities of having their skills and experiences properly validated. In other words, the immense social and economic challenges involved in global migration, and the introduction of immigrants into highly regulated national labour markets, are not simply a matter of linking up employers with the labour market's new subjects, but equally a question of how to assess and validate skills and knowledge falling outside of predefined bureaucratic policies and procedures.

Moreover, the V/I project, and much of the work of validation done in Sweden, today represents, contrary to the original intentions of its proponents, a return to employability as a policy concept aimed at focusing on socially, physically, and mentally vulnerable groups simultaneous with a more explicit focus in society on the individual and his/her qualities, credentials, and personal responsibilities regarding knowledge/skills (competence) and values/attitudes (social skills and adaptability) (see, for example, Garsten and Jacobsson, 2004; Fejes and Berglund, 2010). Constructing the employable immigrant is, thus, a set of

organizational activities determined by a variety of political, economic, and financial objectives and at times difficult to combine and bring into harmony.

Finally, the study contributes to the literature on validation. Contrary to expectations that validation will solve all the problems of social injustice by putting a greater emphasis on the lifelong learning of all citizens (Bjørnavold, 2000; Butterworth, 1992; Peters, 2000; Tudor, 1991), our analysis suggests that validation practices have unintended consequences in that they reinforce the immigrant's weak position on the labour market when he/she undergoes extensive continuous assessments or is classified in unfavourable categories. The study thus confirms previous research suggesting that validation, notwithstanding its positive intentions, often exposes, in practice, individuals to alternative forms of discrimination or exclusion (see, for example, Fejes and Nicoll, 2008; Harris, 1999).

For policymakers and scholars who consider validation practices to counteract social inequality, the study may be disappointing. However, validation practices are neither inherently discriminating nor inherently good. The enactment of validation practices is an everyday, human accomplishment which is constantly being re-negotiated and subjected to modification (see also Usher, Bryant and Johnston, 1997).

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Fight for your alienation: The fantasy of employability and the ironic struggle for self-exploitation

Peter Bloom

abstract

This paper draws on Lacanian psychoanalysis, to introduce employability as a cultural fantasy that organizes identity around the desire to shape, exploit and ultimately profit from an employable self. Specifically, the paper shows how individuals seek to overcome their subjective and material alienation by maximizing their self-exploitation through constantly enhancing their employability. This linking of empowerment to self-exploitation has expanded into a broader organizational and political demand calling on individuals to fight for their alienation by having managers and governments help them better exploit themselves through enhancing their employability. Paradoxically, the more contemporary subjects aim to overcome their subjective and material alienation through fantasies of employability the more alienated they become.

Introduction

Perhaps no greater freedom exists than the ability to determine one's personal destiny. Employability stands at the heart of this trumpeted empowerment; purportedly providing individuals the resources to not only obtain employment but also, more importantly, the opportunity to 'control their employment fate' (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996; Hall, 2002). Consequently, employability points to the emergence of an empowering contemporary identity juxtaposed against a changing economic reality that is marked by even greater job insecurity (Kanter, 1991; Harriot and Pemberton, 1996; Ghoshal et al., 1999).

Yet, critical scholars point to the more insidious character of employability discourses (see especially Cremin, 2010). These studies highlight the growing concern that employability, far from empowering workers, actually deepens their commitment to capitalist ideologies and managerial demands. At the heart of this desire for employability, organizations' wish to cultivate a culture in which the authority of management is re-established through the creation of a committed, yet autonomous, workforce (Costea et al., 2007). Employability is further meant to 'indicate how people should behave and what their responsibilities are' (Field, 1997: 62) and is considered to be representative of a new form of capitalist self-disciplining (Dean 1994, 1998; Cruikshank 1999). All this suggests an identity built around domination rather than self-determination, whereby one comes to identify with, and seeks to embody, the perceived desires of the boss (Cremin, 2010).

Such critiques invite an investigation into the deeper ways employability shapes contemporary subjectivity. This paper aims to better understand how desires for self-mastery, as presently associated with employability, are thought to influence work identities and contribute to emerging forms of managerial control. In doing so, the analysis aims to go beyond a simplified binary of in control/controlled; rather, it emphasizes how employability operates by granting individuals the prospect of mastery over their employment self. An idealized, but never realized, figure of the 'fully employable' work subject presents itself; able to dictate one's career choices such that he or she, instead of the boss, is most profitably able to exploit one's labour.

In order to make this argument, this article turns to the psychoanalytic insights of Jacques Lacan. Organizational literature drawing on Lacan links professional identities to a utopian ego ideal affectively 'seizing' employees in conformity to company values (Arnaurd, 2002; Bloom and Cederström, 2009; Vanheule et al, 2003; de Cock and Böhm, 2007; Styhre, 2008). Here, individuals strive for an always precarious subjective security attached to a beatific, though eternally elusive, vision of a romanticized self associated with culturally provided fantasies. Significantly, this attachment is made possible and strengthened, paradoxically, by the continual failure to achieve this identity (Driver, 2009; Hoedemaekers, 2010). A key theoretical intervention made in this work is the central role fantasy plays in not only establishing selfhood, but also organizing how individuals cope with the eternal failure to realize this ego ideal as well as their own fragmentary subjective nature through the continual attempt to work on or master this socially provided self.

Building on such insights, this paper contends that employability is a cultural fantasy that structures identity around desires for self-mastery. Essential to this

identity is individuals' longings to subjectively take control and materially profit from their own life. Consequently, current and potential employees paradoxically strive to overcome their subjective alienation through mastering their accepted material alienation as a capitalist subject: the contemporary subject of employability struggles not for the eradication of exploitation, but rather for their right to 'self-exploitation'. Notably, this struggle for 'self-exploitation' represents the ironic ways individuals seek to psychologically deal with the eternal failure to control their professional and personal destiny through continually attempting to master their self via employability. Further, this struggle is transferred onto growing demands for employers and governments to 'empower' individuals by enhancing their employability.

The paper is structured as follows. First, it critically reflects upon the paradoxical ethos of self-mastery that drives contemporary values of employability. This initial analysis will then be linked to a Lacanian-inspired theoretical framework connecting identity and ideological domination to the efforts of individuals to attain self-mastery through an alienating fantasmatic identity. The following sections explore, in turn, employability as a cultural fantasy that organizes identity around the desire to shape, exploit and ultimately profit from an employable self. In its most idealized form, this identity represents an empowered mode of self-alienation, in which individuals attempt to assume power over their identity and life through embracing and working to control an alienated capitalist identity. The final section concludes with an examination of how ideologies of capitalism and managerialism are presently reinforced through this fight for one's alienation.

Employability and alienation: Who's in control?

Worker empowerment is increasingly associated with values of employability (Guest, 1998; Ellig, 1998; Kanter, 1989; Littleton and Arthur, 2000; Yerkes, 2011). More precisely, it revolves around enhancing one's capacity to more readily and easily obtain and maintain new employment (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996; Hall, 2002). Employability is inexorably bound to ideas of enhancing worker's overall autonomy (Schmidt, 2006). To that effect, employability promises to make 'each worker a more aware and a more independent organizer of the succession of activities and commitments that, combined, constitute his/her working life' (Gazier, 2001: 23). Yet, the promise of employability as a source of empowerment has been progressively challenged. Critical scholars point to employability as a force for ensuring that individuals conform to the needs of the contemporary marketplace and the evolving prerogatives of management (Anderson, 2007; Schmidt, 1990: 101, 352).

As a result, identity construction based on desires for enhancing one's employability becomes translated into a continuous process of maintaining profitability and fulfilling the desires of employers. This reveals a deeper paradox that plagues discourses of employability within contemporary capitalism. Namely, values of employability appeal to individuals as a means for controlling their own capitalist destiny and identity; it manifests itself in practice as a form of capitalist self-disciplining. Here, the call to become more employable is a demand for individuals to 'pre-occupy the self with the self' (Dean, 1994, 1998; Rose, 1998; Rimke, 2000), in order to ensure survival and thrive within a business climate characterized by regular job turnover and technological change. Employability, further, is part of a move toward the development of 'self-regulatory mechanisms' for empowering individuals to better conform to managerial wants (Anderson, 2007: 127-128). Employability, accordingly, will 'indicate how people should behave and what their responsibilities are' (Field, 1997: 62).

This paradox speaks to a broader shift in strategies of managerial control based on the ironic championing of the self-determining and autonomous subject. Willmott (1993) argues, hence, that contemporary forms of corporate regulation are founded on a cultural promotion of worker's freedom and autonomy:

> Corporate Culturists commend and legitimise the development of a technology of cultural control that is intended to yoke the power of self determination to the realization of corporate values from which employees are encouraged to derive a sense of autonomy and identity. (Willmott, 1993: 563)

Expanding on such insights, some scholars have revealed the ways regulative employment ideologies and practices are sustained through an affective attachment to an economic identity that promises self-determination. Identities associated with market rationality (Bloom and Cederström, 2009), entrepreneurship (Jones and Spicer, 2005) and autonomy (Maravelias, 2007) present a false illusion of self-determination in which the employee, rather than the employer, is in charge.

This linking of control to themes of autonomy and self-determination points to the lack of control individuals feel over their identity in relation to these organizational and economic discourses. Put differently, is one's identity determined by one's own values and aspirations or simply a reflection of the cultural ideals of the marketplace and managers? Costas and Fleming (2009) describe this tension as representative of a deeper discursive 'self-alienation'; whereby, employees realize that their core selves are constructed by organizations rather than their own self-determination. As such, the complete subjectification of the 'inner self' is made difficult as people recognize that they

have become strangers to themselves (Leidner, 1993; Sennett, 1998). For this reason, individuals struggle to protect their selves from organizational control (Mumby, 2005; Trethewey, 1997).

This form of subjective self-alienation has direct resonance with present day discourses of employability. Cremin (2010: 131), in this regard, describes how 'the subordination to capital (the material fact of labour) is defused by the sense we have of our independence from the employer (an identification that is not associated with the act of labour)'. Drawing on the psychoanalytic perspective of Jacques Lacan, he illuminates the desire for employability as a perpetually futile quest for freedom, revolving around the need to meet the always elusive 'boss's desire'. In becoming 'fully employable', one can achieve her or his professional and personal ambitions since, armed with comprehensive skills, one may choose from an infinite number of opportunities. Yet, as Cremin notes, this drive for 'mastery' leaves one permanently unfulfilled and beholden to capitalist demands, finding that regardless of their effort one can 'never be employable enough'.

However, this analysis, while valuable, does not fully capture the way this subjective alienation associated with discourses of employability plays into and reinforces an individual's material alienation as a capitalist subject. Values of employability are not merely a means to an end but increasingly shape how individuals view empowerment and more fundamentally their identity. At stake in this paper, then, is clarifying the ironic and deeper nature of this identification as an explicit identification of capitalist empowerment that is central to contemporary capitalist exploitation and directly connects up to Marxian ideas of material alienation. More precisely, the paper investigates how present day processes of material commodification are transformed into an attractive desire for self-exploitation through a fantasy of employability.

The next section introduces the Lacanian concept of fantasy: employability is revealed as an idealized identification, one that is premised on the illusory ability to overcome perceived subjective alienation through controlling one's own material alienation.

Fantasizing the self between 'self-mastery' and alienation

As pointed out in the above section, a central component of employability discourses is the question of who controls one's identity. This tension can be theoretically transferred into broader discussions of the relation between subjective alienation and desires for self-mastery in identity construction. Rather than think of these as opposing concepts, however, Lacan proposes a theory of

the identity which recognizes their paradoxical but nonetheless mutually reproducing interaction. More precisely, the affective appeal of an alienating cultural identity is found in its always incomplete promise of achieving self-mastery through a dominant social discourse.

Lacan, in line with psychoanalysis generally, rejects ideas of the autonomous ego. Drawing upon the original insights of Freud, he views identity instead as always formed around a subjectification to and overdertermination by one's unconscious. Lacan takes this objection to autonomy even further, positing that selfhood is necessarily structured according to socially constructed desires and norms external to one's own subjectivity. This subjugation is multi-leveled – existing in the interrelated registers of the imaginary, the symbolic and the real. At the level of the imaginary, individuals are captured by the image of an idealized other, originating developmentally in their first view of their reflected selves as an infant, which affectively promises psychic wholeness against their always felt lacking nature (Lacan, 1977). This imaginary ideal is formed within the matrix of an external symbolic discourse unconsciously shaping individual's desires. For this reason Lacan (1988) argues that it is actually discourse, not the subject, which has autonomy– as it is this outside set of values and understandings that organizes subjectivity and consequently conscious identification.

Thus for Lacan, self-mastery, the possibility of ever being a fully self-determining subject is impossible as alienation is an inescapable part of identity. Put differently, to be a subject is to be alienated. To this effect, in a tellingly entitled chapter 'The Subject and Other: Alienation', he (1981) proposes two types of alienation as precipitated by the presence of a Big Other, a figure who ostensibly represents psychological fullness. The first is contained in the very 'decision' to become a subject, through entering into a prevailing symbolic discourse. The possibility of psychic fullness, or of overcoming our innate sense of lack, through the symbolic command of a Big Other is inalterably alienating; it is akin, according to Lacan, of facing the slave's choice of their freedom or their life. Secondly this alienation persists even after one enters into the symbolic order. The 'Real' of who one is forever escapes the symbolic meanings culturally provided by a Big Other. Accordingly, one is by nature alienated, in that one defies symbolic signification. The 'Real' of our identity is marked by our non-meaning, literally 'non-sense'. Lacan (1981) portrays this relationship in a Venn diagram [figure 1].

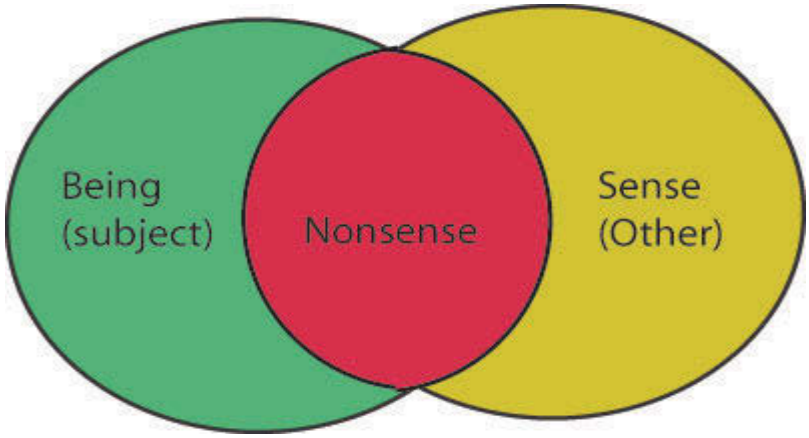

Figure 1: Being, sense and nonsense.

However, drawing on Lacanian theory there is a more complex story to tell regarding this overriding desire for self-mastery in the face of our inherent subjective alienation; one in which it is not merely a delusion, but rather a productive fallacy. Far from being a laughable afterthought, self-mastery exists at the very centre of selfhood: though it may be impossible, without it, so to may be identity. Indeed Lacan (1977) mentions that a key element of an individual's initial experience of unity in the *Mirror Stage* is a jubilation linked to feelings of self-mastery. It is this perceived false mastery (Lacan, 2001), which continues to drive identity throughout an individual's psychological development. It offers subjects the perceived opportunity to overcome their 'natural psychic tendency' (Lacan 2001: 6) toward subjective fragmentation and disintegration by reinforcing the 'autonomy and primacy of the ego, creating an impression of transcendental consciousness and intentionality' (Hoedemaekers, 2010: 81).

Fantasy is crucial to this formation of identity between the poles of subjective alienation and false mastery. It does so by providing a stable scenario for this identification to play out; transferring the eternally futile and alienating drive for selfhood onto a specific desire, or in Lacanian terms an *object a*, promising subjects psychic wholeness. Central to this fantasmatic scenario, is what Lacan (2001) refers to as *méconnaissance,* whereby the subject misrecognizes their selfhood with their perceived autonomous ego. This misrecognition further reflects the ways the fundamental fantasy of mastery is transferred onto a fixation with a culturally constructed ego ideal. This idealized self-image motivates individuals, providing a tangible though always out of reach visage for individuals to imagine their autonomy as attached to over-determining symbolic discourse (Hoedemakers, 2009).

Yet this promise of overcoming alienation is only ever illusionary, a desire rather than a reality. Nevertheless, this must be seen again as a productive failure, whereby it is exactly this eternal inability to fully attain this ego ideal that ultimately sustains the subject in this identity. As Stavrakakis (1999: 29) observes, identity is necessarily a 'failed identification' in that 'for even the idea of identity to become possible its ultimate impossibility has to be instituted. It is this constitutive impossibility that, by making full identity impossible, makes identification possible, if not necessary'. This highlights the paradox central to identity and alienation: the more one seeks to overcome alienation through a socially provided identity the more alienated one ultimately becomes. To this end, psychic security is maintained not in the achievement but in the eternally disappointing pursuit of these elusive identities. Identity, according to Žižek (2001: 24, see also Cremin, 2010: 138) therefore exists 'in a kind of curved space – the nearer you get to it, the more it eludes your grasp (or the more you possess it, the greater the lack)'.

This Lacanian theoretical framework allows then for a reconsideration of the subject in relation to desires for self-mastery as set against the inherent alienation of identification. The illusions of independence, autonomy and self-mastery reinforce an ultimately socially over-determined identity. It is exactly in assuming that one is free and in control that it is possible to repress the recognition of one's own domination. Current discourses of employability, whereby the underlying demand on individuals to conform to the bosses desire are interlaced with personal aspirations for professional autonomy and control, reflect this complex and often quite ironic relation of alienation and self-mastery in the construction of identity. Yet it also shows how this subjective paradox of alienation plays itself out in contemporary in relation to processes of material alienation. More precisely, as the next sections will aim to illuminate in greater detail, the more one strives to be 'non-alienated' through a fantasy of employability the more subjectively and materially alienated they become as a capitalist subject.

The paradoxical fantasy of employability

The theoretical importance of desires for self-mastery to reproduce an ultimately alienating identity helps illuminate the current appeal of employability discourses. These discourses reconfigure how individuals relate to their subjective and material alienation. Conventionally, starting with Marx, alienation was connected to the inherent exploitation an individual encounters as a wage labourer. More precisely, alienation is conceived as the disconnection workers experience toward their labour, others and themselves in accordance with the

demands of employers in a capitalist economy. For Lacan, alienation further implies that one's identity is constructed through an existing cultural discourse, as well as the distance one feels in realizing this idealized identification. Individuals organize their identity around the eternal desire to be more employable. Importantly, employability provides individuals with the perceived opportunity to overcome subjective alienation through shaping and controlling one's identity as a materially alienated economic subject.

These insights show the intersection in which subjective and material alienation meet and mutually reproduce one another. Drawing on a classical Marxist perspective, Lukacs introduces the concept of 'self–alienation' in which the worker's 'own labour becomes something objective and independent of him, something that controls him by virtue of an autonomy alien to man' (Lukacs, 1971: 87). Lukacs' insight points to the inexorable relation of material and subjective alienation under capitalism; here subjective alienation is a natural consequence of the material alienation experienced as a wage labourer. Yet in contemporary capitalism it is exactly though an identity promising the possibility of eliminating subjective alienation that material alienation is reinforced.

Discourses of employability reflect this emerging paradoxical relation between subjectivities of self-mastery and alienation. Most notably, at a deeper level of subjectivity, they create a scenario in which the only way to secure self-hood is to embrace an identity in conformity with employee desires. This continual imperative to enhance one's employability serves as a framework for seeing the 'world out there' by simplifying complexities and contradictions in order to effectively guide actions in a neoliberal economic environment marked by unpredictability and insecurity (Benford, 2000; Pruijt et al., 2011). In this way these discourse of employability exist as a type of 'planet speak' that provides

> a way of reasoning that seems to have no structural roots, no social locations and no origin. It is part of a 'worldwide bible' that is in every tongue and it seems to provide solutions to the problems faced. (Fejes, 2010: 90)

Yet they also reflect the inherently alienating character of this identification. Akin to Lacan's formulation of symbolic identification as being given a choice of your freedom or your life, the present day subject is offered the option of 'be what organizations desire or be nothing'.

However, employability also affectively grips subjects with the promise of overcoming their subjective alienation ironically exactly through this explicitly alienating discourse. It represents a fantasy of work which promotes a supposedly self-determining employment subject, who regardless of broader economic trends, is in control of her or his working destiny. Employability is

championed as the ability to obtain new employment when required to manage employment transitions (Hillage and Pollard, 1999: 83). In this spirit, employability is promoted as 'independence and work' against the old standards of 'payments and dependence' (Finn, 2000: 393). This illustrates how the symbolic demand to conform to managerial demands is reinforced through an appealing ego ideal of self-mastery. A romantic figure emerges who directs the course of his or her life, free from the whims of economic downturns, bad jobs and an unexciting career.

Significantly, this ironic strive for self-mastery through employability transcends mere career advancement. It organizes identity, directing desires for self-mastery into the continuous pursuit of personal fulfillment. In this context Cremin (2010) connects desires associated with employability to a type of liberal personal fulfillment anchored in a subjectivity of negative dis-identification toward their work. According to this logic, people cultivate their employability simply, and often quite cynically, to advance their own personal goals and ambitions. Such negative dis-identification, according to Cremin, is both spatial and temporal in nature. Individuals disconnect from their current employment and enhance stronger identification with whom they see themselves as outside of work (e.g. 'I may be an accountant to pay the bills, but I am really a musician'), or whom they hope to become (e.g. 'Today I am just a mail room lackey, but soon I will save enough money to leave this job and do something better with my life'). Here, employment and employability are merely professional means to a personal end.

Cremin, nevertheless, misses the deeper ways such fantasies of employability are shaping identity in conformity to employer desires and broader capitalist ideologies. Employability goes beyond organizational ideas of 'good work' or a means to achieve personal goals and is considered instead a 'hypergood' (Taylor, 1989) that represents 'a source of self-realization and self-actualization' (Costea et al., 2007: 249). This reflects a certain paradoxical identification whereby subjective feelings of alienation can be overcome by better taking control over one's material alienation. A supposedly evolved progressive 'soft capitalism' emerges, which conceives

> The self as a self which considers itself to be something more, something much 'deeper', more natural and authentic than the self of what is taken to be involved with the superficialities of the merely materialistic-cum-consumeristic; the self as a self which as to work itself to enrich and explore itself in the process of dealing with its problems. (Heelas, 2002: 80; see also Costea et al., 2007)

This conception of the self illuminates the paradoxical interpellation of identity to a dominant ideology via themes of 'self-mastery'. The authoritarian demand to

meet employer's desires is transformed into an appealing fantasy of self-determination and actualization.

In this manner, selfhood becomes inexorably connected to the insatiable demand to improve one's 'employability', in order to obtain greater personal and professional freedom and satisfaction. Revealed is a fundamental paradox of subjectivity within present day capitalism linked to discourses of employability. Namely, the more one attempts to overcome their subjective alienation through improving their employability, the more alienated subjectively they become. In this new age 'to be employed is at risk (and) to be employable is to be secure' (Hawkins, 1999: 8). This sentiment reveals the subjective 'security' provided by this identification. More to the point though, it reflects how efforts to 'take control' of one's identity, to be this elusive 'authentic self' are necessarily linked to better meeting the expectations of one's present and future employers.

Demonstrated is the paradox characterizing subjective and material alienation in relation to affective discourses of employability. To reiterate, the more one attempts to assert an independent identity through fantasies of employability, the greater their ultimate subjective and material alienation. The next section, hence, will explore how this desire for 'self-mastery' linked to enhancing one's employability is channelled into a struggle for maximizing self-exploitation.

Employability and the ironic struggle for self-exploitation

The fantasy of employability directs desires for overcoming subjective alienation into an 'empowering' identity which paradoxically further conforms to managerial desires. This subjective paradox extends as well to material alienation. Affective discourses of employability link professional empowerment to continued and even more intensive forms of capitalist exploitation. Cremin (2010) introduces the concept of 'reflexive exploitation' connected to employability, whereby 'a person reflects on herself as an object of exchange in order to access a wage and social status, to choose a life that is compatible with the injunctions of liberal capitalism' (Cremin, 2010: 137). Yet this account underplays the transformation of 'objective' self-alienation into an empowering subjective identity. Discourses of employability, by contrast, portray the conformity to capitalist values and managerial prerogatives as an enticing but elusive opportunity to exert control over your life, even if only fleetingly, through becoming eternally more 'employable'.

These insights, on the surface, seem to echo ideas of identity as a project of continual self-creation emerging from and serving to reproduce prevailing social

ideologies (see for instance Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Ezzamel et al., 2001; Giddens, 1993). Specifically, an ego ideal, as first theorized by Freud, offers subjects 'a point outside of the ego from which one observes and evaluates one's own ego as a whole or totality, just as one's parent observes or evaluates it' (Fink, 2004: 117), in accordance with existing hegemonic values. However, this cannot be seen as a straightforward process of simply maintaining a culturally provided self. As Hoedemaekers (2010: 382) astutely notes, for Lacan 'identifications are inadequate by definition, and conscious discourse of the subject they appear in is peppered with slips, unintended significations and fumbled acts'. The ability of an affective discourse to provide individuals with the resources to cope with this failure is key here. Most notably, this can be achieved by offering subjects a social 'self' to perfect: one corresponding with this ego ideal. Thus whereas Hoedemaekers emphasizes the constant attempts by subjects to overcome this lack by seeking to make this identity coherent in his or her everyday speech, this analysis highlights how individual's cope with this underlying psychic 'inadequacy' through the fleeting feelings of self-mastery attained in the daily undertaking of this identity work.

In the present era, this always-partial experience of self-mastery is commonly associated with the ongoing efforts to maximize one's self-exploitation as an employable subject. Tellingly, employability is said to revolve around the constant enhancement of one's human and social capital (Dess and Shaw, 2001; Jackson and Schuler, 1995). By making oneself more employable, better suited to meet the needs of management, one is supposedly increasing their power of self-determination. Here we again encounter the irony underlying discourses of employability, as they relate to contemporary identity construction; namely, they exist as an ethic promising workers the ability to master themselves by anticipating and acceding to employers' ever changing demands. Yet this apparent contradiction makes sense when economic exploitation is understood, less as an instance of surrendering to the mercurial whims of management, and more as an empowering opportunity to achieve a temporary feeling of 'self-mastery' through increasing one's capacity to exploit oneself.

In short processes of capitalist self-disciplining associated with employability, paradoxically, represent an ongoing effort to feel more 'in control' of one's professional life. Accordingly, in practice, employability is depicted as 'an action orientation (that) facilitates individuals altering the work situation to suit their own need' (Fugate et al., 2004: 17). It is an identity that seeks to subvert the ethos in which one should simply follow managerial imperatives for its own sake. Instead, individuals should make the workplace work for them. Nevertheless, this somewhat subversive attitude does not reject the need to fulfill the prerogatives and expectations of one's employer. By contrast, it reconfigures such

expectations into a repetitive process in which one can experience self-mastery by 'providing a blueprint for ongoing identity work' (Hoedemaekers, 2010: 382). Consequently

> Individuals with high employability actively engage the situation, learning, and asserting whatever influence is possible to alter the situation to fit their own occupational interests and fulfill desired career identities. At the same time, they alter their own cognitions and behaviors to optimize the situation and outcomes, such as job satisfaction and employment opportunities. In short, proactive efforts are manifestations of employability. (Fugate 2004: 17)

To this effect, individuals are urged to constantly 'rectify or improve one's quotidian existence through intervening upon an "inner world" through employability' (Rose, 1998: 192). Concretely, the call to master your 'employment fate', as linked to employability, involves constantly working on yourself to become more attractive to potential employers. This employable subject is akin to Thrift's (2002) 'fast subject', who is eternally trying to collect 'material' to construct its identity as a 'success'. In this sense, the present worker, inspired by values of employability, struggles valiantly for the right to self-exploitation as a substitute for confronting the emptiness at the core of their 'real' identity. This subjectivity is seen in the idealization of individuals as entrepreneurs – innovatively advertising and re-advertising themselves in order to 'take control' of their employment destiny (Kanter, 1993). Employability, in this sense, involves a reflexive ordering of all experiences for one's own profit (Cremin, 2007; McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005).

Yet this ironic struggle for self-exploitation is always futile, in that just as one can never be employable enough neither can they ever exploit themselves enough. Individuals must constantly find new ways to benefit their present or future employer, ostensibly for their own perceived advantage. Given then its prioritizing of personal control, this contradiction between an alienating discourse and its reliance on a fantasy of self-mastery is readily apparent in identities associated with employability. This paradoxical empowerment has expanded into a broader discourse of organizational and political 'freedom', in which the contemporary subject is progressively fighting for his or right to be enhance their employability and therefore ironically their subjective and material alienation.

Fight for your alienation!

Through fantasies of employability the present day capitalist subject seeks to be empowered by striving to 'control' his or her employment fate. In doing so, they paradoxically enhance their subjective and material alienation. This ironically

empowering discourse, nonetheless, represent an evolving framework for articulating employee demands both inside and outside the workplace. Here, individuals exert their self-mastery through demanding that their managers and the government, respectively, aid them in their 'right' to maximize their self-exploitation. The struggle then for self-exploitation in this way becomes transferred into the broader 'fight for your alienation'.

Crucially, this empowering vision of self-exploitation creates a moral demand for individuals to continually embrace and even deepen their material alienation as a present or future capitalist employee. Notably, employability stands as a 'super egoization' of the control imperative linked to desires of self-mastery. This emphasizes the need for individuals to be responsible for their professional fortunes, making them accountable for their own personal fate through constantly becoming more employable. A new ethic appears whereby '...people need to be proactive when faced with ill-defined circumstances' (Sennett, 2006: 51; see also Cremin, 2010: 133). Employability, then, at its highest, is championed as not only the ability but the obligation to manage employment transitions and obtain new employment when required (Hillage and Pollard, 1999: 83). Hurlow and Parselle writes thus of the

> ... the burdensome nature of the employability discourse, as students struggle with aspirations, expectations and comparisons. Most importantly, employability appears to be bound up with transition from student to adult, and the associated tension between the potential for freedom and acceptance of personal responsibility. (2012: 3)

However, this moral obligation linking 'freedom' to responsibility is again impossible to fully realize. Nevertheless, its appeal stems from its existence as an always unfulfilled demand that, like one's own self, can continually be 'worked on' and perfected. This insight points to the broader ways a subversive identification, existing in the imaginary order, can in fact paradoxically support a hegemonic discourse from the symbolic realm. In the words of Stavrakakis (2010: 68), 'Fantasmatically structured enjoyment thus alerts us to the politically salient idea that oftentimes it may be more productive to consider the possibility that concrete ideals may be sustained rather than subverted by their transgression'. In this case, it is not so much that an identity is transgressive in that it challenges an officially sanctioned expectation of the self. Instead, it is that individuals are able to achieve a fleeting sense of self-mastery through consistently fighting for these identities. Specifically, the impossibility of ever achieving psychic harmony and full autonomy in relation to an existing fantasy is transferred onto the empowering struggle against a malevolent figure preventing this aspiration from being realized (Bloom and Cederström, 2009).

Consequently, this continuing failure is directed outward, unto established power holders such as managers as part of a broader struggle to become more employable. Here, traditional authority figures are alongside individuals themselves seen as responsible for helping individuals help themselves through enabling them to better 'become responsible' for their employment fate and, as such, their identity. Employers, then, are expected to enhance their employees' employability as an essential part of the contemporary psychological workplace contract (Jacobsson, 2004). Here, management is reconfigured as a force for helping individuals fulfill their personal and professional desires:

> Management itself thus acquires a new discursive outline: instead of appearing as an authoritarian instance which forces upon workers a series of limitations, it now presents itself as a therapeutic formula mediating self-expression by empowering individuals to work upon themselves to realize their fully realized identity (Costea et al., 2007: 247).

Those who fail to do so are judged, either explicitly or by implication, as 'outdated'; a malicious force preventing individuals from reaching their full potential both inside and outside the workplace.

Illuminated, in turn, is how the continual attempt to become empowered through self-exploitation is directed into a wider fight to become more employable. The employee is now thought to have control – not over production or general socio-economic conditions, but the success of their 'self' within this system. According to Waterman *et al.* (1994: 88), companies at the cutting edge 'give employees the power to assess, hone, redirect, and expand their skills so that they can stay competitive in the job market'. Therefore, the manager is thought to serve their workforce through helping their employees gain experience in new contexts, increase awareness of their marketable skills and talents, boost self-presentation efficacy (Ghoshal et al., 1999) and expand their network of contacts. In this sense, increasing one's skill sets, previously understood to serve the needs of organizations and managers, is now packaged as an instance of better allowing dominated workers to 'take control' of their professional and personal prospects. The injunction to 'be employable', therefore, is translated into a progressive command to successfully 'exploit oneself', a longing which must be continually fought for in the face of often resistant managers and organizations.

Thus, while employability may be conceived as a present day type of governmentality 'creating citizens who are flexible, adaptable and constant learners' (Fejes, 2010: 93), it is publicly articulated as a new demand placed upon firms and at a larger level the state by its citizens. In this new world,

> ... the individual needs to take responsibility for using the opportunities for lifelong learning, by means of education and in-service training, offered by the state and the market, thus transforming her/himself into an employable person... Now, structures for supporting the individual in her/his own choice are created instead of collectively planning the future by means of legislative measures and regulations. (Fejes, 2010: 95)

Past demands for 'full employment' are hence replaced by present calls for 'employability' (Finn, 2000).

This shift reflects the broader association of employability discourses with ideas of freedom and liberation. Employability is presented as an attractive right that can universally appeal to employees as current and future workers, across employment contexts. Not surprisingly, calls for employability, historically, are tied to an 'emancipatory discourse, where the ultimate purpose of learning was self-fulfilment' (Garsten and Jacobsson, 2004: 6). Yet whereas the current conventional view is that 'economic imperative, rather than the emancipatory project, is the dominating logic', what this elides is the ways in which employability is still subjectively regarded as an emancipatory discourse. More broadly, employability is seen as a means for 'including' previously marginalized groups – empowering traditionally disadvantaged individuals to take advantage and profit from a marketplace where they exert control of their own destiny (Levitas, 1998).

This reading highlights how fantasies of employability direct desires for empowerment into a paradoxical struggle to be more employable and as such more attractive to employer desires. This politics revolves around the ability of individuals to feel a fleeting sense of self-mastery not only in their constant attempts to increase their self-exploitation but also in their ongoing and impassioned efforts to demand their right to this greater subjective and material alienation. Hence, the paradox of employability and capitalism can be again rephrased – the more we fight for our empowerment and liberation as employable subjects the more we fight for our continual and deepening alienation as capitalist subjects.

Concluding discussion

Contemporary discourses of employability hold out the alluring promise of a self that is at once empowered and alienated. It is one that simultaneously accedes to the demands of employers, while never supposedly ceding to them control over one's self or destiny. An attractive identity presents itself that catalyzes ever new forms of interpellation and disciplining. The dream of becoming 'master' of our employment selves is impossible to realize. Instead, this super ego injunction to

'take control' leads subjects to invest ever more in 'being employable', in order to overcome such insecurities associated with not yet having achieved self-mastery. Nonetheless, this ironic drive for control through employability stabilizes identity, though only precariously, in the process reinforcing capitalist values of profit and the overriding the power of employers to shape selfhood according to their needs and desires.

This paper has sought to expand on current critical understandings of contemporary work concerning identity as connected to discourses of employability. Such values are maintained, in no small part, through promises, though always unfulfilled, of self-mastery. The article has tried to uncover the psychology driving this 'objective' repression at the core of capitalist labour; the 'enjoyment' subjects garner from their attachment to an alienating identity. This is an insight similar to Žižek (1997: 48) when he declares that 'what psychoanalysis can do to help the critique of ideology is precisely to clarify the status of this paradoxical jouissance as the payment that the exploited, the servant, receives for serving the Master'. Particular to employability and capitalism, Cremin (2010) maintains that the surplus labour extracted from the present day worker is inexorably bound up with the surplus enjoyment they obtain as an 'employable' subject. Expanding on and challenging this reading, this paper has argued that contemporary domination of workers is legitimated and reproduced through the attractive desire to become the master of one's exploitation.

As such, employability stands as a hegemonic discourse structuring identity around a paradoxical desire for self-mastery, within an admittedly alienating capitalist reality. This insight does much to illuminate the subjective character of the structural alienation inherent to capitalism. As previously mentioned, identification is caught in the paradox that 'the nearer you get to it, the more it eludes your grasp (or the more you possess it), the greater the lack' (Žižek, 2001: 24, see also Cremin, 2010: 138). However, as I have suggested in this paper, it is perhaps more accurate to say that the greater the feeling of alienation from one's identity, the more one seeks to master it. Discourses of employability, hence, exist as a fantasy that not only proposes the promise of non-alienation but also provides individuals with the exact resources to cope with this constantly felt failure to realize this ego ideal in productive, though ultimately interpellative, ways.

Importantly, this discussion of exploitation, as connected to an alienating capitalist identity of employability, is not intended as a judgment on the levels of alienation between individuals. It is not a matter, at least for the purposes of this analysis, to posit that 'this person is more or less alienated than this person'.

Rather it is to illuminate an increasingly prevalent subjectivity associated with the desire of individuals to 'take control' of their exploitation. In this sense, the drive to overcome our alienation is manifested in a fetishized desire not to end capitalist exploitation, as such, but instead to 'become its master'. Underlying this culture of employability, therefore, is a certain type of grafters mentality in which one constantly seeks to 'get one over' the boss for one's advantage. Represented is the deeper colonization of subjectivity in line with capitalist values through these discourses. Identity centres here on the capitalist desire to maximize one's profit from exploitation. In this case, one is always seeking to maximize the profit from one's personal self-exploitation.

These insights point, in turn, to the ways an empowering identity can be ironically constructed so as to actually reflect dominant demands and understandings. Lacanian scholars, within the field of organization studies and beyond, note that identities associated with empowerment, transgression and the obscene are incorporated into a broader symbolic order through fantasy. Yet, what this analysis also reveals is how a conforming identity is actually framed so as to appear empowering. It is not so much that an empowering orientation is co-opted; rather, that acquiescing to hegemonic values is made more palatable when clothed in an appealing sheen of empowerment and resistance. In terms of employability, the growing command for subjects to accept the wishes of management, whatever they may be, is framed as an empowering identity of self-mastery that one must constantly protect and struggle toward.

At a broader level, this analysis desires to expand upon contemporary views of ideological interpellation and control. Its central theoretical claim is that sublimination is connected to the cultural construction of a fantasmatic self that can continually be 'worked on' and 'perfected'. This builds on existing work in the field linking interpellation and control to failure of identification (Hoedemaekers, 2010; Roberts, 2005). Specifically, the failure to ever meet an ego ideal creates 'the ground by which conscience can be turned aggressively back upon the self' (Roberts, 2005: 636). However, whereas theorists such as Roberts associate this with a type of moral accounting, I have suggested that it is an ironically empowering identification. Specifically, this paper has explored the ways the sublimination and disciplining of identity in conformity to a prevailing ideology revolves around allowing subjects to continually play out desires for self-mastery, through the continual attempt to perfect a socially provided self.

While this analysis may seem overly bleak, it also seeks to provide the foundations for moving beyond this fantasy of employability. Recently, a number of critical scholars within the field have theorized the relation of fantasy to resistance. Hoedemaekers (2010), for example, calls on subjects to pay attention

to such 'interruptions' to identification as potential sites for transversing, or in different words break free from, a prevailing fantasy. Similarly, Contu (2008), inspired by Žižek, promotes a form of resistance by which individuals are willing to engage in acts that defy the symbolism and enjoyment associated with their current identities. Specific to discourses of employability, Cremin (2010) discusses using the desire for non-alienation to break free from managerial demands. Yet as this analysis has attempted to show, it is exactly these desires that can paradoxically deepen individual's subjective and material alienation as present day capitalist subjects. Rather, it is crucial to construct new fantasies and therefore selves 'to master' which reject ideologies of managerialism and exploitation in favour of new values. Indeed, this appears to be happening the world over, as struggles in the wake of the financial crisis, such as the occupy movement or those catalyzed by the European debt crisis, in which new 'commons' are emerging reconfiguring identity work in relation to ideals of greater social and economic freedom and democracy.

To conclude, employability represents a romanticized vision of work, in which one can be the master of one's own alienation. It is a compelling ethos whereby workers can seek to take control of their identity and destiny in an otherwise disempowering labour market. In doing so, they become one and the same, in spirit, as the capitalist they strive simultaneously to please and struggle against. Individuals are directed to desire nothing more than to materially exploit the labour of their 'self' for their own personal profit. Yet, ultimately, this attractive desire for self-mastery structures identity around the supposedly empowering struggle for self-exploitation. Hence, not only is the modern worker destined to be alienated, but also is increasingly compelled to fight for this alienation.

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The 'sellable semblance': Employability in the context of mental-illness*

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abstract

Embedded within the concept of employability is the constant demand to become more 'employable' and to live up to an ideal 'sellable self', with no 'faults', 'weaknesses' or 'limitations'. In order to maintain employability and stay in employment, individuals may be constrained to conceal information that does not correspond to this sellable self. Examining the costs of living up to the 'semblance' of the sellable self is particularly important in relation to mental health; this is even more so in light of the paucity of critical studies in this context. This paper examines issues of mental health and employability as they are reflected upon through the experiences of people with mental health conditions. Looking at the employment experiences of these individuals offers the potential to illuminate the struggles of all, or most of us, in our endeavours to secure employment and retain employability.

Introduction

Employability is a broad concept and intersects with a range of life aspects. Amongst others, these may include the political, social, citizenship, education, skills, behaviour and lifestyle. A significant feature embedded within the notion of employability is the expectation to continuously become 'more' employable (Costea et al., 2012: 33; Cremin, 2010). The ongoing journey of improving one's employability may be related to a number of aspects such gaining certain skills, experiences and qualifications. The notion of employability, however, is also

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associated with the expectation to retain a 'sellable self' (Fogde, 2007, 2011). The sellable self is associated with the constant expectation to perform, manage-impression, self-promote and 'sell' oneself as an attractive product: with no 'faults', 'weaknesses' or 'limitations', always ready to be, and do 'more' (Costea et al., 2012). This expectation may be captured as something that is not directly connected to the ability to do the job, but nonetheless has implications for one's employability, both during the processes of job-seeking and once employment has been gained.

To maintain one's employability individuals are expected to live up to the notion of the sellable self. However, this can be extremely constraining or in some cases even not possible because some personal traits, characteristics, conditions or worldviews may clash with the meanings embedded within this notion. At the same time employability, being the condition for employment (Cremin, 2010), still needs to be maintained. As such, those who do not live up to the sellable self may be able to retain their employability by demonstrating a 'semblance' of the sellable self, which I will refer to as the 'sellable semblance'. Demonstrating the sellable semblance may thus be associated with concealing or denying what the employer may consider a limitation.

Concealing any information that may jeopardize the sellable semblance may help to retain employability. However, this practice also has broad implications, which may restrict the way in which individuals behave, feel and act at work. This, in turn, can lead to a struggle for many in their attempt to retain their employability and employment, which may be intensified for those living with health conditions, most of which are invisible. It is concealing a mental health condition (MHC) at work that this paper will focus on.

In order to maintain a sellable semblance, many individuals with health conditions feel complied to conceal their illness from their employer. Although concealment may have significant health implications for these individuals, the employment insecurities and the unstable working conditions, which characterize many contemporary work organizations (Sennett, 2006), may restrain many of those with a health condition to conceal it at work (Clair et al., 2005). The stigma and discrimination attached to mental health issues at work (Rosenheck et al., 2006; Lloyd, 2010), as well as the increased prevalence of mental illness worldwide (Üstün, 1999; WHO, 2003, WHO, 2007) intensify the importance of studying employability in this context.

The struggle of individuals with MHCs at work indicates how these individuals are often cyclically trapped into low-paid and/or poor quality working conditions with few opportunities for career development (Marmot Review, 2010). Thus it

may not be surprising that in order to be able to secure employment many end up concealing their MHCs (Braunstein, 2000; Markowitz, 1998). Although these individuals may experience an intensified struggle in employment (Corrigan and Matthews, 2003), there are insufficient studies that examine the employment experiences of these individuals. Studying the experiences of these individuals can illuminate an understudied area in a way that also reflects issues concerning the broader working population. Thus, this examination offers a potential chance to illustrate widespread issues for all, or most of us, in our attempts to retain employability.

The rest of this paper is structured as follows. An overview of the employability discourse and its interrelation to the context of mental health and illness at work will be presented, followed by the empirical material on the case of Martin. A brief concluding discussion will consolidate on the previous parts of the paper. This will consider the general implications of the employability discourse as it relates to society at large, and the requirements to constantly endeavour to secure employment and meaning through work.

The employability discourse and the semblance of the sellable self

The endless expectation to become 'more' employable (Costea et al., 2012) and the personal responsibility to continuously perform in a highly competitive market (Cremin, 2010); to gain, maintain and obtain employment and gain 'skills and the qualifications that will make someone want to employ one' (Oxford dictionary, 2011), could be captured as one of the core concerns within the notion of employability. The focus on the responsibility of the individual, not the state to determine the course of their own employment (Peck and Theodore, 2000; Garsten and Jacobsson, 2004), together with the expectation to continuously be engaged with bridging the gap with other competitors suggests that being employable is a continuous project: both a condition for gaining employment (Cremin, 2010) and for thriving in work. This notion incorporates the spheres of politics, citizenship, inclusion, education and lifestyle. It is often a catchphrase for policymakers (Philpott, 1999) and is also considered to be the New Labour workfare project (Jessop, 1994), even though labour market policies focusing on employability started before the New Labour government (Levitas, 2005; Peck and Theodore, 2000) and have continued after it.

However, whilst presented as aiming to reduce social inequality, counter discrimination, tackle unemployment and stimulate individuals to take part in the workforce (Levitas, 2005), employability is still a problematic concern for many in their attempts to retain employment. Nonetheless, this notion bears

within it significant meanings for those who are seeking work or are in employment. As such it is presented to them as a guide or a strategy (Cremin, 2010) to manoeuvre through employment insecurities (Sennett, 2006) and work ambiguities (cf. Gregg, 2011), which characterize many workplaces today.

One aspect embedded within employability is the expectation to be sellable. At the same time individuals are encouraged to be open, flexible and accountable to keep on learning, to have the social and personal abilities to communicate well, 'team work' and 'network' (Salomonsson, 2005). They are expected to perform their employability in a variety of other ways – all related to the constant commitment to improve and 'work on' their employability (Costea at al., 2012; Thrill, 2002).

While employability relates to engaging with the ambition, initiative, social discipline and ongoing commitment to constantly become more employable by gaining more skills and relevant experiences, they are also expected to maintain a sellable self (Fogde, 2011): a performative subject-position (Thrift, 2002). This subject-position may be based on a multifaceted learning process and ongoing introspective reflexivity: and can be expressed through mediums such as self-presentation; communication (Thunqvist, 2003, 2006); impression management and self-confidence. It is also related to acting out a character to brand oneself and self-promote (Salomonsoon, 2005: 120; Krejsler, 2007), display the appropriate practical awareness or attitude, fine codes and behaviours (Sharone, 2007) as well as self-selling and marketing not only one's skills or labour, but also oneself as a product (Fogde, 2007).

The expectation to maintain a sellable self suggests that employability relates not only to having the required skills and education, but also to certain behaviours, traits and attitudes expected by prospective employers. To be employable, one thus needs to be able to: '... create, to stage manage, not only one's own biography but the bonds and networks surrounding... constantly adapting to the conditions of the labour market, the education system, the welfare state...' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002: 4). This expectation to retain a sellable self then suggests that although the employability discourse engages with multi-layered sets of meanings from which individuals craft a notion of self, this, in turn, puts constraints on them, making them behave and think in a certain way, which may hinder their ability to be open at work.

A number of studies highlight the struggle to live up to the employability discourse and the sellable self. Fogde (2007, 2008) highlights the experiences of graduate job seekers who struggle to face the task of self-marketing and impression management. Her study illustrates how in order to maintain this a

sellable self, the study participants felt constrained to conceal information or 'work on' (when possible) certain traits such as shyness and low self-confidence which appeared to clash with the sellable self (Fogde, 2009: 41; Fogde 2011: 73) they were expected to take on. Similarly, Grey's (1994) study illuminates the struggle of employees to continuously engage with 'impression-management'. Although Grey (1994) does not refer directly to the notion of employability, his study illustrates the tensions that result from the requirement to demonstrate one's self as sellable at numerous settings throughout one's working life, such as the recruitment process, professional examination, rating and appraisal, assessment of performance and in social contexts.

Overall, it is suggested from the literature that there could be a number of characteristics, traits or information that may not fit into the ideal of the sellable self. Amongst others, these can include traits such as 'shyness' (Fogde, 2007), long-term illness (Charmaz, 1991), age (Fineman, 2011), race (Miles, 1989), religion (Dawkins, 2003), sexuality (Ward and Witstanley, 2003, 2005), disabilities (Holmqvist, 2008; Riessman, 2003), or any performance-related issue (Grey, 1994). As such, presenting certain information or traits that do not fit into the sellable self can be broad and varied and could have many implications for one's employability and thus the decision as for what to reveal about oneself at work can become crucial (Sharone, 2007).

Not revealing information about oneself in employment settings can help to maintain employability by demonstrating a semblance of the sellable self or, in other words, a sellable semblance. However, this can also be constraining, leading to a struggle over hiding characteristics of oneself when at work, and potentially associated with a sense of pretence (Sharone, 2007). Concealing can also be related to a difficulty to build close relationships with colleagues, be open at work, and even the ability to do the work itself. In the context of health conditions, not revealing information about one's illness at work can have more intensified implications. The dilemma of revealing or concealing in this context is extremely important for one's employability and can have an impact on both health situations and employment circumstances (Beatty and Kirby, 2006).

For people with an ongoing health condition, the protection of equality legislation could be gained only by declaring their condition to their employer. At the same time, this declaration could jeopardize one's employability and their ability to demonstrate a sellable self. Thus, many of those with invisible health conditions may choose not to reveal it at work (Clair et al. 2005; Beatty and Kirby, 2006), maintaining a sellable semblance. Not revealing, however, may also be consuming. It may involve ongoing efforts to manage information, and the preoccupation, anxiety and a feeling of pretence that may be associated with

hiding (Smart and Wegner, 2000). Concealing can also have health implications which may then be linked to performance at work. Thus the dilemma over declaring or concealing at work is complex. It may also involve a wider set of considerations over the question of what to say, how much to display; when, where and to whom (Goffman, 1968).

This issue is particularly important to examine in the context of mental health at work. Not only may the stigma and the discrimination attached to mental-illness intensify the disclosure dilemma of MHCs, but also the growing numbers of mental illness worldwide (WHO, 2007) may stress the importance of studying theses issues in the context of employability. Against the background of growing figures on mental health concerns at work, one-fifth of employees would not disclose stress or mental health issues to their employer as they fear that this would jeopardize their employment (Mind, 2011: 2). Whilst depression alone is reported to become the second biggest cause for disability in the world by 2020 (WHO, 2003, Sunley, 2008), restricted self-disclosure may have crucial implications for the individual as well as the organization.

Despite the fact that people with severe and mild MHCs in the West hold jobs in a wide range of sectors (Mechanic et al., 2002), studies show that employment rates for these individuals are extremely low (Tsang et al. 2007; Rinaldi and Hill, 2000). This may be linked with discrimination, stigma and stereotyping associated with mental-illness and the consequent marginalization of these individuals from full work integration (Krupa et al., 2009). Those that are in work are often cyclically trapped into low-pay, poor-quality working conditions, with restricted opportunities for career development (Marmot Review, 2010). In work, people with MHCs report on financial and emotional constraints (Lefley, 1987) as well as experiences of protected relations with work colleagues and a constricted social network. Overall the experiences of these individuals are associated with restricted self-disclosure (Braunstein, 2000) and secrecy (Markowitz, 1998) and the consequent risk of delayed treatment (Gelb and Corrigan, 2008).

Separate from the prejudice and restricted managerial awareness to mental health at work (Hammond, 2001), the nature of the illness itself can limit the ability of persons with MHCs to cope with employment (Ritsher and Phelan, 2004). This is why disclosure at work and support in the workplace are critical for these individuals (e.g. Fung et al., 2007). The paucity of voices of people with MHCs in the organizational literature (Corrigan and Matthews, 2003) intensifies the importance for studying their employment. Nonetheless, the examination of the struggle of people with MHCs – a population with its more striking characteristics – offers an opportunity to elucidate extensive issues of the

paradoxes embedded within the attempts to live up to the employability discourse.

The case of Martin: The employability discourse and the costs of maintaining a sellable semblance

The case below is chosen from a set of repeat interviews which took place between April 2010 and November 2012, with sixteen working individuals, diagnosed with a MHC, who were using the services of a mental health support group. The sample (which was part of a larger study conducted by the author and funded by the Economic and Social Research Council) included both male (twelve) and female (four) participants with varied occupational backgrounds, age (between early thirties and mid-fifties) and personal situation. The struggle to gain and maintain work and good mental health in the different periods of their career history was salient in the interview transcripts. The following case of Martin was chosen from the dataset because it best represents this paper's point of interest. Along the lines of previous studies that presented in-depth accounts to develop theoretical claims (Thomas and Davies, 2005; Watson, 2008), the case presented in this paper is used as an elaborated example to draw on the struggle to live up to the semblance of the sellable self and the consequential constraints entailed with ongoing concealment. The examination of a population with its more striking characteristics, offers a potential chance to illuminate more widespread issues (Goffman 1961, 1968; Clegg 2006; Shenkar, 1996) of the struggle to live up to the ideals of employment discourses.

Martin is a customer complaints manager in his early fifties who has a MHC (bi-polar[I]). Martin was interviewed twice within a period of one year, comprising of two and a half hours of interview material. This, together with further email exchanges, established a trustworthy relationship with the researcher (Benton and Craib, 2001) and a general commitment to the study. During the two interviews with Martin, his employment situation changed swiftly: from a job seeker and a volunteer in a mental health charity, into an employee who has very rapidly progressed as an agency worker for a bank. Within a few months with the organization he moved from a data-entry position to the role of a senior customer complaints manager. When discussing his experiences and thoughts about disclosing his MHC, Martin said the following: 'I know there is stigma out there so I won't put it [on a job application] if they don't ask...'. However, when asked directly about his health, Martin said:

1 Bi-polar disorder is a mood disorder, characterised by extreme moods, referred to as 'highs' (elevated cognition, mood and energy) and 'lows' (sadness, anxiety, isolation, hopelessness, anger) (Yatham, 2010).

> More often I would disclose it [MHC]. Especially as they [employers] would also need my health records from the doctor so there is no point in me not disclosing.

Martin describes a particular incident of displaying his condition during the process of job application:

> ... there was an agency there that wanted to know all my details, 'cos they said: 'Oh this is brilliant, you are the sort of person that needs to work for us. This is great you are doing this and so give us all your details'. So I gave them all my details, and then they needed my doctors' records for me to work for them. So then I mentioned my bi-polar and they said they will be contacting me in the evening, and then nothing happened. I sent them two or three emails and they haven't even replied...

The reading of Martin's quote suggests that displaying information about his MHC clashes with the sellable self. Martin did not get the job. He felt disappointed. Although he was honest with the employer about his MHC disclosing his condition may have made him appear unsellable and jeopardized his employability. Martin's account illustrates how in order to maintain the sellable semblance and increase his chances to gain employment he decided to conceal his MHC when the next interview came along. He says:

> ... I joined a few agencies. I did actually ask their advice on whether to disclose that I have an illness or not and they said that by law I didn't actually have to disclose...

He did not reveal his MHC and got the job for the bank. He says:

> ... I think it's not good for me to say what's wrong with me 'cos then you are vulnerable, they can play on the fact that you are not well sometimes... because I am actually a temporary worker I don't feel as if I can... they can just say: 'OK if you don't want to do this job then go back to the agency'. I am stuck really [...] I do want to work, but I know that there is prejudice there and stigma. So I feel as if I have got to be normal all the time: I can't let myself get ill and off course 'cos I work for an agency you don't get sick pay so if I did mention it to them... I will end up with no support...

The reading of Martin's interview text highlights how the constraints to maintain a sellable semblance are intensified in light of the job insecurities that characterize so many contemporary workplaces (Sennett, 2006). His account illustrates how being sellable is not necessarily something that is connected to the ability to do the job, but nonetheless has implications for one's employability, both during the job search and while being at work. Martin feels that revealing information about his illness would jeopardize his position as an agency worker; which is something that could make his sellable semblance 'unsellable'. His account exemplifies the daily struggle entailed within the maintenance of the sellable semblance: Martin battles through with the management of his

condition on his own, with no support from the workplace. However, the vulnerable work as an agency worker appears as adding more constraints to his work situation. In order to maintain the sellable image and not to jeopardize his employability, Martin continues to conceal the information about his health. His struggle however, to maintain the sellable semblance entails many costs:

> ... I happened to work [whilst] unwell in the past... Sometimes I arrive at work and the anxiety will cause me to be sweating. But I have to [work] 'cos I have to earn some money. It's not very nice. I try things with my diet and exercise and control getting as calm as possible before I get there and then, when it's over I feel quite relieved. It's quite tiring I suppose... I feel the stress getting to me. It hasn't actually triggered my condition as far as I know. But I can see why it may be a problem in the future [...] I dread each day and arrive at work in pools of sweat but I'm hanging on in there [...] I tend to hide the fact that I am down so I try to do what I have got to do and hope they don't notice... I suppose the problem is still going to be there whatever job I have, and unfortunately they have given me a job which may be a trigger so [laughter] only time will tell.

Martin's account illustrates the costs entailed with demonstrating a sellable semblance and retaining his employability. Feeling restrained not to ask for help and support as well as the sweat, anxiety and the sense of relief when 'it's all over', illustrates the intensified daily struggle experienced by Martin to retain his employability. His struggle to maintain a routine of health at the workplace without revealing his condition is further heightened by the expectation to socialize with his work colleagues:

> My colleagues have actually asked me to go out with them next Monday but I am not going to... that always happens everywhere I go. I never go out 'cos I find the big groups of people stressful. And I can't have a drink to relax 'cos that would affect my mood later so... It's the whole social side of it 'cos they have a team drink and a team meal but I just have to say – 'no thank you I'd rather be at home spending time with my family', which I probably would but it probably is dangerous for me to go out with them in case I am having some drinks or because of the way it affects me. But I can't tell them that because they don't know about my condition... Because to me it's an illness, just like any other illness, only that it seem differently by employers which is why I can't mention it to work mates, because they might say something to my employer...

The reading of Martin's account illustrates how the struggle to maintain the semblance of the 'sellable self' has wider implications, which also relate to the social side of work and to building interpersonal relationships with colleagues. Martin feels constrained to reveal his MHC to his colleagues because he fears that this would jeopardize his employment situation. The account illustrates his wariness that revealing would undermine his employability. However, concealing his MHC at work puts additional constraints on his ability to build close and open relationships. Martin constantly hides his condition from his colleagues

and does not reveal why he is not able to attend social events. He continues by explaining how he feels 'trapped':

> It has got to do with being comfortable, I think. If I was comfortable with disclosing I would... I am still trapped... sooner or later it may come to a head when I have to say either that: 'Look, I have this condition and I am not sure if I can do this job' or – 'Look, I have this condition that's why I can't come out. But I think it would come out eventually it will have to... but it's best to find the right moments, I suppose, to do it [...] Since it's a temporary job it could lead to a permanent job, I might ask if there is another role they could put me into. I quite still would like to work for them, but maybe this is not quite the job for me because of my condition...

The account illustrates how Martin is engaged in a position at work that is not ideal for his health condition. However, in order not to jeopardize his unstable employment situation as an agency worker and his sellable semblance, Martin does not reveal his MHC. Overall, Martin's account illustrates the minute struggle to retain the sellable semblance and how his insecurities (which are characteristic of many working conditions today) increase the constraints to remain employable. The account reveals how this struggle is associated with a number of issues related to job performance, relationships with colleagues and health management, as well as other continuous constraints of hiding a significant aspect of one's life at work.

The case illustrates the overarching restraints to live up to the employability discourse when having to maintain a continuous performative sellable semblance. It shows how this situation entails incremental anxiety over hiding, pretence and a difficulty to be open with work colleagues, to build close relationships and to gain help and support. We can see how Martin feels constrained within the limits of the employability discourse to perform and maintain a semblance of an ideal sellable self. As such, he is restricted not to reveal his condition, not to appear unsellable, and not to put his employment situation at risk. In order to maintain a sellable semblance, Martin silences his MHC and relies solely on himself to maintain good health and a high level of performance. This analysis has wider implications for us all, workers and job seekers, which are discussed below and draw on the costs and constraints of living up to the semblance of a sellable self.

Concluding discussion: The costs of maintaining the sellable semblance

The struggle entailed with the ongoing concealment of whichever information that does not retain the sellable self was the main focus of this paper, illustrated through the analysis of the case of Martin. The analysis highlights the constraints

not to disclose information that may be considered a limitation or a weakness by the employer. In the case analysed, Martin felt restrained not to reveal his MHC and not to ask for support because he risked being deemed unemployable. Martin's case also demonstrated the struggle associated with concealing or 'improving' on whatever it is that the employer considers a 'weakness'. Concealing the MHC to demonstrate a semblance of the sellable self was framing his relationships with colleagues, as well as his behaviour at work in a certain way.

Whist the constraints of living up to the sellable self may be intensified in certain contexts such as MHCs, the struggle inherent in doing this may be relevant in many other instances. Individuals may find it restraining to 'work on' personal traits such shyness or introversion (Fogde, 2007); conceal illnesses or disabilities (Holmqvist, 2008); race (Miles, 1989), sexuality (Ward and Witstanley, 2003, 2005) or not to reveal what aspect of the job they struggle with to the employer (Grey, 1994). This suggests that the key theme of jeopardy that revealing what the employer may consider a limitation or a weakness could immediately put one's employment chances at risk (Costea at al., 2012: 31) has number of implications for us all, or most, in our attempts to secure an income when responding to the demands of the employability discourse.

The employability discourse thus illuminates a critical dilemma for the self. Whist concealing whatever it is the employer considers a weakness may be constraining when doing the job, 'silencing limitations' at work (Thrift, 2002) may be associated with a struggle over hiding, pretence (Costas and Fleming, 2009) or acting in a way that is not in accordance with one's values, feelings (Garrety, 2009, 2011) and what individuals believe is important (Foucault, 1994: 300). The compliance not to self-disclose can also shape the relationships individuals have with others. Although disclosure has benefits in many aspects of life, – 'justice, medicine, education, family relationships and love relationships, in the most ordinary affairs of everyday life, and in most solemn rites' (Foucault, 1978: 59) – in our attempts to live up to the 'sellable self' and maintain our employability we are constricted not to act in accordance to this popular practice.

This sense of compliance not to disclose what might be considered a weakness at work, has broader implications for our sense of community, our ability to be collegiate with others, and to be recognized for 'who we are' (Frank, 1998; Creed and Scully, 2000). In the context of illness, limited self-disclosure may also lead to a restricted ability to effectively self-manage our health or to care for our ills (Foucault, 1997; Clair et al., 2005). This can result in more suffering, late diagnosis; as a consequence of insufficient support and delayed treatments (Pearlin et al., 1981; Turner, 1981; Gelb and Corrigan, 2008).

As such, at the same time that employability and other 'advanced liberal' programmes in all life aspects embrace the rhetoric of autonomy; freedom; identity; self-realization; self-fulfilment; choice; lifestyle; enterprise; freeing up; self-actualization; ethical citizenship (Rose, 1996; Dean, 1998, 1999; McDonald and Marson, 2005); entrepreneuring own capital (Fogde, 2009: 44; Newton, 1996; Quelette and Hay, 2008); self-helping, and self-managing (Rimke, 2000; Rose, 1998), it is a certain ideal type of subject they encourage the individuals to live up to, restricting what it is they in turn promise to provide.

This illuminates the discomfort that accompanies the continued attempts to retain an ideal semblance (Acker, 1992); the incremental fragility, inner tensions and permanent anxiety of failing, being 'powerless to resist and take control of [our] own limits and real possibilities' (Costea et al. 2012: 34; text amended); the self-blame for failing or struggling to find employment (Sharone, 2007) and to pursue a career (Grey, 1994); the difficulty to simply 'be ourselves' (Frank, 1998) and the preoccupation involved in ongoing concealment (Smart and Wegner, 2000). We thus sacrifice our health and fake our experiences and identities to fit with what 'the employable' is expected to be. And when we fail, we must try again, harder (Sharone, 2007).

Employability is 'the attempted coercive and discursive creation of the self as first and foremost a worker' (Levitas, 2005: 158), who performs their social inclusion by working, and is continuously encouraged to become 'more' (Costea et al., 2012) to maintain employability. This never-ending journey, I argue, is tough, fragile, lonesome, and entails many costs. It affects our health, our sense of self and the way we relate to ourselves and to others in our community. Whilst we all attempt to live up to the employability discourse, and at the same time we craft our sense of self according to the meanings embedded within it, the complied sense of 'falseness' rooted within a culture that encourages a 'denial of limitations' (Thrift, 2002) may have catastrophic consequences for us all as workers and job seekers, in our attempts secure an income and a sense of meaning through work.

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Sorting people in and out: The plasticity of the categories of employability, work capacity and disability as technologies of government

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abstract

The 'employable individual' is today a powerful normative category, saturated with assumptions about what it takes to be attractive in the labour market. What happens to people who cannot meet those expectations? For some, the way to employability and employment goes through a process of detecting and coding of disability at the Public Employment Service (PES). Based on interviews with staff at a rehabilitation unit in the Swedish Public Employment Service, the article analyses processes of evaluating work capacity for marginally employable people as part of the Employability Rehabilitation Programme. By studying the classification procedures, the article analyses how administrative categories work as 'technologies of government' that 'make legible' desirable traits in the individual. The analysis shows that employability is mediated, or enabled, by classificatory procedures that spring out of a template for what is considered acceptable and desirable individual characteristics, hence reinforcing standards of normalcy. Moreover, the categories through which the individual moves are plastic and pliable in relation to political predicates and labour market fluctuations. In this process, to be non-employable *becomes a disability* and conversely, to be disabled *can make one employable*.

Introduction: Employability and disability as floating signifiers

The trend in contemporary Western labour markets is one towards enhanced emphasis on competition, mobility, flexibility, and continuous learning. Increasingly, people are expected to assume individual responsibility for the development of their professional portfolios, their capacities, and for their career

trajectories. In current labour market policy, there is an emphasis on the self-responsibilization of the individual as a recipe for achieving a greater degree of dynamism in labour markets (e.g. Clarke, 2005).

In this context, employability has gained salience as a policy category (e.g. Garsten and Jacobsson, 2004). Despite its wide-ranging usage, employability remains a contested concept in terms of its use in both theory and policy (e.g. McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005; Peck and Theodore, 2000). Some have seen the discourse on employability as a form of lofty 'planetspeak discourse' with no structural roots or social location, free-floating (Fejes, 2010: 90) and open to be translated in various ways in different local contexts (Garsten and Jacobsson, 2004). Nonetheless, the 'employable individual' is an influential normative category in current labour market discourses, and it is 'drenched' with assumptions about what it takes to be attractive in changeable labour markets (e.g. Garsten and Jacobsson, 2004; Fejes, 2010). Professional skills and work experience are no longer considered to be enough; 'softer' social skills, flexibility, and adaptability, are also required, as well as the capacity to market and to sell oneself. Self-help discourses are evoked (Rimke, 2000; Sharone, 2007); and job coaches, career counsellors (Fogde, 2009) and other 'experts on subjectivity' (Rose, 1989) are engaged in seeking to transform unemployed subjects into 'entrepreneurial' and 'self-reliant' selves (Thedvall, 2004). The individual is expected to actively assume responsibility for her own employability by being prepared to work on her 'self' in order to improve her attractiveness to the labour market – often without knowing exactly what is expected of her. Ultimately, employability turns out to be a 'floating signifier' in Lévi-Strauss' sense of the term (1950), i.e. a term in itself void of meaning, thus apt to carry diverse definitions. As a floating signifier, employability is open to imply a variety of demands and expectations placed on individuals and, as Cremin (2010) suggests, always bears the risk of the person never being 'employable enough'.

This begs the crucial question: What happens to people who cannot meet all those expectations? As we will show, for some, the path to employment and employability goes through a process of detecting and coding of disability at the Public Employment Service (PES). By coding unemployed individuals as 'disabled', the PES can devise special assistance for them, such as subsidized or sheltered employment or other types of special resources for a period. Disability coding can thus be a means to access public resources and to enhance one's employability. Being coded as disabled is thus one way of 'becoming employable enough' (cf. Cremin, 2010).

The aim of this article, then, is to analyse the processes of evaluating work capacity for marginally employable people as part of the Employability

Rehabilitation Programme, with special focus on examination, judgement, and functional impediment codification. By looking more closely into the actual classification procedures as technologies of government (Rose, 1999), we aim to show how the administrative labels work to mediate and distribute employability. The labels that are 'offered' and opened up for those who undergo rehabilitation are positioned as voluntary. Yet, it is by accepting and agreeing on being coded as disabled that one may receive the benefits and resources available. While the codes may enhance the employability of the individual, he or she is 'formatted' in a process in which the desirable criteria for employability are set according to a specific organizational intervention programme. Employability thus emerges as a result of a template for what is considered acceptable and desirable by the organization, i.e. the PES.

As our analysis shows, employability is constructed and defined by classificatory procedures that involve a number of interlinked actors, organizational typologies, and routines. Whilst the intention of the caseworkers involved is to make disabled people employable through the operations of interventions tailored to the needs of the individual, the primary implication of these is that they contribute to the functioning of a bureaucratic process of classification and governance. We show how the classification practices work as 'technologies of government' (Rose, 1999), serving the organizational need to make individuals 'readable' and 'process-able'. Following Scott (1998) and developed further later on, we conceptualize the bureaucratic assessment practices as techniques of 'legibility' in that they allow for an organizational 'reading' and processing of individuals.

Moreover, the article shows how employability, work capacity, and disability tend to become floating signifiers in this evaluation process. The categories are themselves plastic, relationally defined, and interdependent. To be non-employable *becomes a disability* and conversely, to be disabled *can make one employable*. Moreover, the categories demand versatile individuals who can adjust to and 'qualify' for their distinctions and demands.

In the following, we will first locate our study in the larger policy context before describing the study conducted in more detail. We then outline our theoretical perspective, which will guide us in the empirical sections that follow. The concluding section summarizes the main findings and discusses some implications.

Targeted policy: The identification of employability gaps and dis-ability

Social citizenship, while defined in legal regulations, is implemented by street-level bureaucrats and caseworkers as part of their daily routines for client encounters; it is in the 'interface zone' between the individuals and the state (cf. Martin, 1997) that social citizenship is ultimately defined. It is also here that clients' subject positions are assigned and subjectivities are negotiated and shaped (e.g. Korteweg, 2003), and it is therefore a place where the calibration of normalization, normativity, moralization, and occasionally the compulsion that constitutes policy implementation takes place. This interface shifts according to ideological changes, organizational transformations and policy adjustments. With the present policy focus on employability, the interface between state and individual has shifted in the direction of individual responsibility and activation. The discourse on employability is individualizing, and in part de-politicizing, in the sense that explanations to unemployment are sought in the supply of labour, more precisely in the qualities and characters of individuals, rather than in the supply of jobs as determined by macro-economic policy (Garsten and Jacobsson, 2004; Sharone, 2007).

The individualist emphasis goes hand in hand with the shift in administrative techniques towards advanced liberal forms of government (e.g. Miller and Rose, 2008), which involves not only a new diagram of control exercised by authorities and institutions, but a constant and never-ending modulation of conduct (Rose, 1999). It is exercised, for example, through the practices of continuous training, lifelong learning, perpetual assessment, continual incitement to improve oneself, constant monitoring of health, and never-ending risk management. Correspondingly, there is a growing market for catering to the needs of 'responsibilized' individuals, and to individualized labour market provisions. This may involve coaching, CV-writing, presentation skills, and even dress code management (e.g. Fogde, 2009). A growing cadre of specialists, such as coaches, rehab experts, educational experts, medical experts, personal trainers, therapists, and so on, supply their services to individuals and help out in their fashioning of selves along with current labour market ideals (e.g. Rimke, 2000).

The governmentality perspective, inspired by Foucault (e.g. 1994) and used in increasingly many studies of the encounter between welfare bureaucracies and clients (e.g. Dean, 1995; Østergaard Møller and Stone, 2012), alerts our attention to the fact that these subtle forms of government readily turn into self-government. Indeed, following Foucault, it is precisely the subjectivity of the individual that is the ultimate object of intervention. Hence, the individual is simultaneously an object for intervention and an active subject, and the intervention often aims at infusing agency in the individual. Nevertheless, it is a

pre-given, and scripted – thus institutionally shaped – form of agency (e.g. Korteweg, 2003; Mik-Meyer, 2006). The 'technologies of self', i.e. the devices used to encourage the individual to evaluate, monitor and improve the self that are mobilized in particular ways to shape how individuals perceive and conduct themselves (Foucault, 1994), are also normalizing in their effects. Practices such as individual action plans for the unemployed, career advice, self-evaluation sheets or other types of evaluation instruments help in establishing normalcy standards. Evaluations do not just objectively measure existing qualities – they also signal what qualities are desirable, and thus help in shaping the subjectivity of the individual being evaluated.

It is against this backdrop, we suggest, that we should understand the increasing number of people coded as disabled in a country like Sweden. In many countries there is an emergent division between *active citizens* (capable of, and expected to, managing their own risks) and *targeted populations* (disadvantaged groups, or people 'at risk') who require various types of interventions in the management of risk (Dean, 2008: 167; Caswell et al., 2010). Also in Sweden, recent developments have accentuated the increasing dualization of labour market policy; a categorization of the unemployed into 'normal job-seekers', which can be offered job counselling or self-service activities, and 'disadvantaged' groups, which need special measures (Peralta Prieto, 2006).

This dualization is reinforced by a dramatic reduction of investment in active labour market policy spending (Bengtsson and Berglund, 2012), whereby Sweden in the year 2010 was below the average of all OECD countries. While Sweden has a long tradition of being an active welfare state in the sense of offering the unemployed 'active' measures such as placement support, employment training, retraining opportunities, and mobility support instead of just 'passive' measures in the form of financial subsidies (cash assistance), the cornerstone of Swedish labour market policy, the Work Strategy, has over the last decades been translated into a sharpening of the qualifications for receiving unemployment benefits and social insurance. Activation in the form of increased conditionality and re-commodification has replaced investments in up-skilling and training (Bengtsson and Berglund, 2012). Labour market policy programmes are reduced in favour of employment on the regular labour market and job-matching measures have been emphasized in the national labour market's policy directives. The main assignment of the PES is now to match jobseekers against job openings in the labour market. The more costly training measures have been replaced with the less expensive job counselling services. The main support measures of the PES are now targeted to jobseekers who are no longer covered by unemployment insurance or those judged to have a special need, such as those deemed disabled.

At the same time, the political assignment of the PES in Sweden to rehabilitate and activate jobseekers with disabilities has been more clearly articulated. To counteract social exclusion, resources have been placed on offering special jobs and traineeships to prevent and rehabilitate illness and disability. The aim is to provide the same opportunities to people with disabilities as to regular jobseekers to partake in the labour market (Prop. 2007/08:1). In other words, while the tool-box of measures available for 'ordinary' unemployed has shrunk considerably, a disability coding opens up for a wide spectrum of measures and support for people deemed in special need (see also Holmqvist, 2009)[1]. It is therefore an attractive option both for caseworkers and for individuals with a long history of unemployment or presently finding themselves far from the regular labour market.

In Sweden, subsidized employment is by far the most common assistance given to people classified as disabled. A market for disabled individuals is created by 'manipulating' the pricing of productivity. While this in itself is not a novelty, the emphasis on ability, competence and marketability of oneself in contemporary labour markets means that requirements for employability are raised to higher levels than ever before. As a result, an increasing number of people risk ending up as less employable or even 'disabled' (see also Holmqvist, 2009). This is reflected in the number of people who are coded and registered as disabled at the PES Service in Sweden, which has increased dramatically in recent decades. In 1992, 10 per cent of all registered unemployed at PES Sweden were coded as disabled while in 2011 the corresponding number was 25.3 per cent. In real numbers more than 171,000 people were coded as disabled in an average month in 2011. The 'psychological disability' and 'learning disability' codes have seen the most dramatic rise in numbers, having increased about seven times between 1992 and 2011 (statistics from the statistics department at PES, Sweden, 2012).

The number of people coded as disabled has also increased during periods of lower unemployment. Even if the increase reflects changes in the requirements in contemporary work life, with fewer unqualified jobs and high productivity demands in all sectors, it also, we suggest, reflects changes in work life standards

1 Apart from wage subsidy, there are the following supportive measures available: support for technical aids, support for a personal assistant, special support for starting up a business, special introduction and follow-up support by way of a personal coach at the prospect of employment, and different forms of alternative employment such as Development Employment, Security Employment, employment at Samhall, i.e. a government-owned company providing development opportunities for people with disabilities through sheltered employment, and Sheltered Public Employment. Some of the support measures are temporary.

of normalcy. The PES staff in our study state that today they classify people as 'disabled' who would not have qualified as such 20 years ago.

The floating signification of employability described above thus has implications also for the understanding of work capacity and disability. At the PES, the individual's work capacity is evaluated in relation to the labour market. To be dependent on a wheelchair is, for example, would not be considered a functional impairment if you were to work as a switchboard operator. However, and in contrast to medical evaluations of work capacity, it is not enough to test work capacity in relation to a *fictional* labour market. The PES has to try to find an actual existing job for the person in question. This renders the concept of employability inevitably significant, since an individual may be found to have work capacity, yet still not be employable, simply because no employer would consider hiring her.

The study

The study builds on 22 interviews conducted in 2007 and 2008, 15 of which are with staff at PES Rehab (Public Employment Service Rehabilitation or AF *Rehabilitering*) in two Swedish counties, and seven of which are with local employment officers and staff at the PES central administration[2]. PES Rehab is a consultative function of the Public Employment Service organization, where work life psychologists, occupational therapists, and social welfare supervisors work. These specialists investigate the work capabilities of the individual on assignment by administrators at the PES. Since our research rests on interviews with staff, we are not in a position to provide a clear picture of what disability coding implies for the individual client in question and what it means for his or her subjectivity (see however Holmqvist, 2009; Holmqvist et al., 2012). What we will show is how staff at PES Rehab work to classify disability, to investigate work capacity, and thereby judge the employability of people, and the process of negotiation that this entails. Following Hacking (2007), we are interested in the five elements at work in the 'sorting out of people': the classification into kinds of people, the people in question, the institutions that are engaged in the work, the knowledge on which the classifications are made, and the experts who generate or legitimate the knowledge.

The codes used to classify the disabled are also interesting in their own right. Categories shape not only policies but also individuals, a process Hacking (1986)

2 We gratefully acknowledge the assistance of Ida Seing, who did the interviews, and all the interviewees who generously shared their knowledge, experiences and dilemmas.

calls 'making up people'. From this perspective, classifications are normative in aspiring to shape the conduct of individuals in a certain direction. They also contribute to shaping the self-understanding and subjectivity of those being classified. They are thus performative in that they contribute to constitute and frame further actions as well as expectations (Mik-Meyer, 2006). The methods used are practices that tend to enact realities as well as describe them (cf. Law, 2009).

In relation to related previous work on disability coding (see e.g. Holmqvist, 2009; Prior and Barnes, 2011; and Østergaard Møller and Stone, 2012), our study articulates the organizational technologies of government, involving the use of organizational typologies and procedures to make individual characteristics clearly legible. More specifically, we show how the categories used in the processing of people, i.e. categories used to convey information about employability, disability and capability, are themselves floating signifiers, defined relationally and plastically, within the context of a bureaucratic apparatus. This bureaucratic context furthermore works to de-politicize processes that are in effect politically driven and charged.

In the following we will spell out a critical theoretical perspective for analysing the disability coding as organizational techniques of visibility and legibility.

Techniques of legibility and the making up of people

We all classify on a daily basis. We divide things and people into 'kinds' as a way of making sense of the world. As pointed out by Mary Douglas (1966: xvii), rational behaviour involves classification, and the activity of classifying is a human universal. Yet as Bowker and Leigh Star (2000) pointed out, large-scale infrastructures are in special need of classification tools. Public organizations, such as welfare state bodies, need to classify individuals in order to be able to direct assistance to them. Organizations cannot treat individuals as unique creatures; they need to classify them according to their organizational schemes in line with their own organizational logic. In this process, the individual is transformed into a subject of the organization in question, and complexity is reduced. The individual is made into a manageable case, which may in a next step require a 're-subjectification' along the lines of the template of the organizational intervention programme in question (cf. Bergström and Knights, 2006). Thence organizational classifications create 'institutional identities' (Mik-Meyer, 2006).

The disability codes are part of the assemblage that makes up the technology of government, we contend. In Rose's view, 'technologies of government are those technologies imbued with aspirations for the shaping of conduct in the hope of producing certain desired effects and averting certain undesired effects' (Rose, 1999: 52). It is an assemblage of forms of practical knowledge, with modes of perception, practices of calculation, types of authority, forms of judgement, human capacities, devices, and so forth. In this context, routines for making legible are pivotal for the ability to govern (cf. Scott, 1998)[3]. Thus, we conceive of the bureaucratic assessment practices as techniques of legibility in that they allow for a 'reading' of individuals. Through the usage of routines and typologies aimed to enhance the legibility of individual strengths and weaknesses, the bureaucratic apparatus enhances its governing functions. The processing of individuals, we argue, relies on techniques for making strengths and weaknesses legible and thus actionable. The range of available diplomas, certifications and other signs of achieved learning goals, are other examples of skills and competences made legible. Legibility is crucial for governance, in that it allows for the follow-up of actions, for verification, control, and for sanctioning, or reward. By making legible, i.e. 'readable', for example the functional impairment of a person, the individual may be funnelled to the corresponding labour market intervention programme. The results of this intervention may then be followed up, evaluated, and compared. Legibility thus makes the individual 'process-able'. To make someone 'legible' is by no means a neutral process, but a process predicated on organizational priorities and political aspirations. It is thus a partial and selective process, in which a particular and discerning organizational gaze is operative. The public administration *observes* certain traits and features and re-constructs them in its organizational categories, which has led Michailakis (2003: 209) to conclude that 'one is not born a disabled person, one is observed to be one'.

Thus, we understand disability codes as legibility techniques that serve an organizational need, in particular in meeting the New Public Management logic of management by objectives and auditing of performance. The range of available diplomas, certifications and other signs of achieved learning goals, are

3 Scott (1998) argued that the state, in its attempts to simplify the classic functions of state control, strives to arrange the population in ways that simplify interventions. These state simplifications, he argues, function rather like 'abridged maps'; they neither successfully represent the activity of the society they depict, nor do they intend to do so. Rather, they represent only the slice that interests the official or the organization division in question. Hence, they make legible those dimensions that are relevant for the functioning of state power, while leaving others illegible, or invisible. More importantly, state simplifications are not just maps, but when allied with state power, they enable much of the reality they depict to be remade (*ibid.*: 3).

examples of making legible an individual's skills and competences, as are the evaluations and tests performed by the PES in its assessment of work capacity. Note here that the organization, that is the PES, needs to 'read' individuals, but that the environment also needs to 'read' the organization and its performance.

NPM principles as implemented in welfare bureaucracies have huge implications for the client-related work of street-level bureaucrats. They tend to constrain the caseworkers' discretion, as the emphasis on standardization typically reduces the scope for individualized interventions (e.g. Østergaard Møller and Stone, 2012). Studies from various countries report signs of de-professionalization in the wake of NPM reforms, where professional service delivery is increasingly replaced by bureaucratic programme administration (see research overview in van der Berkel and van der Aa, 2012). One consequence of NPM practices, then, is that 'mechanical objectivity' (Porter, 1995), for instance through standardized assessments, tends to replace trust in professional expertise. The work of caseworkers is increasingly to 'read' the clients according to standardized templates, which has led Caswell, Marston and Larsen (2010: 400) to speak of 'screen-level bureaucrats' replacing 'street-level bureaucrats'. Moreover, how clients are categorized is sometimes determined by the kind of information that the computer-based classification systems can handle, which in turn is often determined by legibility concerns. Thus, the discretion that traditionally characterized street-level bureaucracy, and which enabled some flexibility in matching solutions to clients, has been considerably reduced with the current administrative practices. Nevertheless, one way of widening the range of support measures available and to match a solution to an individual's needs is to classify the client as disabled; the price attached is the disability code – and thus the label as disabled.

Classifications form the base for organizations to act upon individuals but their influence exceeds the particular policy measures they enable. Organizational categories, like all social categories, are not just practical devices by which to classify and sort people out (Bowker and Leigh Star, 2000; see also Diedrich et al., 2011); they also have consequences for those classified – practical consequences, affecting individuals' subjectivity and self-understanding. The power of the diagnosis is essentially the power of shaping subjectivity by providing the 'map' and clues by which to understand one's situation. In this sense, classifications and classes, categories and people, emerge hand in hand, a process of 'making up people' by which people come to fit their categories (Hacking, 1986). Once categories are available an increasing number of people come to fit them. Ultimately, categories and social orders are co-produced. Social and structural changes create new categories of people, which may then be reflected in national statistics (for instance statistics over deviant behaviour,

illnesses, or disabilities). In Hacking's terms, new slots are created in which to fit and enumerate people. Yet, counting is no mere report of developments. It creates new ways for people to be (Hacking, 1986: 223). Categories rely on some degree of participation of the parties involved. Moreover, categories have a tendency to become frozen, barring alternative conceptions of subjectivity. Once established, the memory of all the negotiations and contingency is lost. Hence, they are powerful devices for making people up.

As has been noted by Willmott and Knights (1989), our subjectivities are particularly open to the influence of organizational classifications and practices since they offer a way to gain a sense of self-worth and individual significance, but also recognition of a valued social identity in a larger community. We tend to seek security in those social identities that are both available and valued to us. However, precisely because our subjectivity is open, and indeed encouraged to be open, we also become vulnerable to the workings of this form of power.

In the following, we will look into the practice of disability assessment and coding. Consonant with Hacking's work (1986; 2007), we are especially interested in the ways in which the social, medical, and biological sciences, mediated by organizational routines, create new knowledge and new social classifications. This new knowledge and concomitant new classification schemes render certain qualities and capabilities legible and transparent, thus providing a certain 'governmental gaze'.

Sorting people out: Classification of disability at the Public Employment Service

The PES has a special mission to support jobseekers who face difficulties in the labour market. On top, the PES has a sectorial responsibility in national politics for the disabled, aiming to cater for the needs of the functionally impaired (AF, 2008a). For the PES, the impairment appears in relation to a specific job and a specific work environment, i.e. it is labour market relative. The PES specific programmes for functionally impaired aim to *compensate* for the reduction of work capacity and, in this way, increase their employability.

Officials at the PES refer clients who face difficulties in the labour market to further counselling or investigation of work capacity. This is done by a specialist unit at the PES (PES Rehab), where the main experts are work life psychologists, occupational therapists, and social welfare supervisors. The different professional categories undertake 'work life psychology investigations', 'activity-based investigations', and 'work-related social investigations' respectively. The aim is to

investigate clients' work capability prerequisites. The three main categories of functional impairment are: physical, psychological, and socio-medical impairments (for more detail, see the next section). The investigation then provides the ground for the further treatment of the case at hand.

Classification serves practical, procedural purposes. The coding of disability and its registration in the internal PES database forms the basis for record keeping and thereby serves an administrative purpose. The records are intended to gain an overview of the number of people in need of support and of changes over time. The classification is considered necessary in order to inform the distribution of resources and to channel assistance to the right targets. The record thereby functions as a signal to policy-makers. The classificatory schemes or templates employed by the PES professionals serve to make legible what is, in reality, a complex assemblage of capabilities and 'weaknesses'.

The classificatory schemes we are interested in here are thus not just descriptions of the 'actual' work capacity, but more so, they 'make up' these capacities and subjectivities through their ability to provide the categories with official regulatory force. They thereby assist in the distribution of employability. Legibility thus works in tandem with and facilitates comparison, categorization, and intervention. Nevertheless, the techniques at work in detecting, measuring, and governing work capacity or employability, are not just devices serving a practical purpose – they also assist in establishing normalcy standards.

Our interviewees at the PES stress that medical diagnoses are made by medical doctors – the PES staff merely place the administrative codes onto a person. The code is considered a planning instrument, and 'does not have too much to do with the individual,' as one interviewee put it (Coordinator, PES central organization). As phrased by two other informants:

> To know how much money is spent on these groups you have to have a system. And we manage this by having everyone with a functional impairment accept that we provide him or her with a code in the electronic system. This means that we can count how many people with a functional disorder there are in this country. (Social Service supervisor)

> The reason for administering functional impairment codes in the system of the PES is mainly that we have to make sure the more exclusive interventions are directed to the right people. This is why we do these assessments and set the functional impairment codes. (Work life psychologist)

The explicit organizational ambition and expectation is to code all clients because, as one informant expressed it, 'if you would only put a code on every second case, that would be wrong. However, if you feel that this would go

straight to hell you don't have to'. The formal instruction tells that if a person is considered to have a disability, he or she should be coded, in order to gain access to the measures even if, in exceptional cases, this may not be done. Accordingly, the PES staff have an incentive to use the disability code and the client to accept his or her code. The client must approve of the code and this can be a sensitive matter. At times, the code may be hard to accept:

> What may be problematic is that the code is about the obstacle while we try to focus on the possibilities. So there may be a little clash there [...] It may affect the motivation negatively [...]. However, in most cases it works out well anyway. Especially those who work with this a lot, they learn how to talk about it. You try to explain the purpose of it, which is to get access to those resources that exist. (Coordinator, PES central organization)

Accordingly, clients may be persuaded to accept the code. As also described by Holmqvist (2009), the disability code grows out of a process of negotiation between the PES staff and the client. Holmqvist found that most clients did not want to be coded as disabled but accepted it in order to increase chances of getting employment. Our interviewees say that only a few clients resist the code. However, it can be difficult for a client to do so if a number of tests have shown a clear-cut result, and if the code is presented as an offer and a possibility of getting more 'exclusive' help.

Our interviews show that there are divergent opinions within the PES about the practices of coding disability, such as:

> Let a thousand flowers bloom! Let people be the way they are. Why should we be stigmatizing? Then there is this other fraction, to which I belong, which has as often as possible made the judgement of disability. I realize that this is the only way for this person to actually get access to this money and get this assistance. (Work life psychologist)

The codes may be seen as enabling in that they make possible more exclusive forms of assistance to the individual:

> I see it more as a possibility coding. You give this person who might have been a criminal a possibility to return to a job. (Social welfare supervisor)

Nevertheless, while the codes can be enabling in some respects, they can be disabling in others. Holmqvist concludes, in a study of sheltered employment in Sweden, that the longer the employees stay at Samhall (a state company and the biggest provider of sheltered employment in Sweden), the more disabled they become in the sense of acquiring a 'disabling self'. Even if the initial idea was that the sheltered employment would be temporary, in practice very few managed to get a job in the regular labour market (Holmqvist, 2009). Thus, even

if the aim of the measure is rehabilitation, it might have the reverse effect. While the disability codes are simply administrative tools for the PES, for the individual who is labelled 'disabled' the code might significantly alter her self-perception; she might even assume the identity of being disabled. Yet, the process of evaluation may also be helpful for the individual, who may indeed gain the support she needs to get a job. What we wish to point to here is *the dual nature* of codes and classifications: enabling and empowering in some respects, disabling and disempowering in others. While opening practical possibilities, the administrative codes at the same time streamline and enforce standards of normalcy. Moreover, as we will see, a disability is not just a reality to be discovered but an identity to be negotiated.

Objective tests and 'subjectivity work'

The task of PES Rehab is to investigate the work capacity of the individual. This investigation is based on conversations, self-assessments, tests, and on probation at a workplace. The work psychologists' tests focus on the clients' interests and aptitudes, intelligence, logical and spatial capability, word and reading ability, numerical skills, and the like. The occupational therapist tests, among other things, physical mobility, pain, understanding of instructions, process skills (such as organizational skills and problem-solving abilities). The specialist decides exactly how the balancing of tests and conversations plays out. Most of our informants emphasize the conversation as the most important instrument, but tests are still used to a large extent. Sometimes, a specially assigned test leader may undertake tests during a full day.

While these tests may contribute to providing a clearer picture of the jobseeker, her strengths and weaknesses, technologies such as self-assessments and tests may imply a subtle form of control. Not only do they discover objectively existing characteristics, but they also create, to a certain extent, these very characteristics. By making certain characteristics visible and legible, the tests provide a picture that is then objectified. A personality test may, for example, appear as a neutral instrument, but in fact *formats* the person in the vocabulary of the test (Benson, 2008: 275). The technologies contribute to constituting the qualities that are made visible (Benson, 2008: 276). Thus, they contribute to an objectification or reification of the qualities and characteristics presented by the test. For an individual that is presented, or confronted, with such a picture, questioning or objecting to it may be difficult, or at least counter-productive.

The assessment of the often invisible 'shortcomings' is associated with a degree of uncertainty. One way to reduce uncertainty and to objectify knowledge is

through standardization and quality assurance. The PES staff we interviewed were keen to call attention to the fact that the methods are quality assured. The central organization of the PES has also standardized manuals for the assessment of work capability and functional impairment in order to achieve a more uniform usage within the PES (e.g. AF, 2008a, 2008b). These manuals can also be seen a instruments for 'mechanical objectivity' (cf. Porter, 1995).

Hence, a functional impairment or disability grows out of a process in which certainty is created step by step, and whereby a preliminary fact is eventually established. Moreover, in contrast to the clinical psychologists, psychologists at PES (as well as the other specialists) usually have less time at their disposal and on which to base their assessment; the conversations have to be problem- and possibility-oriented. The tests and the conversations are part of the 'subjectivity work' that the clients undergo, and through which a problem is articulated and a certain self-understanding and self-image are fashioned. Working on oneself (Foucault, 1994) requires the capacity to continuously evaluate and correct oneself to enhance one's attraction in the labour market. Career counselling, for example, is currently largely about learning how to present oneself and how to market oneself (Fogde, 2009). Thus, the 'subjectivity work' aims at creating a selling and agentic self. At the Rehabilitation Programme, we suggest, subjectivity work is about learning about and accepting one's shortcomings and strengths:

> Our jobseekers cannot be remoulded in that way. They have their functional impairments and they need support in that. (Social welfare supervisor)

The investigation of a person's work capacity aims to frame the problem in an objective manner. The implications of this process are in no way neutral, however, but have consequences that infringe on the subjectivity of the person. The outcome of an investigation often involves a paradoxical combination of liberation and limitation. Identifying and objectifying the problem may be liberating for the individual client – who may achieve some self-understanding as to his or her problem in getting a job – but at the same time limiting for the future, in the sense of acquiring a disabled self. Accepting a functional impairment often demands a 'destabilization' of one's identity (cf. Benson, 2008: 276), a re-thinking of one's qualities and capabilities. It also involves a process of 'qualification' into the role as functionally impaired.

> It is basically about building people mentally so that they feel more secure in their own role and their way of being. (Work life psychologist)

In a situation where there are ever-increasing demands on people to be enterprising, active, attractive etc, and in relation to which many people

experience that they are 'never employable enough' (cf. Cremin, 2010), a subject position as 'unemployable' and disabled may paradoxically even be experienced as providing more ontological security – especially as it is supported by objective test results. For a client with a long record of unemployment and of being turned down by employers on the open job market, this identity may even be quite attractive.

Socio-medical disability – a market-related invention?

If employability is a floating signifier, so is disability. At the PES, functional impairment is defined in relation to the labour market. This also means that when market requirements increase, more people become disabled, i.e. the number of disabled, to some extent, follows economic cycles. In times of recession the PES, by government decision, gains more possibilities to provide special support through a larger repertoire of intervention programmes, which means that there is both more supply of, and demand for, subsidized or sheltered employment in times of economic down-turn. In good economic times, there are fewer intervention measures available. However, there are always possibilities for special assistance for those people classified as functionally impaired. This provides an incentive for PES staff to use the disability codes to help the client.

For the physical disability codes, a diagnosis by medical experts is required. Often medical certificates are also used for the psychological disability code and the 'specific' or 'general learning disability'; however, these codes can also be based on the assessments of the PES Rehab staff. As mentioned, these are the codes that have proliferated during the past decades. They are arguably more open for interpretation than the physical disabilities. Of special interest to us, however, is the socio-medical disability code, where the contemporary labour market's requirements become even more obvious. Interestingly enough, this code lacks international equivalence. It is not listed in the WHO's ICF (*International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Handicap*). In our interpretation, the socio-medical disability code becomes a residual category for people who are not considered to have a clear psychological or physical disability but for various reasons fail to live up to the expectations of social skills, flexibility or adaptability. 'This is something we have created ourselves', as one interviewee puts it. He continues:

> It has been formulated by experts in the National Labour Market Board without penetrating at depth [...] The reason why the Board chose to see it socio-medically as a disability was in order to be able to use earmarked money to help those individuals to strengthen their opportunities in the labour market. (Social welfare supervisor)

Examples of 'socially problematic circumstances' that can be coded into a socio-medical disability are criminal background and previous or on-going drug or alcohol abuse (AF, 2008a). However, other circumstances appear as well in our interviews, such as obesity, exaggerated piercing, or insufficient personal care or hygiene. We interpret this to be taken as evidence of a lack of self-reflexive capacity to work on one's self and to present a self that is attractive in the eyes of an employer. The fact that the socio-medical disability can be stretched quite far is illustrated in the following quotation:

> Altogether there is reason to put a socio-medical code if you have not been out on the labour market for many, many years. You lack an anchorage in the labour market. And that makes one use the socio-medical code. (Social welfare supervisor)

Compared to a physical disability, where a statement from a medical doctor is required, the socio-medical code leaves greater space for the staff at PES to make the judgement themselves, i.e. for the social welfare supervisor and her work-related social investigation.

Our informants at the PES stress that social skills have become more important for employers in recent decades, and they are required in order to be considered employable:

> You want the person to function in a social context, which means he or she can't be too much out of the ordinary. One has to have social empathy, be able to communicate, take instructions and transform them into action. (Social welfare supervisor)

The socio-medical disability coding reflects the view that social skills are increasingly important in today's work life, even if there are differing views on the need for social skills within PES:

> Of course there are those who say that 'it is exaggerated and ridiculous with those demands for social skills and to be outgoing and be able to speak for oneself. We should not accept this and [we should not] consider those who have a problem with this as having a disability'. While others see it the way I do: It *is* a disability. It does not work. You can't find your way on the labour market if you do not dare to look people in the eye. If you are so nervous that you can't behave properly in a job interview, then you won't make it the ordinary way. (Work life psychologist)

Who you are as a person is more important than formal qualifications, according to the following interviewee at PES who deals with employer contacts:

> Who you are. How you behave. How interested you are. Your social competence, in other words. That is what is important today. Many employers say that if you lack some knowledge, that can be dealt with – as long as you are a good person.

The demands for social competence – and the response of PES by way of a socio-medical functional impairment – reflects a shift in the *perception of normalcy* in work life, with tougher demands and less space for odd personalities and behaviour out of the ordinary: 'You cannot afford someone who is not productive, who is slow and tardy and somewhat quaint' (Work life psychologist). Our informants at PES agree on the fact that it is difficult to be an odd personality these days, even if they are critical of this development:

> There is no question about it. Today we judge someone as being functionally impaired that we would not have considered being so 20 years ago. You don't have to be very clumsy not to be passable on the labour market. (Work life psychologist)

Another work life psychologist says: 'I have experienced that we are narrowing down what is perceived as normal'. This may pertain to looks, weight, or behaviour: 'That you are just too much'. She is critical of the notion of employability:

> I would think it's very dangerous if we as a public authority decide that people are not employable. Then we would contribute to a negative development. If we disregard people who are not mainstream, what is left? Well, we may get a small group of yes-men (...) I think everyone merits a chance to be a part [of society].

In her experience, the demands for substitutability lead to people 'being fitted into a mould, of some sort':

> Since demands in the labour market have tightened so much, more and more people cannot pass the bar – the bar of demands. And then more and more people are being coded as functionally impaired.

In today's labour market context, the plasticity of available categories for 'sorting people out', i.e. defining who is employable and not, manifests itself in the occurrence of an overlap between lacking employability and having a regular functional impairment.

Employability, work capacity and disability as slippery categories

Since the PES staff strive to find an actual job for the client, their evaluations of work capacity and employability, as well as disability, need to consider the actual labour market situation. Ultimately, the employers decide on who is employable. However, work capacity and disability are also defined in relation to the actual labour market. All three are thus relational concepts, and as such fluctuate in their precise meaning. In the process of coding disability, defining work capacity, and thus judging employability, the distinctions tend to become fuzzy. As pointed out by Bowker and Leigh Star (2000), the sheer density of classification

systems also means that they are likely to 'meet up' in various ways. As we will show, employability, work capacity and disability are liable to melt together in the local practice of the PES, at times creating less transparency and legibility instead of more.

Work capacity is both context- and task-relative; it is defined in relation to a specific workplace and a specific job. The supply of jobs and the demand of employers become decisive not just for employability but also for work capacity:

> We can't say anything decisive about work capacity since the market lowers its demands in times of unemployment and raises them in times of prosperity. (Work life psychologist)

As Brülde contends: 'In actual fact, the changes in the labour market give rise to a weakened job-related work capacity for many, without their competences or their state of health being weakened at all' (Brülde, 2008: 218, our translation). As a consequence more people risk ending up as unemployable and disabled.

> If you link work capacity to employability you have to consider what the labour market looks like. What jobs are there? What do the employers want? That's our focus. Work capacity depends on what jobs there are. In what job are you employable? (Social welfare supervisor)

As indicated by the citations above, work capacity and employability tend to become mixed and distinctions between them blurred.

Even if work capacity and employability tend to coalesce, our informants in the PES Rehab staff maintain that work capacity resides mainly in the individual, whilst employability is ultimately defined by the employer:

> This concept is owned by the employers to a large degree. To be employable during a boom may not be the same thing as being employable in times of recession. This is partly dependent on the particular needs for workforce that employers are facing. It's obvious that they lower the bar at times, and sometimes they raise it. The individual may also change in her employability but it is just as much the employers and the labour market that change. (Social welfare supervisor)

Some of the interviewed PES Rehab staff criticize the normalcy expectation inherent in the concept, whilst others contend that the concept of employability is important since it puts the supply of employers who are looking to hire in focus. The interviewees all say that the demands from the employers are more articulate and more influential today. This is viewed not so much a result of changed attitudes among the employers as a result of labour market changes and enhanced competition in the economy. For the individual, this means that expectations are raised:

> The individual has to adjust to a large extent. She may have to accommodate to higher demands, maybe to shorter contracts. You are not supposed to place too high demands because then you may not be employable. The employers want flexible people who may adjust easily. (Social welfare supervisor)

This social welfare supervisor is sceptical towards the employability talk:

> See, I think it's dangerous. Because this term will become ever more difficult to define – what's the content? And it will glide. It will depend on supply and demand.

Thus, both work capacity and employability are relative concepts, according to our informants, with employability being the more plastic one. A person's employability is determined entirely by the demand for workforce and hence by market forces. But as their task is to find a job for the client, the local PES staff *cannot disregard employability*. As stated by one interviewee: 'I may think that you have work capacity but no one wants you'. Another interviewee says:

> I may have the physical resources as well as the psychological ones. But am I employable? How do I act? What do I look like? What background do I have? How do I live? What is my motivation? In the end it's all about employability. (Work life psychologist)

In practice, a person who, after assessment, is judged to have work capacity might still be unemployable. Staff at PES Rehab thus have to work with both the concept of work capability and that of employability.

The higher demands in work life and the more strictly defined boundaries of normalcy have also created grey zones, with people whose personal characteristics influence their degree of employability without being clearly seen as functional impairments (see also Holmqvist et al., 2012). Some informants perceive it as easier to deal with those who have clear, visible impairments:

> If we can see with our eyes that this person has a functional impairment, then we can adjust and accommodate. But we who work on this, the specialists, we see that it is employability that's really the problem today. (Manager, PES Rehabilitation)

That is to say, there are increasingly many who are not considered to have a visible functional impairment, but who are still not employable:

> Then we are dealing with something other [than a functional impairment]. You may not be sufficiently active, you may not be sufficiently attractive, and you may not be sufficiently communicative.

Oftentimes, it is to do with the ways of the individual:

> That you are somehow difficult, that you are at the margins of what is considered normal. (...) Or else, most things can be fixed. (Occupational therapist)

The socio-medical disability coding as well as the codes of learning disability and psychological disability are ways for the organization to deal with the grey zone cases. But it also implies that the boundary between lacking employability and having a functional impairment is floating, and for some individuals with reduced employability the way to employment goes through a disability code. The classificatory system here functions as a mediator and distributor of employability. By the same token, it also serves to normalize characteristics by sorting them into established categories.

Conclusion: The plasticity of the categories of employability and disability as technologies of government

We have shown that a functional impairment is something that is developed in a negotiation process, where a wide range of individual shortcomings in relation to the job market are being subject to observation and interpretation, made legible, and classified into a documented functional impairment. The disability coding practices are to be understood primarily as technologies of government (Rose, 1999), assemblages of practical knowledge and procedures imbued with aspirations to shape the conduct of people in certain ways. Access to special assistance and resources is conditioned by such a disability codification. Getting a disability codification, in turn, is dependent on 'strengths' and 'weaknesses' being made legible and hence actionable. The enhancement of legibility is also a way for the organization to be transparent to its environment (cf. Scott, 1998), an organizational requirement reinforced by new public management practices.

Disability thus develops through the mediation of a classificatory logic, where a disability code is the path to special assistance and employment. The PES Rehab staff have to handle and assist clients judged to have work capacity while employers find them unemployable. To understand these dynamics, it is not enough to study the internal work of PES (cf. Holmqvist, 2009). We need to locate the problem in a wider social and organizational context, in relation to the particular characteristics of labour market policy that are articulated in present labour market discourses. More precisely, we need to pay attention to a set of combining factors: changes in work life and in standards of normalcy, but also changes in labour market policy with a reduction of active labour market policy spending, limiting the supply of measures available to unemployed in combination with NPM practices. As Mary Douglas (1966) reminds us, classificatory systems are never absolute, but relative, and cannot be understood out of context. Employability and disability coding becomes a way in which the

PES organization can respond to fluctuations in the labour market and maintain a degree of control of its workings at the same time. In concordance with Hacking's (2007) emphasis on the institutional context of 'making up people', we maintain that the administrative procedures of coding, the organizational techniques of legibility and transparency, work to link the organization, i.e. the PES, flexibly with labour market policy goals. A broadening of view also reveals the flexibility of codification practices, the plasticity of the categories available, and the interrelations between policy measures and market fluctuations. The categories of employability, work capacity and disability are shaped by these contextual and contingent factors, but they also have shaping effects on those subject to them.

We have moreover shown how the administrative procedures reinforce standards of normalcy. Categories assist in providing slots for what is inside and outside the box, so to speak, i.e. considered 'normal'. Characteristics of the individual that fall outside the box may be combined to make up a 'disability' coding. To lack employability thus becomes a disability. The disability coding, in turn, opens up for targeted interventions and programmes that may eventually lead to employment. The bureaucratic categories are tightly interlinked and independent. Following Lévi-Strauss' (1950) notion of the floating signifier, categories that may appear stable and definitive, may in themselves be void of meaning, and thus apt to carry a diversity of definitions. Work capacity, functional impairment, and employability may produce the fiction of categorical stability, but are open to be shaped by administrative, organizational, and political priorities.

The social and policy implications of these coding procedures are potentially significant. For the client the consequences of these taken-for-granted organizational practices may be wide-ranging. The self-perception of one's impairment is developed in dialogue with 'experts of subjectivity' (Rose, 1989) and appears, after the assessment process, as an increasingly indisputable 'fact'. The procedures may have empowering as well as disempowering effects. The moulding of subjectivity that the process of work capacity assessment implies is a subtle form of control in which the subject herself is, so to speak, invited to participate. It may have a mobilizing and empowering effect, in that it may serve to support and articulate qualities and strengths in the individual, or assist in creating an awareness of shortcomings that may be addressed. On the other hand, it may as well exert a highly conservative effect, an effect that serves those whose interests and priorities are invested in these administrative interventions (see also Knights and Willmott, 1989: 542).

The form of power that is being exercised by the PES, however benevolent (hence more powerful), works by inducing individuals to subject themselves to the classificatory systems offered to them. The road ahead, to a job or to a supportive intervention, lies in accommodating, accepting, and working with the codes and their administrators. In the view of Foucault, subjectivation is an economical form of power, since it is a technique of the 'social' and of the 'self' which produces a self-disciplining subjectivity (Foucault, 1982; Knights and Willmott, 1989: 550). Modern forms of power and subjectivation, such as those evinced at PES Rehab, work by forcing individuals back onto themselves so that they become 'tied to (their) own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge' (Foucault, 1982: 212).

At a larger scale, the classificatory procedures may as well have implications for the interface between the individual and the bureaucratic organization, i.e. the PES, and the ways that policy implementation operates. The procedures of classification come to exert a certain control over individuals by sorting them into an administrative grid of social relations, with differential access to social welfare resources. And it does so by inviting individuals to agree to collaborate in placing a code onto themselves and in improving their work capacity and employability. The organizational and administrative powers at work articulate the individualizing effects of such new regimes of power, as they push individuals back onto themselves as the primary source for productive work capacity and for employability. As qualities and properties are made visible, legible, and thus highlighted as single elements, individuals are separated off from one another and made governable, as well as more acutely responsible for themselves.

To conclude, an analysis of contemporary labour market policies, and their specific technologies and procedures, must pay attention to the practices and procedures at the interface of individual and state. It must be attentive to the implications for subjectivity, empowerment, or disempowerment, of the usage of large-scale classificatory schemes. Our subjectivities are open and vulnerable to these technologies precisely because they appear to recognize and confirm our individual sense of identity as well as confer a sense of linkage to larger social structures. They are, in Hacking's (2007) view, a moving target. In our view, theoretical inquiry should be directed towards exploring and exposing the contradictions inherent in labour market policy interventions and their sets of technologies, not least pertaining to the simultaneous inducement of empowerment and disempowerment. The contemporary currency of employability points to the double implications that technologies of legibility may have for the individual. It speaks as well to the plasticity with which bureaucratic practices align themselves with policy goals and political ideals.

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Putting theory to work – a.k.a 'if you don't like academia, why don't you leave?'

Paul Taylor

Introduction - Humboldt's rift

> The University of Culture, instituted by Humboldt, draws its legitimacy from culture, which names the synthesis of teaching and research, process and product, history and reason, philology and criticism, historical scholarship and aesthetic experience, the institution and the individual. (Readings, 1996: 65)

> "I don't mind there being some medievalists around for ornamental purposes, but there is no reason for the state to pay for them" [Charles Clarke, the education secretary]... A spokesman for the Department for Education and Skills said: "The secretary of state was basically getting at the fact that universities exist to enable the British economy and society to deal with the challenges posed by the increasingly rapid process of global change". (Woodward and Smithers, 2003)

The rift that now exists between Humboldt's university of culture and contemporary notions of the university's role in creating employable citizens was epitomized when, in addition to his above endorsement of ornamental historians, the Secretary of State for Education in the UK, Charles Clarke said education for its own sake was 'a bit dodgy' and that students 'need a relationship with the workplace' (BBC News, 2003). Since then the employability agenda has become institutionally enshrined by the moving of universities from the Department of Education, first to a newly named Department for Education and Skills, and then to the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (DBIS – sometimes irony is helpless before the acronymic voice). Employability in this sense has become the standard mode of discourse - not only for the media and government ministers, but also academics marketing their institution on parent-centred University Open Days (by such practices is soil heaped upon the increasingly buried notion of students as independent young scholars).

There may well be various academic situations in which the highest ideals of the Ivory Tower cannot be realistically upheld in the given circumstances, but increasingly, academics are accommodating their actions and values to higher education's new *realpolitik* so closely that there is no longer any critical distance left from which the best aspects of the Ivory Tower can be recognized, never mind defended. To illustrate the point I include in what follows some personal experiences and resonant examples from the quite possibly dodgy and elitist fields of literature and history, but I invite readers to judge for themselves whether the employment of such examples succeeds in illuminating significant wider trends.

Dispiriting as the practical employment-orientated realities of university life now are, this article suggests there are two insidiously dangerous and under-acknowledged consequences of the employability mentality – managerialism and academic self-hatred. External threats are no less important for being expected, but less expected and much more disappointing is the pervasion of these pernicious attitudes *within* universities. Their rise corresponds with a decline in the employability of another form of language – critically reflexive discourse that academics frequently research and teach with pride, but signally fail to apply to their own disturbingly conformist situation.

Cathedrals of the mind(less)

> We flatter ourselves that we are civilized yet we habitually place conformity before reason... How... can we stop ourselves being so bloody stupid? (Loughlin and Seedhouse, 2002a: v)
>
> I adore certain symbols no less than you do. But it would be absurd to sacrifice to the symbol the reality that it symbolises. Cathedrals are to be adored until the day when, to preserve them, it would be necessary to deny the truths which they teach. (Marcel Proust -Time Regained)

Proust's lament for the lost power of cathedrals holds more than a passing resemblance to a situation in which academics increasingly place bloody stupid conformity before the reason they are supposed to adore and the truths they should be teaching. *Putting theory to work*, the employability-friendly title of this piece, comes from the website slogan of a university social research centre where I gave a talk a few years ago. Well-versed in the complex theories of figures like Gilles Deleuze and Jacques Derrida, some of the centre's academics nevertheless took exception to my argument that 'putting theory to work' represents a profound oxymoron. I suggested that constantly seeking new employment opportunities for theory in a series of essentially empiricist research projects represents a fundamental misunderstanding and ultimate bastardization of what

makes theory in particular, but university life more generally, innately valuable – its independence from any necessity for utility in an age otherwise given over completely to pragmatic values.

A new generation of commercially pre-conditioned, knowledge transfer-focused academics is a depressing enough phenomenon, but for theorists to simultaneously read highly radical works *and* find ever more (un)imaginative ways to maximize the practical relevance of those works to the latest university corporate mission statement plumbs new depths of Pyrrhic defeat. The rhetorical question that provides this paper's sub-title comes from the question and answer session of my talk when, somewhat akin to a *Daily Mail* reader's response to a criticism of UK society by a member of an ethnic minority, it was suggested to me that if I was so unhappy about the state of universities I could always leave. What struck me most about this exchange was not simply its reflection of the fact that some of the audience disagreed with my 'old-fashioned' position but that their disagreement centred upon an almost blasé rejection of notions that I had hitherto always thought of as a *sine qua non* of academic life in the humanities – for example, a shared sense that, at least as an ideal, theory is valuable for its own sake (whilst fully acknowledging that the exigencies of survival, the need to obtain funding etc., might require various compromises of that ideal).

Further evidence of how low the intellectual ethos has sunk appeared in the post-talk pub discussion. In response to the concern I voiced about my own university's threat to close its Classics department, I received the disdainful pseudo-Clarkean response that Classics are 'the boss's knowledge'. In another after-work pub situation, chatting about a new 'module' (even with such basic terms we are co-opted into the anomic realm of employability) I was developing, I was sincerely asked by my colleague 'what are your learning outcomes?'. With respect to the rejector of classical knowledge, such terminology really is 'boss's knowledge' and all the more worrying for its presence in an informal conversation. If Latin was not proscribed in this Brave New managerial World, I would venture the observation that, on both occasions, *in vino veritas*....

My final personally-experienced example of this increasingly common phenomenon of academic self-hatred comes from a guest editor's feedback on a journal article that had been accepted for publication but which I was told had significant problems relating to its expression. Expecting a large number of revisions to correct my clumsy English, I was surprised to find that the problem stemmed from my choice of seven words scattered through the piece. These included 'temerity', 'proclivity', and 'aperçu' – the latter word I assumed had been incorporated into general English usage but is perhaps now verboten as a result of UKIP's growing political influence. It appears that, even in the

university sector, any language that aspires beyond the proudly Gradgrindian fails to meet the employability requirements of a new breed of vocabulary wardens.

In response to the anti-intellectual, employability-friendly, attitudes described above, I now have the temerity to indulge my proclivity for aperçus garnered from the distinctly non-employability-orientated fields of literature and history. To the extent to which these excerpts can be deemed 'useful', that usefulness is limited to what Adorno, *pace* Kant, described as 'purposiveness without purpose', a quality that is rapidly losing its place in new educational empires of the senseless.

Empires of the senseless

> Lo thy dread empire, Chaos, is restor'd;
> Light dies before thy uncreating word.
>
> (Alexander Pope - *The Dunciad,* cited in Maskell and Robinson, 2001: 63)
>
> ... In that Empire, the Art of Cartography attained such Perfection that the map of a single Province occupied the entirety of a City, and the map of the Empire, the entirety of a Province. In time, those Unconscionable Maps no longer satisfied, and the Cartographers Guilds struck a Map of the Empire whose size was that of the Empire, and which coincided point for point with it. The following Generations, who were not so fond of the Study of Cartography as their Forebears had been, saw that that vast map was Useless, and not without some Pitilessness was it, that they delivered it up to the Inclemencies of Sun and Winters. In the Deserts of the West, still today, there are Tattered Ruins of that Map, inhabited by Animals and Beggars; in all the Land there is no other Relic of the Disciplines of Geography.
>
> Suárez Miranda, Viajes de varones prudentes, Libro IV, Cap. XLV, Lérida, 1658 (Jorge Luis Borges, 'On Exactitude in Science')

The first of the above two literary quotations is employed to convey the means by which the educational light of higher learning is snuffed out by the Trojan mouse of managerialism. In the second, Borges's disused map also acts as a resonant metaphor for the ultimate consequences: a loss of fondness by new generations; the pitiless rejection of uselessness; the bestial and beggar like existence to which its inhabitants have been reduced. Pope's uncreating words appear in higher education today as a form of linguistic slippage in which a spate of employment orientated euphemisms are difficult to disagree with but equally difficult to pin down exactly what they mean. Phrases like *lifelong learning* and *key skills* appear to evoke a generally life-enriching process against which it appears curmudgeonly to object that, with present trends, lifelong learning risks referring to the fact that

it now takes a life-time to learn what the average student used to know by the age of eighteen, whilst *key skills* reduce the hard-earned and well-integrated qualities of a student carefully attuned to critical thinking and intellectual thoroughness to a prospective employee for Chubb Locks Ltd.

Employability discourse is disseminated through the promiscuous use of euphemisms, neologisms, and the skilful slipping into arguments of questionable, yet generally unquestioned, equivalences. Ultimately unjustifiable and illogical parallels between dissimilar concepts and values are sustained by mere repetition: '... it is a perfectly routine and rather frequent equivalence that implicitly carries... a message' (Fairclough, 2000: 27). This pandemic of uncreating words would still be unfortunate, but eminently more understandable, if academics lacked the intellectual skills and knowledge necessary to identify the infection and provide adequate prophylaxis. The essence of the problem, however, has long been known as indicated by Marcuse's observation from the 1960s:

> Total commercialization joins formerly antagonistic spheres of life, and this union expresses itself in the smooth linguistic conjunction of conflicting parts of speech. To a mind not sufficiently conditioned, much of the public speaking and printing appears utterly surrealistic. (Marcuse 1968: 89)

Dispiritingly, academic minds increasingly do now appear to be sufficiently conditioned. Even more dispiriting and ironic is that despite the purported importance of transferable skills, there is little evidence that departments otherwise rich in expertise relating to the detection and deconstruction of linguistic and ideological manipulations are proficient in employing that expertise for their own critical needs – a form of employability that would at least stay true to the Humboldtian ideal of a university worthy of the name.

The decline and fall of the educational empire

> On the night of August 10th, 410, when King Alariac's 100,000 Visigoths drove their bonze-headed battering rams through the walls of Rome, the emperor Honorious was in his palace on the Adriatic coast, arranging and re-arranging his collection of prize poultry. Later the next day, while the Goths were busy looting the imperial city and murdering its inhabitants, a court chamberlain in Ravenna informed the emperor that Rome had perished. Honorious received the news with shock and disbelief. "Rome perished?" he said. "It is not an hour since she was feeding out of my hand". The chamberlain explained that that he referred to the city of Rome, not to the emperor's chicken of the same name. The clarification relieved the emperor of his anxiety. "But I thought my friend... that you meant that I had lost my bird Rome". (Lapham, 1997: 218)

The chamberlain is unable to convey a sense of the tragedy that has befallen the city of Rome because Honorious remains oblivious to any notion of shared concern for the fate of an institution that lies beyond his self-indulgently narrow concerns. Similarly, *managerialism* is distinguishable from *management* by its self-regarding fixations. Whereas, ideally at least, management involves the implementation of a series of acts and processes to achieve a desirable end more efficiently, managerialism provides its own self-referential and ultimately unverifiable justifications for frequently inefficient and undesirable ends while Rome burns. An obvious example of managerialism in (in)action would be the tsunami of university documentation that employ phrases like 'quality', 'excellence', and 'best practice', but as part of centrally-controlled processes and audits that are innately divorced from any research-informed, chalk-face-based conceptions of quality and excellence. Managerialist processes (like empirical research methods) can only measure what they are designed to measure – that which is already compliant with the values built into the measuring process. Somehow, despite the general growth of employability-fixated utilitarianism in higher education, the particular usefulness of managerialist concepts outside their own self-referential frame of reference escapes serious questioning.

There are professional university bureaucrats and managers who very effectively enable universities to deliver their 'core business' – teaching and research. There are other much less effective (but no less successful) managers who routinely employ managerialism's inertial strength against academics directly engaged in teaching and research. Professional university bureaucrats cannot be accused of betraying an academic profession to which they either never belonged in the first place, or which, if they did once belong, they have since made a conscious decision to leave behind in order to seek greasier climes/climbs. Much more curious is the manner in which academics have allowed themselves to become self-interpellated by the employability agenda. The term academic self-hatred describes this self-interpellation and can be defined as the state of mind in which the sufferer is embarrassed or ashamed of the values embodied in Humboldt's concept of The University of Culture.

Self-hating academics tend to belong to one of two groups:

1. those unable or unwilling to distinguish between Humboldt's aspirational model of a university culture available to all those who can benefit from it and the on-going transformation of that aspiration into The Culture-free University of Employability available to all those who can pay for it.

2. those who nominally recognize the distinction, but who still, through their day-to-day actions (if not words), help to increase the pace at which we are moving from the former model to the latter.

Higher education's role as a real world entity, but one informed by, and constantly aspiring to, ideal values, has been sacrificed to the obsessive auditing as to whether chickens have come home, not so much to roost as, more accurately, to sit in cramped cages so that:

> ... current higher education culture, the purpose of which... is to make 'balance-sheets sound like Homer and Homer sound like balance-sheets' ... now turns solely on the enforced internalisation of managerial control mechanisms. Their intention is to displace universalising intellectual comportment by task-orientated technocratic procedures through behavioural conditioning; to make the experience of thinking and learning the sterilized aggregate of specified technical norms. (Davies, 1996: 23)

The reduction of learning to sterilized aggregates can perhaps best be illustrated by the distinction between the concepts of education and training that is now honoured more in the breach than the observance. That the two are profoundly distinct entities can be gauged from the different parental responses that would accompany a child's announcement upon returning home from school that they had received either sex education or sex training. Training is undoubtedly an important part of any advanced economy, but academics shoot themselves in the foot when they allow themselves to be dominated by its terminology.

The academic personality

> ... the curious passion for the mannerism of the non-committed. (Mills, 2000: 79)

The community values of a group such as academics are undermined when they internalize the functionality of means as an end in itself based upon 'the *meticulous functional division of labour*'... 'the *substitution of technical for a moral responsibility*'. (Bauman, 1989: 98; italics in original) The removal of academics' spontaneity/discretion and moral responsibility combined with functional specialization means that 'communal mechanisms of social regulation have all but disappeared and local communities ceased to be self-sufficient and self-reliant... the void tends to be filled by new... supra-communal forces' (*ibid*.: 112). It is these supra-communal forces that now dominate today's academic discourse – the new speech rules of Learning and Teaching (learning paradoxically preceding teaching) and the transferable skills of the employability agenda.

The development of alternative sources of morality is further pre-empted by additional modes of reification:

1. The 'schismogenetic chains' described by Gregory Bateson (1973: 41-42) - authority breeds submission in an exponentially expanding, self-referential cycle.

2. 'Carefully circumscribed parochiality' (Bauman, 1989: 211) - in the context of academia, the disciplinary-facilitated perversion of narrow intellectual focus and the widespread instrumentalization of research.

3. The elimination of teleological categories - 'the relegation of values to the realm of subjectivity' (Bauman, 1989: 10). Traditional academic values look increasingly anachronistic and off the pace compared with the vacuous vibrancy of managerial discourse.

The combined effect of this imbrication of systemic processes, and the cultural norms so produced, creates what *Bauman pace Milgram* terms an 'agentic state' - effectively, the rise of heteronomous rather than autonomous thought. In such a state, the usual notion of responsibility becomes 'free-floating': to the extent that '*the organization as a whole is an instrument to obliterate responsibility*' (*ibid.*: 163; italics in original).

For Arendt (1994), the total nature of totalitarianism is not about domination *per se* but making people superfluous, it is not about the indoctrination of opinions but the preventing their formation ahead of time. Likewise, new academics are not so much browbeaten over time, as their autonomy is pre-emptively lost. Paraphrasing Adorno, they belong to the bureaucracy even before they join it. Common-sense and truth are then free to be supplanted by super-sense where 'nothing matters but consistency' (Arendt, 1994: 458) and the pseudo-reality thus created begins to offer its own bureaucratically textured compensation to the extent that: 'totalitarian regimes hold the power to demonstrate the relativity of success and failure, and to show how a loss in substance can become a gain in organization' and then factuality itself becomes dependent upon the totalitarian world that created the initial fiction... (*ibid.*: 385). Hence, in terms of externally situated labyrinthine auditing regimes, universities make sustained attempts to meet the requirements of the defining terms of the model irrespective of their significance for the reality of life on the chalk-face. In this climate, the distinction between truth and falsehood becomes blurred and fact dissolves into bland statements of corporate purpose in ever more glossy university brochures.

It is an open question as to whether academics today, in their heart of hearts, still realize that the choice between the employability agenda or the death of universities actually means the death of universities through the employability agenda. The sole cause for optimism resides in what Arendt viewed as the unique power of narratives to release new meanings. Hopefully, academics in future can reacquaint themselves with that power and become more critically sensitive to the defining abilities of fictional representations - whether they be literary or bureaucratic.

Conclusion

> ... night has fallen and the barbarians have not come.
> And some who have just returned from the border say
> there are no barbarians any longer.
> And now, what's going to happen to us without barbarians?
> They were, those people, a kind of solution.
> (C. P. Cavafy, Waiting for the Barbarians, 1898)

C.P. Cavafy eloquently expresses the current situation in higher education. The poem describes the citizens of Rome dressing up in their finery to receive the barbarians they have been told are arriving that day. The concluding lines quoted above provide an ironic commentary on the disorientation felt by the Romans upon the eventual non-appearance of the barbarians and the subsequent realization that the loss of their alien values creates a profound, hitherto unforeseen problem. The Romans have an identity crisis since there is no one against whom they can oppose their civilized values, and even worse, there is the further implication that without noticing, they have become barbarians themselves. The most cursory observation of preparations for either an external research or teaching audit demonstrates the continued resonance of the poem. Like Cavafy's barbarians, no one is quite sure in what form these 'initiatives' will appear, if at all, yet this does not stop academics preparing for its visitors with a statistical finery that becomes increasingly pervasive whether the visitors ever come or not.

In a review of ex-President Clinton's memoirs it was suggested that he 'bequeathed to his party not a clear call to high goals but an omnidirectional proneness to pusillanimity and collapse' (Wills, cited in Graetz and Shapiro, 2005: 264). If academics are to find direction, they need to realize that in terms of the ideals expressed in this article, '[t]he unrealistic sound of these propositions is indicative, not of their utopian character, but of the strength of the forces which prevent their realization' (Marcuse, 1968: 4). However, it is a mistake to look for the strength of those forces in vandalizing hordes outside the gates of the Ivory Tower. Well within the walls, today's Visigoths are the

employability-fixated 'customers' waving their £9,000 cheques, apparatchiks eager to 'facilitate' satisfactory 'learning outcomes', and academics too pusillanimous to insist upon the distinction between the reality of education and the managerialist trappings of training. Perhaps Cavafy is right and there are no barbarians any longer, or perhaps even more disturbingly, we are all highly employable barbarians now....

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On employability in higher education and its relation to quality assurance: Between dis-identification and de-throning

Francisco Valenzuela

> The [students´] agitating makes me think of something that was invented one day, if I recall correctly, by my good, late friend Marcel Duchamp, 'A bachelor prepares his own chocolate'. Take care that the agitator is not preparing his own chocolate. Jacques Lacan in 1969 [Lacan, 2007: 199]

Introduction

When discussing it with people of my generation – those who have recently entered the workforce after University, mostly in their thirties – we realize that our grandparents did not have to deal with 'employability' as a concern during their lives as workers. Had they heard of such a thing, it would not have made sense to them. We can imagine them startled by the abstract concept and insisting instead on dealing with a much more concrete problem, namely, 'employment'; where to find it and how to keep it. It seemed simple for them; either you had it or you did not, and that provided a solid statement about a man's (and a woman's) worth. On the contrary, for current generations entering the workforce 'employability' is an everyday concept we have learnt to accept. Despite it being somewhat complex and elusive, we can broadly relate it to the abilities we have developed in the past and to our own projection of an abstract, strategic future. As one human resources magazine puts it:

> [I]f individuals want to remain employable... they too, have to think about what skills they should be working to develop. Is it important to think about what's going to be in demand in the 2020 workplace? And how people are going to

> remain productive and attractive to employers through an increasingly longer working life? (Baron, 2011)

As a generation of fledgling yet motivated workers, we claim to know what 'employability' is and how to handle these apparently reasonable concerns by taking diverse courses of action. However, we can also realize that the 'work trends in year 2020' and the 'ever more extended work life' constitute massive and open-ended anticipations of our future which fill the prospect of our adult lives with anxiety. For authors like Colin Cremin (2010), drawing on Lacanian psychoanalysis, such anxiety is the effect of a particular form of subjectivity, which has been ideologically coded into the narratives of an 'employable' worker self and the practices that promote it. What is at stake here is a subjective split between a unifying sense of self – for Lacan, the imaginary – and the rules of the context in which it is found – for Lacan, the symbolic order or 'Other'. In congruence with Foucauldian readings (e.g. Sparrhoff, 2012), Cremin (2010) interprets this particular subject as caught up in a fantasy in which she desires to surpass the downs (and ups) of the concrete 'employment' game and to enter a new dimension. The offering there is that one can become an imaginary 'employable' self by going beyond the whims of any particular employer and over-demanding oneself to master a never-ending list of desirable skills and experiences (the symbolic order of professional labour). This Sisyphean endeavour embodies the constitutive excess of subjectivity that causes the split, which Lacan called the Real. Of course, this does not ultimately benefit the subject, but only capitalism and its champions, who can now expect the worker to enhance (and to govern) herself by her own in order to maximize the surplus value she can provide (see also Zupančič, 2007).

As the most current generation in the workforce we seem to go beyond our grandparents' horizon in this tragedy, hoping to somehow transcend (the imaginary of) 'employment'. While our predecessors were seeking a job as evidence of their self-affirmation, we can no longer seem to find our own image realized in 'the job'. For Cremin (2010), current modes of 'employable' subjectivity are calling us instead to become recognizable and desirable by a generalized, non-existent 'spectral Big Boss' that would gaze upon us and guarantee (in the name of the symbolic social order) that our 'next job' will be more satisfying than any other before.

Yet with the passing of time this new envisioning of 'employability' – the gaze of the Lacanian Other, the social order – will not only reach us but also the younger generations that follow right behind. They are the ones who will truly have to venture an answer about the work trends in the year 2020, or 2040 for that matter, and endure the restlessness of work. In this sense, there are essential

questions to be asked: how will this particular gaze be construed by those who are not yet workers; that is, secondary or higher education students? What discourses and practices will this Other of 'employability' start to demand from the student-subject? And how will these soon-to-be-workers make sense of them?

In what follows, a reflection will be sketched on how this subject-for-employability and its ideology of anxious self-improvement can be embedded in the domain of higher education (HE). Expanding on above-mentioned interpretations the goal of generating 'quality' in higher education will be analysed, considering the ambiguity in the meaning of this aim and the way it relates to the promise of graduate employability. Turning to Lacan, these ideals will be interpreted as establishing 'master discourses' which both empower and overwhelm the student-subject with the responsibility of self-enhancement, in the context of the new political economy for higher education. Diverse forms of subjective articulation around these master signifiers, namely 'dis-identification' and 'de-throning', will be analysed.

Quality assurance as a metaphor for employability

We should start by acknowledging that younger generations are already facing the problematic concept of employability. This is associated with the shift from 'higher education as a social institution' to 'higher education as an industry' (Gumport, 2000), which has been followed by a number of HE policies in the western world with the aim of strengthening the relation between the University and the (free) market (Miller, 1995; Gornitzka et al., 2005; Kwiek and Kurkiewicz, 2012). Notably, transnational policies like the Bologna Declaration (EUA, 2013) have explicitly emphasized employability as a fundamental goal for educational systems, along with other key aims. The most resonant among these is clearly quality: the goal of assuring that HE systems are egalitarian, accountable, 'efficient', and, above all, 'effective'. When considering these pro-enterprise HE policies, the goal of 'quality' appears to establish a powerful complementarity with the goal of employability. While the former is about enterprising outside, vis-à-vis the market, the latter is about enterprising inside, through 'efficient' and 'effective' management. Thinking critically, however, what we should read in this affinity is not only the coherence between outcomes of the educational system for the sake of 'development', 'equality' or any other purpose, but the symbolic connection between key signifiers representing the value[1] of

1 By talking here about *value* I take advantage of the polysemy of the concept. Both 'quality' and 'employability' find their meaning on a domain – education – that is beginning to redefine its cultural and ethical *values* following a change in the *value* of knowledge according to the political economy of capitalism.

education itself and attempting to stabilize a new regime through its capacity to anchor discourse and subjectivity on specific practices (see also Fejes, 2010).

Following Cremin's rendition of Lacan, we can begin by appreciating employability as an undoubted 'quilting point' or 'master signifier' for the worker who dreams (and speaks) of an 'ontological closure or oneness with the boss' (2010: 134). Her dream of becoming employable is valid because there is a 'spectral Big Boss' (the symbolic social order, the Other) behind the imaginary boss, offering the promise of employability as something efficacious beyond its many possible meanings (or lack thereof). In the case of HE, the characters and the scenery are substituted by the imaginary HE institution, but the Other of graduate employability persists, based on the fact that the meaning of employability as an educational outcome has remained 'chameleonic', elusive and 'decontextualized' to this date (Harvey, 2001; Knight, 2001; Morley, 2001). What we witness then is a mere shift in the shape of the spectre, from a Big Boss behind all imaginable labour to a Big Educator behind all imaginable learning.

In light of such fading of meaning, the subject's overwhelming mission of becoming employable through education appears to be the only response to an urgent commandment; namely, to obtain a meaningful response from a Big Educator or Other that refers to the external side of the HE domain – the market – in any way possible. This, of course, includes choosing the most prestigious University, enrolling in the most enriching degrees, participating in the most CV-boosting activities, among many others. Yet, considering the vague and seemingly empty definition of the quality signifier in HE (Cheng and Tam, 1997; Pounder, 1999), we should also consider that the subject's effort could also be to locate an Other that refers to the internal side of the HE domain – HE quality assurance – in search for stable meaning.

Moreover, if we consider the 'value-laden' character of the quality signifier, subjectively associated with what is good and useful to justify an activity irrespective of its meaning, this Other of the internal would appear to reduplicate the gaze of employability and reinforce its command. It is as if quality were functioning as a true metaphor of employability, in a Lacanian sense. It would be accounting for and offering a kind of meta-guarantee for the student-subject; a guarantee for the effectiveness of HE's own guarantee of delivering the graduate employability that is desired. Elaborating on Cremin's (2010) terms, this would be a guarantee of the Big-Educator-Other that refers to the external side of HE –

graduate employability – which would be itself sustained by the Big-Educator-Other that refers to the internal side of HE – quality assurance – and vice versa[2].

We can see that in her relation to both employability and quality in HE the subject is animated more by the form of the promise (the quilting point) than its content (the filling) (Žižek, 1989). Notwithstanding, the form of subjectivity seems to be articulated differently around the above-mentioned signifiers. Beyond the contents of fantasy, what young people expect to become outside HE – 'graduate employability' – constitutes a different experience than the one that happens inside of it – 'quality assurance'. In the next section these modes of articulation will be distinguished, focusing on their effects over the individual and collective imaginaries of identity.

Dis-identifying with graduate employability in higher education

Although the experience of learning in HE institutions is for the most part collective, the achievement of graduate employability has been conceived primarily as a personal, individual challenge for HE students. Among many conceptualizations of this (e.g. Knight and Yorke, 2003; Bridgstock, 2009), the one provided by Holmes (2001) is the most notable. He puts forward a 'graduate identity approach' as an alternative to the emphasis on 'skills' that has dominated debates in this area. This is precisely the reason why such strategy is relevant to our discussion; the dismissal of skills development – a central concern for HE curriculums – is here based on the premise that 'the nature of human behaviour... depends upon there being a set of social practices and a set of identities appropriate to the social situation' (*ibid.*: 111) Essentially, this means that employable self-enhancement cannot be completed by the process of learning on its own. It also requires an incorporated sense of 'social appropriateness' to the core of one's self-becoming in terms of practices and identity; i.e. the discourse of who we are. Do we not perceive the gaze of the

2 The distinction between the internal and external references of the Other is crucial for the theory and analysis of subjectivity. On the one hand, the gaze of the symbolic Other is capable of validating the reciprocal relationship between the in-side and the out-side of the imaginary depiction of self that the subject constructs. This way the subject can realize where she is in the concrete and what that means. On the other hand, for Lacan the symbolic structure of the Other is radically incomplete and will never be able to fulfil the realization of a stable location or meaning. This proves for the subject that her location in the imaginary is ultimately lacking (an anchor and a reference), that being inside is always also being outside and vice-versa. For an extensive discussion on this aspect of subjectivity (which Lacan sometimes called 'extimacy') see Miller (1994).

'spectral Big Boss' – the Lacanian Other – behind this appraisal of the subject's social suitability?

Indeed, Holmes (2001) clearly advocates the kind of illusory social guarantees that Cremin (2010) has warned us about. It is in this kind of proposition that we can find the specific form of subjectivity that is deployed around the master signifier of employability in the context of HE. Let us consider his detailed account on the relation between employability and identity:

> [G]raduate identity claims... in order to stand a reasonable chance of being successful, must be presented as an appropriate mode of warranting... students would be encouraged to consider what it would be like to be employable and employed in a position, how one conducts oneself, and so on, as the basis for rehearsing their claim upon such an identity. (Holmes, 2001: 117)

Holmes is insightful in contending that a graduate identity can only be deemed employable if it is constantly re-built and rehearsed. This implies a consistent anticipation of what is relevant to the occupational settings the student wishes to enter; 'how one should conduct oneself'; what it would feel like, and so on. Yet what Holmes fails to acknowledge is that this is not a consequence of 'human nature', but, quite the contrary, an effect of a social order – the political economy of enterprise HE – that feeds from the students' desire for a 'liberated' identity and the labour to build it.

With this in mind we can finally grasp the form that subjectivity takes around the master signifier of graduate employability in HE. It is the model of dis-identification, which Cremin (2010) elaborates on in his analysis of workers' employability. The 'dis' prefix does not mean the dissolution of identity; it rather means the possibility of deconstructing the signification of its meaning and of invoking a new master signifier to represent an alternative identity. Following Glynos (2001), it is about ethically transcending or transgressing the mainstream to look for something more sublime, and, therefore, desirable.

It is fair to say that if the students question the appropriateness of who they are, they will probably be able to secure a better job. Yet the meaninglessness that surrounds this fantasy of transcending identity, unfortunately, will eventually result in a mortifying guilt resulting from a lack of knowing how to fully realize it. Inexorably, the question is raised, how and when do we really become employable? Mortification rises precisely because the fantasy of counter-identities does not respond to any 'behavioural mechanisms' but only to dominating ideologies in society – what the Other wants: for us to work and study harder.

Glynos (2001) reminds us that ideology works through fantasy in a specific way: while there is elusiveness or relative emptiness of meaning that produces anxiety (what can we ultimately define as an employable graduate identity?), there is also always a lack of satisfaction (we cannot fully realize an appropriate graduate identity) that only keeps desire going. In this sense, fantasy sustains ideology through a play of void and disavowal, of lack and renewal, which renders identity not only contingent to what is appropriate (as Holmes (2001) proposes) but also always fundamentally reversed. Paraphrasing Glynos, it is the radical failure of identity that comes first, and HE employability merely gives body to this ever-renewed obstacle.

For this reason, the only way to cope with the ideological market-Other outside HE seems to be through warranting the cynicism of a 'graduate identity approach'. In the end, this is the only imaginary in which graduate employability can thrive.

De-throning quality assurance in higher education

We have learned that the student-subject has to constantly deconstruct her graduate identity so that becoming employable outside HE – being one with the master signifier of employability – turns into something possible and bearable. However, what is at stake inside the realm of HE imposes a different form of subjectivity than dis-identification. This form has to represent the quality signifier operating as a metaphor of the employability in the context of HE. In particular, it has to represent 'quality assurance': a method employed to supposedly ensure 'efficiency' and above all 'effectiveness' in HE. Following Lacan, this metaphor is understood as a way of re-negotiating with the Other, of defining yet another (insufficient) guarantee for the (insufficient) guarantees he offers to us.

In this case the guarantee does not seem to be articulated on the individual level, but rather on a collective level. While the promise of graduate employability can only be realized at the expense of others who will be competing for the 'next job', the promise of quality assurance can only be realized if everyone benefits from the same educational excellence. It is a fantasy of a method with no exceptions. This should extend our knowledge about the signifiers of employability and quality supporting each other in the name of the Other, according to HE policies. 'All for one, and one for all'... yet how can we understand the particularities of articulating subjectivity at the collective level in HE? What are the imaginaries that make up this distinct mode of being a student-subject?

Interestingly, there is a concrete case of collective identity in relation to HE quality that can provide some answers to this question. This is not an example of institutional development, however, but an instance of protest against the HE system in demand of a change. It is the case of the Chilean Student movement, which has been active since 2006 in consonance with other student (and academic) mobilizations around the world (e.g. Canada; Spain; UK; see also Bailey and Freedman, 2012).

Following 25 years of extensive neoliberal educational reforms in Chile, including the privatization of institutions and subsequent free-market competition between educators (Vergara, 1997), massive protests broke out. The protestors were demanding a more 'levelled educational playing field' and radical changes in the educational system. Almost a million students marched on the streets and participated in the occupation of schools and universities for months, eventually reaching an agreement with government authorities to work together on a solution, along with a number of experts.

The result, as it can be expected, did not change things radically. It rather promised to balance out previous free-market policies on education by developing major management systems to assure the quality of education and strengthen its institutions. Yet the most interesting part is that the students were somehow aligned with such lukewarm promises of change, based on the possibility of assuring. In the words of Camila Vallejo, their most famous student leader:

> The government keeps seeing education as a commodity and not as a right... we need to turn education into the main tool for the progress of Chilean society as a whole... what we propose is to define education as one of the main concerns of the State, so that it accomplishes international quality levels.... (Vallejo, 2012)

We find here an imaginary of quality assurance that is conceived as something satisfactory for the students' hopes for drastic social transformation. By the time of writing, the Chilean Student Movement is still mobilizing for radical political causes, yet they have kept asking for 'quality education' in their protest banners. It is as if they were working against the system's unfairness, and at the same time, advocating for assuring its present capabilities. We need to discern what form of collective subjectivity is operating here that makes viable such a contradictory connection with the master signifier of quality. We need to deduct how the subject makes amends with this Other of the internal in HE and finally how this relates with the Other of an external employability.

The work of Harvey and Green (1993) can contribute to understand such contrast, as they provide a meta-analytic map of the boundaries of the discourse

on quality that has been used by HE policies and institutions. From this we can understand how the student-subject is taught to speak in the name of the quality signifier. In particular, it gives us the first clue to understand how the elusive meaning of this master signifier enables the student-subject to act against the Other and at the same time fantasize about and demand its presence.

A succinct exercise of discourse analysis is called for here[3]. Harvey and Green (1993) distinguish five stereotypical meanings of the imaginary of quality. Two of them, 'quality as exceptional' and 'quality as value for money', seem to be ascribed by the Chilean students to their antagonist: the current educational system. They mean what is unethical to assure in their society, respectively, 'elitism' and a 'blind search for profit'. Another two meanings, 'quality as perfection' and 'quality as fitness for purpose', seem to be ascribed to the students' own heroic quest: their movement for change. They represent what is ethical and desirable to be assured in their society, respectively, that 'everybody will learn as equals' and that 'learning will be achieved each time by every student'. Finally, the last meaning distinguished by Harvey and Green serves to articulate quality as a metaphor of employability. It is 'quality as transformation', which for the authors means to enhance the learner's capacities and capitalise them professionally.

What we learn from this is that the only way to turn the blurring of meaning into a meaningful promise of assurance or 'professional capitalization' for the student-subject is to cluster the whole five meanings into a desirable yet ambiguous master signifier. This way the ethical can shine against the backdrop of the unethical and the present of HE can overcome the past and also project itself into the future. While some meanings of the master signifier have to be refused, others have to be extolled. There is crucial lesson about subjectivity to be learned from this brief interpretation of discourse on quality, as spoken by the protesters. If the student-subjects want to make sense of the powerful yet obscure message that they are able to decipher from the Other by invoking a master signifier in their discourse – in this case, quality – they have to constantly enthrone and de-throne the master. While university must be overthrown through protest, it should also be assured in its quality, and vice versa.

Lacan was aware of this when he faced student protests personally during his Seminar of 1969. Then his lecture was interrupted by a student who claimed:

> If we think that by listening to Lacan's discourse... we will obtain the means to criticize the ideology that they are making us swallow, we're making a big mistake.

3 The work of Laclau and Mouffe (2001) on discourse analysis should be considered to further understand the particularities in this subjective arrangement.

> I claim that we have to look outside to find the means to overthrow the university. (Lacan, 2007: 205)

Having listened to him, Lacan replied very bluntly: 'But outside what?... when you leave here you continue to speak, consequently you continue to be inside' – and then he added – 'what you aspire to as revolutionaries is a master. You will get one' (*ibid.*: 205-207).

Lacan talks about speaking from inside, because the student-subject builds up her dreams of liberty within the walls of the university. And just like the 'cynicism of identity' in the case of employability, such 'cynicism of protest' allows the subject to cope with an otherwise unbearable command from the Other – 'assure society (and yourselves) that education will deliver (a future)!'. In this sense, and in relation to quality, we can see that the student-subject seeks for guarantees by using the Hysteric's Discourse in Lacan's terms (2007). This student-hysteric seems to always put her teachers and supervisors to the test – ultimately protesting against the 'spectral Big Educators' – so that she can assure whether or not they have enough quality and potency to rule over her desires and give her what she wants – an undoubtable, employable future. This is how she 'gets a master' to speak her being: by momentarily de-throning the signifier to test its royal rights over the Other, the social order of HE's political economy.

Concluding thoughts

The purpose of this note has been to pinpoint the ideologies and fantasies that sustain the student-subject's relation with the master signifiers of employability and quality. As a mode of concluding the argument, it is elucidative to compare the subject's relation to these ideals with what Lacan (2007) called 'University Discourse'. This is not about the subject (re)producing and sharing new valuable knowledge with the world – learning some quality and employability (skills, lessons, etc) – but really the opposite. In simple terms, making the subject calculate her own value in relation to a method (knowledge) that has been produced and 'skimmed' since long ago – becoming quality and employability, being one with their infallible guidelines.

Two forms of subjectivity have been interpreted here and each one of them can be seen as working to re-produce the University Discourse. In the case of employability, dis-identification: deconstructing identity – one's own value and meaning – to improve the chances of becoming appropriate for the method that ensures employability. In the case of the latter, de-throning (hysterically): resisting some meanings and values regarding HE's workings and extolling others, in hope that the method itself will be depurated and assured. In both

cases, the student-subject proves to be only cynical with the possibility of speaking the discourse of the master (signifier), and thus, to stand as a failure under the gaze of the Other who is supposed to be successful in guaranteeing the master's efficacy. The subject cannot decide between mastering the method and mastering herself, and in that sense, according to Ian Parker (2013), she reveals to be more of a 'little slave' beholden to the recognition of the academic machinery. Or perhaps even worst, to be just a mere residue of the academic (re)production of knowledge.

Certainly this does not constitute a picture of progress. Accordingly, the interpretation of these complex aspects should be followed by the discussion of certain issues, in the hope of their amendment. One, of course, is about 'traversing the fantasies' that subjectively sustain the current shape of HE. For authors like Clarke (2012), this implies that policy and political discourse should be criticized in order to open them up to the contingent and the radical undecidability of the social. Another is about the realization of the students' future. Considering their current subjective conditions, we need to follow them and analyse what will happen after they exit HE to begin their working lives. However, although there is much to improve, we should remain hopeful. At least desire has been kept alive and running throughout these silhouettes of student self-realization. And what better time to explore its unknown consequences than youth, when the young still enjoy a lot of themselves...

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Does it ever stop kicking off everywhere?

Maria Vlachou

review of

Mason, P. (2012) *Why it's kicking off everywhere.* London: Verso Books. (PB, pp. 237, £12.99, ISBN 9781844678518)

Introduction

Paul Mason's book is an attempt to explore and understand the global domino of uprisings around the world in 2009-2011. *Why it's kicking off everywhere* brings together some of the many localities of the world that gained global attention from the media and filled people with hope for another, better future. Protests, demonstrations, and revolutions in Egypt, Greece, Britain, and the US are closely followed by Mason who, as a virtuoso reporter, communicates vividly both the feeling of those moments and the stories of the people:

> We had to walk in twos at first – this was my first protest and I didn't know why, but they said it's because of the Emergency Law: more than two is illegal. Then someone gave me a paper with lawyers' numbers 'in case you get detained' – and I am going: 'Whoa, whoa, who!' Her eyes whiten as she relives it... . (p. 12)

In a way, the book and the events that it discusses are unfolding together. As long as one keeps in mind that the book tries to give answers to all the rapidly moving changes, without affording to look through a retrospective lens, and that it is a polemical journalistic piece, one can relax and enjoy this rather turbulent ride.

In this review, first, I will look at Mason's discussion of the role of young people in the global uprisings, which is one of the major themes of the book. The close connections with employability within the current neoliberal political economy will also be discussed. Although Mason rushes to declare that his book does not belong to social science and that it does not 'claim to be a theory of everything' (p. 2) in the book's very first pages, there are plenty of suggestions and claims throughout the book. In particular, he attributes a central role to technology and social networks, which, although important, seems to be exaggerated at times. This will be the second theme in this review. Finally, I will comment on the second edition of the book.

Young people in the global uprisings

The role of young people in the global uprisings, from the Arab spring to the student demonstrations in the UK, is a theme that runs through the entire book, but the discussion is more detailed in Chapter 3. In particular, he concentrates here on the new political subject emerging from the British student riots.

It is on that basis that Mason shows sympathy for the protestors, calling on the reader to stop underestimating the new generation.

Student activism is usually associated with a specific decade (the 1960s), or in order to be more accurate, with a particular year, 1968 (Boren, 2001: 149), and there is an assumption that 'such days were gone – such idealism, such creativity and hope' (Mason, 2012: 4). This claim would be supported by Readings (1999), who considers contemporary students as apolitical and mainly concentrated on their personal careers:

> In a sense, part of what happened in 1968 as revolution happens now as student apathy, which is another name for consumerism: a massive disaffection from the institution and from the modern contract between the University and the nation-state...[there is a] widespread sense among undergraduate students in North America that they are 'parked' at the University-taking courses, acquiring credits, waiting to graduate...What they are engaged in is *self-accreditation*, preparing for the job market... (Readings, 1999, p: 138, original emphasis)

However, according to Mason, what seems to unfold is not a new apathetic, indifferent, and apolitical student generation, but a different, and a more interesting and liberating, approach to politics. It might be that contemporary youth understands politics and political action in less fixed, and arguably, more

rhizomatic[1] terms. For instance, as Bernardi and Ghelfi (2010) suggest, *The Anomalous Wave movement* in Italy in 2008, when thousands of students protested in the streets and squares with the slogan 'We won't pay for your crisis', declared precisely this 'newly emergent subject at the centre of politics, without representation, articulating forms of the social movements expression in pragmatic and non-ideological terms that hold politics to be an open and radical process' (2010: 111). This new approach to politics is also affirmed by Mason's argument in this book.

Mason calls the young Britons 'spontaneous horizontalists' who seem to be almost allergic to representation politics or anything and anyone who attempts to restrict and reduce politics inside categorizations. In other words, they reject any kind of old-fashioned and mainstream politics with hierarchical, top-down, stable, and centralized structures of power: '...anybody who sounds like a career politician, anybody who attempts rhetoric, espouses an ideology, or lets their emotions overtake them is greeted with a visceral distaste' (Mason, 2012: 44-45).

In Mason's view, the new youth do not seem to struggle in the name of any ideology or political party. In other words, the new wave of student mobilizations is not driven by ideology, but it is most probably situated and immanent in more pragmatic and present problems which approach not only from an absent future after graduation but even more worryingly from a future which seems to be inextricably connected with a great debt.

For them it is arguably not a matter of which party is in power and which ideology it represents. They do not necessarily identify themselves with any particular political project. Rather, the conditions of their everyday life, the joblessness, the absent future, the debt, and the austerity caused by the neoliberal imperative drive them to act and react here and now. In other words, a new political era seems to unfold and spread as a *rhizome*, transforming the perception of political organization. As another journalist, Diego Beas, suggests the 15-M movement has contributed to the redefinition of politics in Spain:

> The movement has studiously avoided engaging with ideological agendas, unions and, most importantly, professional politicians. It has filled city squares, co-

1 Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the 'rhizome' draws from its etymological meaning, where 'rhizo' means combining form and the biological term 'rhizome' describes a form of plant that can extend itself through its underground horizontal tuber-like root system and develop new plants.... Deleuzian rhizomatic thinking functions as an open-ended productive configuration where random associations and connections propel, sidetrack, and abstract relations between components. Any part within a rhizome may be connected to another part, forming a milieu that is decentred, with no distinctive end or entry point' (Colman, 2005: 231-232).

> ordinated online actions and targeted specific topics like banking and electoral reform. It has experimented with bottom-up networked approaches to challenge the rigid, top-down, party driven system that has dominated Spanish political life since 1978. City square by city square, individual meeting by individual meeting, thousands of citizens have come together in a networked approach to politics that is fresh and engaging because it defies, above anything else, the hierarchical approach favoured by vested interests. (cited in the Guardian, 15 Oct 2011)

Similarly, the young Britons are disengaged with conventional politics, or to put it simply, they are fed up with mainstream politics. They just want a different life, different politics, different economy, and if it is needed, they aggressively demand them:

> We're sick of the government in general. For decades nobody legitimately can tell the truth; the nature of the hierarchy means only the imbeciles, the suck-ups, only the scumbags ever get to the top. So to truly be free is for everyone to take our part and decide for our freedom. (Mason, 2011: 58)

Or, as another student, who participates in the breaking of Top Shop, says: '...and because capitalism is a damn lie. That's why we are throwing stuff at these fucking shop fronts' (p. 59).

However, to play devil's advocate, do they really fight against capitalism or do they affirm what they try to question? Taking into account that neoliberal capitalism penetrates our very social relations, is it even possible to distinguish a definitive and palpable target of resistance? In other words, do those 'graduates with no future' (Mason, 2012: 66) raise their voices against the neoliberal capitalist logic or do they reproduce it? It may be that while actively resisting some aspects of neoliberal capitalism, young people might be fighting for other aspects of the same system. Employability, which this special issue focuses on, may be one notable example. Limited opportunities in the labour market, often despite having been assertive to the demands of employability, may have led students to question the outcomes of neoliberal capitalism and even the system itself. However, it is a question whether employability, a product of neoliberalism, has itself been challenged, or whether it is something that students are fighting for.

The contemporary university is increasingly concentrating its strategies around employability. At the same time, governments have pushed for further interdependence between the market and universities. Terms such as 'knowledge transfer' mentioned in most white papers on higher education in the UK are only one proof of the aggressive encouragement for tighter links between universities and industry, which has become the key education policy agenda of most British administrations since Thatcher. These trends may have produced 'autonomous' and 'entrepreneurial' subjects (Foucault, 2008: 233), who may be driven by and

would fight for employability, without challenging it. For example, they may want to go to the university in order to enhance their employability, but protest against the rise in tuition fees, which makes this opportunity less viable for them (Williams, 2013).

So, rather than blindly trusting these spontaneous horizontal networks, I suggest these are opened to scrutiny, approached as a 'battleground that is continually traversed by power differentials and lines of antagonistic force, from the production of the common to capitalist attempts to capture it' (Edu-Factory Collective, 2009: 0). In the aftermath of the dismantling of the welfare system and trade unionism, the employer, the state, and bankers have ceased to be the direct target of resistance, today neoliberalism itself constitutes the target. In fact, neoliberalism is diffused in our everyday lives, on the one hand, passing all the responsibility to the individual to be autonomous and self-entrepreneurial, but on the other hand, forces us to develop a tissue of bond, which connects us, but only by putting us in a constant competition with one other, for achieving, in the end of the day, to be included into the neoliberal norm of competition. Hence, it would, perhaps, be wiser to ask how collective organization as well as subjective experience, which do not affirm the neoliberal norms, can be achieved before the student protests of 2011 are over-celebrated as *the* main answer to the current crisis. Nevertheless, this does not mean that the protests, which Mason seems to put all his faith in, are not of importance or have nothing to say about the current historical moment. I am simply trying to warn the reader about the risk of rushing to buy into Mason's over-enthusiasm instead of critically reading his portrayal.

The role of technology and social networks

Having visited the uprisings around the world, from Egypt to Greece and from Spain to Britain, Mason tries on the one hand to provide us with some very interesting, insightful stories and one the other hand sets out to explore and analyse the reasons behind this global unrest.

Mason makes various speculations about the causes of the global uprisings as well as their consequences. However, in many cases, he draws simplified conclusions without going in any depth. For instance, he frequently slides into technological determinism, overestimating the role that 'info-capitalism' and especially social networks, played in the unfolding of the global series of mobilizations:

> The plebeian groups that kicked things off-from Iran in 2009 to Egypt, Libya, and Chile in 2011 possess, in fact, a surplus of the most valuable properties on earth:

> skill, ingenuity and intelligence. Info-capitalism has educated them; social media is allowing them to swap experiences beyond borders. (p. 211)

In the last half of the fourth chapter his obsession with technology and his love for social networks become almost provocative. Here, technology is almost assumed to be the exclusive, driving political force rather than being only one of the heterogeneous, contingent, and partial components of the emerging political assemblage. Mason does not seem to have any doubt about the vital impact of social media on revolutionary politics and new forms of resistance. For him technology defines politics, and for him collectivism can only emanate from individualism, or to put it better from the 'networked individual' (p. 130). Throughout the book, Mason puts all his faith for emancipation in technology and especially in the Internet. Technology and even free market capitalism are over-celebrated for creating this new subjectivity called the 'networked individual'. The recent technological revolutions related to information (recording, storing, searchability as well as the networked availability of information; the digitization and globalization of commercial transactions and, of course, the expansion of social networks) are claimed to have empowered individuals and to have created space for counter network relations within the system. According to Mason, the 'networked individual' is the new revolutionary actor of our century who was created through the 'very values and practices of free market capitalism: individualism, choice, respect for human rights, the network, the flattened hierarchy – the masses have developed a new collective practice' (p. 80). Although he might be right to stress the potentialities of technology and particularly social networks in the new political activism, he seems, on the one hand, to have an instrumental understanding of technology as a tool to be used and, on the other hand, overlooks the hidden perils of his approach to technology as another neoliberal affirmation.

For instance, social media have been widely used, and in fact exploited, by corporations for their own interests, instead of being the new democratic tool that Mason advocates. In other words, social media can also be used towards the reproduction and reinforcement of individualism and consumerism so embedded in capitalist society. Therefore, a counter argument to Mason's would be that social media do not exclusively 'teach' us the democratic values mentioned above, but they also 'teach' us how to become 'better' consumers just with a couple of 'clicks'. For instance, our Facebook page is 'decorated' by all sorts of advertisements that we might find interesting and relevant to our consumer taste.

Even more worryingly, when Mason suggests that the 'networked individual' is the new revolutionary actor of our century who was created through the very

values and practices of free market capitalism: individualism, choice, respect for human rights, the network and so on, he praises the same set of political ideas and practices supported by neoliberalism. The promise of neoliberalism was exactly this: the autonomy of private individual to accumulate and enjoy property rights. At the same time, human rights have lost their initial meaning when at the international level the ramifications of the neoliberal project were the intervention of international law when national governments became an obstacle for the corporations to exercise their 'rights' to work towards profit beyond their borders, usually at the expense of the everyday lives of the local people (Gilbert, 2008: 32-33).

Although Mason has a fair point concerning the fundamental role that technology and particularly social media played in the new global unrest, the reader should not forget that technology, from university's labs to the everyday technological practices, is a site in which power and control as well as struggles and resistance are all at stake.

Conclusion

Despite the at times uncomfortable jumps between first-person reportage, historic, economic, political, technological analysis, and some interesting as well as some sweeping claims, Mason's book is worth reading, if not for anything else, then for helping readers to form their own view on the new global mobilizations. But perhaps the present and the prospective readers of this book should read it through the lens of the reverse question: Why it's *not* kicking off everywhere (anymore)?

Why it's *still* kicking off everywhere (2013)

I finished the review of Mason's first version of the book by asking why it's *not* kicking off everywhere *anymore*? But by the time I finished the review, Mason decided to argue that it is *still* kicking off everywhere. In the updated version of the book, he adds three new chapters on Spain, Greece, and Russia respectively, as well as a chapter that revisits the twenty reasons why it's kicking off everywhere. But is it really *still* kicking off everywhere? Although the twenty reasons why it is/should be kick(ing) off everywhere are *still* around, if not proliferating everyday, it seems like the tide of riots, demonstrations, and occupy movements was followed by an ebb. Can the new chapters convince the reader that it is *still* kicking of everywhere?

Although in chapter 13 Mason reminds us that the pleasant surprise of the riots in Russia, from the Football riots to Pussy riot, in Spain, and particularly in Greece, he also admits that resistance has been replaced by nub feelings of hopelessness and despair. He draws risky parallels between other historical periods and the present; for instance, when he compares the rise of Nazism in Germany and the increasing power of the fascist party, the Golden Dawn, in Greece. These are supported by melodramatic narration and grand claims: '...they [Greek young people] will be left with a choice between the politics of solidarity and what the director of *The Silver Lake* observed: a gruesome trend towards inhumanity' (p. 240). He rushes to draw conclusions but does not ask those questions that are tormenting most of us who want to be an active part of the change.

In line with Mason's claim in the second edition of the book, the recent summer has shown it is still kicking off in different parts of the globe (e.g. Turkey, Bulgaria, Brazil). However, even though the neoliberal expectations seem to have been shattered in the eyes of so many people around the world, why is it not consistently kicking off or effectively enough in order to really start liberating our lives outside of the neoliberal loop? Although the uprisings do say something about our frustration with the current political forms; and we, indeed, need to protest, we should not overlook many other marginalized experiences of resisting and/or subverting neoliberalism which are less loud and hence less noticeable. In other words, even when it seems that it is not kicking off or not with the same strength, it actually does. For instance, technology is indeed very important for the crafting of alternatives to the current forms of exploitation and injustice, but technology is not limited to the Internet and social media, which Mason seems to exclusively focus on. The literature informed by Science and Technology Studies explores exactly those more imperceptible and marginalized relations between politics and technoscience by treating technology as something much more than simply a tool. In other words, technological artefacts are not considered only as tools to be used in order to do radical politics but as co-producers of 'new forms of life'; the very relation between subjects and objects, devices, set of practices becomes the transformational force which remakes our lives (for an extensive discussion on STS see Papadopoulos, 2010). As Ong and Collier remind us, 'it remains important today to reflectively cultivate more partial and cautious propositions of observation that nonetheless grapple with 'big' questions' (Ong and Collier, 2008: 17).

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What work has made us become

Nathan Gerard

review of

Carl Cederström and Peter Fleming (2012) *Dead man working*. Zero Books: Hampshire. (PB, pp. 76, £9.99, ISBN 9781780991566)

Last summer, *The New York Times* ran a front-page story on the latest craze in corporate team building: juice cleansing. 'It was a week when we were slammed, and we just needed to pull together as a community', explains an employee who recently embarked on the three-day-long, liquid-only diet. The cleanse, which entails replacing your typical three meals a day with vital 'living food' juices, promises the salutary effects of prolonged energy, heightened alertness, and increased productivity. 'We all worked through lunch every day' says another toxin purger, 'I got tons of cleansing done'. Particularly notable was the name of the cleanse most popular among the 'all or nothing', 'type-A men': the Excavation (Rubin, 2012).

On the very same day, CNBC posted a story on its website covering the latest technique for gaining a boost in the cutthroat environment of investment banking: testosterone injections. 'Doctor, I'm tired. I'm run down...I feel my creativity slipping. I don't wake up with morning erections', complains a banker allegedly showing signs of what has been branded as 'Low T'. The injections, which are administered a couple of times a week, claim in a similar fashion to counteract sluggishness, heighten alertness, and increase productivity, all while delivering the added bonus of an enhanced sex drive. 'Traders on Wall Street are

always looking to get an edge and pull ahead', writes the article's author, 'especially in this catch-a-falling-knife market' (Perman, 2012).

What to make of these workplace trends? Putting aside the evident risks of malnutrition and shrunken testicles, what is it about contemporary work that compels us to rid the body of toxins and then turn around and resuscitate it with strong doses of hormones? The binge-and-purge manner of these practices, centered around that most taken-for-granted, most ordinary aspect of ourselves – our capacity to feel – suggests today's work has numbed us to the point of seeking extreme assurances of our existence. As office automatons, we float about in search of reminders of a life so alien to us that we're willing to settle for anything – a smartly packaged beverage or a shot in the arm – so long as it promises the Excavation.

Of course, the obvious worry with these fashionable office stimulants is that they won't deliver on their stated promise, or will do so in unwelcome ways. In attempting to 'catch-a-falling-knife', all we may be left with – after significant investments of time and money – is a pair of bloody hands and a painfully unrelenting erection; reminders, no doubt, of our capacity to feel, but hardly worth paying for. A deeper concern is that their social and political significance will go unnoticed, especially by scholars of organization who display a tendency to preoccupy themselves with 'high' theory while the real world of work passes them by.

Thankfully, Carl Cederström and Peter Fleming have been alert enough – and, we hope, without the aid of liquid diets or hormone injections – to register the significance of these and other equally alarming workplace trends, from dressing up like infants and being spanked to standing in a circle and singing Muppets songs. Their new book, *Dead Man Working* is, in essence, a traumatizing journey into the bowels of the working world. Along the way, we are guided through a slue of rotting office landscapes and introduced to a handful of gnarly characters, ultimately to force us – against our will – to take a hard look at what work has made us become. Through lucid prose and a writing style akin more to journalism than the academy, the authors reveal a horrifically close-up (and hence faithful) image of our working selves. The effect on the reader is a prolonged act of mourning. Nervous laughter soon gives way to anger, followed by periods of bargaining and depression, before eventually arriving at acceptance: Hell is not the fictitious home of Luther far below the earth's surface; it's the office in which we spend the bulk of our lives.

Putting ourselves to work

The book begins by painting a disturbing picture of how work has literally consumed us, and not just our dignity or our increasingly lifeless bodies, but the complex web of social relations once thought to exist outside of work. Here the authors follow a train of thought originating with Marx and expanded upon by scholars associated with the Autonomist Marxist movement: namely, that capitalism requires for its continued existence an underbelly of communism. The 'common', as it is so called, is increasingly enlisted by the corporation to sustain the capitalist accumulation process. As a result, and as the lifeblood of the common, we are increasingly 'put to work' – our bodies, minds, and souls – to provide this sustenance of living labor. We now unwittingly train ourselves, manage ourselves, and ultimately exploit ourselves as the hosts of a dwindling humanity extracted as (bio)fuel for what the authors refer to as 'moribund-style capitalism'.

Using this frame as their guide, the authors capture how fads like juice cleanses and testosterone injections, in addition to jolting what little life is left in us, also function to sustain this moribund-style capitalism by creating the fantasy of exit from work. 'Ironically', according to the authors, 'imagining ourselves elsewhere only binds us tighter to that which we seek to escape' (11). Dressing up like infants or singing Muppets songs, for example, represent humorous and playful asides that serve to conjure the allusion of escape through 'non-work' (see Fleming, 2009). As we take comfort in thinking of the office as an outlet for fun, the corporation receives the spark of life it craves. A similar, yet more refined (and less humiliating) allusion to escape can be found among the hallowed halls of Google and Facebook, where beanbags, scooters, and fire poles make work feel more like an exciting fun-park and less like a boring cubicle farm. As workers put in long 'play' hours, and thousands more clamor for their golden ticket into the playpen, the corporation feasts on a seemingly endless supply of living labor.

Even the prospect of death, according to the authors, ironically weds us to a life of work, and more precisely of working ourselves to death, by sustaining the fantasy of eventual exit. As the authors state, 'We work *as if* we are about to die, *as if* we are about to be unburdened from the deadweight of work, but we never actually are until it is too late' (3). Thus, we can no longer rely on death as the great level-setter because its prerequisite, life itself, has been all but consumed by the parasitic nature of moribund-style capitalism.

But the authors provide us with hints that this 'ideology of escape' is crumbling. While most of us could always see through the flimsy veneer of team-building exercises and the naïve attempts at humanizing work, the difference today is that

their senselessness and futility are placed in sharp relief against an economic environment marked by stagnating wages, decreasing job security, and an imperative to work only to be able to pay off mounting debt and take part in meaningless rituals of consumption. Such a sobering reality may seem to be a cause for celebration: like the alcoholic's fateful last drink, the sheer dreadfulness of our situation might finally rattle us onto a new path. But for the authors, the situation turns yet more toxic: 'the displacement of non-work into the office also entails the obverse, the shift of work into all pockets of life' (17). Any hard-won sobriety becomes awash in a slurring of work with life. As the job follows us into more of our waking – and even sleeping – hours, we lose the ability to know just where work ends and where life begins. Numbness and apathy spread still further. To borrow a line from Adorno (1982: 128), we are like 'flies that twitch after the swatter has half smashed them...empty personae, through which the world truly can only resound'.

The real tragedy of the contemporary worker comes into focus when the authors reveal how even our most treasured acts of defiance (e.g. proclaiming to be a communist, shouting 'capitalism sucks', and authoring *Dead Man Working*) are mobilized to further the exploitative reach of capitalism. In addition to providing the allure of escape – in this case, the allure of emancipation – acts spawned from a critical awareness now offer the latest boost to capitalism's productivity. The authors dissect how movements such as environmentalism and corporate social responsibility, which are often thought to aid in curbing capitalism's excesses, actually function to obscure their underlying causes and as a result reinforce the current state of affairs. As the authors state, 'the disingenuous code of responsibility provides a practical medium for people to express their concerns, but in a manner that precisely consolidates their role as an obedient, productive worker' (29). The temporary relief afforded from at least 'trying to make a difference' serves to wed us tighter to the corporation we hope to change.

As one might suspect, all of this cognitive, emotional, and ethical labor eventually takes its toll. 'The inconvenience of being yourself', to use one of the authors' more tame phrases, stems from having to endure the repeated demands of work on our bodies, minds and souls without recourse to lasting relief or genuine escape. In light of such an abusive relationship, it's no wonder why we might choose to hasten our own death, especially to avoid the more frightening prospect 'of *not dying*, [and] being wedded to a life that is not worth living' (3). Physical abuse, emotional trauma, suicide – all are welcome relief; anything to numb us from the thought of living forever and unable to die. But all are also expected of us as the lifeblood of moribund-style capitalism. As we increasingly give more of ourselves to work and increasingly feel less in return, we come to

internalize what the many coaches, counselors, gurus, and self-help books empathically tell us: 'It's not the workplace that's the problem. *It's you*' (39).

Through vivid imagery, the authors convey what eventually becomes the grand motif of the book: how both capital and labor require life-support. The former receives this through bringing more and more of life into the corporation and the latter through adopting extreme practices to rekindle that basic capacity to feel, or in some cases, not feel (e.g. sensory deprivation tank addiction). Both attempt to 'mainline' life by injecting it directly into their veins, but the drug merely serves as a pale substitute for the real thing.

Fresh air

The book's chapters lift around and riff on the vast tract of decaying dross that chokes contemporary working life (or what's left of it), at times conveying the back-story while at other times documenting its proportions and magnitude. The wide-ranging collection of pop-culture references and corporate fads scattered throughout the text – from *Mad Men* and *Aliens* to inner child therapy and Wall Street fight clubs – manages to wickedly entertain while remaining closely connected to the project's overall aim, which at bottom is a deadly serious plea to aim for the 'Big Exit': a life outside of work and away from the colonizing forces of capitalism.

A tantalizing prospect, but can it be achieved? The authors put forth some of the more obvious suggestions – 'de-working our bodies and social relations, separating life from that which has now colonized it' (72) – but not without losing sight of the enormity of the task at hand: in a world where life itself has become increasingly colonized, we must do nothing short of 'unlearn how to live' (67). The authors do an admirable job of teeing up this task within the tight confines of the book. Closing in on the final pages, the reader feels as if he's been in training all along for a full-blown sprint to the exit door. And yet, for all the subtle traps and conjuring tricks we're taught to look out for, and for all the unlearning, when we hear the starting pistol fire, we can't seem to move. We begin to doubt whether it even went off. And as we begin to struggle once again for air, we catch ourselves entertaining the fantasy that the pistol was actually turned on ourselves and that all of this will soon be over and done with. No escape.

In the end, the allegedly vibrant and fresh world outside of work remains a mystery. The geography of this region appears so dismal and so faint as to seem un-navigable. While the authors want to suggest that such 'imperceptibility' is a

necessary feature of this foreign terrain when viewed from our side of the divide, without providing at least the traces of an outline the book runs the risk of leaving its reader gasping for air with nowhere to turn. Worse still, the reader – now delirious – may erroneously write off the call to exit as the disgruntled broodings of two privileged academics dying a relatively decent death compared to the many already dead men and women working.

Aside from these risks, *Dead Man Working* masterfully pins down and dissects that strange, unsettling feeling we've all experienced at some point in the office: whether from having to take part in a 'brainstorming' activity so far removed from work, and so insulting to our intelligence, that we begin to harbor violent thoughts; or from noticing our friendly and trustworthy colleague—the one we share our violent thoughts with—wholeheartedly taking part in that very activity (not even a wink); or again, from reading the CEO's company-wide email announcing the death of a faceless co-worker and referring to the deceased by nickname (the CEO never really knew him) while praising 'his many years of service and dedication to the company' (the epitome, perhaps, of a *dead man working*).

To put it crudely, all of these moments possess the quality of forcing something where it doesn't belong. And all are accompanied with a feeling of powerlessness to put it right. Cederström and Fleming provide a startling glimpse into why this is happening, and they equip the reader with the conceptual tools necessary, if not to put it right, then at least to make refreshing sense of it. For this alone, their book is worth its (sadly light) weight in gold. At a meager 76 pages, the paperback edition now available through independent publisher Zero Books oddly mimics the unbearable lightness of contemporary working life, right down to its blinding cover that matches the petrifying light of the fluorescent-clad office. Intentional or not, one can at least suspect the book comes easy to carry by the floating office automatons who need it most.

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Satire, critique and the place of Critical Management Studies: Exploring Zero Books

Sam Dallyn

review of

Carl Cederström and Peter Fleming (2012) *Dead man working*. Winchester: Zero Books (PB, pp. 83, £9.99, ISBN 1780991568)

Contextualization

Cederström and Fleming's *Dead Man Working*, published by Zero Books, is an interesting intervention that gives us a chance to ponder a question, which should be the guiding question for aspiring public intellectuals and academics of a critical bent: Who are we writing for? In the present context of UK business schools, where the pressure to maximize point scoring on the Association of Business Schools (ABS) journal ranking list (see Dunne and Harney, forthcoming; Willmott, 2011) has been increasingly enforced by university management, the profoundly important question of who our audience is, and who we should be aiming to articulate our ideas to, is precisely the question that gets lost. The question that needs to be posed here is who actually reads the material produced in elite, restricted access academic journals? And in addition to this, do these heavily confined forums ever present a serious opportunity to affect any kind of widespread radicalization or social change? In exploring the question of what the critical enterprise is, or should be, one is also faced with a set of issues surrounding the demise of the public intellectual (Jacoby, 2000). If we believe in critique – and some of us may not have entirely given up hope about believing in an alternative – then considering whom we are articulating

that critique to, and with, ought to be central to any meaningful critical enterprise.

My claim here is that Cederström and Fleming's book presents a significant alternative way of engaging with that question. *Dead Man Working* is a rip-roaring good read and an immensely entertaining short book. One of its contributions is to present a form of satire of work culture. In fact, it actually manages to be amusing in places, something not often achieved in the critical management studies (CMS) field with one or two exceptions (see for example Parker, 2009; Rhodes, 2002). It is unquestionable that there is something of a lack of humour in management journals, particularly highly ranked ones. Perhaps this arises from an inflated sense of importance amongst members of the academic community, the pervasive confinements of journal style, or simply because doing written humour well is difficult; I suspect that it arises from all three. The limitations of existing management scholarship mean that alternative publication outlets like Zero Books provide potentially promising opportunities for different styles of writing and reaching wider audiences.

Dead Man Working is the first critical management contribution in the Zero Books collection, a publishing house based around the idea of being 'intellectual without being academic' (Zero Books, 2012). While some of its authors, including Fleming and Cederström, are academics, Zero Books are written with the intention and expressed purpose of reaching wider audiences and a broader intellectual public. The founding statement of Zero Books bemoans the death of the public intellectual. It is a bit much to declare that Zero Books has reinvented the notion of the public intellectual but it has done something important in posing the question of what 'a making public of the intellectual' (Zero Books, 2012) would consist of. In this review I have two principal aims: first, to situate *Dead Man Working* in the context of the wider Zero Books phenomenon, which I hope will prompt some of us to reflect on why we became academics or social theorists (or whatever label you prefer) in the first place. Second, I think the book is at its strongest when it becomes a satire by blending together an amusing concoction of adult babies, little girls, and men who search for prostitutes for the purpose of pseudo-loving affection rather than sex. The satirical assemblage of oddities in the book is intended to critique corporate working life and self-help 'guide to success' manuals.

Zero Books and the public intellectual

The Zero Books collection is an interesting and an unusual one: its authors often do not come from the academic sphere and many of them write widely-read

blogs[1]. Probably the most famous Zero book is Mark Fisher's *Capitalist Realism*. Arguably the reason why this book in particular has assumed a sizable audience is that it engages with a central problem that critics of capitalism are faced with: the seeming impossibility of transcending capitalist social organization. That is, we live in a capitalist world governed according to false macroeconomic theories (Keen, 2011), unsustainable levels of private debt, stagnation, and wage contraction for the majority. It is an order that denies hope and opportunity to most of the world's population – remember that almost half of the global population earn less than $2.50 a day (Global Issues, 2013) – but one that is increasingly difficult to think beyond. *Dead Man Working* follows the Zero Books trend of critiquing different aspects of contemporary capitalism. Many Zero Books have been based around providing critical accounts of different aspects of capitalism on social, cultural and political grounds, or some combination of all three (see for example Fisher, 2009; Power, 2009; Southwood, 2011). *Dead Man Working* mainly adopts a cultural form of critique: the early chapters are pre-occupied by the incorporation of 'cool' and radical chic within contemporary capitalism, which is also a theme in some of Fleming's earlier work (Fleming, 2009; Fleming and Spicer, 2003, 2007).

Many of the most notable contributions in the Zero Books series are about rethinking the position of the left in light of concrete social realities and experiences. My favourite book in the series is probably *Non-Stop Inertia*, Ivor Southwood's lived analysis of precarious labour and the privatized coercion that characterizes UK Job Centres. It is his expression of the reality of Job Centre life in contemporary capitalist society that provides some of the most powerful pieces of writing that frame the analysis. This is a feature of some of the best books in the series, offering us a succinct and immensely readable critical commentary on a particular pervasive cultural or social phenomenon that many people living in contemporary capitalist society are faced with. From a different perspective, but one that also connects at times with issues around employment precarity, Nina Power offers a powerful analysis of contemporary feminism and the ways in which certain variants of feminism have been constructed to be congruent with,

1 To give a few selective examples, Ivor Southwood posts on 'Screened Out' (http://screened-out.blogspot.co.uk/), Owen Hatherley has the wonderfully titled blog 'Sit Down Man, You're a Bloody Tragedy' (named after the Scottish Independent Labour Party leader James Maxton's riposte to Ramsey MacDonald's final parliamentary speech in 1935) (http://nastybrutalandshort.blogspot.co.uk), Mark Fisher is the author of 'K-Punk' (http://k-punk.abstractdynamics.org), Evan Calder Williams blogs on 'Socialism and/or Barbarism' (http://socialismandorbarbarism.blogspot.co.uk), Adam Koksko writes on 'The Weblog: Home for the Heteronomous' (http://heteronomy.wordpress.com/), and Laurie Penny writes at 'Penny Red' (http://www.penny-red.com).

indeed complimentary to, 'the logic of the market' (Power, 2009: 15). Take Sarah Palin or the attempt to reconstruct wars against certain nations, like Afghanistan, into feminist liberations from the Hijab (Power, 2009: 11). As Power (2009: 10) notes, Palin – who she describes as a 'terminator hockey-mom who calls herself a feminist' – was a member of the pro-life advocacy organization 'Feminists for Life'.

Like all the best contributions in the Zero Books series, these authors engage with social problems and conditions by taking a perspective that is rarely ever voiced in the mainstream media. There is a spirit of the public about these enquiries, by which I mean these books are highly readable and accessible. It is important to not overstate the case for Zero Books succeeding as a public endeavour, but what I think this publishing house has done is offer a range of significant cultural and political critiques and theoretical engagements in a way that is relevant and important. Perhaps its readers are most often postgraduate students across different disciplines that are critically minded and interested in contemporary social life. I say this mainly on the basis of anecdotal and conversational evidence: in my own experience books in the series are frequently mentioned in café and bar conversations with postgraduate students from different disciplines, but one rarely finds them cited in academic journal articles. However, whatever the limitations of the reach of Zero books, they are at least more engaging for a broader public than the vast majority of restricted access academic journal articles.

Satire and social critique

Cederström and Fleming opt for an alternative kind of social critique of contemporary working life, as the book subverts the tradition of corporate self-help manuals though selecting cultural extremities and redeploying them as satire. In this respect the authors signal an interesting shift in the style of CMS critiques by employing humour and satire. Satire is a significant form of social critique, which is memorable because it conjures up great stories and startling images. Satire is principally the use of ridicule, irony and sarcasm to expose and deride vices and follies, usually in a form that is critical and aggressive (Hodgart, 2009: 10). In the best examples of satire it can spark the indignation of some and the contemptuous laughter of others, although the extent to which we laugh is dependent on the context in which the satire is received. The great satires of the 18th century are unlikely to produce belly laugher for most readers in our present context.

One of the most interesting examples of satire is Baum's (2000) *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, which Graeber (2011) draws on in his excellent history of debt. In Graeber's detailed and politically important anthropological history of debt, he mentions that *The Wizard of Oz* was originally intended as a parable of the Populist campaign of Williams Jennings Brian who ran for the presidency on a Free Silver Platform (a campaign to replace the gold system with a bimetallic one that would allow the free creation of silver money). As Graeber (2011: 52-53) notes, 'according to the Populist reading, the Wicked Witches of the East and West represent the East and West Coast bankers (promoters and benefactors of the tight money supply)'. Graeber goes on to note that 'the Scarecrow represented the farmers (who did not have the brains to avoid the debt trap)' and the Tin Woodsman was the industrial proletariat. The yellow brick road and the silver slippers (which became ruby slippers in the movie) presumably speak for themselves, and the Wizard of Oz, who turns out not to be a wizard at all but rather a hapless man hidden behind a curtain, represents appropriately enough, the US treasury. This example of satire points to its strengths and limitations, since *The Wizard of Oz* has essentially become a famous children's story. Yet the original object of critique seems to have been lost in popular consciousness; however Graber's history of debt may help to bring the satirical aspects of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* back into focus.

What satire does in literary form is to create a story. At its best, satire is a story that sticks. Yet, how a story is appropriated and fashioned for critique is subject to the particular social and political context and the 'passage of time'. The closest thing we have to a great contemporary satirist is probably Chris Morris who brings a certain black comedy, with a more than healthy dose of contempt, to a range of topics in the UK. Over the years Morris's critiques have been consistently venomous (I mean that in an entirely complimentary sense) and often directed at different aspects of the media. His critiques have included the portrayal of the September 11th attacks, attitudes towards drugs, the grotesque stupidity of celebrities, the media obsession with paedophilia and numerous other phenomena that are in a sense read through and partly constructed by the popular media. Perhaps Chris Morris's most powerful piece of satire was his *Brass Eye* series. A central piece of *Brass Eye* was the succession of B to D list celebrities who would appear (on what they thought was a genuine news programme) in order to read out a series of bizarre and ludicrous news pieces, believing them to be real. What was so profoundly damaging about this was the extent to which it destabilized the position of celebrities into one in which they actually had to think about the material they were reading out. This device also presented a serious challenge to the viewer's perception of newsreaders and celebrities. In short, it suggested that many of these figures of authority were empty conduits of information. Probably the best example of how satire can still

prompt silly indignation in recent years was the response to the episode of *Brass Eye* about paedophiles, which included the pop DJ, Jonathan Fox, announcing that a paedophile has more genes in common with crabs than other human beings, and a young television presenter, declaring 'we even have footage of a penis shaped internet sound wave generated by an online paedophile'[2].

In a rather more modest and transitory fashion, Cederström and Fleming use contemporary cultural extremities as reference points to send up working life, always somehow anchored by the notion of death. The book explores this theme of death in dramatic fashion in Chapter 6 by opening with Anjool Malde, a stockbroker at Deutsche Bank, who at the age of 24 jumped out off an eight-story restaurant rooftop with a designer suit and glass of champagne in hand (55). The drama and the satirical irony in this instance is reflected in the detail given about the character's smart attire; the fact that Anjool M. possesses many features of an archetype of corporate success – champagne and Hugo Boss suit – as he jumps to his death.

The question of whether this is actually humorous is certainly a contentious one. Indeed, there are few topics more likely to divide audiences than the question of whether something is funny. Yet the purpose of satire, I think, is primarily to provoke reflection and possibly unease. Indeed, often humour divides; what some see as comedic, others may simply see as unpleasant. The approach of *Dead Man Working* is to make a critique of capitalist working life through satirical irony and ridicule – often mixed with a healthy dose of contempt – to highlight the absurdities and the profound social problems that capitalism creates. Perhaps the most serious example in the book is the fourteen tragic suicides at Foxconn in China, the Apple Macintosh producer (58). Apple has recently been named the most valuable company of all time. It has become a corporate archetype for the generation of capitalist value by creating an enormously profitable high-end production model that leaves skilled Chinese workers overworked and, in some cases, driven to suicide. It should be noted that in response to these suicides Apple has pushed Foxconn International[3] to raise wages by around 30% for the majority of workers 'without apparently offering any leeway on contract prices to accommodate the rising costs' (Froud et al., 2012: 8); thus further exacerbating the pressures on workers to produce. In an

2 This powerful contemporary satire on the media obsession with paedophiles, Brass Eye 'Paedogeddon', is available online here: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fLyLGrbKokI.

3 Foxconn International manufactures electronics (like the iPhone) and is one of three separate companies. The other two are Foxconn that manufactures computers and consumer electronics and Foxconn Technology who are a light metal thermal manufacturer and assembler (Froud et al, 2012: 7; Financial Times, 2011).

attempt to minimize the destructive tendency of employees to commit suicide, Cederström and Fleming go into great detail about the efforts Apple has made to reduce this suicide rate. Foxconn have undertaken a variety of measures such as establishing stress rooms, erecting safety nets between buildings and summoning some Buddhist monks to 'release the suicide souls from purgatory' (59). This leads Cederström and Fleming to declare that 'Foxconn are now leading innovators of a new field of management…suicide management' (59).

In terms of satire, the book finds points of reference in the here and now that render visible the obscene underpinnings of capitalist corporate life. One of the most memorable examples of this is the striking reference to the ironically named Humping Hank, a character from a US brothel who appears in a Louis Theroux documentary[4]. Hank, who bears a partial resemblance to Bill Gates, visits the brothel not seeking sex but rather the experience of pseudo-emotional intimacy, described as 'the girlfriend experience'. Cederström and Fleming suggest that Humping Hank 'captures the spirit of the modern corporation with almost perfect precision' (36). In his search for a prostitute pseudo-girlfriend who he can eat popcorn with, he reflects the desire of the modern corporation to establish an emotional intimacy with employees, for the worker to invest one's life and soul in work.

Humping Hank is certainly a memorable personification of the demands for emotional entanglement in the modern corporation, but one of the highlights of the book is undoubtedly the analysis of adult babies. Adult babies are individuals, primarily but not exclusively men, who enjoy dressing in diapers and other forms of baby clothing. Also known as paraphilic infantilism, this behaviour is often associated with some form of sexual fetish although this is not necessarily always the case, it involves role-playing a return to an infant or baby like state. There are a range of adult baby events that are advertised on the adult baby website 'Daily Diapers'; these include what are known as 'munches'. Adult babies present a beautiful satirical embodiment of the fashion for eternal youth: they serve as a grotesque personification of the desire to capture and preserve the state of being young. This craving for youthfulness is of course pervasive in the present cultural milieu of contemporary capitalism. Cederström and Fleming argue that adult babies are a counterweight to cynical distance, that is, they are not deliberately ironic in the sense of adopting a bit of pseudo-radical cool or anti-capitalist chic, such as a poster of Lenin giving the finger. Instead, they note, 'with no signs of

4 This excruciating piece of footage is on Youtube: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qpHS7ksGR78.

irony, they fully and openly play out the secret fantasy of becoming a child' (48)[5]. Perhaps what makes the adult baby such a powerful image is that it is a perfect obverse of the working man or woman in smart attire.

In terms of criticisms that may be directed at the book, one might take issue with its rather nihilistic ethos, which seems to preclude the possibility of a positive alternative. However, this would be to mistake the purpose of satire, since it requires us to continuously question any social reality for its ludicrousness, pomposity and hypocrisy. To suggest an alternative that is not subject to the same forms of critique, and the potential for a comedic dagger, would be a timid, in fact a failed, form of satire. One limitation of the book however is that it does not draw out and render explicit its enemies enough; in my view, *Dead Man Working* would be enhanced by a chapter or at least a few pages that ridicule a particular paradigmatic corporate self-help book. One of the things that makes Willmott's (1993) classic, perhaps even defining, CMS article 'Strength is Ignorance; Slavery is Freedom' so memorable and rhetorically effective is its grounding in a critique of a popular corporate self-help manual, Peters and Waterman's (1982) *In Search of Excellence*. Such grounding might have given *Dead Man Working* a clearer sense of critical intent, which would have increased its force.

Conclusion

Cederström and Fleming's book is an immensely readable piece of satire and pastiche. The book serves up parody and critique in unexpected and sometimes unsettling ways. It also gives us an opportunity to stand back and reflect on how critical management and organization studies might seek to become more readable and address a broader, cross-disciplinary, audience. Popularizing critique is a profoundly important task, and it is one that the Zero Books project brings into view by daring to ask how we might create an 'idea of publishing as a making public of the intellectual'. As I noted above, this is an ideal that CMS consistently fails to live up to. Now more than ever in a time of economic crisis, we at least need the courage to pose the problem. By selecting a satirical pastiche of oddities that constitute an underbelly of corporate life, *Dead Man Working* at its best engages in that task.

5 The book may even be acquiring some recognition amongst the adult baby community. For example, it receives a reference on one adult baby website in-between another post for a book entitled *There's A Baby in My Bed!: Learning to Live Happily with the Adult Baby in your Relationship* and an advert for a Cherry Baby Romper: http://just-clothes.com/Rompers/Adult-Baby-Romper-217/.

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Class action or class struggle?

Joanna Figiel

review of

Perlin, R. (2011) *Intern nation: How to earn nothing and learn little in the brave new economy*. Verso: London & New York. (PB, pp. 258, £9.99, ISBN139781844676866)

Starring Georgia Institute of Technology, as well as Owen Wilson and Vince Vaughn, *The Internship* was presumably intended as the Hollywood blockbuster of Summer 2013. The movie portrays a couple of interns who arrive at the corporation in the hope of securing a job in the creative industries. While their experiences are arguably somewhat less traumatic than those the hapless intern protagonist of *The Devil Wears Prada* has to endure in a similar scenario, the two are nevertheless forced to compete with an army of other prospective employees (i.e. interns) in fulfilling various office and non-office related tasks, some more pointless than others, in order to literally *win* the possibility of the future employment. The movie offers a fascinating glimpse into the inner working of the tech giant – or perhaps it's a feature length advertorial – with its Google-branded blurring of work, play and life. This provides the backdrop for the protagonists' quest for promised future possibilities, golden opportunities and (in)valuable life-experiences.

Almost three years after the publication of *Intern Nation*, Ross Perlin's important exposé on the world of unpaid work, the fact that the film's humour remains somewhat lacklustre throughout may have something to do with the fact that the plight of such interns has hardly ever been a laughing matter. Indeed, in the three years since Perlin shed some much-needed light upon the world of the

intern, there have been many important developments in both the US context, the main focus of his study, but also beyond. Perlin's generally well-received investigations, published in 2011, directly addressed the situation of many real-life interns, locating their plight within the wider frame of a new workplace paradigm and larger shifts in the overall culture of work. I would like to consider Perlin's contribution here, but also, given the time that has elapsed since the publication of this work, to take this opportunity to map out some of the developments in the struggles over internships that have transpired in the interim.

Perlin's book, which remains timely and relevant, is based on an extensive series of one-on-one interviews, conducted by the author over the two years prior to its publication. This means relying on a 'convenience sample', as Perlin himself admits, rather than a full ethnography or what might be considered a sociological sample proper. However, in terms of the data and evidence – even if at times appearing as purely anecdotal – it still makes for a crucial contribution to an area of study in which finding hard data and statistics and employers and employees willing to be named, identified or cooperate is notoriously difficult. The book is not intended as a 'serious' academic text or treatise, though it quotes some academic papers, therefore does not venture a systematic political or theoretical analysis of the intern phenomenon. Rather it is an extremely readable foray into an increasingly important, if often overlooked area of the labour market which weaves together personal stories with media examples, historical snippets, newspaper reports, as well as numerous pop-culture references, including snippets from *Seinfeld*, *The Onion*, and *The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou* – 'Do the interns all get Glocks? – No, they all share one!'

The book consists of eleven punchy chapters, each examining one aspect of the internship phenomenon, bookended by a passionate preface ('This book is meant as a step towards sanity and towards justice', xviii) and appendices – 'The Intern Bill of Rights' (Appendix A – '... a common standard by which to evaluate and improve internships for the benefit of inters, employers, and society as a whole', 239). This forms something of a call to arms, demanding a better definition of, and respect for, internships as a category of work. Along with this, in a welcome practical intervention, it also includes a general guide to relevant employment rights (Appendix B) in the US, Canada and the UK (241-4).

Where Perlin does attempt to situate his research theoretically he turns, among others, to Eve Chiapello and Luc Boltanski (2005), whose account of the 'new spirit of capitalism' and its transformed managerial practices, can be seen as usefully describing the changing characteristics of contemporary employment in an era of decentralization and the self-disciplining subjects. This is an

employment paradigm to which the mode of internship seems particularly fitting, indeed a logical outgrowth. As Perlin notes, 'What structured training programs were to the bureaucratic firms of the mid-twentieth century, internships may well be to the new network capitalism of firms dealing in intangible goods' (95). In this sense he casts the internship as a disciplinary structure perfectly befitting of a more precarious, networked and responsibilized workforce.

This condition of the increasing, disciplinary normalization of precarity is drawn out in his discussion around the issue of access to various professions and the growing gap between the working-class and elites (Chapter Nine). Here Perlin engages David Graeber's discussion of the proliferating structures of exclusion that characterize many sectors of the job market (165) to illuminate the way in which internships have become a means to police access to certain professions to the destruction of earlier promises of social mobility. Andrew Ross and Alex Foti help further inform Perlin's discussion of precarity and its relation to interns, but on a more general and more global level (Chapter Ten). This works effectively alongside the chapter focussing on the economics of internships (Chapter Seven), which draws on literature considering the future of employment, mobility in the job market, as well as the minimum wage debate in the US.

Perlin's understanding of the systematic proliferation of internships appears informed by a tentative engagement with Gary Becker's human capital theory (127-8) and Michael Spence's signalling theory (130), to a degree situating Perlin's account of the rise of unpaid, aspirational labour within the wider development of a neoliberal economic consensus in the US. The generalization of Becker's theory of human capital, with its 'investment approach' to human resources and the burdens and costs of investments in oneself, clearly appears to mirror the ideology of internships. Short-term sacrifice for the accumulation of, not only direct job skills, but importantly contacts, social networks and insider knowledge in the hope of future payoffs, is the honed to a fine art in the practice of the intern (128).

In the short, focussed chapters, regularly presented with an identifiable black-humour, Perlin skilfully covers the origins, subsequent rise, and the current epidemic of internships. This includes the historical origins of the nomenclature (War zones! Internment camps!) and the history of apprenticeships and medical interns. He goes on to describe the subsequent explosion of this form of work and how it is increasingly supported by a fast-growing network of commercial agencies, offering to match interns to positions and vice versa. He also discusses the implication of colleges and universities in the internships' growing popularity, the legal landscape, as well as two 'case studies' – of the internship

programmes at Disney (experts, one would imagine, at offering young people fairytales!) and in the political sector in both the UK and US (Monica!). Perlin likewise endeavours to provide a brief overview of the global rise of the practice, with discussions ranging beyond the US labour market to include China, Germany, and France. Having engaged with the above, he draws inexorably towards the seemingly logical conclusion – a call to action, complete with a proposed manifesto.

Although focussed mainly on the US context, Perlin makes some brief links with the UK landscape, including the grim estimation that the UK's 'internship problem' remains five years behind that of the US (200). The book's pertinent analysis has seen its timely necessity vindicated by significant press coverage on both sides of the Atlantic and on both sides of the political spectrum. In the UK both the right-wing Daily Mail and liberal-leaning Guardian reprinted sections of the book, hosting lively exchanges in their comments and blog sections. Yet public debate of this topic was already taking place, evidenced in an interesting exchange between Prime Minister David Cameron of the Conservative party, and his Liberal Democrat deputy, Nick Clegg, regarding social mobility – an aspect also highlighted by Perlin throughout the book. Just as Clegg criticized the idea of 'unpaid internships, which favour the wealthy and well-connected' and announced a new scheme promoting the maxim of 'what you know, not who you know', the PM candidly announced that he was fine with the idea of giving internships to friends and neighbours (Stratton, 2011).

In other developments, a minor scandal of MPs being exposed for using free labour in their parliamentary offices (Davis, 2010) was followed by the 'Let's get our house in order' campaign by Labour MP Hazel Blears with the support of the Intern Aware campaign group (Blears, 2013). The Trade Unions Congress and the National Union of Students launched a year of campaigning for fair internships in February 2012with a 'Rights for Interns' smartphone application and the claim that: 'In popular career destinations like journalism, advertising, film, television and public relations are becoming an exclusive domain for people from affluent backgrounds' (TUC, 2012).

Both before the publication of Perlin's study and increasingly afterwards – if not necessarily to imply a correlation – a lively range of campaigns and organizations, with a diversity of perspectives and approaches, have focussed on struggles around internships. Such groups include Intern Aware, a campaign focussing on promoting fair access to the internship system, Internocracy who self-describe as a 'youth-led social enterprise passionate about changing the culture of internships for the better in the UK' and Interns Anonymous, a forum for interns to share their experiences and discuss the ethics of unpaid

employment. Beyond this, another example active example is found in the Carrotworkers Collective and the Precarious Workers Brigade who amalgamated to form a London-based group of current or ex- interns, cultural workers and educators, primarily from the creative and cultural sectors, who regularly meet to think together around the conditions of free labour. Other similar groupings include the Ragpickers and the Devil Pays Nada campaigns. Also noteworthy is the Pay Your Interns campaign, with their claim 'Cheapskate employers named and shamed'.

Partially in response to the rise of activism over this issue, Arts Council England recently published its own set of intern guidelines (ACE, 2011), acknowledging the fact that the legislation making unpaid work illegal has been in place – and was often ignored – for a number of years now. In fact, the UK context into which Perlin's book arrived was one in which some sporadic legal victories for interns perhaps indicated a turning of the tide, or at least a qualitative development, in the practice of offering unpaid internships. In November 2009, Reading Employment Tribunal ruled that Nicola Vetta, a film production intern who received expenses only, should have been classified as a regular employee and paid at least the minimum wage. In May 2011, Keri Hudson, a web journalism intern, won five weeks' pay from a Central London Employment Tribunal for the same reason (ACE 2011:9). Together with these employment tribunal rulings has been the promise of other legal action – such as the ongoing NUJ Cashback for Interns campaign (NUJ, 2013), or BECTU interventions (BECTU, 2011).

Although the law has changed recently, the terms 'intern' and 'internship' do not appear in National Minimum Wage legislation, and while unpaid internships can still be advertised, an individual with worker status must be paid full NMW for their age range. However, in practice at least, the law remains opaque, allowing employers to avoid prosecution and continue using free work. While HMRC promises to investigate instances where it is being broken, it admits that 'during 2012/13 it ordered nine firms to pay £200,000 to people who had worked for them as unpaid interns' (Blears, 2013), this figure seems somewhat low, and HMRC refuses to identify any of the companies involved. Meanwhile, there are continuing daily reports of illegal internships being advertised and only recently, an anonymous magazine editor admitted in an interview with *Graduate Fog*, a portal campaigning on behalf of young journalists, that the large-scale, ongoing and organised exploitation of interns continues in that industry (Greenslade, 2013).

To return to the Hollywood context briefly mentioned at the beginning of this review, the fact that as a filmic portrayal *The Internship* hardly raises a smile is

made conversely somewhat amusing – in a sardonic sense – by the movie's own obliviousness to the potential bleak irony inherent in its own double exploitation of the intern phenomenon. It mines the proceeds of the interns' unpaid labour, not only on the level of content, but likewise from within its own 'hidden abode' – after all, the Hollywood movie industry is systematically reliant on the labour of unpaid interns. What adds the element of humour, however, is that finally the joke might be on the production companies and the big studios. A recent court ruling in the US has stated that two interns working on the production of last year's hit movie, *The Black Swan* were 'classified improperly as unpaid interns' and are in fact 'employees' covered by the the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA), as well as New York's labour laws and are thus entitled to minimum wages for the time that they worked for Fox Searchlight (Greenfield, 2013). The ruling also gave the green light for a possible class action suit, meaning that it might, at best, put and end to such practices, and at the very least, force corporations to urgently re-examine their internship policies (Hananel, 2013; Weissman, 2013). A similar class action suit against Hearst Publishing unfortunately failed, but with former interns at *Harper's Bazaar*, and *Cosmopolitan* among others now pursuing separate cases (Greenfield, 2013), these examples demonstrate a significant shift in the debate and in the political organizing around this issue that has taken place since Perlin published his study. If one cannot claim that Perlin's book brought on these somewhat welcome developments, then struggles around the issue have nevertheless likely been aided, inspired and indeed anticipated, by its publication, the above being just one example of the positive, for the interns at least, developments since the book first emerged.

Primarily in a US context, what Perlin certainly attempts and albeit tentatively, somewhat succeeds in doing, is to relate the continual drip-feed of legal developments, emergent loopholes and the steady flow of coverage and commentary to wider debates about the future of work and the wage in general (recently centered around authors such as, for example Kathi weeks or Michael Denning). In a UK context, the (post?-)crisis economy remains particularly marred by high youth unemployment and the state's disingenuous response in the form of the increasing introduction of workfare. The workfare debate, though dressed in the moralizing rhetoric of training, 'bettering oneself' or being deserving of social support can of course be seen as an attempt to drive down costs in terms of both government spending, but also those of employers, following an internship-style trajectory. Workfare however, inverts the intern, producing a direct disciplining of the labour-force, rather than incentive-led or aspirational approach. In this sense workfare might be the stick to the carrot described by the Carrot Workers' Collective.

Perlin's text presents an important intervention into wider debates around precarity, for example the work of Guy Standing (2011), describing a lost generation of well-educated youth. Yet Perlin's offering not only shines some light on a world where unpaid labour is normalised and exploitation often goes unchallenged, it also serves as a reminder that systematised and generalised precarity is not simply a generational issue. Such a situation remains capitalism's default position and in a sense the internship simply represents one of a number of fronts upon which the uneasy consensus between organised labour and capital reached over the course of the twentieth century is being systematically rolled back by the now discredited, and yet still rampant, neoliberal agenda. However, in this sense it also admits a tiny glimmer of opportunity into the debate. In reminding us that internships are of concern beyond a generation of often somewhat affluent youngsters, and that they are in fact very much a class issue, Perlin at least points up a direction of travel. This is to say that in considering how to fight back against the abuse of interns, one might also start to think about class, exploitation and struggle alongside, but also beyond, the limitations of the wage-relation and the increasingly played-out discourses of its attendant labour movement.

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The limits of employability

Melanie Simms

review of

Shildrick, T., R. MacDonald, C. Webster and K. Garthwaite (2012) *Poverty and insecurity: Life in low-pay, no-pay Britain*. Policy Press. (PB, pp. 264, £26.99, ISBN 9781847429100)

At a time when in the UK the government is undertaking a fundamental reform of social security, this book should be made compulsory reading by everyone involved in designing and delivering welfare payments systems, from Ministers to frontline staff. The book explores the dynamics of the lives of people who 'churn' between low-pay jobs and social welfare. Unlike most of this special issue, it is not specifically focused on the concept of 'employability', but the research emerged out of previous work by the authors which examines the early transitions of young people into the labour market. Those studies had highlighted a particular concern with the degradation of work opportunities in the local labour market, Teesside. The researchers wanted to follow up the observation that many of the jobs experienced by their interviewees were increasingly low paid and highly insecure, leading them to make fairly regular transitions in to and out of the labour market.

This project set out to establish the dynamics of the effects of cycles of engagement with low paid jobs combined with periods out of employment. They recruited 60 participants with this pattern of labour market experiences from areas of Teesside that are known to have high levels of deprivation. In many respects, although the geography is important throughout the book, the story of post-industrial changes to labour markets is familiar to anyone who has lived outside the South East of England. The decline of local steel and chemical

manufacturing has been replaced with often low-paid and insecure work in retail, social care and hospitality. The experiences of the participants are vividly presented and a major strength of the research and analysis is that their voices are heard loud and clear.

A central argument of the book is that these cycles of low-pay and no-pay should not be understood to be 'stepping stones' into better employment in the future. Although some of the participants were recruited as part of the previous studies into young people's labour market transitions, they are now in their late 20s and 30s and these patterns of work and non-work persist. Equally, many of the participants are older and have experienced cycling between work and social security. In short, many jobs in the UK labour market are not providing upward trajectories. Indeed, the opposite is true in many cases. The particular ways in which low paid and insecure work can 'trap' people into cycles of poverty are lucidly explored. The book is highly relevant to issues raised by the problematic notion of 'employability'. The patterns of moving in and out of employment described by the participants interviewed emphasise the fact that in the post-industrial labour market of Teesside there is neither the quantity nor the quality of the jobs needed for the participants in the study to make secure transitions into work that would offer them stable income and opportunities. This was true before the recessions of the great financial crisis and it will be the case after.

As is true of all of the themes of the book, issues of employability are discussed sensitively and in a multi-faceted way. In fact, it is undoubtedly important that they are not discussed using the word 'employability' as the term focuses attention onto the supply side of the labour market. A central objective of the book is to confront readers with the realities of the lack of opportunity to find long-term employment in the local Teesside economy. Despite the lack of good quality work, some interventions to support people into work were successful. Participants clearly differentiated between support given to them by different kinds of 'welfare to work' agencies; some emerged very positively, others negatively. It will be of no surprise to anyone who has done research in this area that Jobcentre Plus (JCP) is not regarded with much enthusiasm. Echoing many of my own research findings, JCP is seen as largely ritualistic with advisors having very little time to respond to individual needs.

By contrast, the local Pathfinders agency had resources and scope to address a wide range of factors that might lead to exclusion from the labour market. Specific forms of help discussed in the book include help for job seekers to gain new qualifications and registrations (e.g. for security jobs), funding for alternative forms of transport (driving license, theory test, etc.), contributing to buying new work clothes, applying for identification (e.g. passports), and more.

The constraint is that people are only referred to Pathfinders after a considerable period of time on Jobseeker's Allowance. The longest identified in the book was 18 months and the Pathfinders intervention was successful in supporting a job seeker to retrain and secure work as a security guard.

Importantly, much of the assistance given to job seekers aimed at enhancing their employability was explicitly highlighted as being of little importance in finding the kinds of jobs relevant to the people interviewed for this study. At one point the authors explicitly say:

> Polished CVs and interview performances were not usually required. The interviewees accessed employment that did not appear to discriminate against them on the basis of educational qualifications, skill levels or work history... (p. 121)

This was equally true of participants with criminal records and/or histories of problematic drug use. Rather, personal networks were much more important. What employers wanted was 'a willing worker physically capable of doing the job who possessed the "right attitude"' (p. 121).

In this regard, the book presents a very helpful empirical contribution to ideas about 'employability'. To be clear, that is not its main objective but is an important sub-theme to at least two of the chapters, which should be read by anyone with an interest in the area. The central argument is about the complexity of provisions and outcomes in the 'welfare to work' industry, where some interventions result in employment (still often low-income and precarious) while others do not. Often there is relatively little that support agencies can do to address the most profound barriers to work. For me, one of the most important points relates to the concept of 'the better-off calculation'. In other words, JCP staff often use the idea of being 'better off' in work and this notion has been at the heart of the social security policies of the past 20 years. JCP staff actively use the idea in interviews and meetings with service users with the intention of encouraging them to make applications for advertised jobs. The problem is that the 'better-off test' fails to account for two major aspects of the lives of the participants: the costs associated with work and the insecurity of work being offered. Travel and childcare are two of the most problematic costs. Not only is there a real cost associated with these, but there are often issues about lack of access to both to cover the kind of flexible shifts demanded by employers. Neither childcare nor public transport is routinely provided beyond normal working patterns making many jobs impossible for many of the participants. Employers who help employees access either or both are regarded with considerable esteem.

Importantly, the authors are not only interested in the working lives of their participants. They are keen to understand a wide range of factors that influence their opportunities and choices about work. So stories of ill-health, care responsibilities and debt also feature as important dynamics. Daily, weekly and monthly battles with social security systems are central to the stories of many of the participants. Moving into work typically means that many (although usually not all) social security payments cease. That often leaves a period of weeks before someone is paid for their work, causing difficulties with regular bills payments. More seriously, the jobs that people take are often relatively short-term meaning that when employment ends it can take a long time to re-apply for social security support. These periods of uncertainty can be the trigger for people to take loans from short-term lenders at extortionate interest rates.

The message that shines through the evidence and discussion is the willingness of the participants to work. Their enthusiasm for paid employment is clear. Even those with very serious limitations, including disabilities, were keen to stress that they would be keen to work if there were jobs that fitted around their constraints. There are probably few readers of this journal to whom this is a revelation, but it is clear that the notion of the 'undeserving poor' has been underpinning social security reform for a long time. This book provides important counter-evidence to these ideas. What emerges is a deeper understanding of how the structures of the labour market intersect with weak social security systems and personal misfortune (often resulting from circumstances brought about by poverty) to make sustained engagement with the labour market very difficult. Importantly, these stories are largely told in the voices of the participants themselves. As the authors rightly highlight, it is rare that the voices of poor people are heard in any consistent way. This book is a useful counterpoint to that tendency.

This brings us to the idea of 'insecurity' as a persistent and important theme of the book. Many aspects of the lives of the participants in the study can be described as insecure. Their engagement with the labour market is, by definition, insecure with the end of jobs being prompted by often spurious reasons that are not well understood by the workers involved. Housing is not discussed in any great detail, but we certainly know that those in private rented accommodation will experience insecurity of tenure. The social welfare system provides such a frayed safety net that some choose not to claim. Ill health is a common feature of their own lives and the lives of the people around them and often affects the wider family and friendship network because of the responsibility to provide care. Indeed, it is friends and family networks that emerge as the central pillar of security for many of the people interviewed.

These kinds of insecurity are often overlooked in debates about low-paid work and social security. The insecurity experienced by the participants in this study is deeply embedded in the economic restructuring of the 1980s and the emergent poverty created within these communities. An important point made by the authors is that the welfare system itself contributes to these insecurities. The very low levels of welfare benefits paid during periods of unemployment, and the length of time it takes to establish a claim for those benefits, create and reinforce patterns of insecurity. The illogic of this situation is that there has been a widespread belief – particularly in policy making circles – in 'the great myth' of worklessness that people do not *want* to work and would *prefer* to spend time on social security benefits. The evidence presented here blows apart that myth and explains why current policy intervention centred around improving the 'employability' of these workers is so flawed.

Importantly, although the authors largely avoid the term 'precarious', this book adds to our understanding of different forms of precariousness in the UK. Those experiencing 'ordinary' poverty are rarely explicitly discussed in debates about precariousness, which have tended to focus more on migrant work and the extension of precarious work to 'new' groups such as highly qualified workers. This book is a useful counterpoint and reminds us that many of the most insecure workers in the UK are in places like Teesside where the very nature of the labour market since the decline of labour-intensive industry gives people few opportunities of secure employment.

The analysis makes clear that the causes of these cycles of low-pay and no-pay are complex and intersecting. Nonetheless, the authors are very clear that at the heart of the problem are the ways in which jobs are designed and offered by employers and if I have any major criticism of the book it is that there is relatively little discussion of employers in the analysis. To be fair, they did interview a small number of employers and they do discuss the findings. However, this is not done as systematically as I might hope to build a detailed understanding of the role of employers and pressures on them in the process of designing and offering the kinds of low-paid and insecure work experienced by the participants interviewed. As the authors rightly point out, there is a huge research project in front of us collectively to understand the demand side of the labour market in much more detail.

Related to this, trade unions are also absent from the discussion of possible ways to address many of the challenges of improving the quantity and quality of work available. Again, there are clear reasons for this. It is highly unlikely that unions are directly involved in regulating many of the kinds of work in which the participants are engaged. That reflects the limitations of the contemporary trade

union movement, not of the workers themselves. However, if we seek to 're-imagine' what a re-regulated labour market might look like then we must, surely, give consideration to some form of collective organization that challenges the decisions of employers. The omission of a discussion about trade unionism from the final chapter of the book is, therefore, notable.

The focus of this special issue is employability. This book presents wonderfully rich empirical data about how, in many areas of the economy, it is not workers' lack of willingness or skills that prevents them finding and staying in work. Rather, it is the lack of suitable jobs that offer appropriate numbers of hours along with the wider support of, for example, childcare and transport. In other words, there is a significant demand side problem in the labour market that is systematically under-researched and sidelined in public policy. In areas of the country like Teesside, these demand side problems have existed since the deindustrialization of the 1980s and are not going to change any time soon. These structural changes in local and regional labour markets are not going to be addressed only by supply side interventions around polishing CVs and practicing for interviews. Acknowledging this and addressing it is, surely, one of the most profound challenges in employment policy the decades ahead.

Overall, this is a book that is well worth reading for anyone with a broad interest in work, poverty, social security, and labour market transitions. It is not specifically aimed at those with an interest in employability, but it has a significant contribution to make in this area. It speaks to researchers from a wide range of disciplines and acts as an important evidence base for those who want to counter some of the assumptions and assertions about social security and poverty that are endlessly regurgitated in current political discourse. The authors are extremely concerned about the effects of current welfare reforms on the lives of people who experience work in similar ways to those discussed in the book. I share many of their concerns and if I could make Ian Duncan Smith[1] read it, I would.

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1 Ian Duncan Smith is the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions in the UK.