Fantasies of Neoliberalism: From the Clerical to the Entrepreneurial Subject


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The Entrepreneurial Self, forms an impressive and commendable overview of the forces of subjectification shaping entrepreneurial subjects of the neoliberal capitalist era into entrepreneurial selves. The subject, in this Foucauldian study, is no longer a transhistorical figure, but is itself constituted through power relations and modes of governing, moulding and taking advantage of it. Studying this subject, then, comes down to an examination of these creative fields of force. Analysing these fields of force, the study of the entrepreneurial self also tells a story about the nature of neoliberal capitalism. Neoliberalism seeks to universalise the principles of competition found in capitalist markets throughout society. It recognises, however, that such markets do not suddenly appear and run all by themselves. They need competitive subjects to complement them: entrepreneurial selves.

Bröckling's rich monograph is an exercise in the research field called 'studies of governmentality', following in the footsteps of figures such as Michel Foucault and Nikolas Rose. Governmentality – or the “conduct of conduct” – points to programmes and techniques that aim at changing, steering and guiding the behaviour of human beings. Governmentality does not mean fully controlling or determining the conduct of the subject, but structuring its field of possible action (Bröckling 2016, 8-9). It is this structuring that forms the object of Bröckling's investigation. The resulting 'genealogy of subjectification' presented in this book is thus less a comprehensive description of what an entrepreneurial subject looks like, but, rather, an account of what forms of knowledge, methods, techniques and practices are mobilised to actively shape this subject (Bröckling 2016, xiii and 3).

One of the defining characteristics of the Foucauldian ‘studies of governmentality’ is their extension of the notion of government, which now becomes ‘governmentality’, beyond the locus of the state. For Foucault, power cannot be located in a clearly demarcated entity, exercising it in a top-down fashion. Rather, power is dispersed through lowly and contingent relations of force. In looking for the specific knowledge and social techniques constitutive of the entrepreneurial self, then, Bröckling does not simply analyse an authoritative philosophical treatise or the exercise of power by a centralised source. Instead, he traces a 'convergence of lines' from heterogeneous contexts and lowly cultural sources. In this way, Bröckling structures the book in three sections. First, he addresses the methodology of the Studies of Governmentality and begins to gather some evidence for the thesis that the neoliberal subject is hailed as an entrepreneurial self. Then, there are two parts: Bröckling first draws up the picture, or rather ‘rationality’, of the entrepreneurial self as it emanates from various theoretical sources. Then Bröckling focuses his attention on four “strategies and programmes” drawn from concrete practices, namely creativity, empowerment, quality and projects.

Bröckling starts the book by delineating some of the contours of the entrepreneurial self from self-help books, training manuals and management programs, which are examples of ‘social technologies’ aiming “to organize life around the entrepreneurial model of behaviour” (Bröckling 2016, 21). Concretely, Bröckling points to what the German sociologists Voß and Pongratz describe as the ‘entreployee’: a new type of labour in post-Fordist production. The entreployee is a labour force entrepreneur who is required to increase self-organisation, self-rationalisation and
self-monitoring as well as to autonomously economise their personhood. This sociological notion coincides with demands made on neoliberal subjects in management literature, such as Tom Peters' and Robert H. Waterman's bestseller (1982) In Search of Excellence and Gifford Pinchot's (1985) Intrapreneuring. Much like the entruplyee, the ‘intrapreneur’ (contraction of intra-corporate entrepreneur) is a figure that is not just described as but also praised for its readiness to take risks and its drive for innovation. Impressively, Bröckling situates categories like 'entreployee' and ‘intrapreneur’ in a far broader context of magazine articles, bestseller self-help books, Thatcherite ‘enterprise culture’, management literature, and the advent of the ‘new economy’ of post-Fordism.

Beyond the sphere of management and organisation, Bröckling also observes in the self-help literature an ethical injunction to view one’s whole life as an enterprise, i.e. as “Me Inc”. In this case, the self is not merely hailed as an entrepreneur only at work, but always and everywhere. In the second part of the book, Bröckling goes into four widespread notions which have materialised in organisational culture, namely creativity, empowerment, quality management and the project. These are interesting topics, and Bröckling treats them in great detail and clarity. However, he fails to mention why he has specifically picked out these four rather than others, such as disruption or network. After all, these are also important buzzwords and expressions of the Californian Ideology in the management-scene of the information age. As a result of this, his treatments of these topics feel more arbitrary and less convincing than the more conceptually oriented chapters of the first part. These early chapters, on the rationality of the entrepreneurial self, aim to show that these contemporary convergences upon some sort of entrepreneurial image of the subject are not coincidental. Rather, Bröckling demonstrates convincingly that the normative ideal of an entrepreneurial self forms part of the rationality of a family of economic theories grouped together under the label of neoliberalism. He does this by presenting the reader with an impressively clear and concise tour through a variety of theoretical currents in economics, notably ordoliberalism, human capital theory, and Von Hayek's neoliberalism (later on, Bröckling also turns to contract theory and transaction economics). What these neoliberal theories or theorists all share, so argues Bröckling, are three fundamental convictions. First, neoliberalism argues for market mobilisation. That is, the market is viewed as the most efficient and just mechanism for resource allocation; the market mechanism should thus be universalised by instituting it in various social sectors. Secondly, neoliberalism deviates from classical liberalism in that it views not exchangeability but competition as the essence and main virtue of capitalist markets. Thirdly and finally, neoliberals maintain that neither markets nor competition come about naturally, but must be actively instituted and sustained. Combining these three theses, we may say the political mission of neoliberalism consists in creating and managing the social conditions in which markets and competition are able to come about. In this way, the crux of Bröckling’s argument becomes clear: “If the thrust of neoliberal government is toward generalising competition, modelling society as a whole on the market, then it will ineluctably come to mould subjectivity on the figure of the entrepreneur” (Bröckling 2016, 60).

Bröckling’s observation on the constellation of forces that mould the entrepreneurial subject, then, implies a wider claim on the basic structure of contemporary neoliberal capitalism. It makes clear that the neoliberal dream of market universalisation does not merely mean the wish to institute markets in all the various spheres of society, for example through the privatisation of the public sector. It also means neoliberalism wishes to universalise the market from the public sphere of work to the private sphere of leisure. For the subject is not just an entrepreneur when he/she is sitting at his/her desk at the office, he/she is an entrepreneur of his/her entire life, “Me Inc”. Seen in this way, universalising the market through the governing technique of subjectification becomes a particularly effective way of inserting ‘human capital’ into the economic system. This technique of subjectification is itself a major component of neoliberalism.

The product of this technique of subjectification, the entrepreneurial self, is an essential element of neoliberal governmentality; it belongs to the ‘social conditions’ which must be instituted in order for neoliberal capitalism to function effectively. Accordingly, Bröckling calls the idea of the entrepreneurial self a ‘real fiction’, the kind of story which supplies “systems with the agents they need in order to operate” (Bröckling 2016, 11). As such, Bröckling’s image of the entrepreneurial self tells
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us nothing about actually existing subjects, but, rather, more about the forces of subjectification as we find them in actually existing neoliberalism.

It might, in this respect, seem strange that a book entitled The Entrepreneurial Self does not primarily deal with a self at all, but rather with its genealogical production. Bröckling self-consciously refrains from claiming anything about the effectiveness of the power structures which govern the subject, i.e. from claiming that subjects in fact have become entrepreneurial selves. This means, first, that he does not claim that subjects in today’s world behave like entrepreneurial subjects and, second, that he does not attempt to say that subjects experience the lifeworld as governed by the call to act like an entrepreneur. One can laud Bröckling’s self-restraint here, but one may also wonder whether he does not make it too easy for himself by ignoring the question of to what extent the notion of an entrepreneurial self resonates with the intuitions of those who live and act in contemporary capitalism. Could he not at least have referred to the kind of studies which have attempted to make the sociological, rather than the genealogical, claim about neoliberal subjects, such as Richard Sennett’s The Corrosion of Character? Moreover, does the plausibility of Bröckling’s claims not rest on the fact that the force field of entrepreneurialism resonates with our actual experience? What makes Bröckling’s account intuitive is not just the presence of his theses in ‘high’ theory and ‘lowly’ management programmes, but also in the actual effects of this complex of prescriptions on the behaviour and experience of neoliberal subjects.

Having said that, let us look at what, according to Bröckling, constitutes an entrepreneurial subject more specifically. To this end, Bröckling distinguishes four functions of the entrepreneur as a macroeconomic category. These functions are respectively: the entrepreneur as speculator, innovator, risk-bearer and coordinator.

First, the notion of the entrepreneur as speculator is put forward in reference to economists Von Mises and Kirzner, who both stress that human beings are not just utility calculators, but also possess alertness to opportunities such as arbitrage, a price difference in the same commodities in different markets. The defining feature of the entrepreneur here, then, is her spontaneous alertness to such opportunities of speculation. Secondly, with the entrepreneur as innovator, Bröckling points to the works of Schumpeter, and his conception of the creative destroyer. Here the entrepreneur is a figure who exhibits leadership and establishes new combinations in production and distribution. As opposed to the rationalising and imitative manager, she is the instigator of novelty and difference in opposition to routine and staleness. Thirdly, the entrepreneur can be seen, as in the account of Frank H. Knight, as a risk-bearer. Knight here points to a fundamental uncertainty with respect to human action and knowledge. Rational action cannot be calculated with a straightforward utility function, but is stricken by a fundamental contingency. The entrepreneur, in opposition to the wage labourer and manager, bears this contingency in order to enjoy profit, and in this way she also assumes responsibility. Fourthly and finally, the entrepreneur fulfils the function of the coordinator. Her judgements and decisions regarding resource allocation and coordination attempt to be more efficient than, and therefore different from, business as usual, in which inefficiency is always the rule. In this way, the entrepreneur as coordinator is an agent of change.

Now, according to Bröckling, what unifies these separate, but not entirely unrelated, accounts of what the entrepreneurial function is, is that it is centred around such values as the new and the unknown rather than around the old and the known: “The theories we have analysed above all distinguish the entrepreneurial function from that of the calculating, instrumentalist, rationalist manager” (Bröckling 2016, 75). This proclaimed shift from the rationalist clerk to the innovative entrepreneur fits neatly with a commonplace description of present-day capitalist modernity as having moved from a conception of the capitalist subject as a Weberian-Marxian cog in the machine to an artistic, creative and autonomous post-’69 subject. It fits in with the proclaimed shift, in other words, from the old to the ‘new spirit of capitalism’ (Boltanski and Chiapello), or from solid to liquid modernity (Zygmunt Bauman), organised to disorganised modernity (Lash and Urry), or industrial to reflexive modernity (Ulrich Beck). For Bröckling, the terms of neoliberal governmentality are marked by this shift from rationalist clerk to the entrepreneurial self.
Biography

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