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**Beverley Clack & Michele Paule**

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# INTERROGATING THE NEOLIBERAL LIFECYCLE

## The Limits of Success

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BUSINESS

COMPETITION

FREE MARKET

MONEY
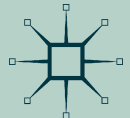
# Interrogating the Neoliberal Lifecycle

Beverley Clack · Michele Paule
Editors

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## The Limits of Success

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*We dedicate this collection to the memory of Margaret Waterhouse, known to many on line as Mags Newsome. A friend and comrade who showed in her life that the isolated individual is not everything, and that we are, in fact, stronger together.*

# Acknowledgements

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# Introduction:
# Welcome to the Neoliberal Life Cycle!

## Beverley Clack and Michele Paule

To present an interdisciplinary collection with 'neoliberal' in the title is, in the twenty-first century academy, a risky business. The risk lies in the term's ubiquity. Writers across social, cultural and economic fields seem to agree that the use of 'neoliberal' has become too lazy, too vague and too readily used to denounce (Peck 2013); too frequently undefined and unevenly employed (Boas and Gans-Morse 2009); too 'overblown' and in need of being 'severely circumscribed' (Dean 2014, p. 150). We have organised the essays in this collection around its banner precisely because of, rather than in spite of, this tendency to ubiquity.

Our rationale is threefold: first, while we recognise the change in the discursive deployment of 'neoliberalism' from a specific political term describing a coherent ideology and policy stance to the more generic

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description of fundamental and widespread forms of social reorganisation, like Stuart Hall (2011), we nonetheless acknowledge its usefulness in capturing the manifold ways in which neoliberalism is a hegemonic project in process. The term's very ubiquity, as Hall argues (p. 10), provides a focus for both criticality of and resistance to those processes which erode the structures that have existed to mitigate inequalities, to reinforce community, and to foster well-being, in order to replace them with market services and an emphasis on personal responsibility.

Second, the essays in this collection offer insights into some of the 'messy actualities' described by Wendy Larner as arising from the study of 'specific neoliberal projects', rather than from accounts of particular epochs or unifying theories (2000, p. 14). Larner suggests that more useful avenues are opened up for the investigation of the ways in which our social structures are being reorganised if we keep insights from the many diverse interpretations in mind. Her summary of three key interpretations of neoliberalism—as policy, as ideology and as governmentality—not only usefully captures the challenges of neoliberalism's complexities, but shows how individual interpretations deployed alone can limit understanding of how power is played out, and of how strategies for well-being are envisaged.

Third, the term 'neoliberal' has moved from being something encountered only in academic circles, to a diagnostic term shaping the agendas of new political manifestos. No longer solely a term used in the academy, it is now a regular feature of broader public political discourse. It is telling that the UK Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn felt his audience would understand him if he included it in his conference speech to the Party in September 2017. 'And now is the time that we developed a new model of economic management to replace the failed dogmas of neoliberalism', he declared. As the word is becoming more well-used, the danger is that it can become something of an un-interrogated shorthand for things and attitudes the user does not like. Political writing in the public domain has followed the academy's lead in expressing misgivings—for example, Nathan J. Robinson, the editor of the online *Current Affairs* magazine, bans his contributors from using it because he feels it is imprecise and over-used, while at the same time acknowledging that

the term captures some very real tendencies in policy and social experience (Robinson 2018). In the UK, a right-leaning group within the Labour Party complains that 'Neoliberal has become a catch-all for anyone with whom you disagree' (*The Progressive* 2015).

Yet the genie, it seems, is out of the bottle and cannot be put back. 'Neoliberalism' has passed out of the ownership of the academy and the policy pundit into more public and popular domains. It is employed in the broadsheet and tabloid press; in schools (Frank 2018); in social media hashtags; in grass-roots movements such as 'Occupy', and as a provocation on mainstream political TV shows such as BBC's *Question Time.* While it could be argued that the term itself is only likely to be understood or deployed by a small number of politically engaged people, its associated concepts—those of self-responsibility, individualism, aspiration and economic citizenship—can be and are more readily translated into popular and institutional discourses. This collection explores the ways in which these concepts have been taken up in a variety of settings and practices and, importantly, internalised by subjects themselves. Jason Read (2009, p. 27) highlights Foucault's recognition that 'neoliberalism is not just a manner of governing states and individuals, but is intimately tied to the lives of the individual, to a particular manner of living'. It is aspects of this 'manner of living' that our contributors explore.

To consider the life cycle is to focus on the experience of the individual subject in societies dominated by neoliberal categories. If the thinkers of the European Enlightenment defined the self as rational, autonomous and capable of choice, the last forty years have seen these 'choices' shaped through the activities of consumer capitalism. According to Foucault (2008), while Enlightenment rational choice was always located in an economic setting in which the idea of exchange and barter are naturalised, the shift under neoliberalism is one which sees exchange and barter replaced by competition, the conditions for which are artificial and must be fostered by the state (Oksala 2013). Rather than exchanging labour for goods, under neoliberalism the worker develops their individual human capital, which is invested for revenue (Read 2009). The image of the competitive human subject

arises from the concerns of politicians to create a free-market economy, where the focus is on entrepreneurial activity, private enterprise and the shaping of all activities—health and education included—through the lens of the economic.

The sociologist David Harvey provides a neat summary of the concerns which shape neoliberal subjectivity:

> Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterised by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. (2005, p. 2)

This is never simply about a discrete economic project that leaves the individual largely unaffected. Rather, 'the financialisation of everything', as Wendy Brown (2015, p. 28) describes the neoliberal economic project, requires something more. As the scope of the free market is extended to all areas of life, it is not just the public sphere that is changed. Public services adopt the model of business, but so too is human subjectivity reimagined. An entrepreneurial economic model requires the individual *themselves* to be shaped as an entrepreneur, not simply in the workplace, but in every area of their life.[1] Brown captures what this means for the individual's experience of their world rather neatly:

> Neoliberal rationality disseminates the model of the market to all domains and activities—even where money is not the issue—and configures human beings exhaustively as market actors, always, only, and everywhere as homo oeconomicus. (2015, p. 31)

Here, we start to get a sense of why an exploration of the life cycle is an important way of both exposing and challenging some of the key tropes of neoliberalism.

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[1]See Lemke (2001, p. 199) for exploration of the 'entrepreneurial self'.

## Work, University and Success

To think of the life cycle suggests reflection on those aspects of life we share as embodied human beings: birth, childhood, adulthood, ageing, death. However, for the economic citizen of neoliberalism, the human individual is always and everywhere defined through their ability to take part in (or not take part in) the world of work. It is important at this juncture to pay attention to the role 'success' plays in shaping this neoliberal life cycle, for to do so enables understanding of the preeminent role that is given to work in shaping the individual's experience. Moreover, while all individuals are constrained to be economically productive in order to enjoy full citizenship, it is university attendance that has become a key marker in the development of the success narrative; for this reason, two chapters are designated to discussing the shape of the neoliberal university. Under New Labour, targets for university attendance were expanded to 50% of the population (BBC 2002), and in 2017 the director of the right-wing Higher Education Policy Institute recommended that the Conservative government expand this to 75% (Hillman 2017). From being optional for the middle classes (and, under 'meritocratic' education systems, for a few 'bright' working-class young people deemed capable of transcending their home culture), university is now seen as an essential passport to economic security in an economically precarious world. That this security is far from assured, commentators like Guy Standing (2011, 2014) have highlighted. Nonetheless, the impetus persists and anxieties associated with university become yet more focused among the population that does attend. Students are more aware of the significance of the 2:1/2:2 divide for career and earnings, with achieving upper second-class honours (or a 2.1) in the UK system an increasing focus of online forum sites such as The Student Room and students news sites such as *The Tab*. The mainstream press participates and feeds such anxieties—for example, *The Independent* (2013) offers 'Something for the "slackers" to focus on: A 2:1 degree is worth around £80k more to you than a 2:2', and *The Telegraph* (2015) ups the ante, declaring that 'a 2.1 is no longer enough'. The sad irony is that never has it been harder for young people to study consistently or to enjoy the security

that a university education once promised. The model of success held out under neoliberalism views not going to university, not as a choice, but as a sign of one's personal failure. As the chapters in this collection explore, the obsession with success does not end with university, but extends through working life and beyond into constructions of successful ageing and indeed, into dying.

When we step back from the idea that the good life as the successful life, there is a realisation of just how peculiar it is to shape all human life and experience through this lens. Success under neoliberalism centres on economic success, but it is also about enshrining competitiveness in the development of the self as opposed to others. In other words, the successful self is achieved at the cost of the failing other. This, then, explains the power of making work—in both public and private life—the marker for the good life. A work-orientated account of human experience thus shapes the neoliberal life cycle as represented in this collection: schooling (as preparation for work); higher education and training (as preparation for work); work (as an adaptable worker); illness (as that which stops one working); dying and death (as life after work). Work is both the arena for shaping identity and also the principle way of achieving the 'successful' life.

We might have expected the Global Financial Crisis of 2008 to challenge the faith in free-market economics as the bringer of the good life. Nothing could be further from the truth, and, while there is doubtless more academic engagement with the ideology of neoliberalism, the years following the crisis suggest a retrenchment of the very ideas that would seem to have been exposed by that event as incapable of delivering a good life for all. As Mitchell Dean (2014, p. 157) observes, rather than thinking of the 2008 crash as a 'hinge between epochs', instead we need to locate it within a series of crises, for neoliberalism, he argues, thrives on crisis. And, indeed, in the name of 'necessary' austerity, the years since 2008 have seen more privatisation, more cutting of public services, more targets, more monitoring, more of the same. What does it feel like to inhabit such a context? Philip Mirowski's interrogation of the use of crises (in his perceptively titled 'Never Let a Serious Crisis Go to Waste' (2014)) includes a chapter entitled 'Everyday Neoliberalism', where he considers the lived experience of neoliberalism.

## Living Neoliberalism

The move to lived experience opens up a curious aspect of the colonising power of neoliberalism. This is not simply about a set of external structures felt in social institutions, but is lived out in the individual's experience. UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's claim that 'There is No Alternative' (the so-called TINA doctrine) reflects the power of neoliberalism, not just to shape economics and institutions, but also (and most importantly) to shape self-understanding. While coming under pressure in recent years—through Donald Trump's election as US President on an anti-globalisation agenda in November 2016; through the UK's decision to leave the European Union Brexit in 2016; through Jeremy Corbyn's leadership of the UK Labour Party from 2015—there remains a feeling that Market economics is somehow the 'natural' way of shaping our understanding of ourselves and our engagement with our world.

That neoliberalism <u>feels</u> natural goes some way to explaining why we have chosen an investigation of the life cycle to critique and challenge the hegemony of neoliberal thinking. Neoliberalism is effective precisely because of its ability to shape and construct <u>every</u> aspect of life, and this is revealed through interrogation of what it feels like to live out one's life against the beliefs it makes as natural to us as the air we breathe. Yet experience is never unfiltered, and considering the four stages of neoliberal life—schooling, university and work, death—reveals how the ideals and practices of unfettered Market economics require a specific kind of individual.

It can be more difficult to trace this political shaping of identity than it might be if we were considering accounts of what happens to the individual under totalitarian regimes.[2] Unlike the obviously oppressive structures of a totalitarian society, the apparently benign claims of a 'liberal' society make it difficult to acknowledge the way it limits experience. Who would not like to be considered adaptable, able to live

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[2]See, for example, Sheila Fitzpatrick's, *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999.

anywhere, be anything, shape one's life as one might choose? Yet here is the shadow side of the success the neoliberal is expected to seek, for what is masked in the language of the entrepreneurial self is the inevitability that for some to succeed, others must fail. Failure is constructed as failure of the individual; the contention that the Market is the objective arbiter of all value suggests that there is no systemic failure, only the failure of the individual to be a self-activating subject. Addressing economic inequality is ignored in favour of promoting strategies designed to create equality of opportunity.[3] Small wonder that neoliberal economics encourages a politics of identity that can be used to sidestep the urgency of addressing problems of class. If we are 'all middle class now', to quote a phrase of former UK Prime Minister Tony Blair, there is no need to consider the various ways in which economic inequality impacts upon the individual's ability to succeed. 'Level the playing field' and the forces of competition will bring about a meritocratic society where the brightest and the best will rise inexorably to the top.[4] Fail to achieve in this Brave New World and the response is likely to be: 'it's not the System, stupid, it's you'. According to the neoliberal state, there is no ideology shaping experience that could be a fault. The Market is not a system, just a fact of life, and if you are good enough, nothing can impede your rise.[5]

That successive governments have felt the need to address insufficient social mobility suggests that this meritocratic story is not all it seems.[6] How strange, then, that there is relatively little public criticism of the ideology which lies beneath claims of the mobile subject, unconstrained by social class or economic misfortune. Here, we arrive at another aspect of neoliberalism that suggests something of its tenaciousness.

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[3]For the shift from addressing economic inequality, see Rose (1999). For an account of what this means for educational practice, see Ecclestone and Hayes (2008).

[4]For an account of the tensions in the neoliberal account of competition, see Davies (2014).

[5]Catherine Rottenberg (2013) makes a similar observation on her work on neoliberal feminisms.

[6]At the time of writing, the UK's Conservative Government is having problems appointing someone to the role of 'Social Mobility Tsar'. There is a suggestion that the role might disappear, or at the very least be occupied by someone less likely to make critical comments of government policy (*The Independent*, 1 April 2018, https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/there-sa-may-uk-poor-help-social-mobility-commission-head-benefits-cut-support-a8280341.html).

Contrary to claims of the ubiquity of the term as a mode of critique, in practice neoliberalism operates largely as something unacknowledged. This is not 'socialism', not even 'capitalism'. Its supporters do not claim it. Critics of its ideals might not even name the thing that they are criticising. If the rational 'liberal' subject can identify her oppression and resist it, the 'neoliberal subject' is constrained, not just by narratives of her own empowerment, but also by the question of how to resist (Harris and Dobson 2015, p. 148). How to resist that which does not present as an ideology but as something that is 'natural', the obvious end point of a series of less successful political experiments? (Fukuyama 2012)

The problem is doubtless exacerbated by the diversity of views on the sources of neoliberalism. Is it the fruit of a conspiracy to challenge the post-war consensus surrounding the Keynsian interventionist state, focused around Friedrich von Hayek and the Mont Pelerin Society that clustered around him in the late 1940s? For Hayek and the members of the Society, the aim was to press for the importance of the individual and free-market economics: a persistent lobbying that came to fruition in the 1970s as politicians looked for new ideas to solve a series of devastating political and economic crises. Or was the advent of neoliberal economics a more haphazard affair, a consensus that emerged in response to the crisis in Keynianism of 1970s? In some ways, its source is unimportant.[7] What matters is the totalising nature of its adoption. Anyone daring to challenge its doctrines is dismissed as naive, impractical, utopian.[8] There is only one way of structuring society and it is neoliberal. What is it like to inhabit a society that holds to the inherency of the values it perpetuates: freedom of the Market, globalisation, prioritising business and financialisation?

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[7]For an account of its rise, along with discussion of the different ways of formulating this, see Mirowski (2014, pp. 27–88).

[8]The 'anti-work' movement have grasped the radicalism that inspires such criticisms. 'The most promising way forward lies in reclaiming modernity and attacking the neoliberal common sense that conditions everything from the most esoteric policy discussions to the most vivid emotional states. This counter-hegemonic project can only be achieved by imagining better worlds—and in moving beyond defensive struggles' (Srnicek and Williams 2016, p. 175).

Foucault's concept of 'governmentality' encapsulates the vast range of ways in which the 'procedures, analyses, reflections, calculations and tactics' (2009, p. 108) of governmental power operate on us; they are internalised and re-enacted by our own volition, on ourselves and on one another—'the conduct of conduct' with all its directive and reflexive implications. This analysis offers a helpful way of considering what enables neoliberalism to become such a totalising way of thinking. It is not just its manifestation in political philosophy and policy implementation that enables it to appear the only show in town. It is also something that shapes the way in which citizens conceive of themselves *as selves*, not just as citizens in relationship to the state. It enables us moreover to accept responsibility for the consequences of the actions it enjoins (Dean 2010, p. 48). However, as Gill and Scharff (2011, p. 8) note, what can be lacking in writing about neoliberalism 'is the emphasis placed by Foucault on the "mentality" part of governmentality' which in his later work emerges as a concern with the relationship between the techniques of government and the technologies of the self. Judith Butler's *Psychic Life of Power* (1997) goes some way to addressing this omission, describing the 'agonising form' (p. 1) of power; in creating our sense of self, it gives us no place from which to dismantle it. Nikolas Rose points us towards an interrogation of 'governmentality' that can open up such spaces, suggesting a 'family' of questions that such an interrogation must involve. This ends with him asking,

> what do your studies of governmentality make amenable to *our* thought and action, in the sense of us being able to count its cost and think of it being made otherwise? (1999, p. 20)

Interrogation of the points at which regimes of government meet acquiescence or resistance illuminates the 'the counter-conducts that can reveal and embody possibilities for doing things otherwise' (Dean 2010, p. 49) and also the unequal distribution of resources for constructing the successful self (Scharff 2016, p. 110).

The language of success and failure plays a particular role in shaping neoliberal subjectivity. The entrepreneurial subject is an achieving subject. In one's achievements is the possibility of the meaningful life.

Making achievement the hallmark of the well-lived life opens up a binary account of individuals. There are winners, and there are losers. There are those who have acquired the skills necessary for the successful life, and there are those who have failed to do so.[9] It also suggests only one model of the flourishing life: that based on the qualities usually associated with the aspirational middle class. And so, the life cycle is shaped by the progressive narrative of middle-class success—school is followed by university; one's career/work shapes the scope of one's life; and death, standing at the end of all success, has to be shaped as something which could be overcome. The aim of this volume is to interpret that narrative, and to show how, at each of these life stages, the neoliberal account is not just inadequate, but also dangerous for the formation of the self and the possibility of a flourishing life.

## The Collection

The papers in this collection provide snapshots of possible citizen life cycle stages shaped by neoliberalism. It is of necessity limited. This is not an attempt to capture the experience of a universalised individual as they pass from 'cradle to grave' in a single neoliberalised state. Rather, the aim is to offer reflections from those whose work leads them to consider the shaping of specific life stages in particular contexts. The contexts presented here are drawn from the developed world; a volume considering the effect of neoliberalism on the life cycle in the developing world, which is also being shaped by the neoliberal paradigm, would be most valuable.[10] Likewise, the role of work in shaping the life cycle has informed the various approaches offered here, meaning other kinds of life cycles engendered by the neoliberalisation of policies and institutions—for example, the criminal justice system or family life—do not feature.

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[9]For an account of 'the failures', see Walker (2014).

[10]For discussion of the different forms neoliberal takes in different geographical places, see Harvey (2005).

Four sections detail the stages of the neoliberal life cycle: childhood and the preparation for work; university and the skilling of workers; work; death and the limits of work. Rather than summarise the contents of each chapter, let us identify some key threads running through the chapters of this volume.

This is an interdisciplinary volume. Contributors come from a range of fields: philosophy, theology, sociology, criminology, gerontology, anthropology, education, regional government, psychology and psychotherapy. Unlike some academic attempts to understand this phenomenon, it is worth noting that, while the majority of contributors are academics, this volume also includes the insights of practitioners from a range of backgrounds. The original seminar series was held to bring different perspectives across various disciplines, the philosophical and the empirical, practitioners and academics into dialogue. As a result, this volume offers a series of different lenses through which to view the effects of neoliberalism. There is no one way of accounting for its success as an organising paradigm, nor is there one way for understanding its shortcomings. The variety of perspectives offered here enables an account of the neoliberal life cycle that resonates not merely with the concerns of academics, but with the experience of all, whether they realise it or not.

Interrogating the neoliberal structuring of the life cycle philosophically shapes the approach taken in the chapters offers by Beverley Clack, Susan Crozier and Susan Pickard. Clack and Pickard are concerned with the shaping of subjectivity when confronted with death and mortality. Crozier, an influential blogger on failure, challenges the narratives of success that shape the life cycle and suggests ways of embracing the possibilities for individuals when they do not achieve within the parameters set up neoliberal self-responsibility and competitive success.

This interrogation can be read through a critical policy analysis, the approach taken in the chapters by Bob Brecher, Louise Grisoni and Sonia Ruiz, and Louise Livesey. Brecher uses mimesis to expose that which is taken for granted, creating a 'Modest Proposal' that mouths back at managers in the neoliberal university the emptiness of their words. Grisoni and Ruiz offer detailed analysis of the uses of austerity to revivify conservative and entrenched inequalities. Looking at gendered

aspects of the neoliberal economic subject model in a failing economy, they find, as Larner (2000) suggests, that its shortcomings prompt alternative collective modes of 'successful' living. Livesey dismantles the underpinning tenets of the neoliberalism as they are applied to higher education and reveals how unwanted voices and bodies are silenced and excluded in the policies and practices of the university.

The critique of the neoliberal life cycle can be read through more deliberate reflection on lived experience, as suggested by the chapters offered by Patrick Alexander, Jason Danely, Philippa Donald, and Michele Paule. Paule and Alexander, academics with backgrounds as teachers, explore gendered aspects of success and failure. Paule explores the limits of the 'successful girl' (Ringrose 2012) subject position and the gendered nature of competitive subjectivity in schools in the UK, while Alexander identifies the 'cruel optimism' (Berlant 2011, p. 21) of the discourses which shape the aspirations of failing boys in the USA. The claim, that 'you can be whoever you want to be', ignores social inequality, making failure a terrible burden to be borne by the young. Danely considers the effect of a similar relentless optimism on the lives of the elderly and their carers in Japan. Donald, a practicing psychotherapist, explores the problem of shaping therapeutic treatments economically and treating structural social problems as individual pathologies.

Contributors reveal, then, different aspects of the social conditions of neoliberalism: the privileges, inequalities and constraints that its own account of itself elides. Engaging with the ubiquity of neoliberal forms and its lived experience in neoliberal societies, the contributors to this volume critique the neoliberal paradigm as it is lived. This is a timely exercise. David Harvey's comment at the end of his history of neoliberalism is one we wholeheartedly endorse: 'there is a far, far nobler prospect of freedom to be won than that which neoliberalism preaches' (Harvey 2005, p. 206). The political shocks of 2016, the emergence of new forms of nationalism, and increased xenophobia demand that we take seriously the discontents of neoliberalism, but that we also offer alternatives which allow for better ways of supporting the flourishing of all. The essays here illuminate the dissatisfactions of neoliberalism, and in doing so draw attention to the possibility of better ways of living.

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# Part I

## Childhood, Youth, and Schooling

# 2

# Personal Moral Autonomy, Responsibility and Choice: Do We Know What Our Cultural Discourses Are Doing to Young People's Mental Health?

### Philippa Donald

In this chapter, I look at how neoliberal ideas and practices and their implications for selfhood inform how we understand mental health and mental illness and, in particular, how this affects how we view the mental health of children and adolescents. My position is that the account of selfhood, choice and rationality that underpins the neoliberal position is both profoundly unsatisfactory and damaging when it comes to understanding why children and young people have mental health difficulties and that, if we want to address the frightening state of young people's mental health and our treatment, we need to articulate these difficulties and focus on developing the alternatives that are available to us.

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## Neoliberalism and the Self

I start here because of our commonly accepted assumption that, in mental health, the first signs of difficulty and crisis are experienced by the self or in its apparently abnormal behaviours in the world. I notice my depression because of what I am experiencing in my internal world, and/or because of how my behaviour is affected in the external world. This may seem obvious but we will see that the way that we understand the self has a profound impact on how we understand mental illness in two key respects.

We will see that the neoliberal account understands the self to reside in an internal locus of rationality, choice and autonomy and that, as a result, solutions to mental illness lie in the capacity of that self to make the correct (rational) choices that will lead to mental well-being. This is starkly summarised by R. B. Edwards, who says:

> 'Mental illness' means only those undesirable mental/behavioural deviations which involve primarily an extreme and prolonged inability to know and deal in a rational and autonomous way with oneself and one's social and physical environment. In other words, madness is extreme and prolonged practical irrationality and irresponsibility. Correspondingly, 'mental health' includes only those desirable mental/behavioural normalities…. In other words, mental health is practical rationality and responsibility. (Edwards 1981, p. 312)

I will not offer any prolonged critique of such a crude definition—the whole chapter is a rebuttal of this position—except to note that it helpfully states the position very clearly.

While we may question this position on many grounds, some of which will be presented here, we should note at the outset that this position is disastrous for children and adolescents, who may not have any autonomy to speak of and whose capacity to reason may be undeveloped, underdeveloped, or simply impotent. We should also note with some immediacy that Edwards, and those who take this position, do little to acknowledge the impact of such a blunt statement about normality and rationality—which culture's account of normality? Which account of

practical rationality? These are not universal or uniform concepts, as we well know, and they present yet again the arrogant and unethical assumption that the values and philosophies of Western norms are to be elevated to universal status.

So, our starting point is this: in relation to how we view our selves, the term 'neoliberalism' represents the powerful view of the self as an independent and solitary foci of agency, autonomy, choice and freedom. In the privileged, predominantly white and paternalistic twenty-first-century culture of the contemporary west, we find ourselves embedded in a cultural narrative of personal responsibility which is firmly routed in the enlightenment project of the eighteenth century. Our neoliberal culture has at its centre a philosophy which espouses subjectivity, individuality, autonomy, choice and freedom; a philosophy which conceptualises selves as responsible agents of change, selves as having a sense of internal moral agency, guiding thought and action.

The neoliberal paradigm understands individuals as having responsibility for their own well-being and success *however* that is defined— and this is a key point for this type of framework, as—along with personal choice and freedom—it maximises subjectivity and moral relativism, whilst minimising and undermining any sense of a shared venture or common values:

> …it is economists who have carried an individualist conception of human nature to its extreme. Consumers, in economic theory, are conceived as centres of subjective preferences that determine their demands in the market. No limits are placed on the objects of these preferences or the contents of these demands; individuals can, in principle, seek anything at all. Such isolated economic units have no history, no culture and no nature. They also have no common good. (Sumner 1981, pp. 170–171)

Margaret Thatcher's infamous quote—'there is no such thing as society'—merely highlights these powerful ideas: that each self exists independently and has the capacity for power and choice over its own well-being, independently of any economic, political or social context that it may be born into. Notions such as neutrality, detachment and rationality become all-important as the main activity of the

autonomous self is to assess and make decisions: Which option is best? What is my preference? Which choice brings the best outcome? Which outcome should I choose? What should I prioritise in making my decision—wealth? Personal happiness?—it's up to me, I have the power and the agency to make these choices, but only for myself. If I make the right choices, all will be well for me. If I make the wrong choices, all may not be well. Therefore, I must maximise my capacity to make intelligent, informed, rational choices, stripped of emotion and confused thinking. I am a consumer in my own world—I choose what I want and, in choosing, I am solely responsible for the outcomes:

> Thus a moral person is a subject with ends he [sic] has chosen, and his fundamental preference is for conditions that enable him to frame a mode of life that expresses his nature as a free and equal rational being as fully as circumstances permit. (Rawls 1972, p. 561)

## The Self and Mental Health

What happens when we apply these ideas to mental health? And, more specifically, the mental health of children and adolescents?

Our contemporary Western medical discourse is inevitably rooted in these ideas, being as it is a product—at least in large part—of the very same enlightenment project and the values it espouses (Caplan and Cosgrove 2004; Lafrance and McKenzie 2013).

At the outset, of primary and fundamental importance is the prioritising of choice and reason over emotion and experience. In our neo-liberal world, personal autonomy and choice are the highest contexts. John Rawls, in his defining text *A Theory of Justice* (1972), invites us to step behind the veil and define our laws according to what is rational when all context is stripped away Those who espouse this approach do acknowledge the importance of feelings—commonly labelled as 'desires' or 'preferences'—but importantly state, very clearly, that the capacity to exercise rationality and choice takes priority over these, because it is only through exercising that rationality and that choice that we get to arrive at the place of our desire or preference (Gauthier 1986).

So, I may have to know what I want or need or aspire to—but the only way for me to get to it is to exercise my autonomy, rationality and choice in the correct way. Practical rationality becomes defined as the capacity of the autonomous self to achieve or maximise its desires or preferences, with the implicit assumption that this will lead to happiness. Put crudely, *I* am the determinant of whether or not I get what I need. My context is not.

An important corollary of this type of liberal conceptualisation of the self and its distress is that it firmly locates distress and suffering in the individual. I am responsible for my choices, my fate, my path through life. I am in control of myself and my feelings; I can make good choices or bad choices. When I am happy and well, it is because I have made the right choices. But if I make the wrong choices, I get it wrong and I must take responsibility—I am to blame. And so we come to the discourses of blame, responsibility, weakness and shame that are so endemic in mental health. Distress is something that the individual could have mastery over—if they don't, then their self is not fully functioning.[1]

So, if I am unhappy, it is my responsibility. If I am happy, it is because I have made good choices, exercised my rationality intelligently and efficiently, functioned well in the world. If I am not, it is because I have made poor choices, I have not used my rationality well, I have not made the correct, informed decisions.

This type of approach is endemic in our contemporary culture. An excellent example is how we think and speak about food and weight, a topic of high importance—and with sometimes extremely important consequences to their mental health—to many children and young people today; conversations about food and weight give us an account of this type of thinking right through from popular discourse to to the most serious of mental illnesses, anorexia nervosa[2]. In our mainstream press, we see an ongoing onslaught of articles about the dangers

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[1]See, for example, Davies' (2015) exploration of the way in which industry has exploited these ideas with phenomenal popular and financial success.

[2]Arcelus et al. (2011) report that anorexia has the highest mortality rate of all mental illnesses and is most prevalent in young teenage girls.

of obesity, along with the diets which will abolish it if only we stick to them and make the correct choices about food and exercises. On social media we read about fat-shaming and skinny-shaming as emerging cultural phenomena, undermining the self-esteem and self-confidence of many of those who do not fit into our very narrow norms of what a normal weight is, and creating mental illness and distress for some of them. For example, the Salon.com website highlights how

> Geoffrey Miller, a professor of evolutionary psychology at the University of New Mexico and a visiting professor at NYU, <u>tweeted</u> the following not very evolved tweet: "Dear obese PhD applicants: If you don't have the willpower to stop eating carbs, you won't have the willpower to do a dissertation. #truth."[3]

We see articles which fat-shame or skinny-shame by criticism and judgement dressed up as concern for health; posts about individuals needing to 'take responsibility' for their obesity; advice from diet and nutrition professionals about how we make choices between 'good' foods and 'bad' foods and how this ultimately leads to our own weight status at any given point.[4]

Above all, we regard food and weight being the result of choices we make, directly within our own control, ourselves placed only as consumers who make either the 'right' or 'wrong'. We blame the poor for their obesity, accusing them of spending their money on junk food, alcohol and cigarettes instead of vegetables and gym memberships; we label adolescent anorexic girls as being 'attention-seeking' and insist that all that is needed in their treatment is education from a dietician around how and what to eat, we smother and undermine people who are fat by voicing our concern for their health and kindly pointing out that it would be a good idea for them (to choose) to lose weight. As I write, the recognised inpatient treatment for adolescent anorexic patients is predominantly focused on diet, enforcement of diet by strict nursing

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[3]http://www.salon.com/2013/07/29/the_six_most_disturbing_fat_shaming_cases_in_recent_memory/.

[4]See, for example, http://everydayfeminism.com/2016/01/concern-trolling-is-bullshit/.

and, ultimately, the use of nasal-gastric tubes and restraint (sometimes by five-strong teams) to 'force-feed' these young people. There is a whole other debate here about how our inpatient treatment of adolescents is the cause of further trauma for them, rather than any sort of a cure.

Fortunately, an increasing number of voices is starting to critique these assumptions as they relate to food,[5] but what is overwhelmingly clear in our culture is how (i) we hold people accountable for their weight and their food choices via a framework of personal autonomy and choice and (ii) how damaging and undermining this is in terms of people's mental health. We may also be completely missing the very important idea that, for many, obesity and eating disorder is a solution and not a problem (Kolk 2014: Kindle Locations 2620–2621). This is especially true for young people, who very often don't have any other way of making their distress known or of drawing attention to their plight: if you are voiceless within a family, and a minor with economic autonomy, the ways available to you of signalling your disease are very limited.

More worryingly, we see this standpoint reflected back to us in the treatments we are offered. It is no coincidence that the therapy of choice for almost all mental afflictions is Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT).[6] CBT can be understood as a very straightforward reflection of the neoliberal position: what you think determines how you behave. Now, I have no wish to offend practitioners of CBT, it remains true that cognitive-behavioural thought and theory is predicated on the notion that we can make rational choices about how to think and behave. Therefore—with more or less therapy to assist you

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[5]See, for example, Appelhans et al. (2011) and Sonnenville et al. (2012).

[6]NICE (National Institute for Clinical Excellence) directs treatment for services provided through the NHS in England and in certain aspects of wider UK practice. This page gives some indication of its dependence on CBT https://www.evidence.nhs.uk/Search?q=NICE+cognitive+behavioural+therapy (accessed August 4, 2018). There is substantial debate and discussion about how the field has been skewed by relying on research designed specifically for CBT approaches: (i) you must demonstrate the effectiveness of your approach for it to be recognised as a valid therapeutic approach (ii) only evidence gathered via RCTs (randomized control trials) is considered to provide this type of evidence (iii) CBT-type therapies are the only therapy suitable for investigation using RCT methods, therefore the only acceptable evidence we have is related to CBT. Wampold and Imel summarise these issues well in 'The Great Psychotherapy Debate' (2015).

in identifying your thoughts and how they influence your behaviours—
you can change your mental state by choosing to think differently. If
your behaviour is making life difficult for you—if you are depressed,
unable to function, anxious, self-harming—you need to change what
you think. And, as a rational, autonomous being, with sovereignty over
my choices, choosing my thoughts, choosing my beliefs and how I
think, is absolutely possible.

We see this position reflected as well in the huge movement of pos-
itive psychology that has been sweeping through popular culture, and
increasingly informing therapeutic practice following on from the work
of Martin Seligman in the USA.[7] Positive psychology has been hugely
influential both in mainstream culture and in the world of therapy and
rests on the deceptively simple and powerful idea that we can determine
our state of mind according to what we choose to focus on and culti-
vate. If we constantly dwell on our unhappiness and suffering, on the
things that we are dissatisfied, we will magnify our experience of that
unhappiness; if we focus on and cultivate the positive things in our
lives, then we will magnify our sense of being happy. We see this way of
thinking reflected in gratitude exercises and journals, in positive think-
ing, in choosing to focus on what is good in our lives.

Again, the underlying notion is that we can determine our mental
state by choosing what to focus on, what to invest our thoughts in, and
that this is the ultimate act of personal choice and rationality.

What is wrong with this position? After all, surely there are good rea-
sons why the culture is so dominant, and why CBT is so successful.

It is true that there is some success with CBT and that, for many
people, thinking about how we think can be helpful and productive. All
of us can identify with 'half-full, half-empty' thinking and the potential
that changing our perspective can have. There is plenty of evidence that
purports to demonstrate that making choices about how we think can
have positive effects on how we feel. My position is not that these are
untruths but simply that they are grossly inadequate and ineffective in

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[7]See, for example, Seligman's website http://www.pursuit-of-happiness.org/history-of-happiness/
martin-seligman-psychology/.

either providing a rich account of mental illness or of yielding effective interventions and treatments; and that this criticism is amplified many times when the thinking is applied to the mental health of children and adolescents.

Why so? Because, first of all—*even if* we agree that there is some efficacy in applying the notion of choice to mental health—they are efficacious only insofar as individuals are well enough resourced to be able to make those choices. In other words, individuals must be educated, adequately economically and financially resourced, socially adaptable, autonomous.

So, for example, we know that stress and anxiety contribute very directly to the many anxiety disorders and to illnesses such psychosis and schizophrenia. If my stress and anxiety are rooted in my inability to earn enough money to support myself and my children then the obvious corollary, in this model, is to reflect and recognise this and to make rational choices so as to bring about changes in my working life. If I am educated, financially secure and insecure housing, I might be able to do this. If I am not—if I am bereaved or an immigrant or an escapee from domestic violence or sexual abuse; or if I have no qualifications; or if I am black and discriminated against—the list goes on and on—then the chances of me being able to change my work in a way that reduces stress and anxiety will be very small. And, as we see in the welfare state in the UK at the moment, there is little recognition of this, or of the deprivation and hardship it causes, and ultimately of the cost it has to our health and well-being.

If we apply this thinking to children and adolescents the inadequacy and immorality of the approach is even starker—how are children supposed to make rational choices about the trauma that living in a home full of violence produces? How is a 13-year-old anorexic girl supposed to make rational choices about the thoughts and feelings of inadequacy, desperation, powerlessness and suffocation that drive her anorexia? And to add into this mix the practice of positive psychology is to risk more toxicity: in asking a minor who is suffering, or their parents, to focus on what is going well in their life is to risk colluding with the system that propagates the suffering and is, as a result, clinically negligent.

We can see the attractiveness of this model—if I am an educated, well-resourced, economically secure individual, with many possible choices at my fingertips, it certainly would seem that I can take responsibility for my own well-being through careful consideration and choice. And this, of course, is exactly the neoliberal position. The huge flaw in it is that it does not serve those who are not privileged and well-resourced in this way. For the model to work, everyone has to be similarly situated in terms of access to resources and personal agency. And this, we know, simply is not the case.

We know that, in the field of the treatment of mental illness, these approaches have little to offer in the following arenas:

- they do not allow for co-morbid presentations (when there is more than one difficulty present, which there almost always is).
- they offer a 'quick fix', challenging behaviours rather than the feelings and experiences that drive them.
- the evidence for their efficacy is not compelling and exists only in the absence of other more complex—but potentially useful—approaches being researched.
- changing thoughts according to what is rational does not always change how people feel (it might be rational for me to stay alive, in the informed balance of things, but this might not preclude me from taking my life).

And applied to children and adolescents the inadequacy is even starker: a model that roots mental wellness in rational and autonomous choice simply cannot apply to this demographic in any meaningful way.

So our first difficulties emerge starkly: mental illness, very often, does not behave according to the diktats of rationality and, even if they did, this account excludes vast tracts of the population. People who are suffering, who are in distress, who are mentally ill, may either not be able to respond to a rational way of regarding their situation or, even if they can, may not find any sort of relief or healing in doing so. What is missing is a rich account of emotion, feeling and context which gives depth and understanding to our experience and which brings about the possibility of change.

# The Importance of Context and the Emotions

Rawls was wrong—not only can we not make our choices behind the veil, we *should* not—because it is the context of lives which determines them, not the mind's capacity to be detached and rational. It is to this we now turn.

I want to start by considering more carefully what Rawls dismissed: context.

What if it is context, rather than rationality, that defines a person's sense of themselves? Contemporary accounts of self that rely on more constructivist ideas start from a position of assuming that context informs every aspect of a person's life. All those factors that Rawls asks us to disregard are, in fact, the essence of who we are. The context of culture, gender, race, class, family, religion, economic status, social status—these are the lived experiences that build our sense of who we are and of what we are able or capable of. *Our selves are contingent and are socially constructed.*[8]

Individuality in this understanding takes on a very different hue: I am the authoritative voice of my own experience, but not because I am most well informed about the choices available to me, or because I am the most rational or the most objectively detached from the contingencies of life and able to make free choices; but precisely because my context, my lived experience is unique to me and formative of me and no one else can know it better than I can.

In addition to challenging the Enlightenment understanding of the self I also want to say something about the account of reason and emotion that goes with it. A common criticism of positive psychology and cognitive-behavioural approaches is simply this: that having the best information about which thoughts and beliefs will bring about the best outcomes for myself very often does not bring about any change in how I feel, however much I exercise my capacity to choose wisely or focus on

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[8]Charles Taylor's *Sources of the Self* outlines (1989) these ideas in detail, as do the more contemporary therapeutic accounts of are found in the narrative therapy of Michael White and David Epston.

the positives in my situation. There is, in fact, real doubt about whether choosing what to focus on, or what to think or believe, brings about substantial emotional change:

> These responses [of extreme distress and trauma] are not reasonable and therefore cannot be changed simply by reframing irrational beliefs. Our maps of the world are encoded in the emotional brain, and changing them means having to reorganise that part of the central nervous system…. (Kolk 2014: Kindle Locations 2276–2278)

Nowhere is this seen more vividly than in situations where a person wants to commit suicide: in the absence of terminal illness, it is never 'rational' to 'choose' suicide if we are operating in the neoliberal framework. There are always choices we can make to change our situation (what to think or do) and it is never the case that we can't bring about positive change if only we apply ourselves (to researching all the options and making the right choices). But ask any mental health practitioner in the land and they will report how profoundly pointless and inadequate—as well as being, at times, grossly inappropriate—this approach is. It may seem, at first glance, a rational and sensible view to take but it is pointless precisely because it does not take into consideration the feelings, the suffering, of the individual; it does not acknowledge how profoundly helpless individuals feel to make any changes in these situations or their (irrational) pessimism about the point of doing so.

There is a long and honourable tradition in the philosophies of our world that argue that, to the contrary to our Enlightenment understanding, reason is the slave of the passions, not the master of them.[9] I do not want to espouse this view here, but it is interesting to note that there is a long tradition of enquiring about the exact relationship between reason and emotion and how each impacts on the other.

How, then, can we understand reason and responsibility to operate if we understand selfhood as being contextual? Do we say that they have

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[9]Hume being an excellent example of this tradition—see his Treatise of Human Nature.

no place in understanding mental illness? Or, more generally, in understanding how best to strive towards well-being?

Of course not. We do not want to be throwing baby reason out with the constructivist bathwater. We only want to acknowledge that rationality is one resource, one capacity, one ability that we all to a lesser or greater extent, develop over our lifetimes. We learn how to reason alongside learning how to laugh or cry, how to care for others, how to determine our own desires and wants. Advances in neuroscience are particularly rapid at the moment and we are learning more and more about how the brain experiences emotions and learns how to reason; perhaps not surprisingly much of this supports the reported experiences of individuals rather than contradicting them. It is notable that simply being able to locate emotion in the brain is a powerful affirmation of the reality and significance of feeling in the lived experience of the individual. Contemporary discourse around understanding mental illness and emotional distress suggests that we might at last start to believe what people tell us about their distress and afford it gravity and interest, rather than treating it as unsubstantiated subjective state which can be easily and simply manipulated by choosing to think differently). Mentalisation theory and neuroscience, for example, show us that the capacity to reason and reflect sits in a different part of the brain to the emotions, and that when part of the brain is aroused the other is less able to act (Fonagy et al. 2004); reason and emotion are different things, different processes, different experiences, residing in different parts of the brain—neither taking priority, neither to be denigrated nor boosted, both to be acknowledged as part of the human experience.

There are two important implications for how we think about children and adolescent mental health in here:

1. We acknowledge at all times that a child's capacity to reason may be more or less developed and may, in some cases, be absent—as may be their capacity to experience certain feelings. Reason is a developmentally acquired skill. Being able to recognise and reflect on our experiences is a learnt process and children and young people—especially those who have been subject to trauma or deprivation—are very likely to be 'behind' in their learning. Much has been written about

child development and the fact that emotional intelligence, reasoning, language, and a plethora of other areas relevant to emotional well-being, is well documented.[10]

2. That it is never appropriate to understand a child's mental wellness in terms of the correctness or appropriateness of the decisions that they are making. Even if the young person sitting opposite us has exceptionally well-developed skills in terms of self-reflection and capacity to choose, how can we ask someone to make choices about their contexts when they do not have the resources to do so? Family violence may be the context of this young person's urge to hurt themselves but in what way is it helpful to suggest to them that they choose not to be affected by that context or to somehow (how?) choose to leave it?

> Children have no choice who their parents are, nor can they understand that parents may simply be too depressed, enraged or spaced out to be there for them or that their parents' behaviour may have little to do with them. Children have no choice but to organise themselves to survive within the families they have. Unlike adults, they have no other authorities to turn to for help—their parents are the authorities. They cannot rent an apartment or move in with someone else: Their very survival hinges on their caregivers. (Kolk 2014: Kindle Locations 2343–2346)

When a child or a young person sits opposite us, in despair, what does this mean? If we are not to ask disempowering questions about the choices they make, what questions should we ask? How should we shape our understanding and response? We ask: What is the context of a young person's distress? What is the context of a boy's criminal behaviour? What is the context of a young woman's malaise, lethargy, inability to attend to the business of teenage living? What is the context of that lad's voices, who tell him to hide and protect himself because enemy agents are seeking to kill him? For example, we now know that more than half the people who seek psychiatric care in the USA have been assaulted, abandoned, neglected, or even raped as children, or

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[10]A good starting place for such discussions is Smith, Cowie and Blade's comprehensive 'Understanding Children's Development' (2015).

have witnessed violence in their families (Kolk 2014: Kindle Locations 432–434).

Working from a contextual perspective shifts the priorities and emphases in what we do. A contextual stance doesn't locate a young person's difficulties solely in their internal world or in their mental machinery; it doesn't assume that the focus of therapeutic work or social/behavioural input is the young person who is identified as the patient. It doesn't assume that the young person is the thing that needs 'fixing' or treating. It doesn't eject a patient, either to another ward or institution, or back (to an abusive) home, because it can't find the right 'fix' for the 'symptoms' that the patient is expressing. It doesn't label the young person as 'too difficult' or 'untreatable', or pass the responsibility over to them for their despair by accusing them of 'not engaging' with the services that are offered.

We think we know this but I would like to suggest that we are much less effective in embedding this system of beliefs into our practice than we think we are. In Todd Hines' film *Carol* (2015), for example, we sit in our cinema seats in disbelief when we see Carol being subjected to psychotherapy as a condition of being able to see her child, the goal of which is apparently to suppress her sexuality and reinforce the rightness of 1950s patriarchal social and sexual arrangements. But how is this different to medicating the 14 year old who has lived through trauma and daily experiences discrimination and social alienation with an SSRI with the intention of deadening the despair and anxiety that arises from this particular context? Or designing a skilled and thoughtful programme of cognitive behaviour therapy that focuses on changing the way that young person responds to the context they find themselves in, or asks them to think differently—by which we mean in a way that ultimately enables them to tolerate more effectively, rather than change—about the context that they find themselves in?

Do we medicate young people to be able to live in conditions of deprivation without too much in the way of symptomology? Do we teach them to cope with their situations by giving them tools and techniques to manage their feelings of anger, outrage and despair at their context?

> In the UK this remains a particular concern where individual solutions through the use of psychological therapies, for instance, to cure people of conditions which have their provenance in the political, social and economic environment have been promoted to get people into paid employment and free from dependence on the state. (Rowe 2011: Kindle Locations 99–101)

We need to ask ourselves these questions very carefully and where we find that this is all we can do in the system that we are working with, we need to be thinking together—collectively, collaboratively—about how to challenge the premises on which such an approach rests.

> Both biomedical and psychological theories of depression decontextualise what is often a social problem, simply acting to legitimise expert intervention, whilst negating the political, economic and discursive aspects of [young people's] experience. (Ussher 2010)

What does all this mean for the treatment of mental illness in children and adolescents? This is an issue worthy of another chapter in itself; for now, some pointers based on what we have been discussing.

What we can expect *not* to be effective are.

Any type of therapeutic intervention which depends upon the notions of rationality and choice for its efficacy. Children and young people may not have well-developed capacities for reason and are, in any case, not generally in an emotional, economic or social position to make the types of choices these interventions require.

Interventions which rely on medication. Medication may—sometimes—be a useful adjunct to treatment, especially where trauma, distress or different states of reality are to the fore. But medicating a child or young person should always be seen as a last resort and an intervention that is used to support rather than to quieten or encourage a child to conform to what is expected of them.

Talking therapies which are primarily dependant upon cognition, thought and rationality for their efficacy. It is not that these therapies are ineffective, but that they may not be appropriate for children and young people. Many children and young people cannot articulate their

experiences and feelings and we should expect this as a normal part of their presentation. An intervention that requires them to do something which they have not learnt to do, or are unable to do because of trauma, is at best non-sensical and at worst harmful.

Interventions based on positive psychology where there is any risk that these may collude with ongoing abuse.

What we *should* be focusing on in treatment includes:

- Contextual interventions. Children and young people do not exist independently. They live in the contexts of families, schools, peer groups, cultures and so on. Assessments and interventions always need to take not of this and be adopting a curious stance in terms of what the context of a child's difficulties contributes to those difficulties.
- As an extension of the importance of context, we should expect to be working collaboratively with the child's network—family, school, community and so on. Our understanding of selves as at least partly socially constructed creatures means that we cannot underestimate or exclude the influence and importance of the social networks that exist around individuals. This is amplified for children—children are not autonomous, independent, authoritative in their own worlds—therefore we must be ready to work with those who take on those functions in the lives of the children we treat.
- Careful assessment around individual therapies. For younger children, individual therapy may simply not be appropriate. For children and young people of any age, where individual therapy is indicated there needs to be a very careful assessment of what kind individual intervention is most likely to be helpful. Perhaps unsurprisingly, one-to-one talking therapies are often not the best way forward (perhaps the referrer is all too ready to ascribe the 'problem' to the young person who, therefore, needs to be 'fixed'; perhaps the young person does not want to speak to a stranger about what they are experiencing; perhaps there is abuse or violence in the home which needs to be addressed before any individual work can usefully be started).
- Individual approaches, where they are used, need to be especially tailored to the young person in terms of their age, context, presentation

and so on. Generally, we can expect poor therapeutic outcomes where we try and use standardised or manualised approaches with young people, who are, to a huge extent, more varied than their adult counterparts. So, we might expect individual approaches to include play, storytelling, creative work, art and music therapies, low-key relationship building, somatic work and so on. And we must also anticipate and accommodate the fact that children and adolescents work best in relationship, and that relationship building will be a key part of any effective intervention.

In summary, I have not argued that neoliberal philosophies cause or intensify suffering or mental health issues—although many do (Kelly 2016)—but rather that the conclusions of the sorts of studies quoted above adds weight to our increasing understanding that the philosophies of choice, rationality and autonomy do not serve us well in the field of mental health. They are profoundly and intrinsically biased in favour of privileged, well-resourced individuals who have to means to exercise their choice in ways that directly improve their social and economic well-being. They do not give us a satisfactory narrative of understanding the experiences of the majority who do not fall into this privileged category and, worse, they undermine effective treatment for mental illness, disease and suffering and ultimately alienate and intensify the suffering of all those who cannot take part in the neoliberal economy of choice (Winegard & Winegard 2011). This is an especially pressing and urgent issue for children and adolescents since, by definition, they cannot take part in the neoliberal economy of choice and therefore are subject to a system and its treatments which—in a profound and damaging way—cannot meet their needs.

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# 3

## Boys from the Bronx, Men from Manhattan: Gender, Aspiration and Imagining a (Neoliberal) Future After High School in New York City

### Patrick Alexander

This chapter explores neoliberal discourses of the self as they emerge in the transition from youth into early adulthood. Specifically, I draw on a ethnographic research conducted over the course of one year (2014–2015) in order to consider how seniors at a large public high school in The Bronx, New York City, negotiate ideas about aspiration in relation to constructions of masculinity and imaginings of the future. Through a series of vignettes focusing on the lives of young men, my aim in this chapter is to explore the spatial and temporal parameters of neoliberal subjectivities as they are constructed at the end of secondary schooling. In rendering visions of their lives after school, students imagine themselves in multiple future times and spaces, often through narratives of partial or total escape from their community in The Bronx and towards visions 'the City'. In this case, 'the City' is occasionally the literal space of Manhattan, and sometimes a more abstract metropolitan destination representative of future success and self-actualisation in keeping with

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an ideal neoliberal reckoning of the self. These removes correlate with imaginings of future masculinity as boys from the Bronx imagine themselves as men 'from Manhattan', and imaginings of future gendered selves become intertwined with discourses of neoliberalism.

However, the partial and multiple narratives of future selves that young men recount also reveal enduring tensions that at times challenge the notion of a singular, hegemonic, neoliberal logic of self. Constructions of future adult masculinity emerge in student recountings of their own potential futures as young men; but they also emerge in the multiple, echoed voices of teachers, mothers, fathers, father-figures and role models who play a part in the relational construction of future selves. I make sense of the resulting tensions, contestations and multiple imaginings of the future through the novel conceptual frame of quantum personhood (Alexander 2017). This concept draws on metaphors derived from quantum physics as a way to capture the concurrent, entangled future persons that are imagined as young people flit, electron-like—some self-assured, some uncertain, many a mix of both—towards the event horizon of early adulthood. The 'fuzzy' nature of the subjectivities conjured through this process represents a complication if not a radical departure from dominant discourses of self-making in the neoliberal tradition (Hall et al. 2013).

# The 4 Train from Manhattan to the Bronx: Research Context

In order to consider the above themes, I would like to begin with a story. In 2014, on a humid September morning, I boarded a crowded 4 subway train at 14th Street, Union Square, in Manhattan. The platforms swelled with commuters, and as the train arrived the crowd surged into the gaps created by doors opening into air-conditioned carriages. Hurtling through Midtown, the train travelled north through the wealthy enclave of the Upper West Side, through Harlem, and across the northern edge of the island of Manhattan and into The Bronx. As we passed Yankee Stadium and travelled further into

The Bronx, the train became quieter, now emptied of city commuters with white ear buds and disposable coffee cups. An hour after leaving 14th Street, I arrived at the Bronx public high school—which here I rather unimaginatively call Bronx High. Throughout the year of research, Bronx High showed itself to be a profoundly future-oriented institution in which students reconcile the privileging of imagined ideal neoliberal futures with the often starkly different realities of their own experiences outside of school. In this way, it is a high school like many others. Bronx High is also an archetypal 'inner city school' in the challenges that it faces to facilitate 'success' for its students. Bronx High School is housed in a castle-like quadrangle of a building dating to Jazz Age opulence of the late 1920s, now overshadowed by a brutalist and relatively dilapidated public housing tower block erected in the early 1970s. Historically, the school has been home to an affluent, predominantly white and male student body associated with the kinds of success that provide the exceptional proof for the American Dream. The halls of the school entrance way are decorated with the names and pictures of men who have excelled in business, in sports and in entertainment, and who have the wealth to show for it. Few of the more recent graduates have been as successful in this narrow definition of the term, even though many will go on to successful jobs and university careers. Now, the school encounters significant challenges, and during the course of the ethnography faced the threat of closure if rates of graduation and progress to college did not improve. The Principal had recently joined the school with an express brief of turning the fortunes of the school around. The change in the profile of Bronx High was closely linked to the disadvantage experienced by its student intake and by issues of structural, generational poverty in the local community over the past few decades. Most students at the school are now from predominantly from African American, Afro-Caribbean and Latino backgrounds, and many are new migrants to the USA. US Census data for 2014 suggest that 39% (or around 10,000) of the population in the immediate vicinity of the school live below the poverty line, with a median income of around US$24,000 (less than half the median income for New York City in 2014). Just

under two-thirds (64%) of local residents have a high school diploma or higher, but only 11% have a bachelor's degree or higher. Among local residents aged 18–24, 49% have a college or associates degree, but only 3% have a bachelors or higher (U.S. Census Bureau 2014). The school is not in the most notorious of neighbourhoods in the Bronx, but issues of local crime and gang violence are made immediately evident when students enter the school through a series of metal detectors, where they are checked for weapons and greeted by generally friendly but serious, armed officers of the New York Police Department. On the other side of the metal detectors students immediately see images of past success stories at Bronx High, along with a noticeboard that says in bold letters: 'The American Dream Can be Achieved Through Education (Pass with Hard Work)'. The motto of the school is *Sine Labore Nihil* (Nothing is Achieved Without Hard Work). In this way, every day at Bronx High began with a symbolic reminder of the 'cruel optimism' (Berlant 2011) that underpins a neoliberal logic of aspiration to future success, particularly when applied in contexts where individuals experience structural disadvantage and marginalisation on the basis of class and race, no matter how hard they work.

On that first day of the ethnography, and empty of students before the beginning of term, the school felt like an immense ship being prepared for a familiar but long and arduous journey. Custodial staff sweated around the school, towels tucked in T-shirt necks, and shouted an echoing commentary to one another down shiny corridors as they hammered, painted and jerry-rigged the school back into shape. Teachers weaved in and out of classrooms and offices, plainclothed, switching quickly between smiling conversations about summer vacations, new outfits and new hair-dos, and more serious hushed huddles about school gossip and politics, hiring and firing updates, missing office supplies, eye-rolling bureaucracy and the coming storm of teenagers. The next day, as students filled classrooms and hallways, the school lurched into life. For the seniors, in their final year, teachers began the process of preparing another graduating class for life after school. And so another year began at Bronx High School.

## Imagining a Neoliberal Future, During and After High School

While schools like Bronx High are places where young people may glimpse a multitude of bright futures ahead, they are also contexts where future dreams must be schooled, disciplined and made tractable (Foucault 1975) in keeping with the ideological parameters of a wider neoliberal world. In this process, alternate visions of the future do not necessarily disappear altogether, but they are made less visible and more difficult for individuals to entertain. Schools like Bronx High exist within broader discursive landscapes, and it perhaps goes without saying that youth, gender, aspiration and 'the future' are connected concepts that hold particularly profound symbolic power in popular, political and educational discourse. Many of the issues troubling the present for Bronx High are reflective of broader social concerns about social inequality, social mobility, race and the future of society—often articulated in relation to the future prospects of young people, and particularly in relation to improving future prospects for economically disadvantaged young men of colour (see, e.g., Harper 2014; Tylor 2013). In complicated ways, 'the future' of young people in this sense becomes a metaphorical staging ground for political statements about the future of society—and a proving ground for neoliberal logics of aspiration (Cole and Durham 2008; Zipin 2009; Zipin et al. 2015). The former is not a discursive phenomenon unique to the present, or indeed to the neoliberal turn in the history of late capitalism. Indeed, one of the profound impacts of being socialised through formal mass education in Western nation states is to be instilled with an enduring sense of the individualist person that, in its manifestation through citizenship, becomes the focus for national political and economic projects. An individualist construction of personhood through education is crucial for widely accepted perceptions of 'success' in late modern, capitalist society because it represents a lynchpin to the kinds of social and cultural capital needed to widen future horizons for employment, social mobility and improved standards of living (Froerer 2011). What is novel about the conditions of contemporary neoliberal discourse as

applied to schooling is the extent to which the responsibility for self-actualisation as an individual is placed *on* the individual, while the conditions of neoliberalism also produce the very conditions of increased and rapacious precarity and uncertainty that make this self-actualisation untenable. In other words, neoliberal discourse provides what Harvey has described as a 'benevolent mask' (2005, p. 119), appealing to young people through the language of choice, freedom, rights and opportunity through competition, while simultaneously masking how aspiration to 'success' principally in self-interested, economic terms will invariably demand that a small and likely already-privileged minority will achieve this success at the expense of those who do not. The power of neoliberal logics of aspiration is that they represent a particular vision of the future not only as preferable but as exclusive: the alternative to a successful neoliberal imagining of the future is, quite simply, failure (Archer and Yamashita 2003).

This derives from a profound reckoning of time in capitalist terms (Pels 2015), where the future is represented to young people (indeed, to all people) unproblematically and objectively as a future source of capital that must be maximised. If the nature of future-time-as-capital becomes taken for granted—that the future is seen as *inevitably* a matter of rational choices about a return on investment of time (Facer 2013)—then a neoliberal vision of what one should aspire to in the future becomes not only the most logical option but the only one that is readily imaginable. It is this logic that demands of young people the development of a sense of self that is entrepreneurial at its core (Brockling 2015). And yet, as I will suggest in this chapter, everyday life at Bronx High reveals a multiple conjuring of the future that occasionally troubles the fixity of this vision. Zipin et al. (2015) have described this as the confluence of doxic (or naturalised, ideational) and habituated (or internalised, individualised, dispositional) logics of aspiration, alongside an emergent (emancipatory, novel, critical) sense of future success that works within but also beyond these logics. In the shifting nature of the subjectivities that young men develop in daily life at school, emergent logics of aspiration occasionally offer critical and emancipatory visions of what the future might be, beyond a hegemonic neoliberal ideal.

## Aspiration and Masculinity: Boys Becoming (Neoliberal) Men

However, individual narratives of aspiration must be reconciled with deeper and broader social forces at work, at the level both of discourse and of policy. At the level of discourse, young men of colour at Bronx High were reconciling contested visions of the future that they would inhabit. There are resonances between young men's experiences at Bronx High and those recounted in the extensive ethnographic record documenting the social reproduction of inequalities through schooling—and particularly those focusing on the experiences of boys and young men (Hargreaves 1967; Willis 1984; Bowles and Gintis 1976; Ogbu 1974; Varenne and McDermott 1999; Evans 2007; MacLeod 2008). On one hand, traditional, linear, functionalist, neoliberal notions of the life course present the future in a straight-forward way that involves a single narrative of self (James 2014). Even where this is in stark reality to their lived experiences, young people may be encouraged to work hard at school in order to go to university (in order to get a job), *or* to get another form of training, *or* to get a job, *or* to do nothing in particular. These narratives are shaped by supposed choices and particular trajectories that an individual is intended to follow, and while it is prone to change, this future is imagined as coherent, linear and irreversible: it is framed by a relatively stable, finite set of probable future options. Among these options, some are presented as far more favourable than others. There is now, for example, significant popular and political concern in both the UK and USA about young people's seeming obsession with celebrity culture and so-called fantasy imaginings of their futures as pop singers, football players and celebrities-for-celebrity's sake (Mendick et al. 2015). At Bronx High, this was regularly articulated by teachers in relation to the 'false hope' of young Black men wanting to become basketball players or Hip Hop artists. On the other hand, there exists a rhetoric of concern that young people suffer from a 'poverty of aspiration', particularly in urban contexts of social or economic disadvantage (Cote 2000; St Clair et al. 2011). At Bronx High, this was the fate of 'hall walkers'—students who arrived at school only to circulate slowly

around the cavernous corridors of the school's quadrangle, avoiding classrooms wherever possible and slowly dropping out of high school. These students were mastering the art of 'successful failure' through schooling (Varenne and McDermott 1999).

Others have documented the ways in which schooling can reinforce inequities of class, race, and gender through banal, everyday practice (e.g. Harper et al. 2011; Horvat and Antonio 1999; Stahl 2015). Often articulated in relation to themes of uncertainty and resilience, students balance the reproduction of an idealised hegemonic neoliberal masculinity alongside everyday challenges to the fixity of this very ideal. Mac an Ghaill's (1994) work on schooling and masculinity, drawing on Butler (1991), provides a useful lens for understanding this tension. Mac an Ghaill illuminates the 'constitutive cultural elements of dominant modes of heterosexual subjectivity that inform … male students' learning to act like men in the school arena' (1994, p. 4), while also emphasising the contingent nature of reproducing gendered subjectivities in schools. Linking the performative nature of gender to neoliberalism within the context of schooling, it is important also to recognise the tension between hegemonic forms of masculinity privileged in the social lives of boys at school—racialised markers of 'toughness' and hierarchical power, for example—and markers of academic success that are often interpreted as 'effeminate' (Phoenix 2004, p. 233; Francis 2006; Archer et al. 2001). While neoliberal discourse in school demands a singular and particular reckoning of successful future masculinity, then, the complexity of everyday life involves multiple reckonings of gendered futures that, while incongruent, are not mutually exclusive (Mickelson 1990; Kimmel 2008, 2012).

Bronx High is by no means immune to these discourses of masculinity and aspiration. While there might be normative assumptions about what socially acceptable options are available for young men at the end of high school, the lived experiences of young people are complex and may include multiple activities that do not fit neatly with this ideal. Complex experiences of youth transitions can be seen across the school. Many seniors are, of course, legally adult, with age ranges in senior classes stretching from 17 to 20. Among the seniors, a range of age-related and gendered experiences served to challenge normative

ideas about what they 'ought to be' at this stage in their young lives. Some students (like Charles, below) care for adult family members or for siblings, meaning they attend school less; some are living alone, on the streets, or in sheltered housing; some are working to support the parental family; some have children of their own in the school's crèche; some chronologically older, adult students are re-taking years of schooling with younger students; some are returning to school as adults after incarceration; some are currently engaged in criminal activity that would certainly fall within a popular criminalised and racialised imagining of 'adult' deviance. Many students are negotiating imaginings of age that are closer to normative ideals of youth the end of schooling—in nuclear families where deference is shown to adults, education is valued, and the expectation for the future is college. But at Bronx High, all of these trajectories are part of the everyday that students negotiate. In this sense, aspiration emerges in ways that are concurrent but not always coherent, as students make sense both of the idealised imagined futures to which they are encouraged to aspire, and their lived experiences of what futures may actually be realisable for them.

## Quanta of Personhood

How then, might we fruitfully make sense of this complex web of potential future trajectories? How might we do so while recognising how these alternate potentialities are subsumed under the weight of neoliberal ideals of 'success'? Drawing on metaphorical language and imagery from quantum physics, here I introduce the concept of 'quantum personhood' (Alexander 2017) in order to get better purchase on what 'the future' means, both as a term of analysis and as impending reality to the students involved in the research. By using imagery and metaphor derived from quantum physics, quantum personhood explores how the supposedly inchoate, isolate individual person can be conceived, electron-like, to coexist in multiple places, across space and time, both in the past and present but also across diverse potential futures, in ways that while seemingly incongruent are in fact more often concurrent and even complimentary (Tavory and Eliasoph 2013). Recognising the multiple and

sometimes incongruous ways in which people are capable of imagining personhood is of course not a particularly new idea (Skeggs 2011; Carsten 2004), but quantum personhood intends to complicate the picture further in relation to temporality and young people and in the context of formal schooling. Quantum personhood seeks to capture the complexity of how personhood is constructed in dynamic ways in the everyday lives of young people at school, alongside an enduring sense of stable personhood as traditionally perceived in Western society. As with quantum physics, the intention here is to complicate existing ideas about personhood by focusing on complexity, uncertainty and paradox, particularly in the temporal figuring of personhood. Quantum personhood accounts for the ways in which the many potential versions of persons impact on how they construct a coherent sense of self both in the present, and in representations of the person projected backwards into the past and forward into the future. As in Strathern's reckoning of relational, dividual personhood (1988), it also emphasises the ways in which personhood is shaped by relational entanglement between individuals, meaning that personhood exists beyond individual psychology or the boundaries of individual selves or individual human beings, and instead is a matter of collective interaction (Ingold 2011). In the language of quantum physics, we are all particles; and, simultaneously, we are all waves. Personhood exists in the co-constructed, shifting narratives that we tell to ourselves and to others, and the stories that others tell about us (Strathern 1988). Sometimes these narratives are complimentary: others may imagine our future action—whether distant or impending—in the same way that we imagine it. This may lead to a co-construction of personhood that is positively aligned with aspirations or dreams for the future—a collaborative, quantum complication of the notion of the self-fulfilling prophecy (Rosenthal and Jackobson 1968). When these narratives do not match up, this discord can have profound consequences for the future of either actor.

In addition to its relational quality, quantum personhood illuminates how the person is shaped in spatial as well as temporal conditions, meaning that personhood can be perceived to linger in and to alter once-inhabited spaces, like schools or neighbourhoods, or anticipated spaces and times, like going to college or living in 'the City' in

the future, even if the person is not physically there (and even if they never actually go there physically). Similarly, personhood may extend to virtual spaces (as in positive or alternative representations of self online, through social media) and in material culture. In attempting to capture more of the temporal dimensions of habitus (Bourdieu 1977), it also focuses on how multiple potential futures are played out in the habitual, ritual performances of everyday life in the present. As the repetition of daily routines turns present into past, with habitual behaviour we re-work familiar but always slightly different imaginings of the impending future. In the present, our imaginings of the future are in turn sculpted in response to the choices presented to us, and to our reckoning of those potential choices and decisions. The regular and repetitive scheduling of the 'daily grind' at Bronx High can be seen in this way as the performance of idiosyncratic versions of the same scene, at once similar but also different (and sometimes incongruent), played out over and over again in the pursuit of an imagined future that will also be made up of repetitive, future-gazing actions, as in the routines of employment or college. Personhood is perpetually articulated and enacted in the present, but its quantum qualities relate to multiple versions of the same personhood, located in the past and the future, always present, as it were, in the present, but not always in neat agreement or concordance. The idea of quantum personhood provides a way to think about how personhood is not simply inscribed in an individual's physical, psychological and social being in the present, but also asks how we develop multiple narratives of personhood, both past, present, and future, through schooling. Persons may therefore have multiple, quantum narratives of self, but these are collapsed and made sensible to dominant, linear, irreversible, and in this case neoliberal taxonomies of how personhood is organised.

## Findings

I will now apply the broad metaphorical language of quantum personhood to make sense of the findings that follow. I have written elsewhere (Alexander 2017) about the various ways in which neoliberal ideals of

imagined future masculinity emerge at Bronx High. Doxic and habit-uated logics of aspiration (Zipin et al. 2015) are woven into the fabric of the curriculum, in the school's honour roll of successful male gradu-ates, in the larger-than-life persona of the self-made male Principal, and in everyday practices in the classroom. In this section of the chapter, I build on this analysis by exploring in more detail the tensions that exist between ideal neoliberal imaginings of future masculinity and the lived experiences of young men at the school. I begin by exploring the broader discursive context for these reckonings of future masculinity. I then focus on the spatiotemporal dimensions of young men's imagined futures after school, particularly in relation to narratives of escape or removal from the local community of the school. The latter section of findings hones in on the stories of two young men named Andre and Charles.

## National Discourses of Neoliberal Success: Does 'Everybody Matter'?

It is important to begin by noting the influence of much broader national discourse aspiration and the imagined futures of young peo-ple. In the USA and during the course of this research, for example, President Obama's 2015 State of the Union address focused explicitly and repeatedly on youth aspirations and the promise of brighter futures for young people. At the same time, his message is underpinned by a neoliberal logic of aspiration, both at the level of the individual and for the nation state. In the speech, President Obama asks:

> Will we accept an economy where only a few of us do spectacularly well? Or will we commit ourselves to an economy that generates rising incomes and chances for everyone who makes the effort?… I want future gener-ations to know that we are a people who see our differences as a great gift, that we are a people who value the dignity and worth of every citi-zen: man and woman, young and old, black and white, Latino and Asian, immigrant and Native American, gay and straight, Americans with men-tal illness or physical disability. Everybody matters.

The significance (and irony) of these pronouncements were made all too (sur)real for students at Bronx High when President Obama literally flew in a military helicopter into the neighbourhood of the school in May 2015 to launch his non-profit organisation *My Brothers Keeper Alliance*, which focuses on the aspirations of young men of colour. Young men from Bronx High were not invited to attend the event. The same students were also experiencing the early growth of the 'Black Lives Matter' movement, as public outcry grew across the USA over the deaths of young men of colour at the hands of the police. In New York City in particular, the death of Eric Garner in July 2014 set the tone for a year of public demonstration against institutional racism and police brutality. For young men of colour at Bronx High, these were issues of acute significance because they were the people most likely to find themselves confronted by armed police, where conflicting, racialised and criminalised imaginings of imminent future action might entangle discordantly, leading to potentially fatal consequences. The realities of racism and inequality in New York City, 2014, suggested an alternative and altogether darker potential future than that outlined in Obama's speech, in which 'everybody matters'.

## Partial Removes: Boys from the Bronx, 'Getting the Hell Out'

The above suggests a tension at the level of discourse between the neoliberal promise of a future in which one can achieve economic, professional and social success with 'hard work' (recall the noticeboard in the Bronx High entrance way) and growing evidence for young people in positions of marginalisation that the cards are wilfully stacked against them. One solution to overcoming this tension was, as one student called Charles put it, 'to get the hell out' of The Bronx. It is perhaps the unspoken aim of schools like Bronx High in disadvantaged inner-city neighbourhoods to facilitate this objective: after all, the rate of Bronx High's improvement as a 'failing' school was measured against rates of graduation and progression to college. Very few students progressing

to college would remain in the neighbourhood. There was some irony in the fact that Bronx High had been transformed into a 'community school' in the process of its recovery from a position of failure, but that the real aim of this programme was to allow students to leave a community that was conflated with economic and social conditions of stagnation, disadvantage and the possibility of 'dead-end' (or simply 'dead') futures involved with criminal and/or gang activity.

Getting out of The Bronx also suggested arriving somewhere else—somewhere 'better' where the promise of self-actualisation could be more readily achieved. This speaks to the spatial parameters upon which the temporal map of neoliberal subjectivities is overlaid. It is important to note, with this in mind, that while Bronx High was in New York City, it was in a part of the Bronx remote from Manhattan in more than just geography. Few of the students I spoke to were regular visitors to 'the City' even though it was of course for them, as for many others, an imagined space of culture and capitalism where dreams can come true. This was as much the subtext in their reading of entrepreneurial, successful men in *The Great Gatsby* as it was in the lyrics and persona of rapper Jay-Z (Belle 2014), or even in the song 'Welcome To New York' by pop icon Taylor Swift, also released in the year of the ethnography. A trip to the 92nd Street YMCA, where some students went to see plays as part of their Advanced Placement (AP) English classes, would be considered being 'downtown' even though this was several miles from the central areas of Manhattan. While the Empire State Building was just visible from Bronx High on a clear day, students saw 'the city' as a place remote both spatially but also, and more importantly, in terms of imagined future lifestyles. Many of the young people that I spoke with during the ethnography described ideal futures where they were successful in 'The City', having already made the remove from The Bronx to college. It was interesting to note, however, that many also imagined a future return to the neighbourhood in order to give back. Several young men described their dream future job as 'philanthropist', explaining that they would make enough money in order to be able to help others. The nature of how they would make this money was rarely clear, but 'the City' was an important destination in building the economic wealth necessary to embody this ideal future version of the self-made

and altruistic businessman. Escape from The Bronx, then, was an essential part of 'making it' (MacLeod 2008). One student had even crafted his personal statement for college with the title: 'How to Escape from the Hood'. 'The City' was not place that you simply went to: you had to get there through hard work.

As suggested above, 'getting the hell out' of the Bronx was a phrase used by Charles, a senior and second-generation migrant from Jamaica. Charles was an athletic, slight young man who had made a conscious effort to 'become the man of the house' after his mother was diagnosed with cancer in his Junior year. Before this he saw himself as a 'knuckle-head' and a 'hall-walker'—one of the young men of colour in the school who was 'running with the wrong crowd' and involved in violence and criminal activity. Narrowly avoiding arrest had added to his resolve to eschew his 'tough' or 'hood' past in favour of educational success and an athletic scholarship to college. In this process, he recognised the importance of removing himself from his neighbourhood: the alternative would likely lead, in his opinion, to prison, homicide or death:

> That's, when, you know all those people from Uptown…we're all round the same age so we grew up with the mindset, you know 'what's the point in fightin?'…You know, why don't we just whoop it up, like you know, 'I don't have to fight you every day, I can just shoot you and get it over with'. And that's when the casualties started rising up…My mindset was, in Junior Year, you know, I'm calm now, but if anybody shoots at my friends, then we gonna have to do the same thing back to them! It's just like, I was in this big brawl…and I heard someone say 'you kill my friend, we gonna kill one of your friends' and I was like that don't make no damn sense! If you kill my friend, I'm still gonna kill - I'm gonna kill everybody….But now, it's just like 'what's the point of all of this, when I'm just tryin' to *get out*.' Now things are calm….you know a lot of…a couple of the main kids around my area, they died, so after that a lot of people started staying in their house, calming down…but everybody says, in the summertime, somethin' *has* to happen…

> …in the long run, it's like "if I do get caught, I'm goin' to jail, so why should I go to jail when I could just be free, like, go to college." … I'm always gonna remember where I came from, but if I stay *in this*

*environment*, I don't think I'm gonna move ahead in life, like, especially when you're in the ghetto part of uptown, I think like every summer like two, three people die, so I was like, "I don't wanna be a part of that." (my italics)

For Charles, his ticket to leave The Bronx was his ability at athletics—although he also recognised that future track stardom was for him unlikely, and he would probably become a physiotherapist. This pragmatic understanding of how far he was willing to embrace his own narrative of transformation—from 'tough' knucklehead to 'calm' college student—suggested a nuanced understanding of how ideal neoliberal futures play out in reality. He was also aware that 'getting the hell out' was probably not a simple or irreversible process. Indeed, Charles in fact saw leaving for college as only a partial remove from the above scenario. The fact that one returns home to the Bronx during vacation time means that one is living in multiple but intrinsically connected futures: one in which Charles is promoting himself as a track star (with quiet aspirations to physiotherapy), and another where Charles must entertain old vendettas that return from pasts he wants to keep distant. In the return of these pasts to the present, imagined future can emerge that draw him back into the disadvantage and danger of the neighbourhood. As Charles put it:

Technically I'm gonna be here [the neighbourhood] for another four years -it's like, I'm away for a certain period of time, but then there's breaks so people come back, and you know when people come back and they want to go to a party and anything can still happen at that point. You can meet up with someone you had problems with years ago. I seen somebody who had been away for six years…one had been in Australia…and one had been in Detroit…they bumped into each other, and one didn't go back home.

The extent to which one spatially located future can impact on another is made very clear in Charles' reckoning of how he may be prone to the dangers of local street politics no matter how far away his ambitions for a different future take him. This has a strong resonance with Archer et.al's (2001) articulation of competing masculine values—in this case between violence and physical toughness on one hand, and the

'calm' qualities required to succeed in education. Further, his comments suggest that these values are spatially situated. As Charles suggests, 'I am always gonna remember where I came from', and with this statement he recognises the complex links between temporal and spatial locations of self in the past and their reverberations into the future. In the language of quantum mechanics, there is a *superposition* of multiple past, present and future selves in this narrative, and the net result is a quantum reckoning of personhood that is the sum of all of these parts, and also something altogether new and valid in its own right by virtue of this process of coming together. The neoliberal ideal of a subject might suggest an individual capable of overcoming adversity in order to shed the trappings of disadvantage, self-actualising in the future by removing oneself from spaces imbued with this disadvantage. Kim Allen (2014) has explored this in relation to the assumption that shedding one's working-class past is an a priori good thing because it is indicative of social mobility. While Charles attempts to do this to a certain extent by escaping to college—by *getting out*—he is all too aware that college may not be the answer to his sporting dreams, or a guaranteed escape from the 'tough' masculinity of 'the hood'. Engaging in neoliberal ideals of the imagined future does not inoculate him from alternate future realities still emerging from the past. These narratives remain entangled and superposed.

## Fight Club: 'It's One Giant Circle'

Charles was in a remedial English class co-taught by Carlos LeBrea and Anne Britain. Over the course of the year, I spent many hours with this class. In the classroom, a blackboard and a bank of dishevelled lockers cover the other walls, and a small American flag hung limply by the window. Both teachers were instrumental in helping young men like Charles to eschew their 'knucklehead' pasts. Most lessons involved Carlos and Anne attempting to convince students to complete the assigned work, which they did slowly, alongside much more enlivened discussions that emerged from, but sometimes lead away from, the curriculum proper. Mr. LeBrea and Ms. Britain clearly had a close and

caring relationship with these students, not least because of their tireless investment in helping the members of the class to succeed in school and life beyond. Likewise, the students were affectionate towards them. Mr. LeBrea and Ms. Britain were also active about engaging students in conversations about what the imminent future might be like, principally because they perceived the students as being particularly unaware and unprepared for what would be expected of them either in college or in employment. This emerged in conversations about what to wear, manners, note-taking, respectful approaches to debate, and participation in class, in terms of preparation for college context and life after school. While doing their best to instil what they saw as basic social and intellectual skills for young adult life, Carlos and Anne were at the same time very aware that many of these students would never make it to college, or to the end of college. By senior year, they felt that in some cases it was too late to develop the kinds of dispositions that would allow them to persevere in Higher Education. Nevertheless, like the students, they continued to wrestle with these multiple imaginings of the future, often expressed through the idiom of academic success and failure, as the seniors moved ever-closer towards the end of formal schooling and life beyond.

While Carlos and Anne were mostly engaged in the hopeful development of skills that would allow their students more ready access to an ideal neoliberal future (Conley 2005), they were also enthusiastic to develop what Zipin might term 'emergent' or critical logics of aspiration. One context where these discussions crystalised was in Carlos' discussion with the class of the novel *Fight Club* by Chuck Palahniuk. On a lazy afternoon, Carlos was struggling to get his digital projector to work. As he worked to fix the technical glitch, he started talking about the plot of the novel and about consumerism, before his discussion brought the focus back to the future lives of the students in the room:

> *Carlos*: You have all this stuff that should make you feel good, but you still feel bad, right? So you can have everything and nothing at the same time. By the way, you should be writing this down…We don't have a problem with having this kind life -that's what we generally work hard for, right? Like why are you going to school?

*Kyle*: So you can make that money -

*Carlos*: So you can make money to have that perfect life…or it's something that you may be forced to want to achieve those things by those who are raising you, there's pressure to be smart, to be good-looking, pressure to have everything…that general pressure to be suc… [waiting for class to finish the word]…successful yes, right? And if you don't meet those things what are you?

*Class*: A failure.

*Carlos*: That's right. It"s like 'Oh you didn't get that job you wanted? You didn't work hard enough'. You don't have the latest TV or shoes or phone? You whack. So we got all this pressure coming at us from all sides. When we watch TV, what do we see? Celebrities…

*Class member*: skinny bitches! (laughter)

*Carlos*: (laughter)…those…skinny women, those…really well-built men, right, and they're always really well-dressed…so all these images that we get give us the pressure to be perfect…

So now you guys are about to graduate from high school this is a pressure that you guys are feeling, right? Like, 'if nothing else, you better graduate from high school!'

*Class*: yeah!

*Carlos*: But then what? And does that pressure ever go?

*Class*: No!

*Carlos*: There's always gonna be someone pushing you to do something else…right? To do more. And you're always gonna have those 'and now what?' moments. What are you being told you have to do right now?

*Class member*: Homework!

*Charles*: Like I got to get a job, go to college –

*Carlos*: …Graduate high school, go to college, then what? What you guys may not realise now is that after college you can't really just go get a job anymore, you gotta go back to school and get another degree! What do you have to do? Get a job? Get a house? Save money? So this thing is… it's one giant circle.

The class were unusually attentive during the above conversation, which was one among several where Carlos actively engaged students in difficult questions about their lives in school and their aspirations for the future. While not advocating a radical or explicit resistance to the ideals

of a 'successful' future focused on economic wealth and consumerism, and while most classes on the contrary focused on preparedness for this very kind of future, the fact that Carlos' initiated this conversation was some evidence of a critical stance towards otherwise seemingly inevitable neoliberal futures. It is telling that the conversation never arrived at an alternative to the 'giant circle' of aspiration described by Carlos: to imagine valid futures that break from the neoliberal tradition of individual self-actualisation was beyond the scope of what the class would cover during this year.

## Improvised Futures

Other students demonstrated their ability to both engage with and see through hegemonic visions of future neoliberal masculinity. Andre, a successful senior student, was a good example of this experience. He was very strategic in his planning for the future and had a clear path laid out. This strategic approach to life after school had allowed him to focus on the kinds of aptitudes and personal qualities that would make him a favourable candidate for college. In turn, this had led to him receiving a prestigious Posse Scholarship and acceptance to an elite liberal arts college—both further confirmation of the value of this kind of shrewd future planning. On paper, then, Andre was a very successful young man and neoliberal subject in achieving his full potential through developing a competitive edge that would in turn lead to economic wealth in the future (he intended to study business). This disposition mapped neatly against an ideal of masculinity in the neoliberal tradition. And yet in reality, Andre was much more circumspect about the inevitability of his intended outcomes from rational choices about life after school. As Andre put it:

> You know, life is straight improv: you just make it up as you go along. You never know what's going to happen or what kind of man you're gonna be. And I wouldn't want a roadmap for what my life is going to be like – that would be boring. Even when you do have a plan, you never know how you're going to like it until you're in it. Life is straight improv!

This perception of the improvised nature of impending futures did not, of course, emerge in his applications for college or for scholarships. Rather, he was all too aware of the need to 'game' the system in order to achieve his personal aims—that is, he was adept at giving the *appearance* of the successful neoliberal subject. Multiple narratives of past, present and future selves were evident here, too, as in Charles' account above. For Andre, it was also evident that the line between performance and enactment was potentially blurry: as Harvey suggests above, the 'benevolent mask' of neoliberalism also makes its measures of success intoxicating to those who are able to articulate them. The reality of 'success' in the transition to college, however, can be less validating than the logic of neoliberal aspiration might promise. One year later, I caught up with Andre via email to see how his initial experiences of college were developing. Perhaps not surprisingly, he had found the experience of going to college 'an existential crisis'. In part, this was linked to the drastic changes that he experienced when leaving his neighbourhood in The Bronx. Chief among these changes was the process of experiencing race, racism and masculinity in ways different to his home environment. Specifically, Andre was made aware of how his status as a Black young man from 'non-affluent' circumstances made him stand out at college, whereas it was taken-for-granted in his predominantly minority, and predominantly lower-income neighbourhood:

> The independence is astonishing yet overwhelming at the same time. I didn't truly appreciate the safety net and bubble that was High School until I started my first year of college all the way in Massachusetts. I've dealt with depression from severe cultural shock and transitional period that is the first semester of college. An Existentialist crisis for not knowing what my purpose in life is. The typical and abnormal situations that a Black-American millennial, humanist, feminist, philosophical, optimistic, realistic, cynical, pro-black, computer scientist, and anthropologist deals with in these contemporary times. There was severe growing pains as I progressed through adulthood one step at a time. I've grown significantly stronger as a result of it all… growing up in the Bronx where diversity from an ethnic point of view as vast as the eye can see. Attending (college) is a massive change to ask for any person of color who wants to

receive a quality education regardless of the finer points of their character. The limited social-mobility of coming from a non-social affluent family is a burden that weighs very heavy at times at well.

In spite of the turmoil of arriving at college—or perhaps because of it— Andre was still as committed to both and agentic, contingent, super-posed vision of the future as he had been at the end of high school:

> I've come to appreciate this statement: "You don't have to be great in order to start, but you have to start in order to be great." God, she, works in mysterious ways as well as other forces in the universe. I adamantly believe that I'm capable of forging my own destiny and path with my own soul however there are external forces that are contributing as well. I have not the slightest idea of what my future entails for the most part. I find myself at a crossroad because of that dilemma. I can't wait to find out however I've also come to appreciate that I can wait! Life doesn't have a script for the most part. It's frankly mostly going off of improvising.

When I caught up with him one year later still, in 2017, Andre was in Copenhagen on a year abroad experience, and planning to write his dissertation on black masculinity in business. As Andre put it best himself, 'Life is Straight Improv!', and it is perhaps Andre's ability to actively embrace the need for improvisation that allows him to entertain a critical, emergent logic of aspiration within, but also beyond doxic and habituated neoliberal logics of future achievement (Zipin et al. 2015).

## Conclusions: 4 Train from the Bronx to Manhattan

In this chapter, I have explored the spatial and temporal components of self-making as it takes place at the end of secondary education, and on the cusp of early adulthood. The aim of this chapter has been to explore how neoliberal discourse pervades the profoundly future-oriented range of daily activities that make up life at Bronx High School in New York City. I have also sought to reveal moments when the hegemony of a

neoliberal vision of the future is challenged by moments of partial resistance, challenge and critical reflection on the vicissitudes that lie beneath the school's mantra of *Sine Labore Nihil.* I hope to have shown that for young men in particular, visions of future masculinity are enveloped into visions of self-actualising, competitive individuals, resilient to rapacious change and focused on self-improvement. An important part of achieving this ideal or 'dream' future subjectivity is the process of remove or escape from the neighbourhood of the school. For some, The Bronx is seen to foster the kinds of dead-end, empty or non-existent futures that go against a neoliberal ideal of self-actualisation. Only at college and later in 'the City' can alternative visions of 'success' become reality, in turn allowing young men to fulfil imagined philanthropic destinies upon return to The Bronx. Like past (white, male) graduates of Bronx High, they want to give something back: but they must get rich first. However, Carlos reminds us that sometimes one can 'never forget where you're from': no matter how far one travels, the past can demand multiple futures, some of which may lead back to the old neighbourhood and to all the dangers and disappointments that it represents. Even in his current destination, far flung in Copenhagen, Andre reminds us of the existential trauma that comes with living out the realities of an idealised neoliberal future. Multiple, entangled versions of self-exist concurrently in this way: these 'men from Manhattan' will still also always be 'boys from the Bronx'.

One useful way to make sense of this complex reckoning of aspiration and masculinity, I have argued, is through a quantum metaphor of personhood. I use a metaphor of quantum personhood to suggest that multiple and seemingly mutually exclusive discourses of aspiration and masculinity may in fact intertwine in the everyday lives of young men at Bronx High. Some subtly challenge the extent to which neoliberal framings of aspiration can or should be accepted by young men as the 'natural' foundations for particular imaginings of the future framed in relation to masculinity. Constructions of masculinity are fused into neoliberal constructions of aspiration, and in the process entangled and uncertain imaginings of gendered futures are collapsed, made invisible or rendered tractable under the weight of a dominant, taken-for-granted neoliberal reckoning of what the future will look like.

For young men transitioning from boyhood in the Bronx to manhood in the wider world, wider popular and political concern for the 'youth of today' in this sense may reflect not only well-worn social anxiety about young people and their socialisation, but also genuinely novel questions of what 'youth' and 'adulthood' actually mean as stages in the life course in contemporary society. The complexity and import of these questions merits a suitable re-conceptualisation of this temporal realm of social identity—a rethinking of what it means to be young, to grow up and to be an adult (or to be in none or all of these categories, as we know them) in the shifting sands of the neoliberal present. I have argued that we need to better understand the changing significance of temporality and futurity as aspects of gendered social identity for young people.

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# 4

# Girl Trouble: Not the Ideal Neoliberal Subject

Michele Paule

In this chapter, I take as a starting point the figure of the 'successful girl' as she appears in popular and educational discourses as the ideal neoliberal subject (Harris 2004; McRobbie 2008), one that simultaneously reproduces and elides entrenched structures of privilege and power (Baker 2010) within a particular context that produces her as successful—that of 'gifted and talented' policy in the English education system of the early twenty-first century. My interest lies in ways in which individual girls make sense of their lives in school contexts where they are enjoined to be successful within identifiably neoliberal parameters.

The late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries saw a burgeoning interest in researching the conditions neoliberalism creates for girls, and in the lived experiences of girls within such conditions (Mendick 2013). This is evident in proliferation of studies focusing on issues of agency, of possibility, and of limitation that create both the 'successful girl' of neoliberal, postfeminist optimism and her shadow twin, the 'at risk' girl

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(Gonick 2006; Ringrose 2012). Such studies seek to understand better the relationship between girls-as-subjects and the social structures that shape their experiences; they contribute to the challenging of the (neo)-liberal view of the subject as the rational, knowing and self-reflexive constructer of life plans (Harris and Dobson 2015).

The possibilities and limitations that shape girls' lives in the UK underwent a variety of changes from the mid-twentieth century, following the success of feminism in removing some key legal and cultural barriers to equality (Gonick 2006; Harris and Dobson 2015) and the changes in global markets and employment patterns that saw more women enter the workforce and form new consumer markets (ONS 2013). These elements combined in creating a shift towards recognising girls and women as potentially self-determining subjects (Johnson 1993). The late 1990s in particular saw the rise of new manifestations of feminised success in the popular proliferation of 'girl power' and 'alpha girl' discourses, offering new forms of feminism which were pleasurable, individualised and blame-free (Hollows and Moseley 2006), based on the assumptions that gender equality had already been achieved and feminism need only be invoked in the cause of individual fulfilment (McRobbie 2008). Since the 2008 global financial crisis, neoliberal policies have become more firmly entrenched under the flag of austerity. The exhortations to girls to become more resilient and more successfully self-managing have become more insistent at the same time as the burden of austerity lies more heavily on women's shoulders (Allen 2016; De Henau and Reed 2013; Mendick et al. 2018).

The rise of new girlhood discourses is historically contingent with the increasing neoliberalisation of education policy in the UK. This saw the liberal view of education—with its broad objective of 'the development of the common and distinctively human capacities to be exercised in all aspects of life' (Crittenden 2006)—give way to one in which students are conceived of foremost as human capital and as future contributors to the nation's capacity to participate in global economies (Patrick 2013). The resonances between neoliberalism and postfeminism are complex and multi-layered, but have been usefully summarised by Gill and Scharff (2011) as underpinned by their shared model of self-responsibility, by their construction of the subject as autonomous and

freely choosing and, significantly, by the ways in which both suggest how 'to a much greater extent than men, women are required to work on and transform the self, to regulate every aspect of their conduct, and to present all their actions as freely chosen'. 'Could it be', they ask, with a stylistic nod to global postfeminist heroine *par excellence*, Carrie Bradshaw,[1] 'that neoliberalism is always already gendered, and that women are constructed as its ideal subjects?' (p. 7).

At the turn of the millennium, there are certainly indications of culture being seen as increasingly feminised—these emerge in policy discourse, in the popular imaginary, and in education. For example, in 1997 Demos, a cross-party think tank specialising in social policy, produced a report entitled *Tomorrow's Women*. Its authors state that 'Women's importance in society is set to rise … women will soon make up the majority of the workforce and Britain is becoming increasingly shaped by feminised values' (Wilkinson and Howard 1997, p. 8). The 'feminisation' of school cultures was an increasingly common narrative in the late 1990s as girls began to overtake boys in public examination performance. This provoked not only celebration of the apparent confirmation that feminism had accomplished a key goal in countering the patriarchal nature of schools (Bernstein 1977), but also acute cultural anxieties (Ringrose 2013): In popular accounts, the success of girls was positioned in causal opposition to the failure of boys. It was frequently ascribed to supposedly 'feminised' school curricula in which the diligence, self-management and co-operation fostered by coursework are seen to favour girls and to disadvantage boys, whose more mercurial brilliance is better suited to the vigour and challenge of exams (Francis and Skelton 2005; Elwood 2010; Jackson and Nyström 2014). However, whether celebratory or anxious, the school data that prompted both these kinds of responses tended to provoke simplified assumptions about gender as a category and to conceal entrenched differences in performance between the privileged and the disadvantaged

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[1]Carrie Bradshaw is the lead character of the HBO drama *Sex and the City*. A writer, Carrie in each episode poses a rhetorical question framing a contemporary problem for the privileged postfeminist woman.

(Ringrose and Epstein 2017). Not all boys were doing badly and by no means were all girls doing well (Featherstone et al. 2010; Ringrose 2012). Even among those girls who are the supposed beneficiaries of feminised school cultures, there are complexities and exclusions hidden within the optimistic simplicity of 'successful girl' narratives (Ringrose 2007),[2] and tensions with the ideal competitive subject of neoliberalism (Foucault 2008).

## 'Gifted and Talented' Policy and Governmentality

There is a particular 'success' discourse surrounding 'gifted and talented' policy, expressed via specific terminologies, identificatory measures and school practices introduced into the UK education system by Tony Blair's New Labour government. The production of 'gifted' identities for pupils in schools provides opportunities for examining not only the claims of a particular neoliberal policy to improve individual life chances, but also how it 'gets inside' the individual so identified through its formalised creation of a 'successful' identity, and through its interventions and monitoring practices.[3]

The recognition of high ability in students, by teachers and via formal testing, has long been bound up in the sedimented gendered, classed and racialised performances that enable or inhibit certain kinds of recognition—the kinds of performativity described by Judith Butler (1997). However, the 'gifted and talented' pupil, identified and placed on a register through the operations of state policy, is also called into being through an official, formalised process, as in Austin's (1975) perlocutionary act which simultaneously produces the thing it

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[2]I explore these narratives as they circulate in schools and in media and online cultures in *Girlhood, Schools and Media: Discourses of the Achieving Girl in Schools, On Screen and Online* (Paule 2016).

[3]This addresses address concerns raised by Hook (2001) and Gill and Scharff (2011) in focusing in on the 'mentality' as well as the 'government' aspects of Foucault's (2009) neoliberal governmentality.

pronounces. In schools, registers of 'gifted and talented' pupils in year group cohorts and subjects were used to track progress, to report back to the government, to manage pupils' transitions between schools or between stages of schooling, and to ration access to certain kinds of learning and extra-curricular experiences. The newly pronounced 'gifted and talented' identities were carried beyond school gates into families and communities as letters were sent to parents to inform them that their child had been endowed with this status. 'Gifted and talented' policies and practices thus provide rich evidence of the textual, discursive construction of human subjectivity in Foucauldian terms, as they combine to create and make knowable a particular category of human (Soyland and Kendall 1997, p. 11).

## Who Are the 'Successful Girls'?

The study on which this chapter draws involved interviewing 46 girls aged thirteen to fifteen drawn from the 'gifted and talented' registers in a variety of state comprehensive schools across England; these included mixed and single-sex, suburban and urban schools, with diverse pupil intakes and differing standings in local and national league tables. It also draws on data collected from 'smart girl' participants in a purpose-built Web discussion forum involving 134 participants. The diversity of the schools and their pupil populations is important to note. The original 'gifted and talented' register guidelines obliged schools to identify the top 5–10% of pupils within their own cohorts, and this 5–10% had to be broadly representative of the school population as a whole. This local norm-referencing means that being identified as 'gifted and talented' is highly context-dependent: a girl so identified in one school where average attainment is lower or where girls and boys perform equally, would not necessarily be on the register if she moved to a nearby school with higher attainment or where the proportional quota of girls, or of a minority group to which she may belong, was already filled. Such context-dependency calls attention to the fluidity and instability of 'gifted' identities, even were the validity of the testing and identification

regimes that produce them to be established beyond debate.[4] The girls in this study then, are formally identified as 'successful' within particular contextual terms, some of which they demonstrate a keen awareness of, and others they accept uncritically, as I discuss below.

## 'Gifted and Talented' Education Policy in England: Global Positioning and Governmentality

Before considering its operation in terms of girls' experiences and subjectivities, it is worth spending some time providing a context for the introduction of 'gifted and talented' education policy in the UK as a particular manifestation of neoliberal success discourse.

Education is central to the neoliberal self-improvement narrative, in which schooling is a key site where traditional barriers such as class, gender and 'race' are considered dissolved and the only limitations are those of aspiration and commitment. Within this narrative, it is a lack of skills and credentials—or a commitment to attaining them—that holds back the individual, rather than economic, social or cultural disadvantage (Patrick 2013, p. 2). 'Gifted and talented' policies were promoted as a means of addressing disadvantage and promoting social mobility through supporting the acquisition of high-level credentials and became a leitmotif for New Labour's vision of a neoliberal meritocracy.

In his election campaign to become Prime Minister, Tony Blair offered a new model of social justice that was to be achieved through social

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[4]See, for example, White (2006), who traces the historical roots of Victorian and contemporary intelligence testing in schools to cultures of Puritanism both in the UK and the US, in their notions of pre-destination, their privileging of a particular type of logic, and their doctrines of the salvation of the elect. Also Tomlinson (2008) who argues that what she terms the 'mental testing movement' of the twentieth century with its 'ever increasing refinements to tests of intelligence, ability, aptitudes and competences' provided both justification and self-fulfilling prophecy for the successful middle classes (p. 69). Such works expose the processes and contingencies by which the science of ability testing became integral to the design of education systems, policies and practices.

mobility and individual aspiration. 'Education, education, education' was his mantra (Blair 1996). His vision drew heavily on the thinking of 'third way' sociologist Anthony Giddens' conception of newly mobile citizens released from traditional fetters of class, imbued with aspiration, capable of reflexivity, and possessing the necessary determination which would combine to secure well-being in the place of former state support structures (Giddens 1998). The state, through education, would provide access to the necessary skills and knowledge in the new economy to ensure this. In 1999, the 'gifted and talented' strand of education policy was first implemented via Labour's 'Excellence in Cities' programme targeting urban schools in areas of disadvantage (DERA 2005). At the same time, the previous Conservative government's Assisted Places Scheme—intended as a means of sponsoring the meritorious poor into private education and thereby promoting social mobility—was abolished.[5]

'Gifted and talented' policy formed part of a raft of educational programmes that created a specific address to both the anxious middle classes and the aspirant working classes (Tomlinson 2008). This was achieved in part through its continuation of certain aspects of Conservative education policy, namely its commitment to central control of pedagogy and to monitoring through testing while encouraging competition, local markets and 'parentocracy' (Reay 2008, p. 640). These strands of intent are neatly encapsulated in a single paragraph in a 2001 government White Paper reflecting on the first four years of the New Labour regime:

> Our Excellence in Cities programme…is designed to raise levels of achievement in all urban schools by targeting resources in areas of need and by finding new ways to solve historic problems. A key part was increasing diversity between and within schools, so that schools are better able to reflect parental preferences and develop the talents of each individual pupil to the full. (p. 15)

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[5]This scheme had provided funding for eligible children scoring highly in entrance exams to attend independent schools. Costing over £800,000,000 or approximately £10,000 per pupil, by the time it folded (Queen's Speech 1997), it was perceived as both expensive and elitist: most of the 80,000 children benefitting were middle class and white (Edwards et al. 1989).

'Gifted and talented' policies simultaneously assured middle-class parents that their children would be provided for, and reassured Labour's traditional support base in the initial geographical focus on areas of disadvantage. The success of the appeal to middle-class parents was soon evident in the degree of over-representation of advantaged students on school 'gifted and talented' registers and in the disproportionately low representation of working-class and minority students (Gillborn 2006; Crozier et al. 2008).

The 'gifted and talented' programme ran formally—that is to say, with specific state policy directives and dedicated funding— from 1999 to 2010. While there is no longer ring-fenced funding, selection by ability continues and indeed has been increased via the fragmentation of the schools system in the name of choice and competition. This includes the resurgence of grammar schools, the creation of 'free schools' and the widespread semi-privatisation of state schools as business-sponsored academies that permit selection by a variety of means (Academies Commission 2013). While the Conservative/LibDem coalition of 2010 dropped the 'gifted and talented' terminology in favour of 'high ability' early in their administration (Smithers and Robinson 2012), and the current government uses the term 'most able', to date many schools still adhere to 'gifted and talented' practices of formal identification, and of distinct curricular provision and extra-curricular enrichment for pupils so identified.[6]

Under neoliberal regimes, definitions of educational ability appear to both recognise and discount the role of structural advantage in producing success, paradoxically representing ability as naturalised but its absence as resolvable. These definitions are characteristic of the pre-austerity New Labour regime, and the Conservative-led governments that superseded it. Consider, for example, Tony Blair's speech at a Labour Party Conference in 1996:

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[6]Many schools' websites continue to promote their 'Gifted and Talented' provision to prospective parents.

> We believe that people should be able to rise by their talents, not by their birth or advantages of privilege. We understand that people are not all born into equal circumstances, so one role of state education is to open up opportunities for all, regardless of their background. This means we need to provide high standards of basics for all, but also recognise the different abilities of different children.

David Cameron's message to the Conservative Party Conference in 2013 echoes Blair with his claim that 'opportunity is not an accident of birth, but a birth right'. Both endorse a view of inborn 'ability' at the same time as rejecting accident of birth as a determinant of success. It is important to understand these discursive underpinnings of 'gifted and talented' policy, for they play out in schools in ways that offer youth a view on their *abilities* as naturalised, but at the same indicate that their *success* is a matter of hard work and taking advantage of educational opportunities. Here it is possible to see a key characteristic of neoliberal subjectivity identified by Foucault—that of natural limitation always being surmountable through the intervention of technology and/or activity (2008, p. 226)—circulate through the domains of political vision, national policy, schools' practice, and in the ways in which individual pupils come to understand themselves and others.

## The Girls in the Market and the Market in the Girls

In neoliberal discourses of education, conceptions of ability in children are positioned in terms of their economic potential. Pupils are transformed into human capital, their learning as labour. Indeed, the National Academy of Gifted and Talented Youth[7] proposed a national

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[7]Run for the DfES by Warwick University, The National Academy of Gifted and Talented Youth provided extra-curricular activities for secondary school pupils (state and private) deemed to be in top 5% nationally. It ran from 2002 until 2007. *The Guardian*'s John Crace provides a useful summary of the issues for schools around the Academy and the wider Gifted and Talented initiative, although some of the statistics tend to the apocryphal: https://www.theguardian.com/education/2007/aug/28/highereducation.schools.

model headed with 'Optimisation of Human Capital' to a House of Commons Select Committee enquiry (2010, p. 15). The witnesses at this enquiry justified the investment in such programmes in terms of creating an international intellectual elite that will future-proof the nation's global competitiveness. This discourse carries through from New Labour to the Conservative government, so David Cameron tells the party faithful at conference in 2013 that 'In this world where brains matter more, where technologies shape our lives, where no-one is owed a living…the most powerful natural resource we have is our people'. A 2013 Ofsted report states that:

> in an increasingly competitive world…if we are to succeed as an economy and society, we have to make more of our most able young people. We need them to become the political, commercial and professional leaders of tomorrow…we need to make sure that our most able students do as well academically as those of our main economic competitors. (pp. 4–5)

In schools, 'gifted and talented' initiatives bring discourses of individual achievement and personal goals into alignment with social and economic objectives, through exhorting students to conceive of themselves as ambitious, competitive subjects with responsibility for their own destinies (Bradford and Hey 2007, p. 597), and whose learning is a form of labour investment in their future productivity (Harris 2017).

In the school interviews, it was clear that girls saw themselves as part of this competitive market and adopted its vocabulary. In one school, thirteen-year-old Amina talked anxiously about the '*job market*', worrying, '*that there's gonna be more people out there in the workforce that want the same job,*' and describing how '*it makes you feel like, OK, what if I try so hard and do my best but I don't actually get where I want to be?*' Some girls described how their induction into Year 7 made them worry about not preparing themselves properly for competition later in life: Sonia related her response to her head teacher's talk on her first day at the school: '*That's what got me working. I was just petrified. I walked out of that assembly and I was like 'Oh my God! Oh my God!' Since then, I've worked.*'

The girls also recognised that, in the same way that they themselves are encouraged to develop a conception of the 'successful' self as

competitive and individualist, so too are others, and this makes them uneasy. Tanya described her anxieties over her relationships with future colleagues who will see her as the competition, and over the workplace characterised by hierarchical rather than collegiate relationships:

> If you're smart then you're probably more likely to get a better job and things…more likely to, um, be more successful when you're older. But then, that's…it's good stuff but then, I dunno it's just like… the people in your workplace will be like the same as you, kinda like, will want the same things as you. But then there's other people who are like, might be above you. Who will be like, kind of looking down on you and then…so it's like… I dunno.

Alison agreed with her: she was ambivalent at best about the 'successful-woman-as-role model' discourse that is characteristic of neoliberal feminisms such Sheryl Sandberg's *Lean In* (2013) and its girl-orientated younger sister, the 'Ban Bossy' programme (2014). Her comment is particularly interesting in its recognition that successful women are penalised for their success. This runs directly counter to postfeminist narratives of gender equality in the workplace as achieved, and to 'successful girl' discourses that tell her she can grow up to be/do anything she wants.
   Her reply to Tanya was as follows:

> I dunno. I think that, um, smart women are looked up to in the workplace, like, people … try to use them like to try and do better as well. But then like they're kind of like despised as well because…you don't want them…because they have the same ambitions in the same job. You don't want them to get the better job because that's a disadvantage against you because it's kind of like dog-eat-dog, so if you don't get it you kind of miss out so you despise them sometimes.

Alison's anxieties illustrate ways in which a dominant neoliberal success discourse—that of competition—may be incompatible with other kinds of well-being. Her fear of being despised is matched by a fear that she may become somebody who despises others. Here we see at work the 'socially corrosive ethic of competitive self-interest' underpinning neoliberal meritocracy as described by Jo Littler (2013, p. 54). There

are no other possible roles than winner and loser on offer. This same argument is being played out in feminist philosophy, in exploration of the claims to a new 'compatibilism' within neoliberal feminisms. Such claims assume that tensions between feminism and competition are resolved and that, rather than implicating women in the perpetuation of domination, greater representation in privileged positions is a means to achieving change (Cawston 2016, p. 206). The examples above illustrate how the language and self-conceptions of the neoliberal market have 'got inside' the girls, but also suggest that the colonisation of the girls' sense of selfhood and their visions of successful lives is not complete. This incompleteness is interesting in its suggestion that while the girl may be the 'ideal neoliberal subject' insofar as neoliberal discourse aligns with that of postfeminism, there are irreconcilable tensions with the competitive heart of neoliberal subjectivity.

## Meritocracy and the Daughters of Neoliberalism

'Gifted and talented' policies have at their core a belief in meritocracy— or, a system in which individuals are apparently rewarded according to what they can *do* rather than who they *are*. This concept is as problematic as it is chimerical (Tomlinson 2008; Littler 2017). Its core assumptions are highly debatable in themselves (i.e. the existence of essential, measurable merit), unfair in those assumptions (i.e. that those fortunate enough to be born with innate talent should alone have the means to access a good life) and are dependent on systems that can deliver distributive justice and equality of opportunity to achieve social mobility (Liu 2011): those very structures that neoliberal government seeks to dismantle.

Littler (2017) provides an incisive summary of how the popularisation of meritocracy provides both a cornerstone and a smokescreen for neoliberalism's promotion of gross inequalities:

> Meritocracy, as a potent blend of an essentialised notion of 'talent', competitive individualism and belief in social mobility, is mobilised to both disguise and gain consent for the economic inequalities wrought through neoliberalism.

The extent to which this supposedly meritocratic system can work to benefit the already advantaged while concealing its own inherent injustices can be seen in 'gifted and talented' policy discourses that normalise its appeal to middle-class parents, while at the same time shifting the burden of blame for some pupils' failure onto working-class parents, and, as they grow, onto children themselves. New Labour's mobilisation of discourses of individuation, blame and aspiration can be seen in the language in which it sets out its aims in its first education White Paper, *Excellence in Schools*:

> To overcome economic and social disadvantage and to make equality of opportunity a reality we must strive to eliminate, and never excuse, under-achievement in the most deprived parts of our country. Educational attainment encourages aspiration and self-belief in the next generation, and it is through family learning, as well as scholarship through formal education, that success will come. (DfEE 1997)

The same discourse appears more starkly and the 'othering' more extreme in David Cameron's speech to the Conservative party in 2013:

> It's OK for the children who have parents reading them stories every night – and that's great … but what about the ones at the back of the class, in the chaotic home, in the home of the drug addict or alcoholic?

A focus on aspiration frames disadvantage as at root a cultural problem rather than an economic problem. Within neoliberal education narratives, the role of parents as partners and co-educators through provision of learning environments, resources and appropriate attitudes is now central (Reay 2008). This has implications for the perceived locus of failure, which shifts from structural inequalities to fall on the shoulders of working-class parents (Lucey et al. 2003, p. 289).

The government's investment in the idea of the individual as reflexive and resilient neoliberal subject is also manifest: unpicking some of the narratives reveals patterns of the 'right' kind of parents working with the education system to provide opportunity for the individual pupil as the ultimate producer of her own destiny.

The reproduction of discourses of parenting, of class, and of self-responsibility emerged in girls' accounts of their own successes and of the failures of others. Parents were described as providing both structures and opportunities. These include formal learning at home and the provision of cultural experiences such as museum and theatre visits. Restrictions on media use also appear important, both old media (television) and new (phones and laptops), as well as support with school work. Shameem said that success starts with '*how your family brings you up to learn, and how they help you when you're learning, like in school.*' Sally offered this account of her family's role in producing her high attainment:

> I was taught to read and write before I went to school, so it all kept me motivated…There was a certain routine when I got home…like I've never been used to going home, sitting in front of the TV in my school uniform and not doing my homework. It was always, 'Come on then! Take off your uniform and do your homework

Sally's description also conjures the spectre of the 'other' kind of laissez-faire parenting, in which TV is unrestricted, homework unmonitored and moral slovenliness indicated through failure to change clothing.

Girls whose parents do not take up the mantle of family educator in this way described themselves as assuming the responsibility themselves for their success. However, ways in which they experienced that responsibility varied according to their class position and to the kinds of educational discourse to which they had access. When working-class interviewee Sonia declared '*My parents don't really care if I do homework or not, but I still do it*' she did so with a blend of pride in her self-management and shame in her parents' lack of concern. In contrast, two of the middle-class interviewees rather proudly invoked an anti-authoritarian parenting model which sits more comfortably with liberal rather than neoliberal education discourse: Dora described how, '*There's all these parents' that work their kids really intensively and my parents don't really care if I get an F or an A, and that's helped because I don't feel pressured*'. Lydia concurred, saying, '*the more pressure, the more somebody hammers on to you about doing something, the more you just don't wanna do it*'. While both Dora and Lydia

presented themselves as self-managing subjects, they could do so in a way that attached no blame to their parents; in fact, Lydia presented this kind of parenting as ethically superior. Their ability to frame their parents' attitudes within a recognisable alternative to the dominant neoliberal education discourse frees them from the shame of parental inadequacy that is attached to Lydia's experience.

## Working Hard and Deserving Success

The idea that girls' achievement is produced by application rather than inspiration has long held sway in the wider imaginary[8] and this association of diligence with girls' success is a key seam of alignment with the successful, self-managing subject of neoliberalism. This means that school discourses of meritocracy can weigh more heavily on successful girls than on their male counterparts, as the kinds of subject positions associated with effortless, erratic success, or with non-compliant behaviours, are not as easily available to them. In their navigations around the 'hard-working girl' trope, some of the girls offered a challenge to the idea that their success is produced by diligence alone. For example, success came quite easily to Sally, yet she was aware that her status on the 'gifted and talented' register was understood as tied to effort:

> It's really weird actually because I'm supposed to be 'gifted and talented' but if I like, sit back and think over the last couple of months I don't even know if I push myself that hard and apparently, I did well and I feel like… I didn't feel like I put like, my whole self into it because I don't really know what it's like to work really really hard…

Others described the hard-working girl identity as one which enabled them to balance the competing demands of academic success and femininity, through avoiding the effortless success model associated with

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[8]I explore the historical foundations of contemporary accounts of gendered learning in 'Dinosaur Discourses: Taking Stock of Gendered Learning Myths' (Paule 2015).

masculinity (Renold and Allan 2006). The appearance of 'working hard' can also act as a kind of performance smokescreen—for example, Jurda described how she was able to get work done quickly in class, then avoid further teacher demands while furtively occupying herself with something she enjoyed more: '*most people think I study a lot, but instead I love to read fiction.*'

Girls demonstrated awareness that diligence and compliance are central to their identification as successful in the classroom. Sally made this clear in her descriptions of how, for other girls,

> it's like, almost all right for them to not work…It's that they can have a bit of, um, a muck-about and if you muck about even a little bit……it's like, oh my god! She mucked about! It's supposedly like you're genetically programmed to never do anything wrong

For those whose academic success is performed in less complaint ways, that nonetheless do 'muck about', the risks of non-conformity are illustrated in the experiences of Kelly, a working-class interviewee. She described how:

> I'm not an angel and that. I get sent out a bit and I talk a lot and stuff like that so people don't think I'm clever, but I am. In my maths lesson I get sent out nearly every lesson but I don't know why 'cause I'm still quite good at it

Dora concurred, reporting that '*A few people got moved down (from the 'gifted and talented' set) because they had bad behaviour, but they were really smart. And it just seemed a bit unfair*'.

These strategies for managing 'successful girl' identities—teacher-pleasing, adopting compensatory feminine behaviours, appearing to work hard, flouting behavioural expectations—are not equally available to all girls. The hard-working 'good' girl is particularly associated with white, middle-class identities (Archer 2005) but carries more negative associations for some minority groups who may be perceived as overly passive (Archer and Francis 2006). Non-compliance is associated with working-class pupils' resistance to the cultures of schooling

in which historically they have failed (Hey 1997; Archer 2012). Such strategies are not equal in the risks they represent. While the hard-working compliant girl may risk social censure from her peers in the short term—for example, Anna described not wanting to '*act smart in case a certain group of girls don't like this*'—the risks for the girl who is continually sent out of class or barred from top sets are more significant and potentially far-reaching.

Some interviewees gave accounts of success and failure that reproduced morality discourses attached to hard work and self-improvement, reinforcing neoliberal tenets of success as a matter of aspiration and application. Isobel maintained that '*No matter what you are you can get what you want*'; Tanya, that you will succeed '*if you kind of believe in yourself and believe you can do it*'. When I asked the girls if they thought it possible for anyone in the school to be as successful as them, they agreed. Adele said that some of her peers '*could be really smart if they pushed themselves*'. Nicki offered the following mini-narrative:

> You came to a point and you wanted to try harder. To be like, where the high people were. Like for example if you was in a lower set in Year 7 and you look up to the people and you try and work harder to get to that point

But when I asked her if this story was about her she laughed and replied, '*No! I was already in top sets.*' This suggests how ideas of meritocracy work in schools to provide pupils with accounts of success and failure that allow them to see themselves as deserving and others as less so, even when these accounts do not accord with the evidence of their own experience.

The girls struggled to express awareness of the operations of class in their schools and tended to frame it both euphemistically and in ways that reproduce neoliberal stigmatisation. Holly described how peer identification means that '*there are some people who don't work as hard as each other…they don't work as hard, like with that group of people*'; Poppy accounted for under-achievement as a matter of individual valuing of 'cool' over 'school', saying, '*there are some girls I guess that don't…that probably want to seem more cool than care about their, like, education*'.

Sally recognises a link between class identity and school success, and expresses it as '*certain people who are really clever but they're of a certain social group where they're supposed to be the 'muck about' people*'.

The 'hard-working girl' narrative provides few explanations for failure and occludes the role of advantage in producing success. For some of the girls in the study, there are others among the participants whose 'successful' identities are less secure, this is problematic. Where they have invested in the hard-working success model they have no explanations for their classmates' failure other than individual inadequacy. Bradford and Hey (2007) describe 'success' discourses in neoliberal education systems in the UK as representing,

> a new twist on redistribution in the sense that the discursive tactics entailed seek to inscribe young people from disadvantaged backgrounds with confidence and resilience in the face of psychological and social pressures. (p. 601)

This entails the development of what they term 'psychological capital', of which a key characteristic is the desire to improve the self. Failure therefore implies a failure in appropriate desires or in carrying through such desires into reality, rather than in the structures necessary to foster success. In some of the girls interviewed, there is evidence of the failure of this 'psychological capital' model to inscribe resilience. Farida describes her ambition to become a lawyer and recognises that it is 'really hard work'. She contemplates not achieving this goal by saying '*I don't think I have the ability to do it*'. Living in one of London's poorest boroughs, Farida learned English as a second language and performed well enough to gain a place on the school's 'gifted and talented' register. However, the neoliberal self-improvement narrative stresses success as the outcome of individual effort and aspiration. It does not offer her an account in which she might understand her not having attained the grades she wants and therefore plan her life narrative, outside of a failure of her own 'ability'. Amina asked the group: '*OK, what if I try so hard and do my best but I don't actually get where I want to be? And then it's just…yeah*' [holds hands up in gesture of defeat]. The other girls had no answer for her.

## Choosing Not to Invest

The previous examples explore negotiations with taking up the 'successful girl' subject position; an example I found particularly compelling emerged from the conversation with two girls who refused to create life-plans according to the neoliberal self-improvement model. They were 'successful girls' insofar as they achieved good grades; they had further 'earned' their places on the 'gifted and talented' register through their diligence and compliant behaviour. However, while they seemed secure in their academic achievements and professed to enjoy school, they refused to conceive of their work as investment of labour in their futures, and to develop the kinds of 'psychological capital' described by Bradford and Hey above. They are of interest because both were working class and are typical of the cohort among which the school wished to foster aspiration. Further, both had been identified as potential beneficiaries of careers service intervention, which marked them as causing particular concern. Under New Labour, careers advice in schools was delivered via the Connexions service, which was tasked to ensure transitions into work or further/higher education particularly among the disadvantaged, the at-risk and the undecided (Morris et al. 2001). It was more unusual for pupils identified as 'gifted and talented' to be referred, although when the service was established anxieties were expressed that,

> failing to recognise that 'academically able young people also need access to guidance and support to make successful transitions' would lead, in future, to increased levels of drop-out from both further and higher education. (p. 30)

Kara described her response to being targeted by the service:

> I saw the Connexions person, the guidance counsellor. And he um, he was trying to, like, give me options that were like better for my grades. That were more…that would be like better jobs than what I actually wanted, just 'cause I could get them…cause I'm a high achiever But, like, I don't really wanna do that

Her friend Nicki offered a similar story: '*Yeah. I went to the Connexions guy…and he gave me all these options. And it kind of put me off.*'

While Connexions was abolished by the Conservative-led coalition government in 2011 and replaced by in-school provision, the principle of the less-advantaged pupils being the chief beneficiaries was continued. University-bound pupils were assumed to have parents who could advise them and to be able to access wider networks of information and support. This was borne out in the study, with more privileged girls drawing on family narratives of university life, proclaiming the benefits of gap years, telling stories of family members' experiences and offering parental perspectives on university and course choices. Some rated their parents' expertise over that of their teachers, and a dominant narrative among this group was the expectation that they would not only participate in but would enjoy university. A further group of girls was more dependent on the school for advice, less knowing about what university life might entail and more anxious about its risks and benefits. Some asked how many years a degree might take, and whether students were allowed to live at home. Accumulating debt and uncertainty about financial benefits in terms of future earnings were a source of anxiety, as was the amount of work a degree might entail. Nonetheless, these girls too saw university as an essential stage in a prescribed successful life-course, and one for which the risks of omission far outweighed those of pursuit. Shameem described the steps as a kind of a mantra: '*It's like, primary school, high school, college, university*' and Sally feared that if she didn't go, and go straight from school, '*I'll never get anywhere. So I really wanna get things right, like, in order*'. Sonia (who had earlier described the fear instilled by her head teacher in Year 7) was aware of the stigmatising judgement attaching to those who do not properly aspire, and sees the government as the source of this:

> I think I'm pretty sure I want to go to university and like pass A levels and stuff…because I think, these days, like government requirements to get a job, they judge you more on like if you've been to university. If you haven't really been to university it's like…I dunno

Set against these narratives of entitlement and anxiety, Kara and Nikki's refusal of social mobility can be understood as a refusal of the losses it entails rather than the gains it promises. As Littler (2013, p. 55) observes, the language of meritocracy is about moving 'upwards' in financial and class terms' but does not necessarily entail 'existing in a "better" or "happier" culture'. And while the upward movement is invariably away from working-class cultures that under neoliberalism have become locations of cultural shame and personal stigma (Tyler 2013; Walker 2014), for working-class girls this movement may represent loss in terms of family and community, as well as psychological harm in terms of the shame that adheres to working-class identities (Lucey et al. 2003; Hey 2003). Such a restriction of success to individual wealth and status constitutes is at the core of the problematic neoliberal vision of ways education can contribute to the 'good' life.

## Conclusion

In offering a particular vision of success, 'gifted and talented' policies can be seen to reaffirm discourses of gendered difference, of human capital, and of classed 'ability' while preserving and promulgating the comforting meritocratic myth. The creation of the specific identity of 'gifted and talented' in schools, its underpinning assumptions; its language; the technologies of registers and reporting, and the practices of grouping and career counselling, all work to shape the social and material conditions for pupils so identified, and create new subject positions by which they are interpellated as gifted (or not), meritorious (or underserving) and successful (or failing).

In concluding this chapter, I return to Gill and Scharff's (2011) call for more considerations of the 'mentality' aspects of neoliberal governmentality. I have offered examples that make it possible to see the 'government' get inside the subject in a range of ways—in the direct transfer of the language of economic policy to the pupil through exhortations in school assemblies; in the more subtle incursions of discourses of supportive parenting; and in the divide-and-conquer workings of differentiated discourses of aspiration to higher education. These examples, however, only give a partial account; others, from girls who do not fully buy into the

'successful girl' subject position, offer the possibility of alternatives. Not all of these alternatives are necessarily or knowingly resistant; it is great deal to expect that they should be so, and we should attend to Harris and Dobson's (2015, p. 146) caution against placing the loaded expectation of resistance onto the next generation of girls in the hope that they will be more impervious, more knowing, more capable of instigating change than were we. And as Gonick et al. (2009, p. 6) observe, girls' agency is 'practiced within normative social, economic and political processes' that shape their lives and selfhoods. Some of the girls find alternatives within complicity—they do the school work and the identity work—but they also recognise the constraints and manipulate or evade them, for example, those girls who use the hard-working identity as camouflage to give themselves time/space for other pursuits. Others adopt class and culturally specific forms of resistance: for example, the girls who refuse to adopt the gendered and classed behaviours expected of them; the girls who take pride in their parents' dissent; and the girls who are unwilling to forfeit community and connectedness for individualism and status.

It is tempting to romanticise some of this refusal, not least if one is coming from the position of a middle-aged academic who, as working-class girl, did not refuse the lures of aspiration. It is also important to keep in mind the psychological costs of aspiration, in terms of insecurity of identity and the shame that attaches to working-class origins in many middle-class educational and professional cultures. Our challenge is to offer alternative narratives in which learning is not valued solely as an economic investment and to create cultures in our schools and universities where success is less bound up in class, gender, less shaped by individualism and competition.[9] As Naomi Klein (2017) reminds us, 'There were always other stories, ones that insisted that money is not what's valuable, and that all of our fates are intertwined with one another'; it is these stories that should be brought to the fore—and the strategies to make them realisable—as we create the conditions for life beyond neoliberalism.

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[9]A HoC Select Committee enquiry report on the 'Gifted and Talented' programme includes the observation from the Master of an Oxford college, that successful students have no ambitions to enter public service in any way, but rather they aspire to make their fortunes in the financial sector (2010, p. 5).

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# Part II

## The University Under Neoliberalism

**5**

# Paying for Success "Outside Your World": Antagonising Neoliberal Higher Education

**Louise Livesey**

This chapter builds three interrelated arguments about the impacts of neoliberalism within higher education on those (of us) within it and on the society it claims to serve. First, the specific contemporary formations of neoliberalism did not arise as a *tabula rasa* in the late 1970s and early 1980s but rather rely on and are deeply entwined with entrenched conservative social positions (whilst claiming not to be). This neoliberal-conservative nexus maintains particular (and familiar) power arrangements and governs how we fit, or don't, within neoliberal institutions, focusing on higher education institutions. Arising from this is the second argument that neoliberalism is a form of antagonistic politics which actually relies on systemic eradication of difference from an expected and idealised "fitting body". This systemic eradication is masked within contemporary institutions by ontological claims as to why the familiar power arrangements persist and why creating greater equality would be detrimental, both laying claim to "common sense" as the foundation of

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its arguments. Finally, this piece will further assess the impact of neo-liberalism, and the price paid, in terms of how we come to understand ourselves and negotiate relationships where we are both subject to and object of neoliberalism. Higher education sees the *neoliberalisation of the self* in action, institutionally instilling its preconditions and collectively those within it are collusive in the forms of acceptance or resignation (rather than resistance). However, overlooked in previous discussions of resistance is discussion of the affective work demanded to maintain contradictory ways of existing inherent in the neoliberal university particularly that demanded of those who are "Othered" by not meeting the idealised "fitting body".

# Contemporary and Historical Formations of Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism is a form of political emphasis which shifted thinking from a focus on the state to the "inner workings of the subject" (Rottenberg 2013, p. 3) with its emphasis on "the extension of market (and market-like) forms of governance, rule and control across all spheres of social life" (Leitner et al. 2007, p. 28) including self-conception and normative assumptions about other social actors. Neoliberalism is, therefore, both extensional and intensional (Rottenberg 2013) in that it has changed both the formation of our external world and our internal experience of the world.

In its extensionality, neoliberalism objectifies us under discursive and practical regimes in which we are the units used and counted to assess our productive capacity under capitalist economics or as Wendy Brown (2015) terms it "economicization" of all things, including previously non-economic spheres and practices. "Economicization" means a "remaking [of] knowledge, form, content, conduct" objects and subjects as "economic" (Brown 2015, p. 31). Neoliberalism does not normatively rely on the use of coercive force to impose this remaking: as Soss et al. (2011) note "power may operate and be exercised in a variety of ways that do not require coercion… the political importance of [which…] lie precisely in its capacity to make coercive force

less necessary for the operation of unequal power relations" (p. 24). However, neoliberalism manifests itself through the most expedient means, whether that is coercion or seduction. Neoliberalism therefore operates through all faces of power (Lukes 2005), agenda-setting, consensus-building explicit buy-in and "ways of thought […] where it has become incorporated into the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in, and understand the world" (Harvey 2007, p. 3) and coercion. The intensionality of neoliberalism is this internal re-conceptualisation enacting "economisation" of the self which means we interpellate ourselves as subjects who "think and act like contemporary market subjects" (Brown 2015, p. 31) in realms outside where market, money and wealth are direct issues such as health, medicine, family, education, work and relationships. In short, we are thus remaking ourselves "always, only, and everywhere as homo oeconomicus" (Brown 2015, p. 31). As Hall and Lamont (2013, p. 4) say:

> neoliberalism inspired changes in the dominant scripts of personhood toward ones more focused on a person's individuality and productivity. It promoted new criteria of worth that encouraged many people to approach their lives as if they were "projects" […] people who had once derived self-respect from being "hard workers" found that was no longer enough: one now had to be a worker with high productivity deploying skills validated by the market, signalling worth and social membership through consumption

So we are disciplined by neoliberalism to reconfigure our sense of self as a "responsible self-investor and self-provider" (Brown 2015, p. 84) through a process of "responsibilization". Where previously we might have legitimately blamed employers for a lack of time, training or knowledge to complete a role, underpinned by a modernity-focused Fordist notion of the capitalisation of time and resource, now this becomes reformulated into irresponsibility on the part of the worker to not invest in themselves enough to make time (in what would previously have been considered leisure time but with the neoliberal technological creep is now simply unused potentially productive hours) and seek out the training for themselves.

As Foucault ([2004](#)) reminds us, neoliberalism did not simply arise in the 1980s as a political rebellion by the new-Right, but rather was a political discourse aimed at reshaping governmentality and subjectivity from the 1930s onwards, and gradually gained traction over the next five decades. What has not changed throughout the ascendancy of neoliberalism and in its contemporary formulations is the constituency of those who retain and maintain access to power and capitals. Brown argues the subjectivity required for success under contemporary neoliberalism demands being served (whether paid or unpaid) by others and "only performatively male members of a gendered sexual division of labour can even pretend to the kind of autonomy this subject requires" ([2015](#), p. 103). Similarly, we could substitute racialised, heteronormative, class-based and disablist divisions of labour into the requirements of this form of subjectivity, and indeed, we should consider them as intersecting through a matrix of domination (Hill Collins [1990](#)). The argument here is not that neoliberalism provides a shelter for pre-existing but separate forms of gendered, racialised, disablist, heteronormative power but rather than neoliberalism itself is reliant on, intrinsically bound up with and reproductive of these forms of power. Neoliberalism cannot be anything other than tied up with these power structures and it has, through its intensional reach, ensured the continuity of these power structures in both neoliberal advocates and dissenters.

Neoliberalism claims that any similarity of those at the apex of power and resources now and previously (i.e. the white, male, heterosexual, abled-bodied, serviced or unencumbered actor) is based on meritocratic achievement and simply the result of the degree of rationality and labour demonstrated by individuals. However, this similarity deserves more critical exploration than it has hitherto received. Remembering that neoliberalism was "substantially shaped by contestation with Keynesian economists [...] and conservative politicians, among others. Its subsequent mutations seem to have blurred these lines even further [...] neoliberalism itself is a multifaceted hybrid, more Hydra than Goliath" (Leitner et al. [2007](#), p. 27). The Hydra-like relationship between neoliberalism and conservativism is key to

understanding how neoliberalism, whilst avowing radical individ-ualism and non-intervention, has its foundations in already existing patterns of domination. As Apple (2006, p. 24) remarks "neoliberal-ism does not usually stand alone. It is almost always accompanied by parts of a neoconservative agenda". Addressing this neoliberal-neo-conservative nexus, Goodley describes neoliberalism as providing "an ecosystem for the nourishment of ableism" (p. 2); Brown (2015) com-ments on neoliberalism's gendered basis; and Akram-Lodhi (2006) comments on its neocolonialism—however little has been done to date to tie together the intersecting, pervasive oppressive power struc-tures of neoliberalism. Addressing this neoliberal-neoconservative nexus helps tackle the perceived paradox whereby "people who more strongly endorse neoliberalism also tend to have attitudes that are more […] prejudiced […] *explicit prejudice and neoliberal economic beliefs should be linked because they are part of a cluster of ideologies that serves to legitimise a hierarchical status quo*" (Hall and Lamont 2013, p. 165; emphasis original).

This is not surprising when we consider, for example, the way that the Mont Pelerin Society, the leading group connected with the for-mulation and emergence of neoliberal ascendancy, was formed. The first Mont Pelerin conference and subsequent slightly wider origi-nal membership of the society was constituted by Friedrich Hayek writing to fifty-eight people who he considered to share his view-point (Hartwell 1995) about the need to eliminate state involve-ment in markets and people's lives; fifty-seven of them were men[1]; and all were European academics, economists or involved with media production. Hayek hand-selected people to ensure that the dominant subjectivity of these thinkers embodied particu-lar, and privileged, forms of self-conception. That, then, predicta-bly became deeply embedded through neoliberalisms contestations.

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[1]The exception was Cicily Wedgwood, great-great-great-grand-daughter of the potter Josiah Wedgwood. Cicily's lineage includes not only the Wedgwood family but also the descendants of Charles Darwin who supported eugenics. The Darwin and the Wedgwood families had close ties and a series of intermarriages. Cicily was a historian and biographer of nobility who lived with her long-term partner, civil servant Jacqueline Hope-Wallace.

As Jones (2012) notes, "the idea that redistribution and greater equality were not simply disincentives to initiative but actually morally debilitating emerges as a crucial dimension of neoliberal thought" (p. 64).[2] Neoliberalism justifies this as being based on meritocratically deserved advancement from a level playing field (a claim which is epistemologically unsupportable and empirically untrue) whilst neoconservatives see this as the result of historically evidenced hierarchical best fit to understand how society can be protected (Akram-Lodhi 2006). So whilst neoliberalism espouses a radical equality of opportunity which it sees as setting itself apart from conservative beliefs that the world is naturally not equal, neoliberalism and neoconservativism both, in practice, accept the status-quo organisation of human societies. Indeed, some argue that the dominant force in the last thirty years is not neoliberalism but neoconservatism (Akram-Lodhi 2006). In short, the marginally different grounds for supporting the status-quo act merely as a mask for this support. Both justify (neo)paternalist approaches (based on merit or inheritance), believing that those who engineer the retention of power are those who, by their attributes, are best fitted to do so without critical assessment of how their justification of extant power structures is based only on a verisimilitude of ability/understanding. Instead, the actual conditions for "best fit" are social similarity to existing formations of power. Both rely on a justification of these existing formations as reflecting a "common sense", that is an unalienable and unchallengeable right (through merit or inheritance) to dominance. This Hydra-like theoretical intertwining, then, underpins the social policy changes which both cut back social safety nets and enforce the processes of marketisation, self-economisation, and responsibilisation (Akram-Lodhi 2006; Brown 2015) and which deny and dismiss the calls for change from those who are excluded by these processes.

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[2]Although as I will discuss later, these critical voices also tend to replicate existing power differentials—Jones (2012) is a book in which Heraclitus gets an index entry but neither equality nor women do.

## Neoliberalism as Antagonistic Politics in the Academy and the "Fitting Body"

It is not enough to simply name neoliberalism, or to map its development, to explain the problematics of neoliberalism in contemporary academia. The frequent trope of "It's neoliberalism, stupid" merely creates a fixity for neoliberalism which masks the power processes enacted through an internalised acceptance of the neoliberal-conservative-paternalist formulation, or through explicit use of power. Yet for some parts of our academic and intellectual system, "It's neoliberalism, stupid" is the only response given when asking or being asked questions about outsourcing, redundancies, course closures, the narrowing down of focus through closure of departments and community activities and the dissection of higher education. More surprising is that this answer comes not only from those invested in *enacting* neoliberal managerialism but also from supposed critics of neoliberalism as explanations for the lack of challenge to these increasingly common experiences within higher education. Just as neoliberalism developed on the basis of existing conservative social formulations, then such answers reinscribe these same social hierarchies in their assumed fixity and assume "naturalness".

We see this clearly, for example, in Eagleton's praise of "democratic" collegial glory days at Oxford colleges:

> Today, Oxbridge retains much of its collegial ethos. It is the dons who decide how to invest the college's money, what flowers to plant in their gardens, whose portraits to hang in the senior common room, and how best to explain to their students why they spend more on the wine cellar than on the college library. All important decisions are made by the fellows of the college in full session, and everything from financial and academic affairs to routine administration is conducted by elected committees of academics responsible to the body of fellows as a whole. In recent years, this admirable system of self-government has had to confront a number of centralizing challenges from the university […]; but by and large it has stood firm. Precisely because Oxbridge colleges are for the most part premodern institutions, they have a smallness of scale about them that can serve as a model of decentralized democracy, and this despite the odious privileges they continue to enjoy. (Eagleton 2015)

What Eagleton omits from his nostalgic description of the "pre-modern" college ideal as resistant to an encroaching neoliberal centralised University is that the former is overwhelmingly populated by white, middle-class, not disabled, performatively heterosexual male actors.[3] Therefore, in using the college structure as the model of resistance to the neoliberal order, Eagleton makes no claim that the alternative should divest itself of this conservative social hierarchy—it is easy to envisage a privileged, homogeneous and largely self-replicating institution as a form of "decentralized democracy" precisely because differences will tend to be of an intellectual order (or indeed as Eagleton suggests here about investment, flowers, portraiture and wine purchases) rather than directly addressing issues of "Othering", exclusion and injustice. This example is neoliberalism-in-miniature, whereby neoliberalism is a form of antagonistic politics which relies on eradication of difference from the expected and idealised "fitting body" within its institutions—here, the college institution shares far more with the neoliberal University rather than being any bastion of resistance to it. More concerningly, those who claim to oppose neoliberalism appear to accept the same conservative, paternalist foundation for any challenge to it.

Within the wider academy, the neoliberal framework means that achieving a position of power is largely the end product of a process of conformity and collusion with prevailing neoliberal, neopaternalist, patriarchal, white-privileged, abled-bodied heteronormative privileges. As previously noted, we cannot disentwine these systems from each other but have to see them, as Patricia Hill Collins (1990) argues, as part of a matrix of domination. Reay (n.d.) points out that:

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[3]It is very difficult to get information about the make-up of Fellows in Oxford and Cambridge colleges but the Public Equality Duty does, at least, put pressure on HE institutions to publish some information about protected categories. From this, we know that in 2015/2016 academic staff at Oxford were 78% male, 93% white and 97% not disabled. We cannot tell anything about sexual orientation as Oxford only monitors this for applications and not existing staff. For Cambridge, the reported figures are 58.7% male, 90.5% white and disability and sexuality are not monitored by job type (academic, facilities, etc.). Cambridge also measures University committee (but not College) membership by gender which shows a male predominance ranging from 95% (Chairs of Faculty Boards) to 54% (Council) (University of Oxford 2017; University of Cambridge 2017).

> The apprenticeship model within academia means that achieving a posi-
> tion of power as a woman [person of colour, disabled person etc.] is
> largely the end product of a process of conformity and collusion with,
> rather than challenge to, prevailing power dynamics which privilege men.
> Unsurprisingly, the discourses which interrogate white male hegemony
> are largely absent from the academy. But hidden male power is no less
> effective than easily observed acts of coercive power. It is the invisibility of
> hidden power that makes it so powerful.

This framework demands conformity in enough areas that a person can
"fit" into the space already allowed for its politics. In the academy, it's
relatively easy for a white, heterosexual, middle-class, Western man who
espouses "radical" views to fit into the demanded shape but it's harder
if the contortion/corners are on multiple matrix points—the person
trying to fit is radical and/or a woman and/or non-white and/or not
straight and/or not abled-bodied then the contortion required is often
too much to bear. As such neoliberalism does not just promote a "sur-
vival of the fittest" but acts as a regulatory provocation towards relative
sameness.[4]

To give some idea of how this operates in practice, we could look at
a myriad of examples: for example, many institutions have met basic
(physical) disability access requirements to the seating areas of their
teaching spaces, but not to the presenting areas with steps, stages, lack
of seating and daises all precluding easy disability access (Swain 2016;
Sang 2017). Most internal staff meetings fail to meet even a basic stand-
ard of behaviour which allows hearing-impaired colleagues or those
with auditory sensory distortion to participate fully due to the number
of overlapping conversations which take place, let alone if a colleague

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[4]There is much to be said about how neoliberalism across the education system prior to Higher
Education level embeds this sameness in a way which enables HE institutions to disavow their
role in the maintenance of this hegemony by convincing many that higher education is not a
place they would comfortably fit therefore responsilibising such individuals for not applying in
the first place. This is as true for research degrees and job applications as it is for students' choices,
and we see the impact of this in the increasingly concentrations of white, male, heterosexual and
abled-bodied post holders as one ascends both career structures and the dreaded League Tables.

had executive dysfunction, were neurodiverse or needed trauma-informed contexts (Goodley et al. 2014).

Similarly, there are multiple cases where these systems of power and disciplinary responses are being enacted, but where the story is queered enough (by gender, race, sexuality, disability and so forth) to render it "untellable" (Coates 2000) in popular and higher education discourses and the media. A single example from many is the controversy over Bahar Mustafa's position as Welfare and Diversity Officer at Goldsmiths College in 2015. In February 2015, Mustafa organised a BME social before the screening of the dark comedy *Dear White People* (2014) about racism on US college campuses—an event picked up by *The Spectator* blog, a bastion of conservativism, and described as "racial segregation in a British university" (Prendergast 2015). In April 2015, Mustafa organised another event for BME women and non-binary people and on the Facebook page invite asked that white-cis men did not attend. The story was again picked up and amplified via a range of conservative sources, and Mustafa was pilloried—precisely for trying to create a space in which counterinstitutional voices had priority. Mustafa then tweeted a picture of herself next to hand-drawn A4 poster saying "No white cis-men pls [sic]" with a picture of a mug labelled "male tears" (Batchelor 2015; *The Telegraph* 2015 both reproduce the picture) and the campaign against her intensified. When she tweeted with "#killallwhitemen" (an ironic rejoinder to the #notallmen campaign which seeks to challenge the idea that misogyny exists because not all men commit misogynistic acts), the negative coverage was immense and resulted in complaints to the Police and Mustafa being arrested and charged with sending a racially motivated malicious communication (Batchelor 2015; *The Telegraph* 2015)—charges later dropped for lack of evidence (Elgot 2015). This demonstrates a retrenchment of white, male power through measures supposedly designed to protect "Others". Goldsmiths College institutionally disavowed her actions by writing to the Student's Union promulgating claims that creating such spaces was racist and *The Spectator* ridiculed Mustafa as "a foul cretin"; "an ass, a halfwit"; and "the silly cow" and her supporters as "personification of the abject stupidity which reigns within our universities" (Liddle 2015). Describing the Mustafa controversy as "untellable" refers not to the

narrative of the neoliberal-neopaternalist-conservative media claiming its freedom to insult Mustafa and higher education in general, but to the untellability of the story behind Mustafa's actions—the sexism, racism, disabilism and heteronormativity of contemporary Universities. As Brinkhurst-Cliffe (2015) points out, "it can be safely said that no white men ever felt threatened by Mustafa's hashtag, or were ever really afraid she was inciting white male genocide" because, in the neoliberal-conservative nexus, white men have safely retained their position at the apex of power relations. However, in the media discourse, Mustafa's actions are presented as coming about spontaneously, without antecedents, rather than as embedded responses to a series of provocations which, themselves, are responded to in neoliberal-conservative terms as requiring greater "resilience" or responsibilisation. It also demonstrates how antagonistic responses to counterinstitutional actions open up spaces to be reinhabited by neoliberal-conservative ideal individuals; in this case, some students and commentators drawing on neoliberal discourses of freedom, free speech and political correctness gone mad to antagonistic relations which are designed as protections for existing power relations.

This re-taking of spaces by neoliberal-neoconservative privileged bodies and voices is also seen in many of the discourses surrounding course closures in which affected staff and students are "responsibilized" for their inability to be flexible about their work or study base and their inability to recover from the shock of closure announcements. We also see a congratulatory linkage of this white, male, performatively heterosexual, ableist hegemony in public discourses, particularly around courses which have constantly challenged or problematised the higher education sector, such as the case of Women's Studies course closures. In one example, the (white, abled-bodied, performatively heterosexual and mostly male) management welcomed tweets such as this from supremely conservative quarters: in response to mostly black, queer and/or disabled part-time students who were trying to resist the announced closure (part way through) of their MA Women's Studies course (Lytton 2015). The mostly white, straight and not-disabled management took tweets like this as examples of public support for their decision to disenfranchise part-time students from being able to continue their studies as a coherent cohort and argued

**Fig. 5.1** Equality for Men Tweet

that the complaints were signs that the course (staff) had failed to equip students with the resilience to manage the transition after it had been announced (Fig. 5.1).

The notion of being inadequately resilient to the actions of neoliberal-conservative frameworks is an example *par excellence* of how the responsibilisation of the self operates, and demonstrates the neoliberal-neoconservative nexus as it clearly raises the neoconservative conception of "character" into neoliberal discourse (Apple 2006). As Joseph (2013) notes "the recent enthusiasm for the concept of resilience across a range of policy literature is the consequence of its fit with neoliberal discourse" (p. 38). But the notion of "resilience" within higher education is not just proposed through policy but enacted through (sometimes mandatory) training for academic staff and included as a desired graduate attribute. Whereas resilience in an ecological or engineering context refers to the ability for systems to bounce back from shocks, in neoliberal terms it is the individual, not the community or system which must enable this (Hall and Lamont 2013) and create protective factors from future shocks, in Joseph's (2013) terms "in order to survive the uncertainties of complex systems, people have to show their own initiative as active and reflexive agents capable of adaptive behaviour" (p. 39). As Rivers and Webster (2017) have pointed out, this "resilience response" is deeply neoliberal in how "the language of 'resilience', 'grit'; and the insidious 'Growth Mindset' flatten out the complexities of success or failure as well as the apparently personal attributes that influence either outcome". Yet, "at times, academic and student distress has been explained away as the consequence of a scholarly vocation that adapts poorly to the realities of marketization" (Hall 2017), and the individual becomes responsibilised for managing the uncertainty and unpredictability

which neoliberalism is based upon and indeed such "creativity" of approach becomes an inherent part of responsibilisation itself (O'Malley 2010). Obviously, those best able to do this are those who already hold most resource (*capitals*) and power to smooth such systemic uncertainties, this is true in higher education choices as elsewhere—that is white, not disabled, performatively heterosexual men who experience life set on difficulty level "Low" (Scalzi 2012). This pattern is replicated in students attending these different kinds of Universities too, as Canaan and Shumar (2008, p. 7) note "Students with great cultural capital and greater social capital may very well be better able to negotiate the marketised system and "buy" credentials of higher social status and thereby become less commodified than students at less elite institutions". The latter, who are more likely to attend more "vulnerable institutions" and receive "an education that has been reduced to narrowly defined core competencies which have been legitimated on the bandwagon of consumer choice" (Naidoo and Jamieson 2005). As Galvan et al. (2017) outline, this "resilience response" "encourages individualization, naturalizes and depoliticizes social structures, positions insecurity to be normal and even expected and places additional demands on women and people of colour".

We also now see staff—mostly those already "Othered" by higher education institutions—becoming responsibilised for the mental health of students as a measure of their performance, "The #stepchange policy framework of Universities UK discusses staff training in mental health literacy and health promotion, allocating time and resources to staff, aligning student and staff mental health, and crucially building 'mental health – and health – *into staff performance*'" (Hall 2017). That is, rather than addressing and changing the neoliberal structures which detrimentally impact staff and student well-being, Universities are responding by making resisting those impacts and enabling others to resist them, a measure of success. This is hugely detrimental in that it ignores the impacts of systemic disadvantage, making those without resources like time[5] (or solutions) responsible for ensuring

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[5]Whilst the UUK documents advocates for giving time, anyone working in Higher Education knows there is a big difference between hours allocated in workload modelling and real hours being given at the time to a student or colleague is in crisis.

others do not complain (which is a key marker of resilience when all is said and done) and demands even greater input of emotional labour.

Therefore, neoliberal practices retrench and re-embed neoconservative versions of stratification which demands more of those still actively positioned as "Other" (such as greater coping mechanisms, time, personal management strategies and attitudes of forgiveness) within the system. As noted above, the neoliberal-neoconservative academic system relies on a myth of meritocracy in which it is assumed that higher education is really "a competition in which there are clear winners and losers, but in which the resulting inequalities are justified on the basis that participants have an equal opportunity to prove themselves" (Miller 1999 in Reay 2014). This myth of academia is used pragmatically to explain away the negative realities of the academic role (see, e.g., Gill 2009), to stigmatise those who do not survive, succeed or pursue a traditional academic career and to excuse socio-inequalities in higher education including presenting disenfranchisement as a lack of entrepreneurship, resilience, economicisation and responsibilisation. Although it is possible to exist within the neoliberal higher education sector and still be subject to these "Othering" power relations, this is only managed by significant contortions with personal impacts as noted above. Whilst things (may) have moved on from this discussion in Reay (2014):

> *Tutor 2*: I can't understand all the fuss about working class applicants it's the lower middles we should be concerned about, they are being denied entry – what used to be our bright grammar school boys, we just aren't getting enough of them. The working classes aren't interested in coming here it is outside their world.
> *Diane*: What do you mean outside their world?
> *Tutor 2*: Well by definition they are interested in things of the hand and body rather than the intellect, Cambridge is off their radar. (Reay 2014)

Or indeed my own experience of returning to my former secondary school and talking to the teacher who had been my Head of Year.

> She immediately congratulated me on having done so well to have got so far as doing a PGCE – she honestly meant the congratulations at the same time she remarked that she was talking to someone who had been in the top 1% of that year's cohort (something I didn't know). When I gently informed her I wasn't there as a student teacher, she was unable to think of an alternate explanation for my presence. When I explained I was conducting research for a higher degree, she was silent until she asked me why I would turn down the solid work of secondary school teaching for the pursuit of higher knowledge and research. (Livesey 2015, p. 1)

The experience of being a working-class, queer, disabled woman (accidentally) in higher education (as I am, or indeed being working class or queer or disabled or black, etc., or any combination of these) is one of experiencing the pressure of these "Othering" power relations. hooks (2000) notes that there is a stark choice for those who inhabit the intersections of being women, working-class, non-heterosexual, a person of colour, or having disabilities:

> Slowly I began to understand fully that there was no place in academe for folks from working class backgrounds who did not wish to leave the past behind. That was the price of the ticket. Poor students would be welcome at the best institutions of higher learning only if they were willing to surrender memory, to forget the past and claim the assimilated present as the only worthwhile and meaningful reality. (hooks 2000, p. 36)

So those of us who are "Othered" in the academy are actually being asked to remake ourselves to fit the ideal body for which the institution was designed. This is done by being asked to at least try, as much as possible, to forget or deny those things which make us different—our class background, our race, our disabilities, our caring responsibilities, our gendered corporeal selves and our very modes of being. As Reay (n.d.) has written

> working class women like myself who grew up with very different cultural values to those of the academy - cultures in which straight talking is valued [and] the exigencies of daily life leave little space for either flattery or conceit - find academia an alien and confusing space […] She [the

working class woman] is positioned in an untenable space on the bound-
aries of two irreconcilable ways of being and has to produce an enormous
body of psychic, intellectual and interactive work in order to maintain her
contradictory ways of being

These demands placed on us are the price we pay for trying to remain
within higher education institutions; however they should not be seen
as the price of entry to an institution (i.e. something which can be
parted with to gain something in return), but more as the price we are
made to pay for misadventuring beyond the limits set and consistently
supported by the neoliberal-neoconservative nexus.

Moreover, the meritocratic, equal opportunities myth which is
underpinned by paying this intensional price is used as a direct instru-
ment of extensional neoliberal governmentality in such exercises as
Research Excellence Frameworks, targets and increasing allocations of
responsibilities based on bureaucratic calculations in which failure to
succeed is repackaged as individual failure to maximise ones economised
self as a saleable object or accept individual responsibilisation. This falls
under neoliberal:

management techniques (evaluation, projects, standardization of pro-
cedures, decentralization) [which] are supposed to make it possible to
objectify the individual's conformity to the behaviour norm expected of
him [sic], to evaluate his subjective involvement by means of grids and
other recording instruments on the manager's 'control panel', on pain
of penalization in his job, wage and career prospects. (Dardot and Lavel
2013, p. 263)

Such a clash between the extensional and intensional conditions
means that those who do not fit into (White, male, heteronorma-
tive, abled-bodied) higher education spaces "stick out [… which] can
mean to become a sore point, or even to experience oneself as being a
sore point" (Ahmed 2012, p. 41) and to experience being made sore
oneself by the constant abrasion which wears away and is difficult to
avoid the impacts. This is because neoliberalism is an antagonistic
mode of thought and politics despite presenting itself as having purged

antagonism from the arbitrary hierarchies it maintains (Žižek 1989, 1997). Chantal Mouffe (2013) describes the linguistic trick by which neoliberalism maintains this fantasy, what we might otherwise "call an 'adversary' is merely a 'competitor'" (p. 8) and by envisaging:

> the field of politics as a neutral terrain in which different groups compete to occupy the positions of power, their objective being to dislodge others in order to occupy their place, without putting into question the dominant hegemony and profoundly transforming the relations of power. (2013, p. 8)

In other words, neoliberalism relies on what Hemmings has called a "rhetorical invocation of unity" (Hemmings 2002, p. 170), where such unity clearly does not exist. But this rhetorical invocation is used consistently and antagonistically to eradicate (and erode) all other viewpoints and discipline those who hold them into the conformity of a "responsibilized" self. Thus, the aim of neoliberalism is not to maintain hegemonic supremacy by convincing us of its rightness but rather to maintain its hegemonic position by making it impossible to think any other way, to eradicate all critique and dissent. In the case of higher education, the expansion of student places (which had the potential to democratise higher education) has meant a widening of the audience disciplined into such thinking by increasing the exposure to neoliberalist ideologies. By critiquing neoliberalism, for example by pointing out how the terrain is not neutral but is rather gendered, racialised, embodied, etc., one becomes cast not as an adversary with an acceptance of the righteousness of being able to contest arguments, but rather one becomes interpellated as competitor which must be eradicated both extensionally (by removing such contest from spaces, for example, through course closure, redundancy, disciplinary procedures, etc.) and intensionally, by convincing us to reform our thinking. In this sense, "responsibilization" is little more than making it impossible to operate in any mode other than co-operation because failure to do so becomes an individual failure (rather than a systemic issue), and the response to this is increased responsibilisation.

Of course, critique does have the ability to challenge neoliberal hegemony (it is not the case that we can (or should) shrug and claim "It's neoliberalism, stupid!"; see also Springer [2016]), and there is a fragility to the practice of this antagonistic politics as recent cases have shown. For example, Professor Thomas Docherty, critic of the neoliberalisation of Universities, was disciplined by the University of Warwick for sighing, making "ironic" comments and giving off "negative body language" which was said to undermine the authority of his, then, Head of Department (Gardner 2014; Grogan 2015). Failure to impose intensional changes on/in Docherty (in that he refused to change his belief that his behaviour was justified and appropriate) led to extensional power being used, and Docherty was suspended ostensibly for his body language and demeanour but in actuality for the use of body language and demeanour as part of his critique of the neoliberalisation of his home University. Docherty was in reality being accused of having failed to embed and express appropriate mirroring of the neoliberal-conservative value nexus determined by the use of "soft" culturally normative power through surveillance of demeanour, body language and facial expressions. The response to this failure of responsibilisation was the utilisation of the most extreme disciplinary power available against *homo oeconomicus*, the deprivation of meaning through employment and waged labour.

## The Impact of Neoliberalism and the Price We Pay

Neoliberal institutions are built around presumptions about the bodies who will inhabit them (and the use of those bodies) which responsibilises individuals by turning around justified complaints, to become discourses of "not fitting in" (Ahmed 2012) and lacking resilience as we have seen. Part of the extensionality of neoliberalism is the linking together of institutions via an ideological network which shares a point of view on the right shape that complaints and complainants should take. White men, like Docherty (above), being victimised for speaking against marketisation are the right shape for stories about valiant

complaints and complainants against neoliberalism. But women, people of colour, queers and those with disabilities are invariably the wrong shape, as Sara Ahmed (2012, 2016; see also Pells 2016) has aptly written about, and as demonstrated by the example of Harris Manchester College, Oxford issuing a warning to students to be vigilant and "alert a member of staff" after CCTV showed Femi Nylander, a black graduate, in the college grounds after dark (Turner and Asl 2017). In this neoliberal system, the "failures" of women, people of colour, queers and those with disabilities to "progress" (a word beloved of neoliberalism and all theories wedded to white Western Anglo-centric modernity) at the same rate as those who "fit" is re-presented as an individualised failure to fully realise the economisation of the self (Brown 2015) and to "take advantage" and "make the most" of their economisable attributes.

As subjects under neoliberalism we often come to adopt forms of ontological and self-actualising neoliberal thinking, not naively, but through their sheer ubiquity. As Shore (2010) notes "while staff do not necessarily internalise that image of themselves the effect of constant scrutiny and surveillance (as Foucault demonstrated) profoundly influences an academic's sense of self" (Shore 2010, p. 27). These neoliberal transformations of the self are rarely enacted through coercive control (except in states of "failure" as the Docherty case exemplifies) but rather, through a Foucauldian understanding of power in that we internalise this reconfiguration of the self and perpetuate it in our everyday practices, surveilling both ourselves and others. As Canaan has argued that "academics have little alternative but to be at least partly compliant with the new order now structuring HE" (Canaan 2014, p. 55). We, therefore, (are made to) remake our neoliberal subjectivity everyday and recast it in terms of choice, freedom, the need to increase our social or academic capital, economic or working portfolio, or the need to leverage our resources (by which we mean skills, characteristics or abilities) for our own advancement. As Foucault (2004) identified part of this submission includes the internalisation of such power through self-surveilling strategies (time management, research output plans, etc.). We are compelled to write about ourselves in neoliberal, "responsibilized", marketised terms on job applications and appraisal documents, and we are made to advise students to do the same. In this latter action,

we become the conduits from the continued reproduction of neoliberalism. When, even as critics of neoliberalism, we are made to instil it in our students or at minimum tacitly support it as a framework for students' self-development and self-identity (as through so many University "career planning/building" and "'enhancement' activities") then it becomes clear that any part of operation within higher education requires submission to neoliberal orthodoxies.

This incessant replication of neoliberal ideology, which has been much explored before, is reliant on the conservative, neopaternalist agenda inherent within neoliberalism, as explored above. The inculcation of higher education students and staff into neoliberal discourses provides new opportunities to embed a conservative status quo masked as meritocratic. Indeed, we see this clearly if we look at the gender or race differences in employment figures within higher education (HESA 2017). The impact of this conservative status quo is backed by a number of studies, including Grummell et al. (2009) who posit that the increasing female relegation to the lower—and more precarious—levels of higher education employment should not be surprising given the division of emotional labour demanded in the split between teaching and managing, where managers are seen as "care-less" workers within higher education and lower grade workers (where more women are present) as "care-full" (it is worth thinking about this in terms of the Universities UK announcements of mental health #stepchange) (UUK, n.d.). The gendered division of emotional labour within higher education is used as both explanation of gendered patterns of employment and as a mode of replicating these gendered divisions. Indeed, within the neoliberal-conservative nexus of higher education an implicit and idealised "male-ness" has

> exacerbated a number of aspects disadvantageous to women. In the first place, they have tended to promote a masculinised culture extolling values and practices such as highly competitive, rather than collegial, reward-oriented striving […] The 'bottom-line' imperative has also resulted in a proliferation of casual and fixed-term employment arrangements – with women predominating among those employed on that basis. (Wilson et al. 2010, p. 538)

And as Diane Reay reminds us, there are "repercussions of an elitist and masculinised academy for, in particular, women and academics from working class and ethnic minority backgrounds, and consequences for academic identities in neoliberal new managerialist practices" (Reay, n.d.). This neoliberal idea of the rational, utilitarian, economised self is not, as neoliberal-conservative discourse likes to present it, an atomised individual divorced from other social processes and connections rather than as a gendered, racialised, heterosexually disciplined, embodied neoliberal subject within deeply conservative power structures. Thus, the queer, disabled woman is expected to exploit economisable capitals (including, according to Catherine Hakim (2011), her erotic capital) whilst fitting into institutions designed to fit around white, male, heterosexual, abled-bodied and middle-class existences. The queer, disabled woman is then disciplined and responsibilised so that her failure is recast as being constituted by a lack of resilience and an inability to have an economisable regulated and predictable body[6] in terms of both erotic and productive labour; by choosing not to enact heteropatriarchal sexual identities (and indeed often challenging that by being public about her queerness and her disinterest in hetero-sexualised practices including sexual advances) and being subject to conservative social practices which mean she is not a disengaged, individual but tied into reproductive and emotional labour in both her work and her non-work existence. In short, the queered position of the non-fitting subject means she also expends more energy and time on managing the "bad fit" (what is really meant by resilience), including deflecting institutional hetero-sexualised practices, managing negative feedback relating to her bodily difference and working harder within institutionalised gendered divisions of labour and expectations of behaviour and attributes (Boring et al. 2016; Wagner et al. 2016; Mengel et al. 2016; MacNell et al. 2015; Reid 2010; Centra and Gaubatz 2000; Basow 1995). Effectively her very presence, degraded and exhausted as it is, is a critique of neoliberal-conservative formations of institutions and yet it is also made invisible by the same institutions.

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[6]In which I also include functioning of the mind in so much as it can impact the performative aspects of existence.

# Resisting Neoliberal-Conservative Higher Education

I want to conclude with some ideas about how we can resist neoliberal-conservative higher education framework because, as Mouffe reminds us "Other worlds are always possible and we should never accept that things cannot be changed, there are always alternatives that have been excluded by the dominant hegemony and that can be actualized" (Mouffe 2013, p. 132). Inevitably, challenging this comes with risk precisely because of its inherent antagonism and the power it holds, both hegemonic and practical, which regulate the lives we lead within (and increasingly outside) the institutions. This is part of the price we pay under neoliberalism in higher education.

Mouffe's solution to the inherent antagonism of neoliberalism is to create spaces and institutions which are agonistic and enable a pluralistic diversity of voices because it seeks not to eliminate dissent (as neoliberalism does) but to win hegemonic supremacy against worthy adversaries. Agonism, in this sense, is about reformulating institutions to operate from a stance which does not privilege a particular formulation of rightness as inevitable, natural or normative. Challenging neoliberalism's antagonism, whilst inhabiting a neoliberal system, can only be done by rejecting as the benchmark of success whether or not we displace antagonism, but rather whether we create meaningful change in our collective lives and our ability to sustain ourselves. We must create spaces and counterinstitutional narratives which acknowledge the matrix of domination (Hill Collins 1990) or what has commonly become known as intersectionality (Crenshaw 1991).

Counterinstitutional narratives only come about through conscious action creating platforms for voices and bodies who do not (and refuse to) fit. This moves the notion of tellability, queering platforms away from the expected, idealised institutional figure. This involves those with privileges setting them aside to consciously create explicitly agonistic spaces, relationships and links needed to maintain and embed a diversity of voices in communities, groups and organisations. Burawoy's (2004) notion of "public sociology" goes some way to this end but still

relies on the idea of the academic-as-(public)-expert rather than on plural counterinstitutional voices. Combining Burawoy with Milojević's (1998) idea of multiversities may come closer to Mouffe's (2013) idea of agonistic institutions which build themselves around exchanges and differences. However, the creation of agonistic spaces within the neoliberal university is fraught with contradiction because our relations with students and colleagues are inherently regulated by antagonistic practices such as benchmarking, grading and metrics.

This can only be achieved by collectivising actions starting at grassroots level to build supportive, agonistic spaces in which we can both do and reflect on our work. This would help ensure the inhabitability of higher education by queer and queering subjects by sustaining them/us and protect them/us from the affective and practical demands of the "fancy footwork"[7] needed to avoid substantial harm from the soreness of not fitting. Collectivised grassroots action also critiques and challenges the inevitability myth of neoliberal-conservative higher education. Creating these agonistic spaces involves resistance through our everyday practice such as challenging our own slips into neoliberal and antagonistic language because language has power, and challenging colleagues when they utilise the same discourse. Instead, we need to create actively different spaces, language and thinking which begin social transformation by being able to "resist inequalities, acknowledge complicities, and foster collegialities […] Collaboratively exploring and experimenting with alternative practices is similarly necessary if we are to find new ways of *un*disciplining the subject of higher education in present times" (Saltmarsh 2011, pp. 134–135).

In this collectivised action, those who are critical of the current system and hold the most institutionalised power need to shoulder more of the burden of challenging and resisting (Brecher 2015). It cannot (and should not) be left to the precariously employed, younger and more often female, people of colour or disabled staff to carry out such resistance (at least not alone) because the proportion of damage to them of such actions is much greater than the proportion of damage to the

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[7]For this idea, I am indebted to personal discussions with Steph Green.

career of a white, male, permanently employed professor. Those who are in permanent employment in established and historic institutions should carry more of the burden than those in precarious institutions facing demographic, financial and funding crisis (and who not surprisingly also employ proportionally more women, people of colour and disabled people). The current reliance on the staff who are most affected to carry a movement recreates the same system that Ahmed (2012) highlights where the neoliberal-conservative system relies on it being small numbers of those most affected who become tied into challenging a particular thing, whether it be racism, sexism, homophobia and heteronormativity or neoliberalism. This both institutionally privatises the issues to that group and places a burden upon them to be the ones to solve the situation whilst also shouldering the burden of being the ones who are naming and experiencing the problems.

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# 6

# Universities: The Neoliberal Agenda

Bob Brecher

## Introduction

This chapter considers a central element of neoliberalism's agenda concerning the creation of individuals in its own image: higher education. The process having started at school with the construction of children as atomic and competitive egos whose worth and self-worth is measured in terms of examination results by teachers whose jobs depend on them that discipline has to continue to be imposed as they mature into university students. So where once universities were at least something like institutions of disinterested learning, they have now been pressed into ideological service in the production and consolidation of the neoliberal individual in order that they may reproduce the features of that individual throughout the rest of their lives. This task is both economic and epistemological. Nearly 50% of school leavers in the UK now attend university in order at once to be trained to perform their role in the

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continuing evolution of the so-called knowledge economy and to deal with youth unemployment. At the same time, and crucially, they need to be persuaded of Hayek's description of human beings as inevitably ignorant, a task that requires bringing about just that state of affairs that he claims is inevitably already the case. And that in turn requires a fundamental reorientation of the university, from purveyor of knowledge to purveyor of ignorance.

## The Language of the University

We are committed to achieving our vision and delivering to our students a transformational educational experience beyond excellence. Through a focus on blended learning, our proposition will 'prepare you for a successful future, and give you some great experiences along the way'.[1] Our courses are delivered by staff who are recognized, nationally and internationally, as leaders in their field and we have 'been honoured' to have several 'of our leading academics invited to become subject panel members for the REF'. Right across the piece, 'The University of' X 'offers its students an inspiring and enlightening learning experience. … As a consequence, our students graduate with the skills they need to thrive in the twenty-first century economy'. The best will display 'Exceptional understanding of the complexity of practice and make(s) sense of the situation in a meaningful way', where 'the term meaningful refers to the student's ability to "make sense" of the complexity of his/her practice and or the practice environment and enables them to gain significant and important learning to inform their future practice'. At the same time, our world-leading researchers will deliver exceptionally excellent leadership across the piece in moving forward the impact agenda for the 2021 REF.

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[1]Where quotations are not referenced they are taken from documents published by a UK university since 2014. I have taken the liberty of rendering them anonymous, since my purpose is not to embarrass any particular institution, but rather to offer a critique of the direction the entire UK university sector is taking. Readers may turn to any university website, or to any issue of the *Times Higher*, for all too many current examples.

How have we reached a position where bullshit like this litters every university in the UK? One explanation is, of course, structural: universities are ideological state apparatuses and it should come as no surprise that the neoliberal revolution should manifest itself here just as it does elsewhere. Certainly that is the case, but it is not the whole story. After all, academics are agents. Furthermore—since they are working in something calling itself higher education—one might reasonably presume academics to be relatively intelligent agents. So while the structures under and in which academics work have increasingly become inimical to the exercise of moral agency (MacIntyre 1999)— and are to be judged in the light of that—it nonetheless remains the case that academics have a role in all this: either inasmuch as we do certain things and are thus overtly complicit, or because we fail to not do certain things. As Agamben beautifully puts it (masculinism apart), 'Today's man… has become blind not to his capacities but to his incapacities, not to what he can do but to what he cannot, or can not, do (2011, p. 44)'. Now some of that is doubtless temerity: the mortgage or rent needs to be paid and anyway—already a self-fulfilling aspect of the problem—one's colleagues can be neither expected nor relied on to go to the wall for the sake of others. The academy is no different on this score from any other business and never has been. But temerity is not the whole explanation. Idiocy has played a part, and it continues to do so.

One aspect of such idiocy is of course the traditional and self-indulgent naiveté of so many academics. Consider just one example: the rise and spread of modularity, a process largely run by academics on the Left, people who surely might have been expected to be able to think ahead just a little and imagine what the outcome would be of modularization: the transformation, by now largely complete, of knowledge into information (Brecher 2005). However, what I want to focus on here is not that sort of idiocy, but one that is far more insidious: the idiocy which either does not even notice, or if it does, then only to underestimate its importance, the ideological role of language (Halliday 2014). And what is centrally important is that the antidote to both temerity and to idiocy is knowledge; in this case, the knowledge that these empty-sounding but actually content-conveying phrases, and all the many

others like them, are ideological weapons wielded in the service of the neoliberal revolution, in the universities as elsewhere. That is why, to make an entirely obvious point, that language matters, and matters supremely—nowhere more so than in universities (e.g. Collini 2012, 2017). I shall return to this at the end.

## Neoliberalism

To understand the nature of the neoliberal agenda for our universities, we need first to try to get clear what neoliberalism is. So let me start with "Sir" Alfred Sherman, Thatcher's beloved guru. Here is what he 'told the London correspondent of *Pravda* in January 1984':

> … if the unemployed get lower benefits, they will be quicker to start looking for work… As for the lumpenproletariat, coloured people and the Irish […] let's face it, the only way to hold them in check is to have enough properly trained police. (*Daily Telegraph* 2006)

Or consider Milton Friedman's disarming honesty in the wake of the New Orleans hurricane in 2005:

> Most New Orleans schools are in ruins, as are the homes of the children who have attended them. The children are now scattered all over the country. This is a tragedy. It is also an opportunity to radically reform the educational system. (Friedman 2005)

The point is that today's neoliberal hegemony is not some sort of accident, simply one particular outcome of Reagan's and Thatcher's contingent election victories of the late 1970s. Rather, it is the outcome of a very carefully prepared conspiracy that started in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War. Worried that the post-war and post-depression compromise that capitalism was having to make with something like socialism, and worried even more about the sort of example that the Soviet Union might constitute for people disaffected

by the pre-war liberal consensus, a shadowy group of 'like-minded scholars' founded the Mont Pelerin Society. To quote the Society's website,

> After World War II, in 1947, when many of the values of Western civilization were imperilled, 36 scholars, mostly economists, with some historians and philosophers, were invited by Professor Friedrich von Hayek to meet at Mont Pelerin, near Montreux, Switzerland, to discuss the state and the possible fate of liberalism (in its classical sense) in thinking and practice.
>
> The group … emphasised that it did not intend to create an orthodoxy, to form or align itself with any political party or parties, or to conduct propaganda. Its sole objective was to facilitate an exchange of ideas between like-minded scholars in the hope of strengthening the principles and practice of a free society and to study the workings, virtues and defects of market-oriented economic systems. (Mont Pelerin Society, n.d.)

The best extended treatment of the role of the Mont Pelerin Society in the neoliberal revolution is that offered by Philip Mirowski in his *Never Let a Serious Crisis Go to Waste*[2] (2). The Society's Ghent Archive offers details of its inner workings, discussed in detail in Cornelissen (2017).

Here is a flavour of what Mirowski says. First, and crucially, '… neoliberalism as worldview has sunk its roots deep into everyday life, almost to the point of passing as the "ideology of no ideology"' (2013, p. 28). Second, and barely less central, is the fact that

> … mature neoliberalism is not at all enamored of the minimalist night-watchman state of the classical liberal tradition: Its major distinguishing characteristic is instead a set of proposals and programs to infuse, take over, and transform the strong state, in order to impose the ideal form of society, which they conceive to be in pursuit of their very curious icon of pure freedom. (2013, p. 40)

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[2]See also two other indispensable and more general treatments of the nature of the neoliberal revolution and its relation to the liberal tradition: Brown (2015) and Harvey (2005).

So, as Hayek once wrote: 'It would be impossible to assert that a free society will always and necessarily develop values of which we would approve, or even, as we shall see, that it will maintain values which are compatible with the preservation of freedom' (Mirowski 2013, p. 57, quoting Hayek 1962, unpaginated). Again as Mirowski puts it, 'The starting point of neoliberalism is the admission, contrary to classical liberal doctrine, that their vision of the good society will triumph only if it becomes reconciled to the fact that the conditions for its existence must be constructed, and will not come about "naturally" in the absence of concerted political effort and organization' (Mirowski 2013, p. 53, fn.1). It needs 'a strong state as both producer and guarantor of a stable market society' (Mirowski 2013, p. 54). Thus 'A primary ambition of the neoliberal project is to redefine the shape and functions of the state, *not to destroy it*' (Mirowski 2013, p. 56).

Third, and crucially for an understanding of its agenda for the universities, there is neoliberalism's denial of the very possibility of knowledge as something that human beings have. In Hayek's words: 'the case for individual freedom rests chiefly on the recognition of the inevitable ignorance of us all' (Mirowski 2013, p. 78, quoting Hayek 1960, p. 29). 'Thus … central to neoliberalism is a core conviction that the market really does know better than any one of us what is good for ourselves and for society' (Mirowski 2013, p. 79). Hence '[T]here is not much reason to believe that, if at any one time the best knowledge which some possess were made available to all, the result would be a much better society. *Knowledge and ignorance are relative concepts*' (Mirowski 2013, p. 78, quoting Hayek 1960, p. 378). And of course, if knowledge and ignorance are 'relative concepts', the entire Enlightenment project of progress based on reason is quite unworkable. Indeed, only the market can protect us from the delusions—and thus the power—of people who think that they do actually know something, as Hayek had argued in his seminal *The Road to Serfdom*: '… the only alternative to the submission to the impersonal and seemingly irrational forces of the market is submission to an equally uncontrollable and therefore arbitrary power of other men' (Hayek 1944, pp. 204–205).

It is because neoliberalism posits the market as 'an information processor more powerful than any human brain' (Mirowski 2013, p. 54)

that we must subordinate ourselves *entirely* to that market; and why the whole Enlightenment project has to be rejected. Neoliberalism, one might say, would have had to invent postmodern scepticism if the Left had not done so on its behalf. Of course, if that scepticism turned out to be false, then Hayek's central argument for the epistemic supremacy of what neoliberalism is pleased to call "the free market" disappears. And quite obviously, it is false—otherwise neither Hayek nor any other true believers could be in a position to make the claim they do about the market. For to do so would be to perform an obvious contradiction. The simple point, here as elsewhere, is that if relativism is true, then it cannot be true that relativism is true. That so much of the Western Left of the late twentieth century should have been stupid enough to regard postmodern relativism as an emancipatory tool will hopefully turn out to be one of the odder twists of the history of ideas and of movements. Nonetheless, contradictory though it is, postmodern scepticism about knowledge remains a powerful position. And neoliberals—like others—feed on it.

## The Neoliberal Agenda for Universities

It is clear from the above that neoliberalism's rejection of the very idea of knowledge is central to its agenda for our universities. If that rejection were justified, then that would perforce constitute a powerful argument simply to abolish universities as they are (still) currently understood altogether. After all, if the job of universities is to produce knowledge, and if that job is impossible, then universities have no useful function. That is why the heart of the neoliberal agenda is, quite simply, to get rid of universities as producers of knowledge—limiting them to processors and distributors of information. Real universities constitute a standing affront to Hayek's rejection of the claim that 'if at any one time the best knowledge which some possess were made available to all, the result would be a much better society' (Mirowski 2013, p. 78, quoting Hayek 1960, p. 378).

This claim should not be confused with a sensible realism about education's in my view traditionally serving two quite contrary needs:

continuity and renewal. At the most general level, any society that goes beyond its satisfying its basic reproductive and subsistence needs requires some sort of internal continuity in order to constitute a society at all. At the same time, however, it requires possibilities of change and development if it is not to stagnate. The proverbial trick is how to balance these needs. Now, provided the numbers are small, that need not be a great problem. The majority of the small minority of educated people will perform the continuity role; and only an even smaller minority of that small minority will concern themselves with renewal. And anyway, we can always deal with a few troublemakers from among the latter, such as Socrates or Spinoza, who threaten the certainties on which continuity depends. But a late capitalist culture needs to engage the vast majority for its project—as consumers, if not as producers. And as it becomes more technologically complex, so it needs more and more skills and more and more knowledge. Nor is that all. With the increasing pace of technological change, there arises a need for people to be changeable too; a "flexible" workforce is essential. People need to be able to take on—or rather to have foisted onto them—all sorts of different roles over a lifetime, and an increasingly long one at that.

In short, the post-war role of secondary modern schools—to keep the hoi polloi in their place—needs to be extended so that it goes much deeper and goes on for much longer. That of course raises a problem of disaffection: who wants to spend even longer ticking boxes, acquiring neoliberal survival skills and turning themselves into the commodity that neoliberalism requires us all to be? No wonder that schooling and policing are becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish, and not only in the USA.

But that is not the whole story, and it is at this point that the neoliberal agenda really kicks in. Whereas for the traditional ruling classes, people's knowledge is an inconvenience, more or less dangerous, and containable so long as it does not spread too far, for the neoliberal revolutionaries it is much more than that; it undermines their entire ideology. It is not just that, as ever, the ruling class has to keep everyone else in their place. That is nothing new. It has always been the case. But as schooling, and then university education, are extended to more and more people on grounds of economic necessity (education's 'renewal'

function) so education has at the same time to be increasingly harnessed to the cause of 'continuity', lest these extensions—and with them a better-educated public—provoke too much dissatisfaction. That is why, as the Czech humourist Jan Werich is reputed to have remarked, while the struggle against stupidity is the only human struggle that will always be in vain, it must never be relinquished—both contrary to and on account of our rulers' intentions. What is new about the neoliberal agenda, however, is that, as I have outlined, the its agents are intellectually committed to the view that knowledge is not something that people can have and that *therefore* everything—including knowledge—has to be left to the market. And, again as I have already suggested, there is an obvious problem here: the position is contradictory. How can Hayek and his acolytes know that they cannot know and that only the market can know? Still, that is not the main point, for in the world of actually existing politics, contradiction hardly suffices to undermine positions, as anyone working in a UK university knows all too well: in Paul Krugman's rather nice words, 'Inconsistency in the pursuit of useful guidance is no vice' (Krugman 2010, quoted by Mirowski 2013, p. 21).

What does matter is, first, what this represents: namely a crude form of the sort of "thinking" characteristic of social Darwinism, sociobiology, and evolutionary psychology; what *counts* as knowledge is *whatever the market is said to predict.* Just as whatever is the case of whoever is said to have succeeded in life is what counts as 'success'; or just as 'intelligence' is said to consist in high IQ because IQ is said to measure 'intelligence': so the market is infallible because what the market is said to "do" is what counts as knowledge. *That* is what the claim amounts to, that 'prices in an efficient market contains all relevant "information" and therefore cannot be predicted by mere mortals' (Mirowski 2013, p. 54). The dictum is that only the market produces knowledge; and since monetary value is thus the only criterion of any judgement at all that the market recognizes, so only that can constitute knowledge which has monetary value. It is of course the case that this sort of "reasoning" is, to put it kindly, bathetic; but it is equally the case that it is influential and likely to become more so as critical analysis is sidelined in the face of relativism, "resilience" and all the other comforting nonsense that neoliberalism offers us in its contemporary reworking of social Darwinist "logic".

Like Social Darwinism in all its various manifestations, this constitutes a quasi-theological form of argumentation: the market is, literally, the neoliberals' god. It is important to stress that, while liberalism itself *may* be understood as a form of idolatry (Brecher 1997), its neoliberal form can hardly be understood otherwise. We are frail and ignorant; we must therefore put our faith and trust in the market, since only the market can truly be said to know anything at all. Nor can the market ever be mistaken: it is omniscient, omnipotent and eternally omnicompetent. That the whole story makes no sense is its strength, not its weakness; it is we who are weak, not the market. Ignorance is thus both a virtue and a tool.

That is why, regardless of whether or not they acknowledge it, and despite the inherent contradiction, what matters for neoliberals is ignorance. That is why ignorance is a virtue for the neoliberal revolutionaries. For the very possibility of genuine knowledge would fatally undermine their claim about the *epistemic* role of the market and with that the entire neoliberal ideology. So we should not be surprised that '… for purposes of public understanding and sloganeering, neoliberal market society must be treated as a "natural" and inexorable state of mankind' (Mirowski 2013, p. 55). Hence too, as we have seen, the connections with, and incursions into, '"evolutionary psychology", network sociology, ecology, animal ethology, linguistics, cybernetics, and even science studies' (Mirowski 2013, p. 56).

Take cognisance of all this, and the neoliberal agenda for our universities is obvious: their very function as producers of knowledge has to be undermined; and the obvious way to undermine it is to monetarize knowledge. Hence the Browne Report's arguably central claim, and the only paragraph in which it has anything at all to say about why Higher Education matters:

> Higher education matters because it transforms the lives of individuals. On graduating, graduates are more likely to be employed, more likely to enjoy higher wages and better job satisfaction, and more likely to find it easier to move from one job to the next. (Browne Report 2010, p. 16)

Thus it is indeed the case, as Mirowski argues, that '… if one wholeheartedly subscribes to the neoliberal doctrine of the market as

über-information processor, then "reform" of the university prescribes the monetization of knowledge in all its forms' (Mirowski 2013, p. 216; cf. CDPU, Collini 2012, 2017; Hotson 2016; Smyth 2017).

## Neoliberal Subversion of the University

Neoliberalism's subversion of the very idea of education is directed at both the means of production of knowledge and its logical terms and forms. The first strategy is what one would expect: to undermine pay and conditions; and to outsource, first, cleaning, catering, student accommodation and administration, before then going on, of course, to outsource and thereby further to casualize academic work too. That is why modularity was introduced, whether or not its proponents understood that fact: for it fragments the very possibility of knowledge, thereby encouraging specialist "private providers" to open monoversities. That is also one reason—perhaps the fundamental reason—for the introduction of fees: to help make higher education into a commodity and thus to bring about what the neoliberals claim is the "natural" case, namely that monetary value is an epistemic category. Certainly it would explain the introduction in the UK of loan-based fees of £9000 per annum despite their long-term cost—once likely non-repayment levels are taken into account—being greater than what they replaced (Institute for Fiscal Studies 2017). This is why the various forms of outsourcing are so important. They serve to undermine the university as a community dedicated to the production of knowledge, a co-operative undertaking, and in doing so—in individualizing people's activities— outsourcing undermines one of the conditions of the production of knowledge, namely co-operation. For co-operative activities directly counter the figure of the free-floating neoliberal individual, the entrepreneur who invests in themselves: a figure at once the bedrock of the neoliberal vision and one—unhappily but traditionally—beloved of all too many academics. All this is too well documented to require elaboration.

But the second strategy, neoliberalism's revolutionary attack on the logical terms and forms of knowledge, appears largely to have escaped

academics' notice no less than that of the commentariat. Nonetheless, in terms of the neoliberal agenda it matters even more than what I have just outlined; and why its being largely ignored is so important. As an example, consider just a few of the responses to the 2010 Browne Report that recommended trebling tuition fees to £9000. Reading those in the *Times Higher* (the UK academic trade rag) really did make me wonder if our collaboration over the last 25 years with the commodification of the universities—our collusion with 'student satisfaction' surveys, 'research excellence', 'impact' and all the rest of it—has not seriously addled our brains. One commentator bemoaned the Browne proposals because they 'risk(ed) creating a two-tier system under which most institutions, serving the greater majority of students, "will be offering a worse – and also more expensive – experience"' (Attwood 2010, quoting Roger Browne). '*Risk*'? What risk? The Browne Report's proposals were designed expressly to achieve this, and they have succeeded in doing so. Here is just one more example, from a *Times Higher* leader (for others, see, e.g., Brecher 2011): 'Most deprived will be the arts, humanities and social sciences, downgraded to "non-priority" status, a disaster for the nation's intellectual and cultural life that undermines the very idea of the university (Mroz 2010)'. For some, this would indeed be disastrous. But what the observation misses is that, far from being a 'disaster' for the neoliberal revolutionaries who imposed it, it is for them a clear and obvious good. For all this "critical" nonsense suggests that people are actually able to gain knowledge and to improve the world on the basis of that knowledge. And that is precisely the position that the revolution needs to undermine.

Or consider how power and control in the university have been centralised to serve the revolution: the standardisation of timetabling, teaching modes and methods; the increasing insistence on generic propaganda "modules" intended to inculcate entrepreneurship; and the simple-minded assumption that, since only that which can be measured is real (and of course what can be measured can *ipso facto* be monetarized), the standardisation of forms of assessment across different disciplines. In short, the eminently liberal (in an everyday sense of the term) Baroness Warnock has been made to sound positively Trotskyist:

The aim of the universities can never be to follow the market, in the sense of offering whatever it is that students want. Prospective students often do not know what they want, and certainly do not know what, in order to achieve academic goals, they ought to be given. On the contrary, universities must try to remedy the inability to make intelligent choices, forced upon people by their position in the market economy. …The job of universities is to teach students to want the right things, not to give them what they want. (Warnock 1989, p. 25)

## What Is to Be Done?

For three decades now academics have been complaining about the directions in which UK universities have been moving: Relatively lower pay; the ever-increasing ratio of management and administration to academic staff; ever-larger classes; the corruption and policing of research; ever-increasing de-professionalisation; the university as corporation rather than association of members; and so on. Today we are saddled with tuition fees; 'impact'; online 'courses'; the withdrawal of state financial support for humanities and social science teaching; private 'providers'; outsourcing; and so on… and on… and on. Most fundamentally, as I illustrated at the beginning of this essay, the very language in which university matters are discussed is all too frequently meaningless. But what is crucial to understand is that this—and the universities' linguistic corruption in particular—is neither laziness, accident nor mere stupidity. It is deliberate. Lewis Carroll got it exactly right:

'When I use a word', Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, 'it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less'.
'The question is', said Alice, 'whether you can make words mean so many different things'.
'The question is', said Humpty Dumpty, 'which is to be master – that's all'. (Carroll 1970, p. 269)

Our protests are largely to no avail: "we" complain; "they" take no notice. How come UK academics are so extraordinarily impotent? One set of answers is to do with individuals' cowardice, complacency,

complaisance, corruption and—above all—stupidity. In that we are no different from any other bunch of people. But this is not the place to moralize: first, because it would make no difference; second, because moralizing deflects attention from the fundamental causes of the situation. What we need is a clear analysis: and a first step in that direction is to recognize not just the political realities and priorities of the neoliberal revolutionaries—to recognize that they are indeed revolutionaries and that we are living through a revolution—but also to understand the way in which the revolution is an *epistemic* one.

So let me offer by way of a conclusion a version of The Ten Commandments, newly updated for twenty-first-century university life.

One: let us take on the task of understanding the epistemic as well as the material reality of what is going on and the role we have been cast in. Two: let us say no to further commodification; say no to the Stalinist fundamentalists who are busy re-engineering human souls. Three: let us resist the corruption of language, and thus of thought, that the neoliberal revolution demands. Four: let us keep telling people that we are doing all this. Five: let us laugh, contemptuously: go-getting, forward-facing neoliberals hate being laughed at as they yet again move forward across the piece and into the 'long, dark tea-time of the soul' (Adams 1988). Six: let us try not to compete with each other, however hard that might be in a sector the very raison d'etre of which is now competition. Seven: we have to make allies, all of us in the universities, and not least top make genuine common cause with everyone who works in the universities: porters, administrators, caterers, cleaners—in short, with everyone, even managers, who are not (yet) fully invested in the neoliberal revolution. Eight: we must never, ever, be seduced into believing the neoliberal—indeed the liberal—lie that working as an academic requires disinterest. It does not. All education is always political. Nine: let us remember that it is what we do, much more than what we say, that sets an example, whether in the university or outside it. And so, finally, number ten: we need always to remember, as Humpty Dumpty reminds us, that the question is who's in charge—that's all.

Today it is the neoliberal fundamentalists who are in charge. But they can yet be ousted, in the universities as elsewhere. We need to understand that so far we have been very largely on the losing side of

a *revolution* and to act accordingly in plotting our counter-revolution. The first step, as ever, is to exploit the contradictions. And as a profession, academics are surely in a better position than just about any other set of workers to do exactly that.

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# Part III

**Work, Success and Failure**

# 7

# Gender Equality, Austerity, Vulnerabilities and Resistance in the Spanish Neoliberal Life Cycle

## Louise Grisoni and Sonia Ruiz

In this chapter, we examine how central government neoliberal austerity measures have negatively affected gender equality in Spain, one of the European countries most severely affected by the recent global recession. In terms of the neoliberal life cycle, our attention is primarily on the work stage, although we attention challenge and complicate this with our focus on women's experience at all stages in their lives. It may be that neoliberal responses to austerity contain a deliberate set of policies designed to break the public sector (Mirowski 2014) and that women and disadvantaged groups will suffer most. Klein (2007) argues that neoliberal free market policies have risen to prominence in some developed countries because of a 'shock doctrine'. The exploitation of national crises such as austerity is used to push through controversial

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policies while citizens are too emotionally and physically distracted to resist effectively. Using a heuristic approach, we focus on the unique features of the impact of the recession and subsequent austerity measures on women. Taking into account the argument that the state is no longer a guarantor for gender equality but more often a threat to it (Ruiz 2013), our analysis identifies different ways in which gender equality has experienced a backlash, which we argue is as a result of gendered austerity measures. We have adopted a feminist perspective to explore the multiple nature of the impact of the recession, and evidence the growing gendered nature of disadvantage in publicly available statistical data.

One of the unforeseen outcomes of the economic crisis and consequent austerity measures in Spain is the opening up of new possibilities for collective action, specifically for gender equality. In Spain, the deterioration of representative democracy resulting from the imposition of a range of austerity measures has resulted in a resurgence of feminist collective action. The Indignados movement's (15M)[1] slogan 'no nos representan'[2] points directly to a crisis of representation which aims to tackle political gender issues (Ruiz 2015). Different forms of collective action have emerged in response to austerity: a political movement, 'Barcelona en Comú', and two examples of feminist activism, 'Igualdad de género frente a la crisis económica' and 'La Vaga de Totes'. These initiatives point to alternative ways of engaging with work and working lives, in the hope of redressing the inequalities that have increased over recent years.

The lessons from Spain would suggest that there is a populist move to the political left at local level, which has resulted in innovative forms of political activism. In general, political institutions generate

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[1]The Indignados (also known as the 15M) movement in Spain emerged when several organizations called for a public protest to publicly express the intense insufficiencies of the current democratic system to be held on 15 May 2011. After that date, the most important squares in Spain were occupied and hosted citizen assemblies on the political system, economic, feminist or ecological issues. Cyber and digital work also supported the street action.

[2]'No nos representan' translates as 'They do not represent us'.

low confidence among the Spanish population as they do not take into account the participatory voice of the people. Central government is not setting gender equality as a priority, and we anticipate that this will continue to have consequences for the life of women in the long term. The conservative and social democratic labels for policy no longer offer reasonable solutions to austerity as more radical democratic forms of action emerge.

## The Multiple Nature of the Crisis and Emerging Policy Scenarios

Debates surrounding the impact of austerity have broadened to include an understanding of a multiple systemic and structural crisis (Wallerstein 2010; Marquand 2012). The dynamics and interrelationships of the wider system are seen as central to understanding events in Spain where political and social issues are discussed conjointly with concerns about economic and financial sustainability. This explanation of the recession is further enriched by feminist critiques which question normative assumptions of the crisis by integrating gender, food, care and ecological concerns into a description of a 'multidimensional crisis' (Larrañaga et al. 2011; Pérez Orozco 2011; Fraser 2014; Herrero 2017). The crisis from a feminist perspective specifically directs attention to austerity impacts on social reproduction, care and domestic work and all those activities which are necessary to sustain life, rather than a narrow focus on paid labour (Elson and Pearson 2015).

Financial markets are also an area of concern for Adkins (2015), who calls on feminism to include the strategy of putting finances to the service of gender equality in the field of redistribution policies. More recently, scholars have focused on how the economic and social crises are linked to political ones. Lombardo and Kantola (2017) have provided evidence on the changes in the economic institutions and processes as a result of the crisis, and they have also collected gendered impacts of the dynamics between European Union policies and domestic policies as a result of austerity measures.

In order to consider the nature of austerity measures and its gendered impacts, there is a need to understand the current crisis of capitalism by incorporating gender inequalities into the analysis. Lux and Wöhl (2014) do so by integrating the social construction of gender—in relation to other categories that may cause inequalities and relations of domination, by including the public–private continuum, including social reproduction, and the hegemonic gender orders and gender regimes. Based on value Marxist theory, Charnock et al. (2014a) focus on the limits of the accumulation of capital in Spain, taking into account historical and structural roots of the economic crisis and highlighting financial issues, urbanization factors and policy dynamics. Charnock et al. (2014b) argue that Spain is a paradigmatic case in the crisis of capitalism as the country's growth possibilities have been limited to a model where social reproduction is subordinated to money power and authoritarian law. Gender relations should be analyzed as a constituent part of capitalism (Fraser 2014), and the impacts of neoliberal measures can also be a catalyst for political change:

> On the one hand, they [neoliberal policies] have stabilizing effects by externalizing social reproduction and care work to private households, especially in times of crisis, and thus bolster accumulation process. On the other hand, they have a destabilizing potential as those externalization processes are questioned and challenged by various individual and social groups. (Lux and Wöhl 2014, pp. 103–104)

There has been a direct attempt to (re)impose a conservative gender order by means of the austerity-related measures implemented in recent years, favouring a recessive perspective in terms of women's rights. Therefore, there is a need to further understand how gender inequalities are related to a capitalist system in crisis. Alonso and Paleo (2013) argue that the right-wing Popular Party, in office since 2011, has had a negative impact on women. The social policy initiatives of the conservative party go beyond the objectives of economic adjustment, and deliberately intend to structurally change both the socio-economic model of the country (del Pozo and Martín 2013) and the way gender policies are structured by the state. This is consistent with changes

regarding welfare, the family, the care system as well as the labour market which are reshaping gender relations across Europe (Rubery 2014), and it has been argued that the EU-framed austerity measures have blurred differences between social democrats and conservatives (Lombardo 2013).

We consider how austerity measures aim at transforming gender regimes, taking into account the relations and tensions of the gendered division of labour, namely the presence and situation of women in paid labour, care and domestic work. We are aware of the danger of conceptualizing a gender regime that is single dimensional. We therefore work with Walby's definition (2015), which runs parallel to the intention to structurally change the gender regime and addresses financial policies, public expenditure, employment and care giving in households, as well as in the political system. In addition, Connell (1987) is concerned with symbolic, emotional, production relations, and power. We understand the concept of gender regime as 'rules and norms about gender relations allocating tasks and rights to the sexes' (Sainsbury 1999, p. 5). Growing gender inequalities in employment are a common feature across the EU (Larrañaga et al. 2011). Scholars have also identified the reduction in public expenditure (Rubery 2014) related to austerity measures as a threat to women's welfare rights. These policy responses to the financial crisis effectively cut the income of the poor and of women where services are most needed (Walby 2011). In addition, the neoliberal agenda that extends the market into all areas of activity puts at risk the de-familialization of care and other progress made towards equality achieved before the crisis (Karamessini and Rubery 2014).

## Gender-Equality Policies and State Feminism Agencies

The neoliberal agenda in the EU (Lombardo 2013) has subordinated equality between women and men to a focus on 'more urgent' economic issues. Gender equality needs constant state support to be successful, yet the approval of gender equality laws has stopped in Spain.

In Galicia (2009), Catalonia (2010) and Cantabria (2011) projects for regional equality laws were put on hold (Alonso and Paleo 2013). In addition, the conservative party suspended an anti-discrimination and equal treatment law developed by the previous socialist party in opposition to EU directives. This Spanish anti-discrimination and equal treatment law not only highlighted discrimination based on gender, but also other dimensions of inequality, such as ethnicity, race, class, age and sexual identity or orientation. Nevertheless, the main equality body, the Instituto de la Mujer established in 1983, has just been renamed as 'Instituto de la Mujer y para la Igualdad de Oportunidades'.[3] The mission has been broadened to prevent and eliminate discrimination on the grounds of 'birth, sex, race or ethnic origin, religion, ideology, sexual identity or orientation, age, disability'.[4] Although its duties have broadened, at the same time the new Institute's budget has been significantly reduced.

The expansion of government equality bodies has been stopped. In 2010, the first Ministry of Equality was removed, as were the equality services in Galicia, the Women's Institute in Murcia and the Women's Council of Madrid—a regional women's NGO created as an advisory body in 1993 (Alonso and Paleo 2013). Local authority responsibilities for gender equality were suppressed by law in 2013, and the consolidated local safety net for assistance and protection for women suffering gender violence is being dismantled. In fact, the Spanish government had been working without a framework for action on gender equality for three years, which meant that there was no strategic direction and work program at the same time as the worst of the recession was in progress. It was not until 2014 that a 'Strategic Plan for Equal Opportunities 2014 – 2016' was finally adopted. However, in 2017 there is no longer a working strategic plan.

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[3]*Instituto de la Mujer y para la Igualdad de Oportunidades*' translates as 'Woman's Institute and for Equal Opportunities'.

[4]Ley 15/2014, de 16 de septiembre, de racionalización del Sector Público y otras medidas de reforma administrativa.

# Employment, Care and Domestic Work

Instability has been the leading characteristic of the Spanish labour market for decades, and the employment structure promotes a high deregulation of labour relations. Today, there are fewer jobs characterized by stable, permanent employment with decent working conditions. More women are trying to enter the labour market, changing the tradition of staying in the home to look after family. Government policies are trying to return women to the home, but many women resist this retrograde move.

In the first months of the crisis, the biggest blow to employment was the crash of the construction sector, a male-dominated area. This meant that increasing unemployment among women went unnoticed, and the reduction of the number of jobs was understood as a gender-neutral issue by the government (Ruiz 2013). Spain has the highest rate of unemployment of the OECD, and long-term unemployment is double the EU average, running at 49.7% (Instituto de Estudios Economicos 2014). This increase has accompanied a gendered reduction in unemployment protection. Unemployed women in Spain have a 77% likelihood of not receiving any benefit at all (CCOO 2014).

Unemployment for men and women has increased, although 4 out of 5 jobs created have been targeted for male workers. A question here is whether cutbacks in male employment reproduces or changes gender norms (Lux and Wöhl 2014). At the margins of official data, there are many other non-formal jobs that define the Spanish labour market. A large number of the employed population are working an illegal job, and there is also a high percentage of non-formal housework, domestic services,[5] internships,[6] sexual work and prostitution and other precarious categories. The majority of the people working these jobs are

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[5]The situation of the women working in domestic services is paradigmatic and exploitative. These workers are not included in the general workers regime; they do not have the right to unemployment benefits and make up a big part of the illegal jobs in Spain.

[6]The European Commission recently denounced the situation of interns in Spain as their labour conditions are oppressive and irregular (2012). They are mostly young people whose labour replaces jobs for little or no money, sometimes over the course of years.

women, and women make up 72.9% of part-time employees (PIGY 2014). Part-time employment was established in 1984 as work that allows the combination of labour activity with domestic tasks and is a female-dominated field (Ruiz 2013). Occupational segregation is still an issue in the Spanish labour market. There is a 23% gender pay gap, and it increases according to the level of seniority as careers progress and the age of the female worker. Women in Spain would need to work 84 days more than men each year to earn the same salary performing a similar job (UGT 2014).

The labour market measures implemented by the current conservative government are deepening the gender inequalities that already exist. Austerity measures have put the brake on what would have been one of the most effective work-life balance policies: non-transferrable parental leave for childbirth established on a basis of equal rights for women and men—in terms of both time and remuneration. For example, in Barcelona 35.1% of contracts issued in 2016 were less than one month and 59.6% of contracts issued were for less than 6 months (BA 2017). Both the debate and implementation of reforms in this area have been stopped (Castro 2013).

Reforms in the Spanish pension system are worsening female poverty. Given that women are over-represented in the informal economy and more frequently interrupt their professional career than men to look after children or relatives, women often meet with difficulties in reaching the minimum requirements for a decent pension (Ezquerra 2011). The 2012 labour reform has had negative consequences for gender equality in the workplace. Tax discounts for employing women have been removed and the reform boycotts work-life balance rights by limiting workers' power to negotiate flexible working arrangements. There has been a move to stop women from using time during the day for breastfeeding, and the option to accumulate this time to additional days for childcare has been removed and eliminates state financial incentives when women return to their former jobs after childcare leave. With this reform, part-time jobs are allowed to add overtime (extra time) and the privatization of the labour market continues to expand through the promotion of temporary work agencies. Unilateral opportunities for employers to introduce more de-regulated labour conditions

without having to respect collective agreements have increased thus making it easier and cheaper for employers to fire employees, including pregnant women (Lombardo 2013; Ruiz and Porta 2012; Ruiz 2014; Ezquerra 2011).

Current data on the use of time (CIS 2017) show that women are increasing their commitment to care and domestic unpaid work. Women are 'mainly responsible' for preparing meals in 54.6% of Spanish households, compared to the 19.4% of the men who are 'mainly responsible' of cooking. Similar data are to be found in relation to washing the dishes (48% of women and 20.6% of men) or cleaning the house (44.9% of women vs. 14.8% of men). The management of the households is the only task that is equally shared by women and men (34% of women and 34.5% of men). Unpaid leave for taking care of dependent relatives is increasing in Spain. The leave to take care of children has increased by 10.6% between 2005 and 2014. Women were 94.01% of those requesting leave to take care of children (León et al. 2015). In addition, household workers have seen their situation worsen since the Popular Party took office.[7] Caregiving is seen as a woman's obligation with an absent state, i.e. a state that is not taking responsibility for the care needs of its society, the reduction of family economic resources and the increasing number of men not sharing caring arrangements (Ezquerra 2011). Around 1 in 4 women shorten their working day to take care of their children[8] and 38.2% of employed women have taken leave of more than one year for caring responsibilities. Women in Spain dedicate an average of just over four hours per day to domestic work—two and a half hours more than the male's contribution, which has increased by only 45 minutes in the last seven years (INE 2011).

This work overload, the double burden of family and job responsibilities also has an impact on women's health and their vulnerability increases along with their age and with the number of children or

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[7]Real Decreto-ley 29/2012, de 28 de diciembre, de mejora de gestión y protección social en el Sistema Especial para Empleados de Hogar y otras medidas de carácter económico y social (BOE de 31 de diciembre de 2012).

[8]http://www.publico.es/actualidad/506338/ocho-etapas-de-la-discriminacion-laboral-de-las-mujeres.

relatives who depend on women care givers. Moreover, the lack of gender disaggregated statistics does not help to show the entire picture of female poverty. For example in Catalonia (2016), the poverty rate for single-parent families (mostly women) is 42.8% and 13% of female workers are in poverty (Rovira and Fuertes 2016).

## Social and Welfare Policies

The welfare state regime, especially in southern European countries, is facing a critical challenge. For years, the common good has been confronted with the trend to create opportunities for profitable privatization and progressively minimize the state (Ruiz 2013; Rubery 2014). As women tend to rely more heavily on welfare benefits, public services and social care, government cuts affect them disproportionately (Peterson 2011; Walby 2011). The demand for 'insertion minimum wages' for people without income (61% of them are women) increases; meanwhile, the main plan for basic social services has suffered a new budget reduction and its amount is currently 27.6% of the 2009 budget (PIGY 2014).

Cuts to the Dependence Law[9] have meant a dismantling of services: economic resources have decreased by more than 14% and benefits for people whom the state considered 'moderately dependent' have been eliminated, affecting thousands of people in disadvantaged situations (Marea Violeta 2012). Subsidies for professional caregivers in nursing and old people's homes have been reduced (Lombardo 2013). The social protection for non-professional caregivers named in the Dependency Law has disappeared. These and other dependency cuts are part of a strategy to push women back into the home, promoting a reduction of their labour activity rate and generating more jobs available to

[9]Ley 39/2006, de 14 de diciembre, de Promoción de la Autonomía Personal y Atención a las personas en situación de dependencia, better known as 'Dependence Law', is a Spanish law that created the current System for Autonomy and Care Unit, which is the set of services and benefits for the promotion of personal autonomy and protection and individual care through concerted public and accredited private services.

men in the labour market. In 2011, 160,000 people were registered as non-professional caregivers in the social security system: more than 90% of them were women, and a majority of them were over the age of 45. After the 2012 reform, only 24,000 of them were still registered (Requena 2012). Despite 65% of dependent people being women and 83% of the non-professional caregivers, the dependency budget is not present in the institutional gender impact evaluation (PIGY 2014).

Since September 2012, the Spanish healthcare system has no longer provided universal medical coverage. People without a residency permit are excluded from these services, and a large number of vital medications formerly subsidized by the state now have to be paid for by everybody, regardless of their situation or income level. The 2015 budget allocated for health services is 56% of the 2011 budget. A privatization process has started in many regions, and 53,000 workers in the health system have been dismissed since 2009 (PIGY 2014). Austerity has also dealt a drastic blow to education policies. Among others, the 2015 budget allocated for schooling for children between 0 and 3 years represents 75% of the 2010 figures (PIGY 2014).

## Gender Violence, Sexual and Reproductive Rights Policies

Attacks on women's freedom and rights have included the issue of control over women's bodies with the aim of reinforcing the traditional role of women as mothers and carers, keeping them in the home and out of the public sphere. From 2008 to 2013, laws on the protection of pregnant women have been approved in six regions, all of them with conservative governments (i.e. Castilla la Mancha, Castilla León, Murcia, Galicia, Madrid and La Rioja). Under these laws women in vulnerable situations, i.e. teenage girls will continue their pregnancies, and some of these governments stress the 'tragedy of abortion' (Alonso and Paleo 2013). In addition, central government has explicitly excluded lesbians and single mothers from public infertility treatments. The project to control women's sexual and reproductive rights has at its core the

intention to suppress the 2010 law that regulated voluntary termination of pregnancy according to criteria established by the World Health Organization and in line with the majority of EU legislation. This proposal was finally dropped in 2012 following pressure from feminist groups.

Ten years after the implementation of the law against gender violence, the statistics are discouraging. Preventative measures against gender-based violence are one of the policy areas that have suffered most from economic cuts and the conservative government. Up to August 2017, 73 women were killed by their partners, although the central government only acknowledges 36. From 2010 to 2013, the evaluation of 'extreme risk' situations—which needed constant supervision—dropped 31% and the 'high risk' ones 46%, while those requiring just an occasional surveillance increased 3.1% (Sanchez 2014). It is being stated that austerity and the new conservative wave in Spain is endangering the existing previous consensus among ideologically different parties, on gender-based violence from the late 1990s (Lombardo 2013). It can be argued that austerity policies in promoting inequality have fostered increased violence towards women. Job insecurity in Spain has increased and has contributed to an increase of gender-based violence and harassment against women in the labour market, especially in relation to motherhood (Gálvez and Torres 2009). The 2016 report of the Spanish public prosecutor states a 40% increase of sexual harassment at the workplace in the last two years (Madrigal 2016).

## Emerging Forms of Gender Action and Resistance

The negative impact of cuts at times of austerity (McDowell 2014) has been well catalogued, and scholars also suggest that the current political scenario might become a catalyst for progressive political change (Walby 2011; Rubery 2014). Neoliberal policies are having a negative impact in women's lives, and resistance is being expressed in feminist collective action establishing new organizations and political movements. For example, the proposed introduction of a law to restrict abortion was

withdrawn by the government as a result of feminist opposition, which can be seen as a success of feminist mobilization. However, counter forces continue to operate, illustrated by the pro-life demonstration that took to the streets of Madrid in November 2014. Walby says:

> It may be a tipping point or a critical turning point, either an opportunity for the right to gain ground….or an opportunity for the resurgence of the social democratic project. (Walby 2011, p. 119)

Drawing from the Spanish case, we suggest that there is more of a move to the political left together with potential for other forms of innovation and activism beyond the social democratic project that could drive a different future for the feminist agenda. Charnock et al. (2014b) point out that any transformation towards a global society that is not just subjected to the accumulation of capital remains an urgent need. We believe that this can be only attained by a conscious fight of the international working class. However, this is unlikely to be successful, given other issues such as the decline in social democracy across Europe as well as the neoliberal refusal to consider gendered exclusions, especially relating to care and paid labour activities (Evans 2015).

We argue that the multiple crisis, which we have presented in the form of austerity policies, represents an opportunity for new voices and activism to emerge in the political arena. Thus, new forms of advocacy and representation appear in political parties (particularly at the local level which are promoting progressive policies), trade unions and social movements. The examples of collective action we discuss extend Walby's (2011) proposal that suggests the only way gender-equality action can counteract the neoliberal trend is through a social democratic project, and show that alternative, more radical, routes to activism and gender policymaking are under construction in Spain.

Our analysis shows that two alternative economic strategies have been adopted by emerging groups to address the central government's policy response to the crisis. These are not isolated from each other, but in permanent dialogue. Both are seeking ways to reduce inequalities created through austerity policies and other measures. Drawing on Agenjo (2011), the first perspective is a '*merged*' strategy anchored in the

market with a focus on production that has been reviewed with a gender perspective. This is a social democratic approach, where the market and the domestic sphere merge, and both are given the same value and the same analytical status. Differentiated effects of the crisis on women and men are considered, and scholars make visible the important part of women's work that is hidden in the economy (Agenjo 2011). Proposals to overcome the crisis emphasize reshaping the financial economy and the promotion of new employment models that are socially and ecologically sustainable (Larrañaga et al. 2011), as well as the promotion of work and life balance.

The second strategy is a '*transcending*' strategy where the focus is on a 'sustainable living' argument (Beneria 1999; Kuiper and Sap 1996; Carrasco 2011). This is a more radical democratic approach which aims at transcending the dichotomy of employment and domestic work in relation to productive and reproductive spheres. It identifies aspects of the current multidimensional crisis: the social reproduction crisis—with female migration at its core—and links it to the care crisis, the ecological and the food crisis (Pérez Orozco 2011). Solutions include: the socialization of the responsibility of care; business tax on care; the promotion of community projects; tackling private property and putting a focus on body politics and ecological concerns (Herrero 2017)—in conjunction with traditional care policies such as the public provision of nurseries and dependency centres, measures to support dependency situations, the implementation of mechanisms that allow for the collectivization of rights such as pension systems, and the universalization of rights promoting high quality universalized health and education systems (Perez Orozco 2011).

These two different strategies are found both in new feminist movements and in new political parties that aim to counteract neoliberal approaches to austerity. Three examples of feminist mobilization that have emerged since the beginning of the crisis demonstrate how collective action aims to change the institutional or traditional parameters of representation and address the negative impact of austerity policies. Intersectionality, radical democracy proposals, participatory initiatives and feminist demands are at the centre of all these initiatives. As feminist perspectives are voiced in the streets, in social networks and in new

**Table 7.1** Emerging strategies to re-establish gender equality

| *Merged* strategy | *Transcending* strategy |
|---|---|
| Market and domestic sphere merge and are given the same value | Transcends the dichotomy of employment and unpaid domestic work |
| A system integrator approach (Agenjo 2011) with a focus on: | A sustainable living approach (Beneria 1999) with a focus on: |
| • Reshaping the financial economy | • Introducing business tax in order to socialize the responsibility of care |
| • Promoting new employment models that are socially and ecologically sustainable | • Displacing the materialist conception of economy and focus more on body and ecological issues (Herrero 2017) |
| • Addressing work-life balance | • Tackle the issue of private property ownership (Herrero 2017) |
| • Increasing nurseries and dependency centres | • Supporting community projects on care |
| Part of the social democratic neoliberal project: how to distribute the cake better! | A radical democratic project: how to change the recipe for the cake! |
| E.g. 'Igualdad de genero frente a la crisis economica', 'Barcelona en Comu' | E.g. 'La Vaga de Totes', 'Barcelona en Comu' |

political structures, there is opportunity to develop new organizational forms of protest and action (Table 7.1).

"**Igualdad de género frente a la crisis económica**"[10] was a 2009 manifesto with a set of measures to be implemented by the government. Their approach follows criteria of the 'merged strategy' approach:

> Gender equality is key in making the most of women's human capital, and of the caring capacity of men; for the effective functioning of labour markets and government budgets; for making the change to a more technologically advanced economic model. (IGFCE 2009)

The proposals were signed by a large number of women's groups and individuals and publicly presented in several Spanish cities and towns. Among other measures, the manifesto called for a general reduction

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[10]'Igualdad de género frente a la crisis económica' translates as 'Gender Equality in the face of the crisis'.

of time dedicated to the labour market; the sharing of domestic work and care tasks among women and men, or among the members of a household; a universal public coverage of education for children from zero years; public services for dependent people; increased opportunity for working mothers to include the removal of care leave measures orientated to discourage women returning to their jobs following maternity leave; the establishment of an equal and non-transferrable paternal and maternal leave; the inclusion of domestic employees in the social security system's workers general regime, an updated widow's pension and the progressive equality of status for the non-contributory pensions. Their manifesto states: 'Women are necessary, now more than ever, as workers and as citizens'.

'La Vaga de Totes'[11] was a project that was active from 2014 to 2016. In October 2014, a massive strike took place in Barcelona. Thousands of people: young and old, women and men, paralyzed the streets of the city. They occupied offices of political and economic institutions and demonstrated under the call for 'La Vaga de totes'. The end of another year of austerity measures tipped people into action in a way that said: 'enough is enough'.

This project fits into the 'transcending strategy' approach, as it puts at the centre of its plans for action issues that transcend the dichotomy of employment and care, as well as activities that flow at the edges of the productive and reproductive spheres. The origins of this action can be found in feminist perspectives on work and the conclusion that the world is organized on a patriarchal system and that women are allocated the task that will sustain it. The organizers of 'La Vaga de Totes' denounce the current concept of work, because it excludes all activities that are not paid, that are not performed in the public space and that do not function in relation to criteria such as success, power or capitalist accumulation (LVDT 2014). 'La Vaga de Totes' adopted a radical approach which aims at creating a mobilization designed to collapse the present economic system. At the core of their action are: 'Unemployed

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[11]'La Vaga de Totes' translates as 'Everyone's strike' (NB reference to the feminine case in Spanish).

women, precarious women, housewives, domestic workers, undocumented migrant women, retired women…Can you imagine a strike from them all?' (LVDT 2014).

Links with previous social and women's strikes are clear, for instance with the 2000 Global Women's Strike and the 2009 Prekarias a la Deriva (Vulnerable Women Adrift) a strike organized in Madrid in 2009 (Ruiz 2013). Moreover, in the two general strikes held in 2012 feminist action related to the Indignados movement denounced specific attacks by the labour reform movement against women. Strikes over food and care were organized, as well as gender strikes led by LGBT groups. Pickets in markets and at the entrance to schools also took place, led by 'care commandos' (García 2014). Strikes are a well-established and traditional method of resistance to oppression; however, "all-women's strikes" is a challenging form of collective action.

"**Barcelona en Comú**" is a political party under collective development, open to the Barcelona citizenship. It provides an example of a political party aiming at a '*transcending*' strategic approach. Organized as a citizen platform it was launched to take part in the local elections in 2015. '*Barcelona en Comú is a radical democracy project*', says one of the members of the gender group. Their policy on gender issues and basis for their electoral programme aims at eradicating all sexist, homophobic and transphobic violence. They want to guarantee people's participation in all spheres of their lives, from their bodies to the political, economic and social common decisions. They propose establishing mechanisms that ensure all voices are being heard regardless of sex, age, social class, ethnic origin, functional diversity or study level. In economic terms, their analysis states that the public administration is responsible for the current care crisis. Barcelona en Comu aims to guarantee leave, universalize rights, review purchase contracts, support cooperative and community care strategies and recognize the importance of these tasks for the sustainability of life and economic development. This means also tackling inequalities in the labour market and transforming the economic model so that the city's wealth from paid and unpaid work is distributed among all the citizens. Their gender programme highlights both proposals placed in the '*merged strategy*' and the '*transcending strategy*'. The gender intersectional approach, which takes a wide range of

categories of inequalities, also has to be underlined. The recent elections in Barcelona were won on this platform. Several policies such as a strategy against feminization of poverty and precariousness in daily life, gender urbanism and democratization of care have all been drawn up and are in the process of implementation. However, it is too early to assess the full impact of these policies.

New forms of gendered political action reflect the richness of democratic projects emerging in Spain, which aim at counteracting the central government's austerity policies. They present innovative organizational forms that are finding ways to counteract women's inequality created by austerity measures. They have some shared priorities such as the integration of gender-based violence concerns in their approaches. On the one hand, the more pragmatic approach of the *merged* strategy is mainly to be found in the new political parties and the *transcending* strategic approach is found in the feminist movements. Thus, new ways of gender-equality activism to counteract the neoliberal trend are being developed beyond purely social democratic perspectives.

## Conclusions

We have examined how austerity measures have affected gender equality in the context of Spain, one of the European countries most severely affected by the recent recession. We focused on the sociopolitical context that has developed and evidenced the growing gendered nature of disadvantage by drawing on publicly available statistical data. This reinforces arguments put forward by Mirowski (2014) that neoliberalism was not dislodged by the financial crisis because it now lies within ourselves. We are compelled to position ourselves in the market, and as such, we manifest neoliberalism's innate logic. We identified four different areas where women have experienced increasing inequality which we argue is as a result of austerity measures. We have shown how austerity measures have a multidimensional and systemic quality linking the economic crisis with political agendas. These have resulted in widening inequality and in particular, a worsening situation for women and their position in society. Challenges to the gender-equality agenda

have been illustrated and highlighted with examples of how inequality is being institutionalized for women. These include: increasing physical attacks on women, attacks on the right to reproduction and maternity leave, welfare and social policies, labour market changes that encourage women back into the home in caring roles and gender mainstreaming policies that bury the specific needs of women under a broader equality banner by focusing on a range of disadvantaged groups. The austerity measures are clearly having an impact in women's living conditions, and in Spain, we see deliberate and explicit government policies designed to reshape gender relations and increase inequality.

One of the unforeseen outcomes of the economic crisis and consequent austerity measures in Spain is the opening up of new possibilities in terms of the gender agenda, as well as opportunities for collective action. New forms of collective action have emerged—initiatives which point to alternative ways of engaging with work and working lives, in the hope of redressing inequalities that have increased over recent years. This reinforces Klein's (2017) optimism for transformative potential in the face of crisis, overcoming the neoliberal inertia that pervades. In the multiple crisis scenario, radical democratic forms of action have come to the fore which go beyond the social democratic label from *merged* to *transcending* strategies for change. The *transcending* approach is being developed by activists and included in the manifestos and programmes of new movements such as 'La Vaga de Totes' and 'Barcelona en Commun'. Institutions and traditional organizations generate low confidence among the Spanish population as they do not take into account participatory proposals voiced by the people. New forms of organization have been successful in mobilizing this by developing the struggle against austerity from a progressive perspective. Neither the conservative nor the social democratic label are valid any more, and radical democratic forms of action have come to the fore. In general, we can say that the move to the political left is seen as potentially more favourable towards an equality agenda and a move to the political right is likely to lead to greater inequality. This is reflected in central (right wing) and local (more left wing) political organizations. These new initiatives in Spain bring hope. They will need ongoing review to see how they continue to develop and how effective they are in the longer term.

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# 8

# Towards a Manifesto: On the Love of Failure

Susan Crozier

Under neoliberalism we are charged with the responsibility to maximize our potential. This chapter seeks to explore alternatives and resistances to utilitarian and market-driven ideas about the self by playfully valorizing the experience of personal failure, both within and beyond the world of work.

## The Manifesto

In what follows, I invite the reader's collaboration on a manifesto of sorts, some ways of thinking about failure that rescue it from its overbearing sibling, the phantasm of success. For failure, I would like to suggest, rather than being the opposite of success, is better aligned with solidarity. We are in this together. John D. Caputo explains the benefits of acknowledging our shared frailty:

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> The healing gesture, the gesture meant to heal [our] suffering, is not intended to explain anything away or fill in the abyss but simply to affirm that [we] are not alone, that our common madness is a matter of degree, that we're all siblings in the same "night of truth." The healing gesture is not to explain madness if that means to explain it away but to recognize it as a common fate, to affirm our community and solidarity. (2000, p. 38)

Here and now I would like to raise a toast in celebration of every form of so-called failure (so-called because it is assumed to be a deficit state, which I contest), every instance of not making it, of falling short, of weirdness, every fiasco, debacle, every humiliation, misfire or stumble. Such experiences, painful as they may be, speak powerfully of our shared humanity, our fleshy, temporary, tenuous existence. They speak of our need of one another; our vulnerability and our creatureliness. They remind us that we are animals on this planet that need to eat and drink and be sheltered. Failure reminds us that we are not machines: neither our bodies nor our minds will ever be entirely ordered according to some mechanistic imperative to serve the economy.

This manifesto might go some way towards the work of creating a language outside of the marketing and managerial discourses that have come to dominate post-industrial society. In it we might find ways to speak in which we are not attempting to promote the self as yet another commodity and in which the self is not being positioned as a consumer.

As soon as we move outside of that marketing/consumer discourse, it can be hard to know where we are. None of us want to be failures. And yet, the freedoms and possibilities failure speaks of can be alluring. Failure cannot be made into a product, nor is it a position that can be practised for gain, for profit.

> Paradoxes are at the heart of all dealings with failure – it is a position to take, yet one that cannot be striven for: it can be investigated, yet is too vague to be defined. (Le Feuvre 2010, p. 16)

Failure, at its most productive, invites us to consider how we might live if we didn't look for gain, progress, profit. It is so entrenched in us to see ourselves as getting somewhere—this fundamentally modernist belief

in progress. At its lightest and most elusive, failure can be a form of freedom.

One of my favourite workplace stories: A man goes to work at a new job on Monday morning. He goes out for lunch at midday and never comes back.

Work is a kind of violence. Just say no.

Of course work is a good thing and I am grateful to be currently employed. By some fortnightly miracle, money appears in my bank account and I take this as proof of my non-failureness. And yet, I still prefer to align myself with the unsuccessful. Therein lies some magic. Some secret power.

As an act of resistance, it might be that this manifesto on the love of failure would be argumentatively weak, vague, woolly. Or not that exactly, but perhaps only suggestive, allusive, open, like poetry. The manifesto might have the same openness to interpretation but also do the kind of language-making that poetry does, playing across meanings, not ultimately offering up an argument or a product you can sell.

At this stage, the manifesto is feeling towards the meanings that failure might generate or destabilize. It is not a recipe or a brand. It isn't going to support merchandising: there will be no cuddly toys or pencil cases.

## Our Frenemy, Neoliberalism

As we move into this foggy territory, how will we understand failure? Neoliberalism has been instructive in this regard. The central myth of neoliberalism is that success can be caused by the will and effort of an individual. Ergo, failure is your fault. It is a sign of weakness, of lack of will and effort, of getting it wrong and therefore somehow being wrong. Failure can unperson a person, leading us to believe that the self is wrong in itself. As any failure knows, we are somehow simultaneously possessed of an agency we are unable to exercise (weak, lazy, deluded) and utterly without agency (hopeless, futile, pathetic). This is why failure is dreaded. It is a devastating assault on the self.

The awful truth of failure is also why it is endlessly recuperated. Because failure happens, but is an intolerable offense against the self-determining subject of neoliberalism, we are told we must grasp onto the notion that failure is no more than an accidental detour on the way to success. I mean "SUCCESS!" because it is always emphatic, in the manner of a motivational speaker: "YOU are the independent, self-determining individual that neoliberalism has created YOU to be. YOU are the agent and author of your destiny! YOU must EMBRACE FAILURE! Celebrate it! Your failure shows that you DARED GREATLY! YOU are the HERO of your own narrative! Work hard! YOU CAN make it! DON'T give up!"

Such demanding emphasis. So wearing.

Even the exhortation to "believe in yourself" has come to seem distasteful to me. It is a desperate shriek let out as we grasp after an ever-crumbling empire of having, being and becoming.

And then how much is my failure really mine? The more the success–failure dyad is individualized, the more it is taken out of structural understanding of the ways in which power and privilege are reproduced. Every good left-leaning intellectual knows that the so-called level playing field has a wicked tilt in it. But isn't it also true that even the privileged among us can find ways to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory? (Asking for a friend.)

This is why I love the failures—we have fashioned a counter-economy out of non-success that has its own delights. Let me be clear, I believe failure is sweeter than nihilism. It has a bumbling tenderness about it, an appreciation of ordinariness, a lack of sophistication, and an understanding of just how embarrassingly ugly/beautiful we are in our misshapen clothing and less than perfect bodies.

Mark Fisher summons something much darker in this account of Kurt Cobain, the musician who committed suicide in 1994 at the age of 27:

> In his dreadful lassitude and objectless rage, Cobain seemed to have given wearied voice to the despondency of the generation that had come after history, whose every move was anticipated, tracked, bought and sold before it had even happened. Cobain knew he was just another piece of

spectacle, that nothing runs better on MTV than a protest against MTV; knew that his every move was a cliché scripted in advance, knew that even realizing it is a cliché. The impasse that paralyzed Cobain is precisely the one that Jameson described: like postmodern culture in general, Cobain found himself in "a world in which stylistic innovation is no longer possible, [where] all that is left is to imitate dead styles in the imaginary museum". (2009, p. 9)

It might be that "objectless rage," that despondency of a generation, is the most appropriate response to the realities of life trapped inside the neoliberal paradigm. But as a failure, such sophistication passes me by. I still believe in ordinariness: cups of tea, gardening, love for friends and family. I'm already not making it in the intellectual beauty contest of high theory, so I don't mind if people think I'm naïve. You see I have nothing to prove and nothing I am trying to become. So then is failure complacency? I like to think it has a steely core of resistance, just quietly.

## Advice from a Failure

In coming to love failure I have come to see it as a form of resistance to all kinds of cultural imperatives weighing on the neoliberal subject to be and to become. As a marker of falling short, of not making it, failure always points towards forms of freedom. As Judith Halberstam puts it "alternatives dwell in the murky waters of a counterintuitive, often impossibly dark and negative realm of critique and refusal" (Halberstam 2011, p. 2).

Here is the thing: it should have all gone so well for me. I come from an educated middle-class family. That is to say, my father was educated, achieving a Ph.D. and then a postdoctoral fellowship at MIT and had a long career as a scientist. My mother dropped out of university on becoming pregnant at 20. Coming from a working class background, marrying into money was a kind of success for her, but marriage and motherhood did, I think, unperson her. Something at the intersection of class and femininity was awry for her, and she never found a comfortable place to stand.

For myself, being white, middle class and straight-passing has given me chances again and again. Even when I have thrown my chances away I have been given still more. This is how privilege works—you get so many bites at the cherry. Perhaps this is true of many left-leaning intellectuals, but I have never felt at home with success. The whole business of believing in yourself has eluded me and despite the years of therapy I have never been entirely convinced of my own entitlement.

Femininity and feelings of failure have an intimate history in the psycho-discourses and women have been a particular focus of the self-improvement industry. I was seven when I saw a book in the pile next to my mother's bed called *Advice from a Failure*. Underneath the library's rustling plastic cover, the jacket sleeve was washy blue. The title *Advice from a Failure* floated against the blue background as if printed on a crumpled piece of white paper, the signifier of writing that didn't work out.

Originally published in 1965, Jo Coudert's *Advice from a Failure* is a book about psychoanalysis for the lay reader. A book my unhappy mother might have sought out and read to try and make sense of herself, to make herself better. Never really engaged in a career, my mother struggled with her life; she moved in and out of depression and disordered eating. To my knowledge she never entered therapy or took anti-depressant medication as prescribed—that is to say, she took medication, like aspirin, when the pain got too bad. She read a lot of "how to" and motivational books over the years, before settling into a dedicated diet of crime fiction—the one thing that makes sense of everything.

Eventually returned to the library, this book never had permanent residence in our house. But I do remember being struck, even as a young child, by the strangeness of the idea that the title spoke: that my mother (perfect and all knowing) might seek advice from a failure; that a failure might give advice to my perfectly beautiful mother. The title wrangled around in my memory for years, a lovely language puzzle, a koan, perhaps. I think I always loved the sardonic taint of despair in the title "Advice from a Failure." Who are we to turn to if the advice givers are failures?

The generation of post-war women my mother belonged to was, like earlier generations, expected to be happy and to find fulfilment

in family life. What was new for these mid-century women was the popularization of psychoanalytic ideas in books such as *Advice from a Failure*. My mother's generation, and then my own, were steeped in a psychologized discourse that made sense of women's difficulties in terms of the inner landscape of the unconscious. This was the place where deep-seated conflicts played havoc with one's best and most socially sanctioned aspirations.

My mother had triumphed over her the struggles of her working-class background by marrying into middle-class privilege. But still she was unhappy. How to make sense of this failure to be fulfilled by the role of wife and mother? Her days were filled with child rearing, domestic labour and consumption. Ever determined to get the better of her despair, she took on interior decorating, she threw Cordon Bleu dinner parties and played tennis and bridge. But around the edges of this apparently good life, she struggled to get out of bed.

What the popularized discourse of psychoanalysis offered was a means to search the psyche for the cause of this unhappiness. This was the other part of women's work, seeking out and eliminating the personal cause of their personal unhappiness, ideally by entering analysis. These days, someone like my mother might be more likely to take up yoga, mindfulness and clean eating, but the underlying imperative is not all that different.

Sometimes the best therapy of all is quitting therapy. That is to say, the failure of therapy is sometimes the most liberating part. To finally stop trying to draw closer to someone else's idea of what a good life would look like.

Marilyn Monroe is famously considered one of the great failures of psychoanalysis (Best 2012). She suffered from a treatment that retraumatizes the patient, producing side effects that are more unbearable than the initial problem. In Marilyn's case, she is unravelled in a psychoanalysis that dismantles the ego's defences, further unravelled in acting lessons that play with personal boundaries, and then patched up with drugs to make the whole show work at all. She ricochets from therapist to husband to doctor to lover. Unto death.

The risk of psychoanalytic thinking is that it leaves you nowhere to go. There is no solid ground. Everything can be a symptom.

Anything you can point to or claim as solid ground could be resistance, projection, transference. The experts know you better than you know yourself. The unravelling will give you access to the truth they know but that you cannot bear to know—that is your neurosis. There is no system acting upon you, only your unconscious duking it out with your superego.

## Feminism's Failures

If we have moved on from Freud, our everyday life is still saturated with psychologized discourse. We are steeped in it, our lives unthinkable without it. Every difficulty is made sense of within its terms. So well-schooled in this focus on "Me" and "My Issues" had we become by the 1980s that when Margaret Thatcher declared, in one of the foundational statements of neoliberalism, "there is no society" it was a well-fitting glove placed on a pre-psychologized hand. We were oh so ready to understand that we had only ourselves to blame, only ourselves to overcome on the path to success.

Against the pervasiveness of an individualized psychology we can put a structural, systemic analysis. My mother read Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*. Later she read Betty Friedan, *The Woman's Room* and gave it to me to read. Feminism taught us that our failure, our unhappiness, is dished out to us by a patriarchal system not of our making and not in our favour. Resistance was possible, the world could be changed, and we could claim our freedom right now.

Yet neither psychologized discourses nor feminism liberated my mother from her own shameful experience of herself as a failure. She continued to see her unhappiness as a result of her own personal weakness. My friends and I, as enthusiastic young feminists in the seventies and eighties, wondered why our mothers had fallen for all of society's conformist nonsense. We were ashamed of them for being such dupes to the patriarchy. We believed in freedom and we believed it was ours for the taking. Only later did we realize that things were not that simple. The work of overthrowing the patriarchy still belongs to the woman. It's as if a feminist transformation of society is just another

really arduous and endless load of housework. To paraphrase Gloria Steinem, a systemic, gendered analysis will set you free, but not before it pisses you off. Or just wears you out.

Poet Nayyirah Waheed (2014, p. 88):

> all the women.
> in me.
> are tired.

My mother knew about the feminist analysis of the patriarchy but still thought that she herself ought to be able to do better. Her life was an unyielding battle for control over her mind and body; restricting food, exercising fanatically and then, after my father left her for another woman, battling to even want to live. It was a battle that she did ultimately both win and lose, taking her own life in the advanced stages of ovarian cancer when she was just 59.

For myself, feminism has saved my life and it has defeated me. As a child I was a very girly girl. I was shy, sensitive, loved pretty dresses, ballerinas, flowers, puppies, kittens etc. I was utterly preoccupied with fantasies of romance and motherhood. I wanted more than anything to be pretty as I understood prettiness as the main kind of personal power available to me. I yearned for frilly dresses, full skirts, lacy tights and patent leather shoes. My ever-frugal mother dressed me in serviceable brown corduroy trousers and a sturdy hand-knitted cardigan. At the same time, she warned me of the dire prospect of relying on marriage for one's happiness, since the man was bound to leave for a younger woman. This is what had happened to our next-door neighbour, who haunted her back garden with her little terrier dog, following the departure of grown up daughters and unfaithful husband.

Despite my unfeminist desires, middle-classness meant that I grew up thinking that I could do anything at all. My brother and I used to watch nature documentaries where intrepid European men and women in khaki outfits went out among the tigers and elephants in Africa or somewhere. I felt sure this was available to me, that the world was one of endless possibilities. And yet when it came to realizing these possibilities, I stumbled at every hurdle. Whatever sense of entitlement

I should have had crumbled in the face of a femininity that seemed saturated with shame and powerlessness. I felt weak, fearful, objectified in a way that left me disgusted with myself, and utterly without agency. It seemed like being pretty was all I had to rely on and that was both dangerous and up for debate.

In 2017, the **#me too** campaign appeared on social media in the wake of the news of movie mogul Harvey Weinstein's long career abusing and exploiting women. The chorus of women claiming "me too" gives some sense to the degrading and degraded experience of feminity in our society, revealing (again, was it ever news?) that women's lives are filled with sexual harassment, abuse, shaming, blaming, demeaning, disabling treatment that can cut us down just when we could rise.

Once I reached adulthood, marriage still seemed my most hopeful career plan since I, like my mother, struggled to get out of bed. I studied history at university. The joke in those days was that women studying for an arts degree were just there to find a husband. (Do they still make that joke?) But before I could wed, I discovered feminism and the anger it produced was thrilling, energizing. It seemed that my powerlessness and fear had a non-personal cause. Then I became a lesbian and fell out with the discipline of history because back in the early 1980s at my university history didn't include women. I was personally at war with the patriarchy and one of two things was evident: Something was wrong with me. Or something was wrong with the world. One or the other.

When I say that feminism saved my life, I mean that it taught me that this weakness was not my fault. When I say that it defeated me, I mean that it asked me to be strong in ways that my mind and body could not seem to tolerate. As I said, something was wrong with me. Or something was wrong with the world. One or the other.

I said something like that to my boss in my last full-time job—either there is something terribly wrong with me, or there is something terribly wrong with this job. I'm pretty sure it was the job. Or me. This feeling that I don't do whatever it is you are supposed to do very well. Every now and then I can paddle harder and get my head above water, but I can't keep it up.

But lately this sinking feeling has started to feel like a kind of freedom.

## Failure Gets the Foucault Treatment

It is a lot of work to keep the political paradigm front and centre of my emotional life. Michel Foucault showed us how we were taught—in prisons, schools and clinics—to take upon ourselves the burden of self-production and to police our failures as personal shortcomings (1975). The psycho-discourses made it about the self, while sociopolitical discourses made sense of the subject-in-process, a self that is produced and constrained by systemic rules and norms.

There are strands of critical psychology that bring the personal and the systemic together. One of these is a therapeutic practice grounded in post-structuralism, known as Narrative Therapy. At the heart of this approach is the assertion that "the person is not the problem, the problem is the problem" (White and Epston 1990). Developed by Michael White and David Epston, Narrative Therapy eschews diagnostic and psychodynamic understandings of people and problems, in favour of a discursive exploration of how problems work in people's lives and what gives these problems their strength and influence. By speaking in ways that separate people's identities from the problems that impact on them, it becomes possible to enter a collaborative inquiry between therapist and the person consulting the therapist. This "externalization" (the problem is outside the person) makes space to negotiate ways of challenging, resisting or reframing problems that have seemed totalizing. The focus then turns to "re-storying" the person's experience in the light of their preferred values leading to purposeful actions that support the life they hope for.

This intersection of the personal and systemic can be seen in Michael White's (2002) exploration of the experience of personal failure. White links the personal project of self-making, and the consequent failure that so many people experience, to the operations of modern power, as set out by Foucault. In Foucault's schema, traditional power is hierarchical and operates in a top-down manner. A defined group of power holders impose their will through force, coercion or prohibition. Modern power, on the other hand, is dispersed. It "recruits people's active participation in the fashioning of their own lives, their relationships, and their identities according to the constructed norms of culture" (White 2002, p. 36).

Foucault locates the operations of modern power in self-forming practices originally operating through social institutions (church, school, family, clinic) and then further developed in the professional disciplines (medicine/psychiatry, psychology, social work, criminology). Cultural beliefs and practices are sustained and disseminated through institutions and disciplines and as we are inevitably immersed in this environment (there is no outside of culture) we are imbued with power's operations. Power is not imposed by force from above, but is the very field of meaning within which we live. And, of course, because meaning is fluid, power is never totalizing. That part is the Foucauldian good news.

We exist inside a mesh of discourses that produce us, including both those that liberate and entrap us. In late capitalism, there has been a proliferation of acceptable discourses about how a person might be. New freedoms have appeared, and yet the project of the self has intensified. It is now more possible than ever to be your own weird self—to exercise your religious or atheistic self, your dietary preferences and requirements, your gendered fixity and fluidity, your sexual proclivities, your marital status, your style, your personality, your Myers-Briggs, your astrological influences, your ethnic identifications, your loves and hates and tribes. And all of it is on the table and available to be claimed and shored up over and over again. Indeed, it needs to be repeatedly shored up, since racism, sexism, homophobia, misogyny, class warfare, have not gone away. The possibilities for failure have not diminished and may even have effloresced in the face of all these possibilities of realizing selfhood.

Consider the burden of responsibility it places on the individual to do the work of being a self. Consider this work, compared to, say, more communal forms of identity and belonging in traditional societies. In this setting personal success and failure are not understood as an individual choice or responsibility. For example, in the indigenous Maori culture of Aotearoa/New Zealand, identity is not an individual project in this way. Identity precedes the individual such that when you introduce yourself in a formal setting (the introduction is called a Pepeha) your "self" is the last and least significant aspect of who you are. The Pepeha establishes your identity and heritage and might follow a structure like this:

*The mountain that I affiliate to is …*
*The river/lake/sea that I affiliate to is…*
*The waka (canoe that ancestors travelled to Aotearoa on) that I affili-*
*ate to is…*
*My (founding) ancestor is…*
*My iwi (tribe) is…*
*My hapu (clan) is …*
*My marae (clan home place) is …*
*I am from …*
*My parents are … and …*
*My name is …*

Identity and belonging are first and foremost tied to a land that is imbued with ancestral and cosmological significance and only subsequently to tribe and clan and parents and self. In Aotearoa/New Zealand, as in many other places across the planet, colonization violently displaced and disrupted such forms of identity and belonging. Maori land was stolen by the colonial authorities, and tribal and clan groups were broken up. The people were cast out of their traditional homelands, separated from their farming, trading and hunting livelihoods and communal ways of living.

Compared to tribal belonging, the injunction to become an individual in a society of competing individuals makes for a cold and soulless world. In Aotearoa/New Zealand colonization has resulted in devastating psycho-social harms that have been passed down through generations, although there has been powerful work to recognize and heal the damage done through an ongoing cultural renaissance.

What is most helpful about White's understanding of personal failure is that it is not located within the individual. It is experiential rather than definitive. That is to say, a person is affected by ideas about personal failure, rather than being a failure in herself. Ideas about and experiences of the self arise in a context. We are shaped by events and experiences, but also by the socially and culturally available stories we have to draw on to make sense of experiences in being and becoming a self. Thus an experience of personal failure—as wife, mother, woman-is produced and consolidated by socially accepted stories about what

wives, mothers, women should be like, stories that we strive to conform to and measure ourselves against.

According to White, there is something about our particular, neoliberal, juncture of history that is intensifying the experience of failure for everyone:

> Never before has the sense of being a failure to be an adequate person been so freely available to people, and never before has it been so willingly and routinely dispensed. (p. 34)

Is that true? Is it now more possible to experience personal failure than ever before? The notion of success/failure as a personal responsibility would seem utterly integral to the so-called level playing field of neoLiberalism. And as inequality deepens, as this system concentrates wealth in the hands of the few and blames and punishes the rest for not making it, perhaps the mythology of personal failure is necessary to keep entrenching the idea that I am to blame for all that I have not achieved and all the goods and services I am not able to access.

Let us consider how a person's identity is at stake in contemporary culture "in regard to making it in life; in regard to reproducing a life that is a reflection of the cherished norms for what it means to be a 'real' person; in regard to adequately engaging in the favoured identity projects of contemporary culture" (White 2002, p. 35).

Here is my suggested list of the favoured identity projects of contemporary culture:

1. Education—succeeding *by merit* to demonstrate your superior (or upwardly mobile) class status and intelligence by getting a tertiary, ideally postgraduate, education;
2. Career—a planned and managed continually upward arc of income and status; ideally in a profession or in business;
3. Marriage—be paired off with one other (preferably opposite sex) person and stay happily with them;
4. Parenting—have children and invest heavily in their psychological development, education and social advancement;
5. Real estate—*through industry and thrift*, own your own home and preferably multiple homes;

6. Experiences—travel extensively, see all famous sites, have ongoing adventures;
7. Moneymaking—*through industry and thrift*, make money, accumulate money in ever ascending quantities; save, invest, retire in comfort;
8. Health and beauty—be thin, healthy, well-dressed and attractive in all approved ways;
9. Selfhood—a robust sense of self—demonstrating high self-esteem, confidence, clear boundaries, resilience, an outgoing personality able to be productive in the world;
10. Creativity—be especially creative in ways that earn a lot of money or win prizes or other kinds of worldly appreciation.

Have I missed anything? I would add one more. Another of the favoured identity projects is the *overcoming of limitations* (such as physical disability, origins, distress, trauma). This overcoming is essential to the narrative of subjectivity at the heart of neoliberalism. Your (personal, heroic) overcoming proves that specific limitations are not real, that the playing field really is, indeed, level. The injunction goes something like this: if there is something wrong, fix it; if you cannot fix it, do not speak of it; if you still cannot fix it and cannot stop speaking of it, I cannot tolerate you.

   I have worked hard at overcoming. And yet it finally dawned on me that this hard work was itself a kind of violence. All the years of therapy, all the self-improvement, all the searching and striving. I found myself terribly interested in what happens if you let yourself go under, if you give into failure. That is to say, what happens if you sit down in the road, if you stop trying to pursue the cherished identity projects. This is not to belittle the struggles of those who have fought for and won inclusion, nor to diminish the real suffering of exclusion with its many and ongoing consequences for physical and mental health and access to basic goods such as decent housing, education or safety. But if you have the luxury to choose to withdraw from the struggle, or if you are teetering on the brink of exclusion and you dive in by intention, what happens?

There can be freedom in failure. Freedom in becoming invisible, unrecognizable, insignificant. Irrelevant.

Thus when Michael Leunig's character Mr. Curly receives the news of being declared irrelevant by The Great Committee of Clever, Powerful People, it is a happy event. For Leunig, the outsider status of the irrelevant is freedom to live amid simplicity, music, ducks, the seasons. Irrelevance is a spiritually charged status outside of worldly concerns.

## The Rag and Bone Women

I count myself among a number of women who eke out a living from a bit of this and that. These women do bits of paid and unpaid work, some making, some scavenging, some deployment of a skill they no longer entirely believe in. Some receive welfare and supplement it in creative ways, others make enough from their creative work so scrape by, others still have some retirement funds, or a bit of family money or maybe even a partner who earns—some way of having enough to keep things ticking over while they create some kind of fringe-dweller life.

I think of these women as the rag and bone women. They are small-scale wheelers and dealers, keen for a bargain, making something out of nothing, dressing from charity shops and collecting and trading second-hand goods. They are scavengers and they know how to make the money stretch. They might keep a garden to feed themselves, they might live simply or not live anywhere at all but travel for next to nothing in India, or live in a religious community, or string together a series of housesits and residential jobs, trading insecurity and instability for freedom.

Frugal, reclusive, strange and strangely dressed, they might be difficult, argumentative, uncompromising in their ways of simply doing as they please. They might be single or partnered, gay or straight or trans, with or without children—though I think that to take up this life entirely it pays to be single and without dependents. They might drink too much, or smoke heavily, or keep too many cats or a single, ugly dog.

I have come to love these women. I was frightened and repulsed by them in the past but I now experience solidarity with them. We

are survivors, outsiders, failures and freedom fighters within the small lives we have eked out for ourselves. You can come to know these women through the things that matter to them. The causes they fight for, the way that they will not desist from drawing your attention to injustice, their unfiltered rage. Or the clothes that are more costume than fashion, their too-large jewellery, their careless hairstyles. Or something else entirely: The poetry they read or the art they make. The rules they break, their dodgy dealings, their raucous laughter, their unmanicured teeth, their soft bellies and sagging breasts. They might be supporting troubled adult children, or feeding colonies of feral cats, or living simple reclusive lives studying the Dhamapada. They might pour out an anger fuelled by a deep compassion in the face of injustice that makes them hard to be around. They are prophets. They don't get many dinner party invitations. They are nearly always old—that is to say, over 50.

The crone turns towards death. She sees it coming and she begins to let the identity projects that preoccupy a younger woman fall away.

We will all die. This is what the Buddha taught: the inescapable fact that we will all experience aging, sickness and death. We will all be separated from the things we love.

Ariel Levy says: "anything you think is yours by right can vanish, and what you can do about that is nothing at all" (2017, pp. 2–3). This is not mental illness, it's just true.

I am dying. You are dying. We are all dying.

It is not that we must face death as some kind of psychological maturity test. It's not that facing up to reality will do us some bracing good in forcing us to overcome delusional fantasies of eternal youth and endless hedonic satisfaction.

But in turning towards death as unrecuperated failure, there is something liberating for human creatures. This is why Buddhist monks were sent to meditate in the charnel grounds: Know the reality of death. Know that you are dying. Know that failure and loss are the core of human existence. How fleeting is your life, how little the broken cup matters, how insignificant the party invitation you didn't get, how pointless the relentless striving to become *someone*.

# Fading Out

Successful people have tried to tell us that our failure is meaningful:

> *Arianna Huffington*: "Failure is not the opposite of success, it is part of success."
> *Richard Branson*: "If you don't have failures, you're not trying hard enough."
> *Oprah Winfrey*: "There is no such thing as failure. Failure is just life trying to move us in another direction."
> *James Cameron*: "If you set your goals ridiculously high, you will fail above everyone else's success."

But what if failure is not a blip, not a way-marker on a relentless path of upward striving, not a side effect of progress? What if failure is just, well, failure? What if there is no recuperative arc? What if you simply didn't make it, after all and there is instead a long slow living out of what was never achieved.

Failure is acceptable when it is recuperated into a success story. If you end up in a hole, you must gain strength by climbing out. There is no encouragement to sit down at the bottom of the hole, look around, share a smoke and a joke with others sitting around down there. You must see your error, learn from your mistakes, pull yourself up and start again.

But what if it's not so bad down there?

What if you give up trying anyway? What if you are neither striving nor resisting, but only resting.

> In the face of failure, is there any point in striving for success, when there can be an immersive warmth in being simply pathetic, in not trying. (Le Feuvre 2010, p. 15)

I have been feeling into the immersive warmth of failure for a while now, and wondering, as I scope out this strange territory, whether this might not, in fact, be a kind of liberation? Might it not actually be

freedom, even if it is a freedom that, while you are falling into it, feels something like despair.

Charles D'Ambrosio is one of my failure heroes, because he summons its pleasures so beautifully: "I longed to fall. To fall that is, and to hear what the descent had to say" (2014, p.18).

I started writing about failure a couple of years ago and started my own *Advice from a Failure* blog (with a passing nod to Jo Coudert). I hoped for a better readership than I got, but I appreciate that failure is not a sexy topic. Seeing that I was making failure a feature, rather than something to be eradicated, a friend asked a question that went to the heart of the matter: If you are good at failure, does that make you a success? As if that would close the subject once and for all. As though everything could be incorporated back into one of those two positions—success/failure. But I have taken inspiration from Halberstam in looking for "a way out of the usual traps and impasses of binary formulations" (2011, p. 2).

I didn't want to simply claim a different kind of success—the success of a good life, somehow free from cultural norms. For us failures, ours is a freedom that might sometimes tip over into madness or self-destruction. This isn't new, there have always been fringe dwellers for whom survival was a battle. I speculate that what is new is that there are more of us now, we are a side effect of neoliberalism—and we come from many directions and we make new tribes. I have come to believe that our freedom needs to be supported through community. It can be hard to be a glorious failure on your own. Although many prefer it that way.

I stay interested in failure that does not lead to triumph, failure that does not cheer for itself, failure that opens onto an entirely different paradigm for what constitutes a good life.

> To set out to succeed at failing, or to fail at failing, is to step aside from the orthodox order. (Le Feuvre 2010, p. 17)

Stepping aside, I have offered this essay. Shifting the terms of engagement I have tried to explore what failure knows, what knowledge it offers, knowledge that we have been taught to fear so much.

This manifesto on the love of failure might include some of the following position statements:

- I believe in the value of rest.
- I am quite sure that trying to get somewhere will not take you where you want to go.
- As failures we are often socially and emotionally estranged, but we do not need to be cured of our strangeness.
- Trying to make yourself into a marketable product might make you ill.
- It is ok not to try so hard, or even to stop trying altogether and just see what happens.
- In the end, we will all die, and that will be an end to it.

Please feel free to add your own.

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# 9

# 'I Don't Want to Live Too Long!': Successful Aging and the Failure of Longevity in Japan

## Jason Danely

In this chapter, I examine the tension between older Japanese individuals' efforts to achieve a 'successful' old age and their anxious sense of failure for living 'too long.' I locate this tension within the creep of neoliberal ideals into Japanese social policy and public discourse, which others have described as having a profoundly destabilizing effect on families, labor, education, and other institutions that had once structured the life course in Japan (Allison 2013; Morioka 2012). In the case of older adults, neoliberalism draws on catastrophic narratives of population crisis and the hopeful science of gerontological/geriatric research to support a market-based solution based on a 'logic of choice' rather than a 'logic of care' (Mol 2008) and individual risk over collective social responsibility (Dannefer 2000; Rubinstein and Medeiros 2014). Anthropologists strive to give flesh to these narratives, exploring at the same time, the ways gaps between ideologies and lived experience can produce openings for individuals to experiment

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with alternative visions about what it might mean to live a long and full life (Lamb 2017). Ethnographic moments taken from 'life on the ground' (*genba*) (Yuki 2012) of Japan's aging society illustrate how older people and carers live immersed in these discourses, and how they find themselves bearing the risk and moral responsibility for the aging process.

## Background

By 2030, about one-third of the Japanese population will be over the age of 65, and each will be supported by only two working-age persons, compared with 11.2 in 1960 (Muramatsu and Akiyama 2011, p. 426). A large proportion of these older people will be the post-World War II 'baby boom' generation (*dankai no sedai*), who will be entering their late seventies. Already the demographic change has resulted in sometimes shocking observations: Sales of adult diapers have now surpassed those for infants, and the number of adult day care or 'day service centers' is approaching the number of convenience stores (some popular chains have introduced home delivery, carer support 'salons,' and even in-store consultations with care managers).[1]

   Japan's aging population is the result of both low fertility and longevity. A Japanese person who reaches the age of 60 today will live, on average, another 26 years (slightly less for men and slightly more for women), or about a decade longer than was expected for those turning 60 in the mid-1980s.[2] This rapid lengthening of average life span is particularly noticeable when we look at the numbers of the 'oldest-old,' or those who have lived for a century or more. In 1986, census data indicated that there were only 153 centenarians living in Japan, each of whom would have been awarded a small gift (a silver ceremonial cup inscribed with the auspicious character *kotobuki*, meaning 'long life')

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[1]In 2017, the number of convenience stores in Japan totaled 55,090. Day service center facilities 41,242. See news release from Lawson http://www.lawson.co.jp/company/news/102841/, accessed October 1, 2017.

[2]MHLW.

and an official government certificate celebrating their achievement. Thirty years later, the number of centenarians had already surpassed 65,000 and is projected to be on its way to 532,000 by mid-twenty-first century. Given the rate of overall population decline, this means that about one in every 200 people you meet in Japan would be over 100.[3] The government will still be giving out certificates, but most regions have already decided they would have to do without the silver cups.

Japan serves as an important case study on the social effects of mass longevity not only because of these globally and historically unprecedented numbers, but also because of its approach for adjusting to its aging population.

While Japan has had a system of universal national health care since 1958, and a universal national pension since 1961, it had been slow to implement nonmedical social care for older persons until 1989, when the Liberal Democratic Party launched its popular and ambitious 'Gold Plan' (Tamiya 2011, p. 1184; Coulmas 2007, p. 67; Knight and Traphagan 2003, pp. 14–18; Long 2008). This restructuring aimed at relieving the burden of eldercare from adult children, since not only were families smaller than they had been in past generations, but they were also more urban, nuclear, and dual-earning. Hospitals, which in many cases served as de facto nursing homes for older adults with chronic conditions, were also overburdened, and restructuring plans had ambitious goals of doubling institutional beds and tripling community-based services by 2000. The Gold Plan was gradually scaled back as Japan entered its post-bubble recession, with most of its goals unrealized and social care in disarray.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the LDP had a new rising star in the Elvis crooning Junichiro Koizumi, a bold figure in introducing neoliberal reforms to Japan's sluggish economy. The Japanese

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[3]The population of Japan peaked around the same time the postwar baby boomers were beginning to retire (2005–2007) at a little over 127 million. Fertility rates have been below replacement levels since the late twentieth century, and as the boomer generation grows older, Japan will experience a globally unprecedented increase in the proportion of the population over 65 (already over 27% in 2016 and will make up 40% by mid-century). By 2050, when many of the boomers will have died, the population will plummet to 100 million, with centenarians comprising about 0.5% of the total.

Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare (MHLW) needed to fix the broken Gold Plan, but with the growing number of older people, it was clear that they couldn't afford to do it themselves. The solution was to shift eldercare from a centralized tax-funded welfare system to a mandatory Long-Term Care Insurance (LTCI) system funded by a combination of taxes and insurance premiums. LTCI originally enacted in 1997, was implemented in 2000, opening the door to third-sector (private and nonprofit) care prevention and provision (Long 2008, pp. 140–143).

Article I of the new LTCI law states that its purpose is 'to provide benefits pertaining to necessary health and medical services and public aid services so that these people are able to maintain dignity and an independent daily life routine according to each person's own level of abilities' (MoJ 2009). Not only were individuals more central to the selection of services, but increased effort was made to promote 'care prevention' (*kaigo yobō*) activities modeled on the ideal of an autonomous subject whose autonomy is practiced by staying healthy and active (Yuki 2012, p. 80). The ideal subject of care in the LTCI system, in other words, is, in some ways, the docile body of Foucault's biopolitics, animated by a caring bureaucracy into a successful ager. The adoption of a more neoliberal style welfare system and the centrality of successful aging approaches worked hand-in-hand, resulting in both a boom in third-sector care services (and a slowed growth of state provisioned care) and an increased focus on the insured individual as an agent whose moral responsibility it was to avoid costly long-term dependency.

In the years since the LTCI was introduced, however, the numbers of older people needing care has continued to rise at a pace that has outstripped the capacity of the care industry. A look at Healthy Adult Life Expectancy (HALE) compared to Life Expectancy at 60 shows a difference, on average, of seven to ten years. Perhaps conceding to the ineffectiveness of kaigo yobō and services to slow the progression of health decline, the LTCI introduced plans in 2014 to drop its provision for care services for less dependent older people and instead, to fund locally led community projects and volunteer groups. Despite this, LTCI rates have risen significantly and access to services has become more restricted. Care workers are in serious shortage, residential care facilities

have long waiting lists, and many must rely heavily on family members or pay out of pocket for services when it becomes difficult to navigate the bureaucracy of the system.

The successful aging approach, however, still persists in Japanese communities, despite these indications that its limits may not be adequately acknowledged. In order to understand why this is the case, we ought to take a closer look at what kinds of subjects the successful aging paradigm seeks to create, its convergences with some Japanese cultural values and the possibilities for alternatives to the hegemony of successful aging.

## Successful Aging Comes to Japan

Gerontological literature up until the mid-1980s tended to use the term 'successful aging' to refer to one's ability to obtain a degree of subjective well-being and satisfaction in old age despite some degree of inevitable age-related decline in physical and psychological functioning (e.g., Havighurst 1961; Knipscheer 2010). This 'optimistic' view of old age departed from the decline/disengagement view of aging, and paralleled broader political movements advocating for greater public assistance and improvements in access to institutional care for the aged and disabled in Europe and the USA (Fredvang and Biggs 2012; Sanjek 2012).

From the mid-1980s, however, things began to change again. In 1987, John Wallis Rowe and Robert Louis Kahn published their landmark paper 'Human aging: Usual and successful,' in which they argued that not only should 'successful aging' be studied systematically using objective, measurable outcomes, but also that individual lifestyle choices could make one more successful than 'usual.' In the following years, these researchers would refine their version of successful aging and amass evidence culminating in the book, *Successful Aging* (1998), that laid claim once and for all to the term. This new turn on the successful aging concept quickly became the most widely used paradigm for gerontological research, social policy, and businesses around the world (Lamb 2017).

In Japan, for instance, a Google Scholar search for the Japanese transliteration for 'successful aging' turned up 588 results between 1998 and 2017, while the same search yielded only 24 results before 1998. This dramatic increase in use of this term reflects both the use of the concept as a paradigm for research but also the need for Japanese research to respond to this paradigm (including critiques). It may also be evidence of the naturalization of the use of successful aging in policy and clinical literature. Successful Aging, often termed 'active aging' in Japan, filters into the social consciousness through authority wielding institutions, media, and marketing in ways that resemble the global flow of diagnostic categories for mental illness (Kitanaka 2011; Applbaum 2006); while at the same time, on the level of everyday practice, active aging must also contend with other cultural expectations of the life course, the body, and the value of age (Long 2008; Moore 2014).

Successful aging (SA), while admittedly far from the elixir of youth, still had a magical effect on all sorts of industries that stood to profit from the growing ranks of 'young-old' baby boomers at the millennium. The positivity of SA had merged with the power of consumerism and a new fascination with the plasticity of the body. Aging didn't have to mean 'old age' as we knew it—'60 could be the new 40,' and science would make the post-retirement years not only healthier, but smarter and sexier too (Loe 2006). If earlier forms of SA sought to dismantle discriminatory practices and establish forms of institutional and social inclusion, this new incarnation of SA followed a neoliberal logic of the life course, where 'success' was determined by individual consumer choices within a market-regulated system. Following the same logic, our approach to caring for an aging society turned away from the role of the subject of welfare and rights, toward a more personalized, individual-centered model based on the autonomous subject of choice and an ethic of prevention.

Rubinstein and de Medeiros (2014) most recently summarized the effects of neoliberalism on modern social support for older adults, concluding that it is not only consistent with the paradigm of SA, but also that SA can be viewed as a mode of governance that gerontologists have been happy to contribute their science to. Sociologist Brett Neilson (2006) examined the consequences of SA discourse and the social

temporalities they work to construct. Neilson argues that in the logic of the global biopolitics, aging is conceived as something to be prevented, foreclosed, or perpetually placed in abeyance. The biopolitical logic of prevention is 'a strike against a future fate that can only be avoided, or so the fantasy would portend, by an action that can never occur too soon' (2006, p. 157). In aiming to 'protect the future from the present' (2006, p. 161), the narrative of success in aging is also a narrative of non-aging.

Adopting a subjectivity of prevention means embracing the key assumptions of the 'successful aging' model of the life course, namely that well-being (characterized by the three components of 'low probability of disease,' and disability, 'high cognitive and physical… capacity, and active engagement with life' (Rowe and Kahn 1998, p. 433, quoted in Rubinstein and de Medeiros [2014]) 'can be attained through individual choice and effort' (1997, p. 37).

SA encompasses a wide range of possible activities prevalent among older adults in Japan, including clubs and social groups, exercise, volunteer activities, and educational programs. While some have argued that these activities, especially those involving arts or religious activities are consistent with long-held Japanese models of old age as a time to develop one's character and spiritual life (Rohlen 1978; Moore 2014), most older adults I have met who participate in these groups are absolutely clear that their primary aim is to prevent dependence by staving off physical and cognitive decline (cf. Traphagan 2000). One man who I met at an older persons' club made it clear that all the 'play' was aimed at avoiding a long and frail old age. He leaned forward on the edge of his seat saying, quietly at first, 'Sometimes you hear people say, where's so-and-so? And someone else says, "He died!" But that's what I want! I want to die that way!'

But this is exactly where we run into problems, because although the SA paradigm contends that we choose how we age, most of us still don't get to choose when we die, and unfortunately for the proponents of SA, we are still a long way from eliminating the slow decline leading to death. Longevity, it turns out, is like a moving finish line that keeps receding the longer and faster we run.

Admittedly, this caricature of SA overlooks some of the more measured, nuanced, and insightful research on aging well that has undoubtedly improved many people's lives. I am not interested in questioning the general value of emotional contentment or physical comfort in old age (or any age), nor do I intend to focus, as others have, on the effectiveness of some of the SA policies or programs for achieving their aims. Instead, I want to focus on the tension between life extension and quality of life that casts its long shadow over the SA paradigm (Moody 2009/2010). Advocates of SA accept longevity as a starting point and try to make the most of old age, but this opens the door for life extension and anti-aging advocates to propose doing away with old age altogether. While a future of super-longevity becomes more certain (at least for some), quality of life seems more precarious than ever.

## Failure and Force of Longevity

'Old age,' observed social gerontologist Paul Baltes (1997, p. 367), 'is young.' It is only recently that humans have enjoyed such long lives and had to figure out what to do with them. In early medieval Japan, forty was considered the beginning of the slow decline of aging, and the age of sixty[4] was celebrated as the auspicious entry into a ripe old age where 'retirement' (*inkyo*) would have been expected, and authority and inheritance passed on to the next generation. Interestingly, when the early twentieth-century developmental psychologist G. Stanley Hall effectively established the scientific field of gerontology, he too argued that those in their 40s had entered senescence. In 1922, Hall wrote what has been called the 'prophetic' text of population aging (Cole 1984), in which he argued that older people have 'a function in the world that we have not yet risen to and which is of the utmost importance' but which 'can only be seen and prepared for by first realizing what ripe and normal age really is,

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[4]Traditionally, Japanese begin the enumeration of birthdays at 1, so that 60 would, in modern reckoning, be only age 59. Symbolically, this age, called 'kanreki' in Japanese, represents five complete cycles of the twelve signs of the Chinese zodiac, and the symbolic return to youth. Kanreki celebrations, therefore, often feature symbols of rebirth and infancy, such as bright red clothing.

means, can, should, and now must do, if our race is ever to achieve it true goal' (Hall 1922, p. ix).[5] Hall's botanical metaphor a 'ripe' old age suggests not only an affinity for linking the science of human development to the science of other natural life cycles, but it also reveals his interest in some overall functionalist or teleological view of a society that achieves it goals. Success, to Hall, may be realized in and through maturity.

Such a view lands not so far away from long-standing Japanese ideals of the fruits of longevity. A long life has been celebrated and sought after for thousands of years in Japan, where palaces and gardens would be decorated with a mythical bestiary of supernatural immortals: the tortoise and crane, the dragon and the phoenix. The cry 'banzai!' literally means 'ten-thousand years!' but might be more accurately translated as 'eternal life!' Drott (2015) has found references to life extension in the healing practices of Buddhist clergy as early as the sixth and seventh centuries. Long life (*kotobuki*), in this cultural sense, meant not only a long and full life for the individual, but also for the life of a lineage, such as that of the Imperial family, which in turn, is a metonym of an ethnic-national identity (*kokka*).

But for most people until the mid-twentieth century, living into very old age was considered exceptional. The age of 70, for example, was referred to as '*kōki*,' written using the characters for 'old' (*furui*) and 'rare' (*mare*). When celebrating a friend's 70th birthday, we all marveled at how much things had changed. 'I suppose that in the past, hardly anyone lived that long,' she told me, trying her best to muster some gratitude, 'But these days, Japanese people are all living so long. I hardly ever receive notices about people who have died younger than ninety anymore. It just makes me wonder how long I have. I don't want to live too long!'

Looking closely at casual complaints like these reveals both the force and failure of longevity in the minds of the current older generation. Age, and especially old age, is something that approaches both too slowly and too swiftly, entangled both to an embodied sense of duration and to the space of social relations that frame it (i.e., the uncanny appearance of a death notice, like a message from beyond, inviting an untimely reflection

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[5]See archived open access original text of senescence here. https://archive.org/details/senescencelast-ha00halliala, accessed October 1, 2017.

on one's own mortality).[6] The changes in the social landscape are marked by the incongruity between the mark of cultural time (auspicious year celebrations) and demographic time based on projections of population statistics, so much so that it becomes nearly impossible to speak of one's age without comparison to others, often reflected through the frame of the national population. 'There are too many old people around here,' one of my older neighbors plaintively remarked as we watched an ambulance carry off another older neighbor down our narrow street. 'Too many old people in Japan!' she quickly added, before shaking her head and walking back to her house.

Longevity, as these anecdotes illustrate, is not only considered problematic for the individual who endures, but also for maintaining national and social vitality. It signifies both the promise of an extended ripening of the valued qualities of maturity, as well as the dread of bodily decrepitude and by extension, broader social decline. When the 'quantity' of life becomes a problem for 'quality' of life, older adults tend to reconsider the value of lasting so long. Older adults in their eighth and ninth decades of life often find themselves caught in an ethical double-bind where the projects of self-improvement and active aging that characterized their early post-retirement life result in the prospect of lasting longer than they would like. As earlier 'success' seems to slip away, the life remaining is felt as a kind of moral failing that does nothing but burden others and weaken society.

## The Spoils of Success (or Just Spoiled?)

Longevity creates a tension between success and failure that calls into question both traditional values of long life and the technological and medical idealism of 'ever-fixable bodies' (Kaufman 2013, p. 558). Is it

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[6]'If I want to mix a glass of sugar and water, I must, willy nilly, wait until the sugar melts. This little fact is big with meaning. For here, the time I have to wait is not the mathematical time which would apply equally well to the entire history of the material world, even if that history were spread out with a certain portion of my own duration which I cannot protract or contract as I like. It is no longer something thought, it is something lived.' (Henri Bergson, quoted in Schweizer 2008, p. 15).

good to continue living into old age today? At what point does a ripe old age turn into spoiled fruit?

The Apricot Association was one of the volunteer groups I joined during my fieldwork, and as their name suggests, they had their own ideas about what made a ripe old age. All of the other regular volunteers were older women themselves, retired or working part-time, some as waged carers or social welfare employees. When I asked one of these paid carers why they would volunteer on the weekends with the Apricots, she told me, 'it's so they won't have to come see me later on! For some people, they only get out to do something once a week or two, then they get worse and it's a real mess. We have to do something to keep them active!'

And Apricot Association makes efforts to provide opportunities for people of advanced old age to continue participating in social life. In the neighborhood where I conducted fieldwork, volunteers held monthly gatherings that were key sites for cultivating ideals of a successful old age.[7] A small grant from the city provided enough to cover the cost of renting a meeting space and craft materials, but there were frequent concerns about how to sustain the group, which changed location three times during my year-long stay. Their activities included light exercises for the hands and legs, simple crafts, singing, and conversation over tea and cakes. Cutting and glueing small bits of paper or fabric in a crowded office room may not seem like your idea of successful aging, but for the volunteers and participants, it not only provided a welcome diversion (and practice at fine motor skills), but produced a small ornament to decorate the home or give as a gift. Successfully aging, I was reminded, is not about climbing Everest[8] but about basic attributes of life satisfaction. In fact, most of the key literature on SA does not list longevity as an aim of active aging, but rather focuses on the maintenance of capacities for continued autonomy, independence, and

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[7]Groups like these are relatively new, but have a precedence in much longer standing old age societies (see Traphagan 2000) and clubs.

[8]Yuichiro Miura climbed Everest at age 80 in 2013.

engagement that sometimes involves recognizing limitations (including a limited lifespan) and making lifestyle changes. In their modest way, Apricots were cultivating a sense of social vitality that would keep them from being seen as 'old persimmons' (Skord 1989; Yanagita [1946] 1970).

Once each year, a sample of the group's work was exhibited alongside the work of other similar community groups in a large, multipurpose recreation hall of a local primary school. When I went to visit the exhibition, I found a small group of older women seated in a corner of the room and introduced myself as one of the volunteers. 'Getting old is no good. We're just no good anymore when we get old. It is nice to be young, you know? Being young is a great thing, a really great thing!'

At this, another woman sitting with the group quickly tried to put a positive spin on things, smiling and nodding as she replied, 'Oh, but there are things that you have when you get older!'

Ando-san, however, wasn't about to be convinced: 'Oh but no one listens to me! That's just hard, but that's how it is. Of course we have some wisdom or something, but then we just think. "Oh it used to be like that, but it isn't anymore, it was always that way, but I don't know now." You know?'

We continued for few more minutes, talking not only about loss of authority, but also loss of memory function and physical strength. Consequently, everyday tasks like grocery shopping became a challenge, and most of the women in the group now depended on a delivery service, but this too had its challenges. Ando-san recalled how recently she had forgotten a previous order and ended up with double the amount of food that she would usually buy, but this story somehow became indexical of the experience of age:

> *A*: I just bought too much stuff and there wasn't enough room and my daughter got all mad at me. I guess you can't put that much stuff in the fridge or it'll bust (*itamu*). There's a limit. Right?
> (to everyone) for everything in life, there is always a limit (*gendo)*!
> There is always some sort of maximum limit (*genkai*) that we have to think about when we do something! (to me) Isn't there sensei?

She then compared longevity to the excess frozen food she ordered, saying 'It doesn't go bad really, *but the taste is no good.*'

Meal delivery services and community crafting clubs are just two examples of the array of services that have become increasingly common with the introduction of the 'community care' approach to successful aging. There are also home visits by doctors, nurses, physical therapists, care managers, and neighborhood association members. If this surveillance isn't enough, tracking technologies that can detect and report activities of solo-dwelling older people, and social robots like Pepper are also being promoted as solutions to keep people in their homes and communities.

As Ando-san notes, however, the taste isn't the same. SA, while conceived as a means of promoting factors that improve quality of life, has translated, it seems, into a reorganization of spaces and infrastructures that sustain, but do not necessarily enrich that life. Like excess food in the freezer, one is preserved rather than vital and flourishing.

## Success Comes Home

The Apricot Association represents one of the more benign, everyday means by which successful aging circulates and seeps into the public consciousness of age. Together we made dozens of small cloth ornaments, learned a few soft and melancholy old Japanese songs, laughing at ourselves when we forgot the words. Participants were polite and hardworking, making an effort to be what Traphagan called 'good *rōjin*' (2006). But to see the Apricots as merely benign would misrecognize the role of voluntary organizations in the broader scheme of neoliberal privatization (Hayashi 2016). For participants, the association bridged informal and formal care, community and corporation, and by engaging with a variety of aesthetic and affective modalities, it cultivated desires to stay alive and at home.

One of the major goals of the cost shifting program of LTCI has been to move the locus of care delivery from institution to the domain of the

home.[9] This shift is comparable to most trends in delivery of eldercare in Europe and the USA, where the emphasis is on 'community care,' or 'aging-in-place' supported by home care services (Broadbent 2014, p. 4; Otto 2013). Building and maintaining full-service nursing homes is costly to insurers when compared to services staffed by part-time and on-call staff who are usually paid minimum wages and not reimbursed for travel expenses (Broadbent 2014). Services delivered are restricted based on a care needs assessment and are aimed at providing the minimal amount of care needed to promote a return to independence and prevent further decline. In practice, successfully aging at home meant that most older adults would use gradually more care services as health and mobility declined.

Entering institutional care was always seen as a last resort. After LTCI, fewer and fewer insurance-eligible residential nursing homes were being built, and in 2014, over 520,000 names were on the waiting list for beds in nursing homes.[10] The next year, a change in the eligibility requirements for entering residential care (more serious disability would be required[11]) resulted in this number dropping by almost 200,000 overnight.

Given the long wait for a bed in a residential care home and the costs of most private care facilities, it has become increasingly popular for older people, especially those living alone, to rent care assisted older adult housing, where residents live independently in their own small apartments, but could order services such as home care aides or physical therapists from a menu of fee-based options. One care manager I spoke with bemoaned the fact that such clients were now referred to as 'customers' (*kyaku-san*) rather than service users (*riyōsha*) or patients (*kanja*).

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[9]According to the WHO, Japan had 13.4 hospital beds per 1000 people, far outstripping any other country in the world (the UK ranked 27, at 2.95 beds per 1000), https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_OECD_countries_by_hospital_beds, accessed October 1, 2017

[10]Private rooms in LTCI eligible care homes are rare. Usually, there are four to a room.

[11]Services for the insured individuals are restricted based on the level of care need as determined by a care worker and self-evaluation. Based on these, the insured is ranked from level 5 (most need) to level 1. In addition, there are two additional classification for those with only minor conditions that do not affect independent living (need of support levels 1 and 2). Currently, only those level 3 and above can be reimbursed through the insurance system for care expenses.

There were also concerns that owners were seeking to maximize profits by cutting staff. On one occasion, while delivering meals to solo-dwelling older people in my neighborhood, the other volunteers noticed that one of the regular recipients was no longer on the list. As they shared information with each other, they pieced together that her health had declined and her family were unwilling to take her to their home. Instead, they got her a 'rojin apartment' where 'if you want services like someone to help give you a bath or cook your food you have to pay extra.'

'Those kind of places are a little scary,' one of the volunteers said, shaking her head.

'They look alright on the outside, but at night, there are about 100 people living there, and only 3 staff! And the staff aren't trained in elder care, just administrative staff types.'

The other volunteers agreed. One of them added 'They say that if anything happens at night, tenants can ring a bell or something, but how is anyone going to answer all those? If something happens, what do they do?'

We kept walking to the next house, carrying our parcels of lunchboxes, each wrapped in a mustard-colored floral patterned cloth. Were the men and women who would untie these parcels alone at home aging successfully? And what of the woman who moved away? Certainly, she maintained a kind of autonomy, and even some degree of choice over her care services, but could we say that she is aging 'successfully?'

The answers to these questions elude us because the standards by which we determine dignity, autonomy, independence, and choice break down when their subjects are men and women entering the last years of a very long life. They are then replaced with something else, something just as valuable, but something that escapes through the sieve of success with a whisper, *shhhh.*

If the SA paradigm is too entangled with forms of knowledge-making that reduce life's value to consumption, it won't hear this. It will miss the ways older people take and transform time in old age. The quiet capacities of a 'usual' old age, and the meaningfulness of decline.

# Meaningful decline as a new paradigm for living and leaving

In her cross-cultural research with elders in India and the USA, anthropologist Sarah Lamb (2014, 2017) uncovers not only a discomfort with the notion of successful aging, but an alternative paradigm that foregrounds the process of accepting the changes brought on by advanced age and the new forms of social exchange, love, and spiritual belonging that gave it meaning. In many ways, this attitude echoes the sentiments I found in conversations I had with bereaved elders in Japan (Danely 2014). Rather than an ageless self that pegged personhood firmly to capacities in earlier life, these older Japanese adults found that age gave them a new embodied intimacy with the departed, and by extension, to the invisible presences of the ancestors. Japanese cultural theorist Kiyokazu Washida (2015, p. 71) described this experience of maturity as one defined not by steady, linear progression from birth to death, but rather a series of encounters with a widening circle of 'Others' (*tasha*) through whom subjectivity is formed and transformed. SA, in contrast, describes a process of aging that is not only progressive and positive,[12] but involves a deepening sense of self-awareness and self-confidence. Japanese elders may experience these changes, but they are not seen as signs of normal maturity, let alone old age. Dependence in old age was linked to Buddhist values of nonattachment, compassion, and grief.

Interestingly, psychologists examining emotions among the oldest old have started noticing some significant discrepancy between Japanese and North American groups. Rosa et al. (2014), for example, compared self-reports of important life events between a group of 239 US and 304 Japanese centenarians, concluding that US respondents were much more likely to mention happy events like marriage and children, while Japanese respondents were more likely to mention grief, trauma, and other 'negative' events. Grossmann et al. (2014) not only support this observation, but further discovered that, when examined over the life course, Japanese elders did

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[12]See Carstensen et al. (2011) on happiness in old age.

not experience the decline in negative emotions that one sees clearly in the USA. The authors believe these results might be related to differences in the cultural construal of emotions, also noted by others: Japanese elders appear to be able to see the good in the bad as well as the bad in the good.

If, as these studies suggest, elders in Japan develop emotional lives that do not map on to discreet categories of positive and negative, success or failure, then they risk being excluded by the kind of logic that pervades current neoliberal approaches to the management of life. This was demonstrated when I visited a small handmade paper and stationery shop run by an older man in my neighborhood. As I was the only one in his shop that afternoon, I struck up a conversation, finding out that he had only started the shop after he had retired from a desk job some years back. Although he'd had an interest in paper craft, it never amounted to more than a hobby, but after retirement, he began to pursue it in earnest.

'At first it was hard, every time it was just a mess!' he grinned as he remembered all of his failures, before turning to me again to exclaim, 'But that is a success! "In failure, we have success!" That's what we Japanese are always saying. Life isn't easy, and failure is part of it. If we can learn from it though, there is never any real failure.' His wire-rimmed glasses slid down his nose as he spoke, and he pushed them back again as he turned around to a shelf behind him. He brought down some stencils that he had made, each a meticulously detailed cut out on stiff material. The one on the top of the stack seemed to be a mountain scene, with tufts of bamboo scattered in clusters. 'This is what we call the snow on the bamboo pattern,' he said, pointing to one of the clusters. 'You see there? The bamboo is bent over with snow on top. I think we like this one because he tells you that spring will come soon. The bamboo doesn't break, it just bends over gently, you see? It is bent over, just like an old person. That's the key.'

'Success in failure,' as this man stated, was a common attitude for many older people, and with longevity new careers, talents and forms of finding meaning and well-being would have time to ripen and mature. But longevity also allows elders to contemplate mortality and consider how the weight of the seasons will eventually bend the bamboo past a point of recovery. Successful aging seems to offer a pathway to healthy, if not exceptional long life, but it doesn't have much to say when it comes to the end of life. Do older people see this too as a failure?

In the neoliberal version of SA, death is, like any form of disability or disease, a kind of failure. With longevity, this failure is stretched out over more years, and as family become more involved in care to fill in the wide gaps in LTCI care provision, this longevity threatens to disrupt younger generations as well. Anthropologist Susan O. Long's (2005) ethnography describes the complications (legal, financial, medical, and cultural) involved when these younger generations and other relatives become involved in end-of-life decision-making, and the need for re-engaging with alternative 'scripts' such as the 'gradual process of leave-taking' (*rōsui*), also known as 'natural death' or 'death from old age' (2005, p. 204). Long's work resonates with Washida's notion of maturity, recognizing that how we die, like how we age, is not merely a matter of rational choice, but also depends on a recognition of selves that are 'socially constructed, tentative, and fragmentary,' existing within 'actual relationships in context' that exceed demographic categories (2005, pp. 214–215).

One of the strongest critiques of successful aging in a time of super-longevity comes from advocates of 'natural death,' which, unlike many Euroamerican countries such as the UK and USA, remains an acceptable cause of death on official documents.[13] MHLW led efforts over the last decade to reduce costs by limiting hospital stays and disincentivizing costly medical procedures at the end of life has led to a significant increase in the number of people dying from 'old age' (NHK Special Shuzaihan 2016).

This was a trend that was especially good news to people like Hashimoto-san, director of Dōwaen, a Buddhist care home in western Kyoto specializing in end of life care (*mitori*). Dōwaen began as a charitable service of a Buddhist temple and was established as Kyoto Nursing

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[13]This is not to say that there is a lack of natural death advocacy in these countries. In particular, Atul Gawande's (2015) best-selling book, *Being Moral: Illness, Medicine and What Matters in the End*, explores the damaging costs of applying the logic of cure in situations of advanced age and terminal illness. Gawande, himself a practicing surgeon, sees both the problems in practice and the responsibility health practitioners have in changing the culture of care. 'Scientific advances have turned the processes of aging and dying into medical experiences,' writes Gawande, adding, 'we in the medical world have proved alarmingly unprepared for it' (2015, p. 11). I would add that it is not only science, but the people who use the science (including patients and non-medical persons) who have changed the process of aging and dying.

Home in 1921. Over time, it expanded to over 300 beds, including a day service center, a children's day care, and home care support. On my first visit, Hashimoto-san, served tea in one of the consultation rooms, where he would speak with family members and residents. A large portrait of the home's founder, in full Buddhist regalia, was framed on the wall, just above Hashimoto-san's clean-shaven head. Although it was the end of the day, there was no hint of weariness in Hashimoto-san's voice. I had met many care home directors by this time, most of them good people who found themselves on the path of eldercare because they wanted to do good in the world. For Hashimoto-san, however, eldercare was a spiritual vocation and an intellectual passion born out of years of fighting against elder mistreatment. I felt my spine straighten and teeth clench in concentration as I listened to his take on Japan.

'The [LTCI] insurance system started about 15 years ago right? With that, we became a "service." Now, a "service" is something you pay money for and buy. Not only that, but there's a contract. The family signs the contract, they buy the experts, and then all of it gets turned over to them.'

Step-by-step, Hashimoto-san led me through the logic of the marketized social care system, as if listing ingredients that by themselves were benign, but ingested together would be poison. Dōwaen, unlike the many care homes established since the 1990s, could draw on its own model of care to formulate a more ecological approach that emphasized complete family support (when there are interested in family) or integrating community support (with the temple or home as an extensions of the community).

He explained to me that despite the rationalization of the Japanese medical system, Dōwaen has continued to promote the natural process of aging and dying (typically by allowing a patient to expire when they are no longer able to eat and drink on their own). He had been disturbed by the fact that nearly 80% of Japanese people, most of them elderly, die in hospitals, often while receiving some sort of life extension support such as nutrition or fluids (at worst, dying of 'spaghetti syndrome,' attached to various tubes and machines).

At Dōwaen, Hashimoto-san explained, end of life care meant finding ways to connect the dying in a meaningful way to others around

their last days. In other words, achieving the goal of *rosui*. While other homes sometimes rush dying or even deceased residents to hospitals in order to avoid the association of care and death, Dōwaen has emphasized the importance of watching over the dying, even going as far as involving other residents in funerary ceremonies for former residents. It is the only nursing home in Japan that holds full funerary ceremonies for residents.

'Every human life has a limit.' Each word grew in intensity until it felt like the last one hit me between the eyes.

'From that fact, it follows that we must support [patients] each and every day, looking after this precious time.' He concluded the home's mission statement. This holistic, integral, and interpersonal approach to aging, caring, and dying, and in particular Dōwaen's natural death philosophy, has not always been popular in Japan. But as I dined that evening with Hashimoto-san and a top prefectural official in the office of social welfare, there was clearly interest in finding ways to integrate this approach. Might this also challenge the individualist, consumer-based model of SA and neoliberal care?

## Conclusion

We have no idea what it will mean to inhabit a future of super-longevity. Some scientists believe there may be a biological life clock that just doesn't let us live past 120 or so. On the other hand, transhumanists of a variety of backgrounds are eagerly pursuing ways to harness technological advances (e.g., implants, prosthetics, drugs) that may lead to significantly longer and healthier lives even in the next few decades. On the radical end of the transhumanist spectrum are those who predict a post-human future, where age and death will evaporate as personhood will no longer be tied to individual fleshy bodies, but part of a system of digital information network. In any case, while each of these futures pose the question of life extension, they each grapple in different ways with the whether or not extension is also enhancement. If a long life without serious disability or cognitive decline is possible, would this benefit both individuals and society? If new technologies allow the links

between our consciousness and creaturely presence to be loosened, do we need to develop new ethical frameworks to even assess the nature of enhancement?

Uncertainties abound whenever we look deep into the misty orb of the future, but whatever it entails for human longevity and enhancement, it will have to contend with the ways that we think about aging and dying today, especially in the super-aged societies like Japan. In this case, demographic pressure and gerontological science intersected with other economic and political interests in neoliberal reforms and gave life to a beast—half-public, half-private—that, for better or worse, older people and carers live with. And while many find it difficult or meaningless to carve their life into bureaucratic categories of dependence or gerontological categories of success and failure, the power of the system is so pervasive, and it is not easy to escape its influence. Critiques from the end of life, however, provide a glimpse of what may lie beyond the limits of an increasingly marketized care system, new visions of human connection, dependence, and love.

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# Part IV

**Death and Dying**

# 10

# Old Age and the Neoliberal Life Course

### Susan Pickard

## Introduction

In this chapter, I look at the way the life course, in its reconstruction within a neoliberal framework over the past several decades, has shaped a version of old age that contrasts strikingly with what preceded it, in terms of both its meaning and its relationship to other stages. The increased valorization of youthful, productive qualities has had the effect of rendering old age meaningless at best (the aim being to pass as young for as long as possible) in the third age, and tragic and pitiful where this is not possible in the fourth. This has had a profoundly gendered impact, where the fourth age is not just a condition that affects more women than men, but is also one which achieves its symbolic apotheosis in the figure of the abject old woman. In what follows, I will trace this development and suggest ways in which this trend be modified in a revisioning of both old age and the life course per se.

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## The Life Course, Modernity and Old Age

Old age, like any other stage of life, can only be understood within the framework of the life course, because the stages relate to each other, deriving their meanings in relation to each other and from the framework itself. The latter is inseparable from notions of time and temporality and intersects powerfully with gender and other systems of stratification. The 'age system' forms an important part of the governmentality of modernity, classifying and dividing people according to age and intersecting with a range of other stratifying systems such as class and gender to facilitate the embedding of inequalities as well as introduce inequalities of its own (Calasanti and Slevin 2006; Pickard 2016). In order to fully appreciate its role, as well as the place of old age within it, it is necessary first of all to consider what the life course of (late) modernity replaced.

In medieval times, ages and stages related to each other differently where a religious dimension meant that 'each age is equidistant from God, who stresses their subordinate but equal status' (Dove 1986, p. 15). Nor did age and stage make sense without being seen as rooted in an entire life cycle. In addition, the concept of spiritual ages imparted a unique value to age, in a way that contrasts with modern associations. So we find the idea that one was likely to be more spiritually developed as one aged. As Tom Cole (1992) notes 'the concept of spiritual ages allowed for the paradoxical unity of physical decline and spiritual ascent' (1992, p. 6). It was possible to be a wise child ('"puer senex" grave and wise beyond his years') (Dove 1986, p. 36) as well as a youthful old person ('senex fortis'), such states deriving their meaning from spiritual advancement and associated with the ideal of age transcendence. It was agedness of the soul that counted (Burrow 1988).

The modern life course, on the other hand, organised ages and stages according to an entirely different rationale, both in terms of their relationality and their role and meaning in society. With the emergence of the 'life course' framework, the ages of life became the 'stages of life', associated with the civilising process that moved from externally imposed discipline to internalised processes of self-control. There were specific roles and tasks associated with each life stage, quite separate and

distinct from other stages and associated with the major institutions of modernity. These included school, the workplace and retirement whilst a range of discourses and associated experts served to reify each age. For old age, geriatric medicine worked with the institution of retirement to construct an old body and old self that differed essentially from both a youthful and 'adult' body (the language of geriatric medicine separated 'geriatrics' from 'adults'). Geriatric medicine announced different norms of health and bodily functioning that required expert understanding (Pickard 2010); this turned the aged person into a creature fantastic in its otherness, like the Aged Parent in Dickens' *Great Expectations*. Policy also reified the old, treating them as another species of citizen, in the way that medicine treated them as another species of human, whose 'burdensome' nature or 'conservative' tendency was potentially ruinous to the rest of society. Psychology and psychoanalysis added their input stressing that development took place only in the earlier years of life.

Within this new conception of the life course time assumed a different form, becoming linear and unidirectional, and the meaning of travelling through the life course was constituted by a 'decline' narrative (Gullette 1997). In symbolic terms, a new iconographic representation of the life course as staircase had emerged by the sixteenth century, rising and falling in a pyramid shape with connotations of progress followed by decline clearly adumbrated in that form. Other imagery representing the life course that appeared throughout modernity include variously: life as a pilgrimage or journey; as a game; as a series of stages linked to Darwinian evolution, economic growth or developmental psychology (Mintz 2015). All reflect the underlying staircase pattern giving particular emphasis to childhood and youth. For example, of Erikson's (1997) eight stages of psychosocial development six are concerned with the period from infancy to youth positioned on the ascent and only two concerned with adulthood and old age. Within this system the old had no real purpose in the present, their task being either to look back in their own life, resolving the conflicts from earlier points left undone, or else to devote themselves to serving the young, thus acting in two senses as curators of the past. Over this period time was constituted as a limited commodity not unlike money—a time economy suited to the organisation of the capitalist workforce—and one of the ideas associated

with the Reformation was that it could run out before one attained salvation (Cole 1992). This was accompanied by a shift from 'contemplation' being considered the highest pursuit to an emphasis placed on activity, which again fitted with the centrality of ordinary life (Taylor 1985). Later, but not until the twentieth century with the fourth stage of the epidemiological transition (Olshansky and Ault 1986), we have a complementary shift culturally and philosophically from a central importance given to mortality to an emphasis on 'natality' (in the words of Hannah Arendt) and hence the privileging of youth over old age (Neiman 2014).

The life course also instated a paradigm switch in the relationship between age and youth and their respective values vis-à-vis each other. Capitalist practices, especially the mode of production and advertising associated with it from the 1920s onwards, attached notions of progress and productivity firmly to youth. The shift can be traced through fashion where, Cohen (2012) notes, the fin de siècle, middle-aged women were the embodiment of stylishness, with younger women considered 'raw' and 'awkward' by comparison. This changed in the 1920s with the new industrial methods including Taylorisation[1] Cohen explains: 'Consumer capitalism … maintains that at the very core of human experience is a desire for what is new…. Advertising and mass industry… turned what was new, and young, into a moral virtue, an economic necessity, and an essential ingredient of personal success' (2012, pp. 88–89). Today, the increasing individualisation that has resulted from the erosion of collective class-based solidarities that accompanied the movement to a service-based economy has further emphasised youthful attributes of flexibility, innovation and the need to create oneself anew. The quintessential manifestation of this is the tech industry

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[1]Frederick W. Taylor introduced the principles of 'scientific management' to work practices in the late nineteenth-century factory which involved the rigorous management of time, a process that later spread to other workplaces and some say the home (see Hochschild 1997, pp. 48–49 for a description both of this practice and of its creep into other realms, especially that of the domestic. The point is also that the time economy provides a measure not just of efficiency and control but of value: time is short and, most importantly, can run out, hence the ever-present fear of obsolescence and the love of the new).

which is not just an overtly ageist industry glorying in the 'natural' talent of youth, but also one which has committed billions of dollars towards anti-ageing research intent on engineering ageing without growing old.[2]

## Gender and the Age System

As modes of stratification, gender and age are closely imbricated, mutually supporting each other since the advent of modernity, a fact which manifests in the symbolic devaluing of the figure of the old woman in particular. The denigration of the body and the association of females and femininity with the body was not an innovation of modernity and indeed its genesis can be traced back to the ancient Greeks,[3] but with Cartesianism the mind/body split and the association of value with mind (male) and the reviled with the body (female) was new; new also was the particular denigration of old age and femininity as against the positive of youth and masculinity which both require transcending for the attainment of reason (which furthermore was flattened to instrumental rationality) (Bordo 1986). Importantly, as Susan Bordo has delineated, there was a psychological element to this also, with Cartesian dualism as a process of separation and individuation from the female universe of the old medieval cosmos enabling the emergence of the disenchanted masculine universe of the modern era. This involves interplay between cultural narratives and individual experience which is constantly repeated on an individual level, as in Elias' (1978) account of how the years' long development of children replicates on a minute scale the centuries' long civilising process undergone by nations. In an account of the 'dialectics of separation and individuation' which Bordo offers as a 'way of seeing the Cartesian era empathetically and impressionistically, through

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[2]See O'Connell (2017) for a fascinating account of tech's fascination with anti-ageing.
[3]See, for example, Bordo (1995).

association and image' (1986, p. 448) and drawing on psychological categories normally used to describe individual development, she highlights the links between scientific objectivism, the rejection of the body and the establishment of the motif of the Hag as emblematic of all the forces of dissolution threatening patriarchal rationalist society. One way through which this separation is effected is by the association of the female body with the abject (Kristeva 1982). This abject quality pertains to lack of control, inherent in incontinence, bleeding, lactation and suckling, the ambiguous boundaries of self and other in pregnancy, the vulnerability of a body *in time*, a body with an animal or vegetable quality of immanence from which state the (masculine) self seeks to distance itself. Undesirable or uncomfortable qualities are projected onto women and older people such that if, as Mary Douglas (1966) suggests, the body is always a social body providing, through its boundaries and conventions, a clue to social mores, then the feminine body is marked by the social most of all, and the older female body is its epitome. Dorothy Dinnerstein suggests:

> The child's bodily tie to the mother… is the vehicle through which the most fundamental feelings of a highly complex creature are formed and expressed… this tie is the prototype of the tie to life. The pain of it and the fear of being cut off from it are prototypes of the pain of life and the fear of death. (1976, p. 34)

Concurring with Norman Brown (1959), Dinnerstein links the sociocultural denial of death—including the horror of signs of ageing and senescence—with our early recognition of bodily vulnerability. Woman (or Mother standing for all female bodies) is henceforth considered 'representative of the body principle in all of us that must be repressed when we embark on any significant enterprise' (Dinnerstein 1976, p. 126). But if the young mother reminds us of our intractable vulnerabilities, how much more terrible to behold is the old mother, on whose now-withered breasts we, who are no-longer-children, once lay our heads? She surely is the 'night in the entrails of the earth' of whom Beauvoir (1997, p. 179) identifies as so profoundly terrifying to men.

## Neoliberalism and Old Age

Since the 1970s late modernity, enfolded by a neoliberal framework, has reconstituted the life course according to a reworked rationale accompanying the end of the mandatory separation of work from retirement, as well as work from 'life', and the enfolding of all citizens in an obligation of productivity. John Macnicol explains: 'Neoliberalism is both an ideology and a stage of capitalism' (2015, p. 12). It has become 'a modern generic term for free market, libertarian ideas ostensibly supporting a minimalist state, the primacy of the deregulated market, the desirability of private provision of goods and services, the sanctity of individual liberty and so on' (2015, p. 14). These dual threads converge in the figure of the ideal self, modelled after the productive worker and paying little heed to place in the life course. For all stages work remains the definitive role, one that extends its logic—both practically and in dispositional terms—into childhood and old age, as well as into the domestic and leisure space, and that has furthermore also claimed women, as well as men, giving to their lives the tripartite structure that most did not have in the post-welfare settlement (Kohli 1999). This indicates a further stage of individualisation in neoliberalism, this time releasing people from their age classes to a large degree and focusing on their individual properties in a new articulation of biopower.

Concurrently the meaning of life has been further flattened, reduced to success, in terms of autonomy, flexibility, productivity, mediated by choice. This is a million miles away from the approach found in the *Arts of Living* as discussed by Epictetus, Aristotle's idea of eudaimonia, or Tolstoy's articulation of the fundamental questions of existence as 'what shall we do and how shall we live?'[4] The main

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[4]A Greek philosopher of the Stoic School, and former slave, Epictetus focused on living a life of moral purpose, involving the exercise of will and control over the passions and the body, hence leading to freedom. Alasdair MacIntyre's exposition of Aristotle's use of eudaimonia in terms of the 'good' in the good life is one of the best I have come across: 'It is the state of being well and doing well in being well, of a man's being well-favoured himself (sic) and in relation to the divine' (2007, p. 148). It is about flourishing according to one's unique telos or purpose. Meanwhile, Tolstoy has been celebrated as a great writer in part for his ability to ponder some of the fundamental questions of human existence (see, e.g., Steiner 1959). The point is that all

consequence, from the perspective of old age, has been the division into the 'third' and 'fourth' ages and the theoretical ending of the institution of retirement. The third age is not old age at all, in the traditional sense: it is agentic and productive, though not necessarily involving paid work; it is youthful and healthy, an identity constructed through lifestyle consumerism (Gilleard 1998). It involves the broadening of the hegemony of adulthood to the latter years, including in physiological ideals of the body (Pickard 2012). In Rowe and Kahn's key expositions on the subject (1987, 1997) ageing was downplayed as a factor influencing health in favour of individual actions: 'the effects of the ageing process itself have been exaggerated, and the modifying effects of diet, exercise, personal habits, and psychosocial factors underestimated' (1987, p. 143). Moreover, successful ageing is a moral as much as medical achievement: both low probability of disease and maintenance of functional capacity are not enough in themselves, and instead the presence of 'active engagement with life' is also necessary for truly successful ageing (Rowe and Kahn 1997, p. 433). Hereby successful ageing has seamlessly replaced the idea of the good life in old age.

But successful old age also demands the counterpart of a failed old age and this is the role played by the fourth age. 'Frailty' is the most direct marker of enforced exit from the third age into the dreaded fourth age. Despite an immense and ongoing effort by many geriatricians to define and redefine its aspects, the fourth age remains imprecise definitionally (Pickard 2014). Again, as a feature of biopower, it is characterised rather by normative views about what it is to be a 'standard adult' and what one must alternatively work to fend off for as long as possible. This is because, above all, it is representative of the state of

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these approaches view the meaning of life in terms quite apart from notions of 'success' and 'failure' in the market economy, focusing instead on intangibles such as character, virtue, flourishing, experience and telos, and which are as, if not more, likely to be present in old age as in youth. In terms of ageing, 'active' and 'successful' ageing are similarly based on entrepreneurial practices and outcomes that posit not value in the life course per se and in old age in particular (see, e.g., Edmondson 2015).

abjection, container for the unwanted attributes that formerly belonged to old age per se, but that now have been jettisoned in order to make possible the third age, and which are distinctly feminine qualities suggesting that it is, above all, the space of the Hag. In medical terms, it has both qualitative and quantitative definitions. The qualitative aspects identify it as a specific Other, a phenotype whose attributes are a caricature of femininity lacking in strength, energy, vigour and speed. The quantitative aspects define it in terms of deficit and risk, calculating its proximity to death by means of tabulating its number of deficits, which are then mapped into eight risk regions, from 'very fit' to 'terminally ill', such as through the frailty index, which calculates degree of frailty, according to the number of deficits that can be counted (Pickard 2014). However, this ultimately also recognises a qualitative state: by 95, according to Kenneth Rockwood (2005), its chief architect, nearly everyone is frail and indeed it is another example of the staircase metaphor, one that focuses on the downward rungs that recede step by step to death.

In social care, the labelling of an old person as frail in the domiciliary context, which instigates intervention from community nursing teams and possibly thereafter referral to institutional care, results from the fact that 'someone conceives there to be a *lived problem* with a very old person' (Kaufman 1994, p. 50; original emphasis), by which Kaufman indicates that the descriptive element has not been replaced but subsumed into the professional judgement. For example, one recent ethnographic study of community nursing involvement with frail old people (Skilbeck 2014) found that a combination of age and physical appearance was used as a marker for classification, where patients were initially described to the researcher as 'a little, wrinkly old lady' or a 'tearful' and 'anxious' lady, with attention also placed on age combined with extreme thinness. Although later functional and social explanations were added, the classification retained the imprint of something impressionistic, based upon recognition of the abject Other, the Hag. It is easy to see the abject body, in all its marginalisation, defined by decline, dependence, leakiness, vulnerability and proximity to death in this depiction of frail old women in a nursing home:

Martine with her chin on her chest strapped into a chair; Martine with a swollen face, because she has fallen out of bed; Martine badly dressed, one trouser leg hoisted to mid-thigh; Martine with an empty look in her eyes, forgotten in a wheelchair, outside her closed bedroom door. (2012, p. 28)

That it is distinct from disability and concerned with the failure of qualities such as independence, autonomy and boundedness associated with the male body is also clear if we note that frailty is much more likely to coincide with difficulty, or outright failure, in terms of performing aspects of independent living (IADLs), such as preparing meals, managing money, shopping for groceries or personal items, performing light or heavy housework, doing laundry and using a telephone, than it is with disability (Pickard 2014). Indeed disability has been positioned as consistent with social personhood. One reason for this is the attribution to it of 'agency' ('the engagement with life' factor noted by Rowe and Kahn), which those in the fourth age manifestly do not have (Gilleard and Higgs 2011). Second is its association with the leaky body: incontinence, of which twice as many older women suffer than men, may precipitate the diagnosis, or, at least, the inability to keep incontinence private may do so, given that it is a continuum, and one experienced at all stages of the life course, but usually concealed, as social competence is (mistakenly) equated with continence (Mitteness and Barker 2000). Whilst frailty is recognised as a real experience by older people it is not something that maps well onto professional classifications of frailty, but rather indicates a state of existential vulnerability, either temporary or more enduring, and is characterised by dependence, anxiety, or simply giving up in the face of overwhelming physical and functional incapacity (see, e.g., Puts et al. 2009; Nicholson et al. 2012).

In developmental terms, frailty is characterised by loss in two components of intellectual functioning: the 'mechanics' (reasoning, spatial orientation, perceptual speed) and the 'pragmatics' of cognition, associated with cultural practices and acquired knowledge (Baltes et al. 1999). It presents a mirror image to the Piagetian emphasis on a child's developing rationality (Baltes and Carstensen 1996; Baltes and Smith 2003); an un-development on the downward curve, involving a 'crumbling' of

qualities like 'mastery' and 'autonomy' and 'cognitive potential' (Baltes and Smith 2003) that define standard adulthood psychologically. The result of all this structural erosion is that 'the self is at its limits of functioning in the fourth age' (2003, p. 125). This is a depiction, as with the frailty indices, of the staircase of life in its terminal decline, indeed folding in upon itself and slowly collapsing. Despite personality approaches within life course psychology (from Jung to Neugarten, Guttman and Tornstam) that look at the growth and deepening of certain aspects of adult personality, including during the last stages of life, this 'measuring' approach means that any personal development that occurs into the fourth age is lost from view, where 'decline' and 'growth' are seen as antonyms and where qualitative shifts in subjectivity or consciousness gained through suffering and vulnerability (including successfully negotiating the personal challenges associated with them) do not 'count': perhaps because our fear of the Hag closes down our imaginative empathy. Again, in another example of a teleological classification, this decline is foretold in the very terms and values selected at the outset, those of autonomy, mastery and separation, against which the fourth age is seen to be wanting. As such it says more about the ideals of adulthood than about 'old age' per se, although it fails to subject these former to analysis or hold them up to critique.

## The Existential Threat of Ageing

If the fourth age is a space onto which unwanted and unpleasant aspects of existential existence are projected—as well as failure to succeed in terms of late modern capitalism—there is also a sense in which the old retain a dangerous quality, even when they are healthy, functioning and productive. This is the danger expressed through the Freudian Oedipal conflict, today given a particularly late modern twist. A short story in the 2015 collection by the prize-winning Anglo-Pakistani writer Hanif Kureishi provides one example. The 'Land of the Old' is about a time in the not-too-distant future when the old have become strong enough to vampirise the young, treating them as property in the various roles of

domestic servants, companions, quasi-children and sex slaves, at their will. The old also have the power to decide who, if anyone, is permitted to live beyond the age of 50. Kureishi writes, of the piece's old anti-hero:

> They conquered, his generation, flourishing in the new opportunities of capitalism. Soon after, they closed the roads so no one could follow them up, and now they will not let go. It didn't take them long to see it would be a good idea to enslave the young, whom they patronised, envied and hated, and then, with some exceptions, began to kill off at fifty. For them this was barely murder… ridding the world…of those, they claimed, they could not afford. Those for whom there was no place. (2015, pp. 173–174)

Similarly, M. Night Shyamalan's (2015) horror movie *The Visit* depicts elderly grandparents, first as vaguely threatening with shades of dark fairy tales such as Hansel and Gretel or Red Riding Hood, and then as overtly bent on murdering their grandchildren in a representation that has been called 'the most gerontophobic film ever made' (Robey 2015). But while the old man is terrifying in his malevolent strength and brooding geriatric ill-will, some of the most terrifying scenes are those involving the 'grandmother' who, after bedtime, with darkness descended and the children cowering in their bedroom, flies shrieking around the house, clawing at the walls and emitting projectile vomit; a being both monstrous and seemingly possessed by the spirit of senility.

These fictional representations are echoed on the more 'rational' level of political discourse which increasingly sets the generations against each other in an 'age war' generated largely in the media, focused on either the problem of supporting the 'burden' of the poor old fourth agers or equally on the greed and generational advantages enjoyed by the third agers. These latter extend to housing, pensions, educational capital and, in existential terms, their privileged amounts of lifetime luck and success: a flourishing presented as grotesque and unnatural. Such depictions have appeared with great regularity across a range of contemporary media sites, deployed from a range of political positions, including the (UK) *Guardian*, *The New York Times*, *The Atlantic*,

*The Huffington Post*, *Time*, *Forbes*, *The Daily Telegraph and the* (UK) *Times*. Although the arguments found within these themes are diverse, they all fit within the long-held notion that the older generation is potentially or actually problematic for society at large, a view which increased within the context of the austerity debate, Brexit, and then the election of President Trump. The British journalist Will Hutton chastises his own generation thus:

> Having enjoyed a life of free love, free school meals, free universities, defined benefit pensions, mainly full employment and a 40-year-long housing boom, they are bequeathing their children sky-high house prices, debts and shrivelled pensions. A 60-year-old in 2010 is a very privileged and lucky human being. (2010)

Many of the above arguments are also echoed in a vivid indictment by former Liberal Democrat Minister Chris Huhne (2013), again directed against his own generation. He warns: 'The cost of pandering to pensioners is social arthritis', and concludes with a 'call to arms': 'Someone needs to fight the selfish, short-sighted old. They are the past, not the future' (Huhne 2013). It seems as if this denigration is one way of asserting a firmly youthful third-age identity, a distancing of self (evident in the pronoun 'they' instead of 'we') from the spoiled identity of one's coevals.

The science of anti-ageing is another inevitable concomitant of the neoliberalisation of ageing, made possible at the same time as neoliberalism was emerging in the 1970s with the publication of Tom Kirkwood's Disposable Soma Theory (Kirkwood 1977). This brought together arguments that had appeared earlier in the scientific world but placed them within the framework of evolutionary theory, thus seriously challenging the centuries-long belief that death was natural and pre-programmed. It did so by substituting this with the contention that ageing is in fact an oversight of evolution, the result of a number of insults or the delayed effect of certain genes that emerge in post-reproductive phases of life when the germinal line has already secured immortality through reproduction. Ageing, this theory suggests, is not

natural and rarely if ever occurs in nature. Appearing within the context of urban civilisations, it is not distinguishable ontologically from chronic disease, making it meaningless scientifically and thereby feeding the broader cultural discourse. Although Kirkwood himself does not support anti-ageing technologies, and whilst there remain strong supporters of the view that ageing is natural, Kirkwood's theory provides the perfect rationale for the work of anti-ageing scientists intent on finding a 'cure' for ageing and death, among them the visionary figure of Aubrey de Grey, as well as more conventional scientists such as Richard Faragher and David Gems, together with a profusion of Silicon Valley entrepreneurs (Friend 2017). For the 'immortalists', according to Bryan Appleyard (2007), time, not space, is the last frontier, and the future, like a desert or the wild west, exists to be occupied and colonised.

## Concluding Thoughts: Towards an Alternative Framework for Old Age

Whilst the logic of this approach to old age—reviling it and distancing oneself from it—may serve for a time for those with sufficient capitals, even for them it is eventually exhausted in the reality of the finite life and the vulnerability of the flesh. Whatever our personal and cultural wishes and fantasies may be, old age is a fact of life and will remain so for the foreseeable future, and possibly for good, meaning that the impulse to deny and devalue it is fundamentally misplaced, suggestive of a kind of immaturity. There are several possibilities for addressing it in a spirit of mature acceptance. The first is to acknowledge that the category of frailty, however defined and identified, is useful for identifying patients in need of specific intensive medical and social support, and as such requires a well-resourced, sensitive and ethical practice and policy, from which the stigma of ageing as burden is removed. The second is to challenge the neoliberal framing of old age and the life course which, having withdrawn all meaning from old age, approaches it only as a medical category. Whilst we cannot resurrect earlier frameworks

of meaning, such as those contained within the Wheel of Life,[5] we can yet draw on them and other philosophies for inspiration. For example, Thomas Rentsch ([2017]) uses 'virtue ethics' to argue that old age (like any age) is both unique in itself and can only be understood in dialectic interplay with the whole life course. As a result, interpretation is required constantly, and here virtue ethics is also helpful in suggesting the guiding principle, not of success, but of *eudaimonia* or flourishing connected to the concept of the good life. Unlike neoliberalism, the latter recognises the different qualities and challenges associated with different stages of the life course linked together by a thread of continuity of self.

In addition, Rentsch points out that there are two ways in which ageing and old age have valuable insights not so accessible earlier in the life course. Firstly, many aspects of modern life, especially its temporal economy, can be challenged where 'in the tradition of wisdom, to learn from ageing can mean to set concrete practical forms of life, such as slowing down and taking it easy, against the "polar inertia" of late modern processes of technical acceleration, to gain a new sense of the definitive, temporal reality of our lives' ([2017], p. 45). Such insights prompt an understanding that the linear, measurable time economy is not 'time' at all, but merely one way of organising and regulating people around the primacy of work: a process that also encourages the sense of life stages cut off from each other. For old people themselves, secondly, old age presents the opportunity to gain a more conscious life, to awaken to an understanding of finitude and impermanence, of the human truth of vulnerability and the need for solidarity and interdependence with others. As a result, there is a chance for continued self-development in a number of ways, including acceptance and forgiveness of oneself and others for acts committed at previous times; a recognition of life's true

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[5]A celebrated fourteenth-century image, it depicts symbolically the fact that 'each age is equidistant from God, who stresses their subordinate but equal status' (Dove [1986], p. 15; see Pickard [2016]).

priorities, and a perspective on the final meaning of one's life, of attaining a sense of plot laid out from beginning to end, of similar effect as if, having spent years walking in a densely tangled labyrinth of streets crowded with buildings, a vista were at last to open up affording one a view of the entire city. The challenges in old age such as bereavement, loss of roles and of physical capacity belie the suggestion by psychologists and others that one experiences only cognitive decline in old age, and imply rather the chance, not just to develop, but to fulfil oneself in the sense indicated by the old English origin of the word: complete, make full, fill up, which is an enrichment, not diminishment, of the self.

Finally, the gendered aspect of the denial of death is also something that requires a careful work of deconstruction. For example, where Freud identified the twin impulses of sexual desire and fear of death as fundamental to human motivation, history suggests that only one at a time seems able to be expressed and acknowledged openly, whilst the other is repressed. Today the denial of death is as pronounced as the denial of sex was in Victorian times (Rentsch 1997). The result is the fetishisation of both to overcome which requires recognising and bringing both to full consciousness. This would surely lead to a healthier gendered economy, if as Margaret Walker has pointed out, 'much of western patriarchal prejudice against women can be traced, through labyrinthine pathways of the unconscious, to symbolic fetishisation of man's ultimate fear, the fear of his own final nonexistence' (1985, p. 19). To accept ageing and death, such reasoning suggests, is to accept the Mother, which necessitates the turning of the Hag into the Crone, taking the latter as a repressed symbol of valued femininity. Informing the practices of child rearing and early education this would be concerned to integrate what has hitherto been split apart in gendered socialisation in order that we may become adults wise to the fact that we will all experience both autonomy and dependence, strength and vulnerability, power and fragility, not just at different points in our life time, but at every point. Far from something to be overcome, then, old age is the epitome of what it is to journey through the human life course.

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# 11

## Death and Dying in "Third Way" Death Manuals: Shaping Life and Death After Neoliberalism

**Beverley Clack**

Death stands at the limits of human existence. It denotes the ultimate boundary, the end point, for all human striving. That death suggests limits immediately puts it on a collision course with the self-confident, autonomous individual of neoliberal theory. Anthony Giddens, key theorist for the "Third Way" which aligned neoliberal economics with the social democratic New Labour government of 1997–2010, saw the problem of death quite clearly. Death acts as "a point zero" for the neoliberal subject: "it is nothing more or less than the moment at which human control over human existence finds an outer limit" (Giddens 1991, p. 162).

To accept that there might be limits of human endeavour, to grapple with the reality of "being-towards-death", does not sit easily with the relentless optimism of neoliberal aspiration. Acknowledge the skeleton beneath the skin, and the belief that we are always "in control" of our lives, always able to shape its outcome, seems a peculiar conclusion to

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draw from the facts of existent being. Yet, the success of neoliberalism as an ideology stems in no small part from the way it reflects the vision we like to have of our lives. The central tenets of neoliberalism appeal to our vanity, for they reflect powerful fantasies about what it is to be human. We are, we like to think, beings who are responsible, self-determining, creative and free.

In this chapter, I consider what might be called the "Third Way" death manuals of Philip Gould and Kate Gross. Gould and Gross were both, in different ways, involved with the New Labour Project. Gould was a noted strategist, pollster and advertiser. He designed the new logo for the Labour Party under the leadership of Tony Blair. He used focus groups in order to determine the kind of policies the Party should offer as a way of attracting the crucial votes of "Middle England". Gross, while less well known than Gould, worked for both Tony Blair and Gordon Brown as an advisor.

Their memoirs describe their respective experiences of dying and are moving and often poignant pieces of writing from individuals facing the end of life. But they are also notable for offering conclusions that suggest the limitations of neoliberal values to shape a meaningful account of life capable of standing up to the challenge of death. Indeed, the values that emerge from the narratives of Gould and Gross, and that offer some comfort in the face of death, are at odds with the individualism shaping neoliberal accounts of what it means to live well. Out of the tensions and possibilities shaping their respective narratives, new ways of living in the face of death emerge. Importantly, their accounts of what it is to stand in the Death Zone make possible alternative ways of thinking about what it means to live well.

## The Challenge of Death

Death does not, of course, pose a challenge unique to the neoliberal subject. Philosophies of the self which place human striving and achievement at the heart of the meaningful life must also make sense of the devastating reality of death for the individual. The existentialist philosophies of Martin Heidegger ([1927] 1962) and Jean-Paul Sartre

([1943] 1969) have much in common with the direction of neoliberal theorising. Human individuality is defined through one's ability to "stand out" from the world. The challenge is to find ways of resisting the forces that would make one into an object indistinguishable from the rest of the natural world. Subjectivity is defined through creating oneself, and as a result, death's problem is felt in the challenge it poses any possibility of lasting human achievement. The subject is always a subject towards death.

Heidegger and Sartre offer rather different ways of reading this positioning. For Heidegger, death acts as a necessary boundary for human decision-making. Without it, our choices would have no importance: there would always be more time to accomplish whatever we wanted. Our choices are real, our projects have significance, precisely because of our position as finite beings ([1927] 1962, p. 245). Sartre resists the optimism inherent in this view. That we know not the hour of our demise renders the possibility of a meaningful life absurd. Our lives are defined by our projects. Because uncertainty surrounds the possibility of these projects ever being completed, death confronts us with the meaninglessness of all human endeavour ([1943] 1969, p. 533).

Sartre's point suggests something of the problem of death for those who would place human striving at the heart of their account of human being. Faced with the prospect of death and the uncertainty of achievement, it seems difficult not to accept the absurdity of life. Chasing attainment does not provide a certain footing for a meaningful life. There are limits to human striving. The processes of the natural world have a powerful hold over us that cannot easily be shrugged off.

If we turn our attention to the neoliberal subject, we are faced with a similar problem. Defined economically, the neoliberal subject is shaped by its ability to achieve, to stand out from other competitors in the great game of life. Entrepreneurial striving creates this individual. But what is the point, if all this striving is rendered precarious as a result of the fragility that attends to mutable and mortal human life? The neoliberal model of the "successful life" looks somewhat shaky when seen from the perspective of Sartrian absurdity. What happens when the neoliberal subject, understood as adaptable and responsible, is faced with the coming of death? Will the activities that create neoliberal

subjectivity be capable of offering a way of coping with the end of life? Or might we have to look elsewhere for qualities that can offer meaning in the face of death?

## Death and the Memoir

The end of life is accompanied by incapacity, loss and suffering. These qualities seem to have little to do with those that shape the capable subject of neoliberalism. Faced with dying, one method for enabling a continued sense of agency is to find in the experience the material for continued self-development. Utilise this experience to restate your status as an individual who remains capable of choice. May Sarton's protagonist, Laura, in her 1978 novel, *A Reckoning*, captures this impulse rather well. Told she has inoperable cancer, Laura describes "a strange excitement, as though she were more than usually alive, awake, and in command: *I am to have my own death*" ([1978] 1981, p. 7; my emphasis). Choice is not finished with the coming of death: now, it can be used in order to frame how one dies.

Sarton's account is fictional. A recent trend in autobiographical writing offers a rather different way of proceeding. If Sartre gives a high place to writing as a form of project,[1] then the neoliberal subject can turn their dying into literature. The use of individual experience for creativity reflects Leigh Gilmore's identification of "the long memoir boom" (Gilmore 2010, p. 658) of the neoliberal period. The habitual form of the neoliberal memoir follows a distinct pattern. The individual is shown bravely surmounting all the odds to be successful; or they are able to find the personal strength to be redeemed from past failures; or, at the very least, they are able to put aside past constraints in order to find new ways of living. Suffering takes on a particular role in these narratives:

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[1]See his interview with Michel Contat in the *New York Review of Books*, 7 August 1975, translated by Paul Auster and Lydia Davis.

> Suffering, in this model, is ubiquitous, and insufficient to catalyse interest; what appeals is struggle and overcoming—even a narrow escape—that lifts one up and away, through grit and grace, in the achievement of the happier-than-predicted ending. (Gilmore 2010, pp. 659–660)

If escape is the central feature of such writing, the experience of terminal illness with no hope of recovery would seem unlikely to find a home here. There is no happy ending, no way out from death's inevitability. Yet it was probably only a matter of time before the self-help ethos of the neoliberal world applied itself to the end of life. Shaping new kinds of memoir, death does not mark the end of self-actualisation, but offers instead a new space for exploring the self.

As organised religion plays a less prominent part in contemporary Western societies, the idea that one's death might be best approached through common rituals and beliefs seems an anachronistic way of dealing with mortality. Instead of shaping individual experience through religious ritual and practice, the individual is encouraged to look to tales of heroic individuals who have stood up to death and, if they have not defeated it, have at least found a way of taking charge of their own dying. Here, we find the importance of extending the memoir to the experience of dying.

Not all deaths can be shaped through this kind of writing. Dying from cancer offers the kind of time and space necessary for reflecting on—and writing about—the experience. This is not without its own pressures. This kind of dying is now subjected to the imperative for "personal growth" (Kaufman 2005, p. 154). No one is allowed to "go gentle into that good night"; all are supposed to "rage against the dying of the light", or at least learn something from it.

The examples which follow show, both the extension of the neoliberal ideal of control to the process of dying, as well as its limitations when faced with the final destination of all life. In the memoirs of Philip Gould and Kate Gross, the political project of the Third Way takes on a personal dimension as both try to come to terms with the experience of dying.

# Philip Gould: Lessons from the Death Zone

In 2008, Philip Gould, key advisor to Prime Minister Tony Blair, was diagnosed with cancer of the oesophagus. He eventually died in 2011. His memoir, *When I Die*, was published in 2012 and was something of a media sensation, having three print runs in the first year of its release. In this book, Gould describes his battle with cancer, which, as its subtitle suggests, provided him with a series of "Lessons from the Death Zone". Weaving in and out of the account are key figures from the New Labour project. Tony Blair, not surprisingly, is an important figure, along with his Director of Communications Alastair Campbell (1997–2003). Also mentioned are former Labour Home Secretary David Blunkett (2001–2005), and Margaret McDonagh, General Secretary of the Labour Party from 1998–2001, who emerges as a somewhat terrifying figure, Gould describing her as "the steel at the heart of New Labour" (2012, p. 42).

The opening of Gould's account begins with a visit from Blair, shortly after Gould's diagnosis. Their conversation denotes a shift in their relationship informed by Gould's illness. For the first time, they talk about religion, something that Blair had been famously reticent about when in office. As Alastair Campbell once said of his boss and his administration, "we don't do God". Now, things are different:

> [Blair] believes that these values, and his religious conviction, belong properly to a private realm, not the public world that dominated so much of his life…But with my cancer we had left the public world and were living completely in the private realm, and his compassion, his religion and his values could in a way be liberated. (2012, pp. 16–17)

Gould is easy with the idea that "all politicians" are forced to divide their public persona from their personal beliefs. In the moment he describes, they are meeting as "private individuals" (2012, p. 17), the suggestion being that death belongs to the private and personal realm, not to the external world of public politics. We might wonder at the kind of politics which places death on the margins in this way. Might we think differently about the kind of policies and practices best suited

to the public realm if we took seriously the kind of possibilities—and, indeed difficulties—that arise from the vulnerability of "private individuals"? We will return to this question shortly.

Gould spent much of his working life as a political strategist, and so, it seems natural for him to approach death through the methods that informed that work: "Everything I thought about the battle with cancer was strategic, as if I was fighting an election campaign. I saw the elimination of the cancer as victory, and the test results as opinion polls" (Gould 2012, p. 20). If the elimination of the cancer is "victory", if the test results highlight whether he is "winning" the battle, negative results are, conversely, experienced as losing and as failure. The question is how to respond to those failures. Gould quickly realises that to adopt what he calls "the lizard strategy"—"hunker down, hide, retreat" (2012, p. 31)—sent out the wrong signal to his surgeons. It suggested he did not have the strength for the battle ahead, and so, he has to adopt a different strategy to show them that he is strong enough to win. As such, he uses the same set of principles that he brought to the political realm to engage with the experience of cancer: "getting through cancer needs leadership" (2012, p. 43). Just as when you fight a political campaign, "you are pretty much on your own" in the battle with cancer (2012, p. 46).

This comment sounds odd. Anyone with experience of running for political office will know that you are never alone when running for election or when you are shaping policies. You are always surrounded by colleagues and comrades committed to this end. Likewise, it is far from obvious that his cancer treatment involves "being alone". As his narrative shows, Gould is surrounded by friends and loved ones. Similarly, he has access to the best healthcare professionals available. Yet this construction of his illness makes more sense if it is read through his political commitment to the values of autonomy and choice. He is an individual facing death "alone". The greatest challenge he feels he faces emerges when he has dinner with Blair. In response to prompting from the ex-PM, Gould realises that he needs to find out what "the purpose" of the cancer is (2012, p. 56). Far from signalling the end of growth, the cancer is experienced as something which acts as a way of achieving change.

Now, there may be something important in making this turn if we are to think about what it means to live well. There are moments in life, like the one Gould details, when circumstances provide us with the possibility of pausing and thinking again about the way we are living. Yet whether determining a "purpose" in such moments is quite the right way of expressing it, I am less sure. To suggest purpose returns us to the centrality of the individual. "You" are to find a way of learning what this means "for you". If Gould's story reveals the attempt to apply neoliberal principles to the end of life, it also reveals the limitations of this narrative. His journey cannot be reduced to the account of one individual's striving.

Indeed, his writing reflects this. As his illness progresses, a stronger communal narrative emerges. After successful surgery, Gould feels that it is not so much that he is involved in an individual battle, but that he is "connected to the suffering of others in the world" (2012, p. 69). His suffering reflects a wider, universal condition. He is not an atomistic individual, standing out from the world. He is part of a wider whole, part of a wider humanity. As Gould realises he cannot win this battle, his focus shifts towards ways of accepting his death. And here, again, individualism has little to offer him when it comes to finding some kind of tranquillity in the face of death. Acceptance accompanies the acknowledgement that what really matters is less his individual battle and more his relationship with his family (2012, p. 110):

> I am trying to make sense of the world through emotion, through relationships, through feeling. (2012, p. 134)

Accepting the relational shaping of his life involves a further shift. He moves from "being inchoately spiritual to more emphatically religious" (2012, p. 48). Now, it might be tempting to dismiss this move as the kind of crisis faith that emerges when confronted with one's mortality, a way of finding meaning that is much criticised by theologians like Dietrich Bonhoeffer ([1953] 1971, p. 361). Alternatively, we could see it as an example of the purification which comes with the realisation that we are mortal and that our time is limited. Those things which are really important emerge out of the fog of the pressures to be a successful individual.

Gould finds that he needs to place the meaning of his life in a wider whole: his family, but more than that, perhaps in context of the universe itself. This is not to say that the neoliberal narrative of success is ever entirely given up by Gould. At the point where he is faced with the terminal nature of his illness, Gould continues to find himself drawn to this familiar trope: "I have shown myself that I have the courage to transcend death. Maybe I cannot beat death, but death cannot beat me" (2012, p. 119). The worse it becomes, the more he feels he is still left with one last choice: "I can choose - to an extent at least - the kind of death that I want. I have some freedom, I have some power here. I have the possibility to shape for myself my own death" (2012, p. 120). On his last day of conscious life, he is still asking for his laptop (2012, p. 201). He dies surrounded by family and friends.

## Kate Gross: This Magnificent Life

If Gould approaches his death with a studied stoicism, Kate Gross' account of her own dying expresses an explicit anger which the sensitive reader will doubtless share. Hers is also an account that reveals the unreality of the neoliberal account of the self when forced to confront the reality of death. Gross is a young mother of twin boys. She has had a glittering career, working for two UK Prime Ministers, Tony Blair and Gordon Brown. At the time of her diagnosis, she is a CEO of a charity working to establish democracies in Africa. Aged thirty-four, she is diagnosed with colon cancer. Her memoir, *Late Fragments* (2015), is written with her boys in mind and has a subtitle explicitly for them: "Everything I Want to Tell You (About This Magnificent Life)".

Gould was at pains to view cancer as something which confronts the sufferer with the need to determine its purpose. Gross, by way of contrast, is aware of the limitations of such a positive engagement: "Cancer is a pretty terrible kind of gift. It takes and it takes, leaving a trail of destruction in its path" (2015, p. 4). She is angry, a response which feels entirely appropriate. Framing her narrative around the wisdom of the lived-experience she wants to share with her sons, she notes how "in a normal world I would have been granted decades to say all this" (2015, p. 7).

This is where her narrative bites home. Confronted with death, the unreality of the language of self-actualisation is revealed. The neoliberal take on what is "normal" is not normal at all. Gross' experience reveals a life which is far more random and uncertain than the predictability promised if we follow neoliberal recipes for success. Agreeing with the boxer Mike Tyson, Gross kicks notions of life-planning firmly into touch: "Everyone has a plan until they get punched in the face" (2015, p. 52). Reeling from life's punch, she suggests that the values by which she has structured her life are no longer up to the job: "I am not used to this uncertain terrain. In every other aspect of my life, diligence and hard work have been rewarded with getting what I want" (Gross 2015, p. 153). No amount of hard work will enable her to beat this vicious and invasive cancer. A self-described bureaucrat, the cancer doesn't just destroy her life, it also destroys the familiar world of order and control:

> I am a woman to whom control is everything - see how I am trying to control the world even now, by fixing it in print for perpetuity? But I cannot control *this*, I can't game the outcome, I can't decide how the cancer inside me grows, how quickly, where it attacks next, whether or for how long my drugs do the business, how much pain I am in. (2015, p. 152)

It is difficult to think of a better description of the limits of human control. But here, Gross moves her reader in a surprising direction. Rather than lament the loss of control, she argues for the positive dimension that comes with this acknowledgement of human limits. Dying, she writes, has "freed me from convention and from ambition" (Gross 2015, p. 179).

Given the attempt of neoliberal policies to ingrain aspiration in communities that have not, hitherto, conformed to this peculiarly middle-class view of the successful life, this is a surprising and important reflection. Faced with that which strips away all human grandiosity—death—she finds ambition to be something not to entrench, but something from which she must be freed. Her life is no longer structured by the striving for success. Now, new priorities come to the fore that have been obscured. Love for her family and for her friends becomes the central principle for living. Dying frees you up for "the business of dealing

with what you have, of finding meaning in suffering, and of seeing joy in the everyday" (2015, p. 148). Meaning grounded in seeking status and achievement fails to fulfil its promise when confronted with death. A new focus is needed when in the Death Zone. And, crucially, it is a new focus that opens up what really gives meaning to life: family, friends, relationship, love.

It is not just in the Death Zone that that new focus on love is felt. What is interesting in the different accounts of cancer offered by Gould and Gross is that both arrive at similar conclusions when faced with death. Both suggest the social world as capable of coping even with the chaos wrought by death. Rather than consider the self as radically separate, shaped by its projects, a new sense of the relational self emerges. The limitations of the neoliberal subject are made manifest, its account of the self-sufficient individual shown to be something of an illusion. In death, the fact that we are all dependent on the lives of others is starkly revealed. This is not something to bewail. In the end, neither Gould nor Gross mount "a rebellion against human existence as it has been given" (O'Connell 2017, p. 2). Instead, they seek ways of celebrating their dependence on others. Here in the bonds of relationship is the evidence that they are loved. Responding to the challenge of death is less about "having one's own death", and more about recognising the things in life that *really* matter—family, friends, the natural world. In Gould's case, it requires re-engaging with a religious sensibility that had previously been pushed to the margins and which in the experience of dying becomes capable of offering a far more realistic way of positioning the self in a universe of chance and change than the language and practices of self-actualisation. If the neoliberal self is something that requires escaping from in the Death Zone, why do we allow it to shape our experience of life?

## Death and the Limits of Neoliberalism

The limits of the neoliberal account of the self are revealed not just for individuals like Gould and Gross who are seeking to make sense of their own dying. The lived reality of death also reveals the extent of the

inequalities which are promoted by neoliberal doctrine as necessary for a successful society. Death may be the great leveller which reveals the limits of existence for every single one of us; yet dying poor is a quite different experience from dying rich. If we return to Philip Gould's narrative, his visits to the top US and UK specialists make him realise the very real problem of economic inequality. Given his role in shaping policy initiatives which explicitly moved left wing politics away from addressing economic inequality towards promoting "equality of opportunity", this is not an insignificant shift. One's income is not without significance for one's ability to live well, and Gould comes to realise this through meeting others from a range of backgrounds who are also dying:

> I began to understand what cancer meant for those without resources, without help, without insurance, without any kind of reliable medical support…. Cancer is tough at any time; in poverty, without proper treatment and support, it must be hell on earth. (Gould 2012, p. 36)

It might strike us as remarkable that it takes his experience of dying to realise the impact of these fundamental economic inequalities on the ability of individuals to live—and die—well. "I *began* to understand…": as if such inequalities could not be identified from one's ordinary, day-to-day experience of the world. Yet in the everyday world, it is possible to be detached from the lives of less fortunate others, blind to the way in which poverty and limited resources exclude so many from that much vaunted neoliberal bedrock for success: opportunity. In the experience of illness and death, one enters into the kind of social spaces—hospitals—where one rubs up with those who one otherwise would not meet. These shared spaces make possible the realisation that not all have access to the kind of care resulting from material affluence.

At least Gould recognises the economic inequality that shapes and separates the experience of those from lower income groups from his own. Government policies designed to get the unemployed or unemployable into work have singularly failed to do even this. People like Gould who have accumulated sufficient resources through well-paid work (or inheritance) are able to rely on these resources to shape their own dying. Those without such means are condemned to struggle even

as they face up to the possibility of death. In August 2015, the UK's Department of Work and Pensions was forced to admit that 80 people a month were dying *after* assessments which declared them fit to work.[2] While not all these deaths can be attributed to terminal illness—suicide and accident are also represented in these figures—dying poor is shaped by a lack of support and shame quite different to that experienced by wealthy sufferers. A state primarily interested in producing useful citizens for the workplace is unlikely to deal humanely with the limits mortality places on some of its citizens.

Economic valuing of some at the expense of others also affects the way in which the end of life is discussed. As Kaufman notes, the terms in which such debates are set reflect economic inequalities: "The focus on individual autonomy and on reforms to enhance self-determination… downplays the voices of those without adequate access to medical services and/or without political and media clout" (Kaufman 2005, p. 26). For those on the margins of society, arguments for euthanasia are accompanied by anxiety that "the legalisation of euthanasia could lead to the unwanted deaths of persons deemed 'less worthy' by others" (2005, p. 27): a viewpoint that gets considerably less airtime than that devoted to those who "cry for the right to control the time of one's own dying" (2005, p. 27). Here is "the dark side" of that most vaunted of neoliberal values, autonomy, when it is detached from an engagement with its expression in the lives of real, concrete individuals.[3] Autonomy when you have money looks very different from autonomy when you do not. A narrative which structures dependence as a problem is also unlikely to recognise it as a proper, natural, part of life. "The destructive illusion of human self-sufficiency" (Lewis 2001, p. 306) affects our ability to recognise the natural dependence that attends to dying. It also confronts us with the problems of a social discourse which focuses almost exclusively on promoting the goods of independence and that fails to take seriously the realities of economic inequalities.

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[2]Frances Ryan, "Death has become a part of Britain's benefit system", *Guardian*, 27 April 2015. For a dramatic rendition of such real-life scenarios, see Ken Loach's film from 2016, *I, Daniel Blake*.

[3]See Kaufman (2005, p. 28).

# Thinking Again About Death and Dying

The sociologist Arthur Frank offers a way of considering life and death that moves beyond Gross and Gould's realisation of the problem with neoliberalism and which offers a more sustained consideration of how we might shape the meaningful life.

Frank, like Gould and Gross, offers an autobiographical reflection on his experience as a person living with cancer ([1991] 2002), but he also moves beyond his own story to consider the stories of others who are suffering and dying in order to open up ways of thinking about the meaningful life beyond the constraints of neoliberal individualism.

With Gross and Gould, Frank starts *from* the perspective of the one who is ill. This places the personal dimension at the heart of his narrative, thereby transcending the "facts" of medical science that all-too-easily render the person into just another case of a particular illness. Frank's concern is to allow the sick or dying person to be seen in their own right (Frank 1995, p. 7). This is not, however, in order to align his narrative with the neoliberal emphasis on the individual. His intention is not to focus on the individual's struggle, enshrining ideas of the hero, but, instead, he wants to ground their suffering in the acknowledgement of relationship. The sick or the dying are not isolated from the broader swathe of humanity. Rather, acknowledging their relationship to healthier "others" makes possible solidarity between <u>all</u> people, be they sick, healthy or dying:

> The disease that sets the body apart from others becomes, in the story [told by the sick person], *the common bond of suffering* that *joins bodies in their shared vulnerability*. (Frank 1995, p. xi; my emphasis)

This is not about the individual's struggle, as if this could be set apart from the rest of the community. The sick and the dying are not separate from the healthy mass of humanity. They are not aberrations set apart from the healthy. In telling their stories, Frank wants to forge a sense of our common life together. Damage is done to them when they are shunted off to the sidelines, reduced to passive recipients of care. Frank's concern is to show them as people in their own right; people who have important stories to tell about the human condition which we all share.

Their stories do not set them apart, but rather connect to the stories we all might tell—indeed, most likely, will eventually tell—for they reveal the reality of being vulnerable beings in a mutable world.

Sickness moves from sickness as pathology to something that acts as "an intimation of mortality" (Frank 1995, p. 6). Importantly, any sickness offers this intimation. To experience that loss of control—even briefly—is to be reminded that to be human is to be limited. We are not demigods who stand astride the world, but vulnerable, in need of each other. Thus, the suffering of the ill reveals the nature of humanity, for illness is "a common condition of humanity" (Frank [1991] 2002, p. 115). By listening to the stories of the sick and the dying, we take the imaginative step of walking in their shoes, discovering empathy and a greater sense of connection with all who suffer in our world.

The claim that sickness is a fundamental part of human experience is shocking. We are not used to having sickness placed centre stage. Indeed, when he tells the story of the sick, he is not very interested in stories of individuals "restored" to good health. These "restitution narratives" (1995, pp. 75–96) can be co-opted rather too easily into an already dominant narrative that encourages us to read the experience of terminal illness through the category of "winning" or "losing" the battle with death. (We might think here of the role this trope plays in Gould's narrative.)

So Frank directs us, instead, to stories that make for less comfortable readings, stories that defy our desire for happy endings. "Chaos" stories (1995, pp. 97–114) are told by the terminally and chronically ill, and they are important precisely because they reveal the "bulwark of remedy, progress and professionalism [cracking] to reveal vulnerability, frailty, and impotence" (Frank 1995, p. 97). These are the experiences that neoliberalism pushes to the sidelines, rendering them as problems to be solved or seeing them as forms of individual failure. No wonder, as they confront us so completely with the illusion of human control. There is no kind of "purpose" to be discerned in the experience of terminal cancer. "If there were a sense of purpose…the story would not be chaos" (Frank 1995, p. 105). As language breaks down in the overwhelming pain of such illnesses, we encounter the reality of being mortal beings in a mutable world.

Consider chronic and terminal illness and you face a challenge to claims that the natural human state is to be capable and resilient.

How difficult it is to accept this idea. How preferable to stick to ideas of capability and strength. New Testament scholar Elaine Pagels offers a telling example of the deeply entrenched quality of these desires. She describes the theological battle in the first century of the Christian Church to determine the nature of death. Was it natural, there from the very beginning of God's creation; or was it unnatural, something that came into being as a result of God's curse against the first human beings who had disobeyed Him? The victors in this debate were those who, with Augustine, understood death to be unnatural. We might find their victory perplexing. We might not like death, but surely, it is a necessary part of the physical universe? Yet Pagels suggests we share their vision more than we might think. Like Augustine, we prefer to see ourselves as capable and free, not vulnerable and constrained. If this means, we prefer to "feel guilty [rather] than helpless" (Pagels 1988, p. 147), so be it. Taking responsibility for the shape of our death holds out that belief that we are always free to shape our own destiny. The alternative—that we are all dependent on the processes of a mutable world, borne witness to in sickness and dying—seems far less attractive.

Yet what Frank suggests is that the stories of the ill offer a power-ful sense of solidarity that helps us to rediscover our connection to each other as human beings. The fragility of the human subject is revealed in those living with terminal illnesses and with cancer. It might seem easier to make the individual responsible for their illness, or at the very least for turning it into a story of resilience and hope. Frank suggests an alternative. Let the experience of the one touched by death become a "dangerous opportunity" (Frank [1991] 2002, p. 1), one which opens up again the possibility for rethinking the way we think about ourselves and how we shape our world.

## Conclusion: Accepting Mortality

All human lives are subject to change. All human lives are mortal. Neoliberal political discourse recognises the rule of change, albeit in a way that detaches it from the experience of the mutable body. Mutability is swept up in the key virtues of the neoliberal subject:

flexibility and adaptation to changing circumstances. Nothing is solid or dependable: be that the human subject or the traditional ways of shaping human life and experience. This rendition of the changeable subject has little to do with embracing the changeable nature of the body's fleshy reality. If we took seriously physicality in all its varied forms, we would have to challenge the organising ideals of self-sufficiency and control for human society. The failure of idealising of the independent subject becomes apparent when we are forced to engage with illness and dying: "If independence is what we live for, what do we do when it can no longer be sustained?" (Gawande 2014, p. 23).

Opening up the world of the dying and sick makes possible a different way of proceeding. Rather than see ourselves as defined by our separateness from each other, we should look, instead, to the things that unite us. This is Frank's reason for sharing the stories of the sick and the dying: "sharing losses seemed to be the gentlest way of living with them" ([1991] 2002, p. 39). In these stories, we are offered the possibility of going beyond the neoliberal subject, finding other ways of thinking about what it means to be a human being. Death may confront us with the fears attending to being mutable creatures in a universe whose processes are far greater than our attempts at control. Yet it also offers a perspective that demands a greater degree of connection and solidarity. Here is the space for rethinking human individuality through the bonds that bind us together. Here is the hope for a new politics based on our need for each other.

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# Part V

## Afterword

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# Afterword: Advice for a Life Beyond Neoliberalism?

**Beverley Clack and Michele Paule**

Two questions framed the seminar series that formed the basis for this collection: How is success experienced through the neoliberal life cycle? What accommodations are required in order to be successful, and what resistances are identified as necessary to sustain other ways of living well? Looking over the interdisciplinary range of papers presented in this volume reminds us that, just as neoliberalism is pervasive and tenacious, so must be the critique and the seeking of alternatives. In the introduction, we drew attention to Larner's (2000) caution that focusing on a restricted conception of neoliberalism may result in a limited ability to envisage better alternatives. One of the things we have tried to do in this collection is to resist circumscribing our discussion of 'neoliberalism' to a single approach. More than that, however: the aim of the collection

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has been to move beyond the use of a set of theories which allow academics to write cogent and coherent accounts which speak to other academics and which form the basis for an internally reflexive engagement with a set of social practices. By inviting practitioners from outside the academy to the table, we have gone beyond introducing <u>our</u> academic theories to them. Instead, we have allowed the social formations of neoliberalism—how it <u>feels</u> to be living under its auspices—to challenge and to shape the kind of responses that critical analysts of policy might make. This is more than academics headlining the show: this is about the way in which the experience of neoliberalism is formed outside the academy, and also how those living under neoliberalism can challenge, disrupt, and, ultimately, change a society shaped by it. Just as neoliberalism establishes itself on apparently 'commonsense' premises and thrives on everyday repetitions, so its alternatives must emerge from the ordinary and the seemingly obvious. The life cycle approach with its focus on ideals of success reveals dissatisfactions with neoliberal experience to be the new everyday; the ubiquity of such dissatisfactions is our answer to those who would complain about the ubiquity of the term.

Thus, this collection does not offer a handbook for the overthrow of global neoliberalism; but neither does it suggest ways of accommodating oneself to living more successfully within it. This should not be taken to mean that 'resistance is futile'; rather, by revealing the false promises of neoliberal optimism and identifying ways in which it is not possible to live well under its hegemony,[1] the possibility for alternatives is enabled. Stepping outside the discourse of the market, of competition and individualism, is no easy matter. It is hard to consider alternatives to the TINA doctrine. It is difficult not to grasp for economic answers to the questions of existence. Yet just as the maverick nineteenth-century philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche described the disorientation that comes with acknowledging the Death of the absolute God,[2] so embracing that

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[1]In this work, the editors have agreed that this should be pronounced throughout as 'hegemony' rather than 'hegemony.'

[2]'What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Where is it moving to now? Where are we moving to? Away from all suns? Are we not continually falling? And backwards, sidewards, forwards, in all directions? Is there still an up and a down? Aren't we straying as though through an infinite nothing?' (Nietzsche [1887] 2001, p. 120).

disorientation makes possible the realisation that neoliberal solutions are not the only ones. New horizons open up for a life after the totalising discourse and practice of neoliberalism. As Nietzsche says as he encourages his followers to embrace the New World made possible by the Death of God: 'the sea, *our* sea, lies open again; maybe there has never been such an open sea' (Nietzsche [1887] 2001, p. 199).

What do we need to do to embrace that new horizon, to sail on that open sea? There is an urgency to this question which needs addressing. Womanist theologian Keri Day (2016) has suggested using the religious imagination to develop new futures beyond neoliberalism. In this collection, it is the reading of its elements together that allows for possible ways forward to emerge. Edited collections can encourage a 'pick and choose' approach: read a paper here, a paper there. The sections adhering to the different stages of the neoliberal life cycle encourage a different kind of reading, where the articles contained are best read alongside, against, and between each other, creating synergies, revealing spaces for alternatives, and, indeed, gaps for further research. Here, the varied tones of the contributors become an advantage, for through the mimesis of satire, the conversationality of the therapeutic blogger, and the more obviously academic reflections, the everydayness of the terms in which neoliberalism is couched are exposed, and new possibilities created. We end by suggesting three ways in which the contributors have prompted us to think differently about neoliberalism and its privileging of 'success'.

## Rethinking Philosophy

A philosophical challenge can be made to neoliberalism through an interrogation of the account of the individual that lies at its heart. The neoliberal assertion is that human beings are best understood as economic units, detached from each other, who act out of self-interest in a market place. But as we have seen throughout this volume, there have been historically—and are still open to us—other models for thinking about humanity.[3]

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[3]For an edited collection of a variety of different ways of conceptualising the human, see Clack and Hower (2018).

The way in which we conceive 'the human' brings with it alternative ways of understanding what makes for human well-being. If neoliberal well-being is grounded in narratives of material success, a dominant thread in the last three thousand years of human theorising suggests something far removed from today's market solutions. Humans are the part of the universe that is capable of reflecting upon it, capable of standing back, of grappling with what it means to be alive at a particular point in history.[4] There is a reason for the formulation of the human genus as 'homo sapiens'. We are—or should be—'the wise animal', capable of reflecting on our existence, and of finding new solutions to the old questions of how best to live. In the contributions from Clack, Crozier, and Pickard, different ways of considering our humanity emerge from allowing failure, ageing, and death their proper place in the life cycle. These are not things to be avoided, but experiences which confront us with the reality of our vulnerability. Taking seriously our need for each other, acknowledging the role of care (as in Danely's contribution), necessitates a fundamental shift away from accounts of the human that would make resilience, strength, and independence the concepts through which we shape the social world. There are better ideas through which to construct our humanity than the reductionism of free market economics.

## Rethinking Policy

Neoliberalism, as we have seen, cannot be reduced to a collection of policies. This would imply, as Fine and Saad Filho (2016, p. 9) point out, that 'alternative policy initiatives could reverse neoliberal reforms and even transcend neoliberalism'. Neoliberal policy frameworks have shaped our institutions in fundamental ways; they are now very different to those they would have been had priority not been given to transforming them into markets (Angus 2015, p. 402). This does not mean, however, that it is not possible to re-imagine them and shape them differently. After all, there were schools, hospitals, public housing,

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[4]A classic example of this way of framing human being is found in Aristotle and in the philosophical schools of the Ancient world that followed his example: see Nussbaum (2004).

and universities before they were infested with internal marketisation. Alternative models already exist on the fringes from the hyper-local to the global, such as housing collectives for retired women, experimental free universities, and the People's Global Action Network.

It is not only the degree of change that presents difficulties; it is how deeply entrenched the marketplace sensibility has become. Alex Williams (2017) describes how, within the public sector,

> the management of schools, universities, hospitals, and local government, a managerialist form of neoliberalism is firmly implanted within structures and processes, as well as operating as a world view for managers. (n.p.)

There is a possibility that, along with these managers, proposers of alternatives will not be able to escape this world view. From a hegemonic discourse, neoliberalism has achieved the status of a doxa (Patrick 2013). This is particularly evident in the mobilisation of the market to serve non-market objectives: for example, in the provision of state community services through third party providers (Huot 2013). Here, we can see the neoliberalisation of social policy-making itself, where other objectives are diminished and sidelined (Fine and Saad Filho 2016, p. 19). To reclaim policy and re-centre objectives, we need, instead, to ask ourselves what *kind* of schools, universities, and workplaces, what *kinds* of childhood, family, or working lives, what experiences of frailty and death, might be possible if the starting point of policies and the end point of practices were to be developed around alternative conceptions of the well-lived life and the flourishing community. In paying attention to some of the voices from within those institutions, the researchers and practitioners in this collection illuminate some of the spaces where the doxa has not penetrated.

## Rethinking the Good Life

Key themes emerge from the papers here, that provide a starting point for rethinking the good life. This is an important philosophical, political, and practical endeavour, for neoliberalism has colonised what it means to live well.

The first alternative suggested is that of connectedness over individualism. A range of possibilities open up from rejecting atomistic individualisation if attention is paid to reconsidering connection, collectivity and reinvigorating the discourse of solidarity. This could mean a focus on (re)establishing the connection of individuals to the contexts that produce them, and the structures that shape and limit their experiences and expectations. It could also mean connectedness of individuals and the role of institutions with(in) communities, and collectivism in the workplace. It could mean considering ageing, illness, and death as processes which take place in community contexts.

The second suggestion involves cultivating transcendence. For Grisoni and Ruiz, transcending entrenched ways of thinking about social divides enables the promotion of equality and sustainability. Work through their lens is transformed by paying attention to private as well as professional spheres in ways that challenge the individualism of homo economicus and reinscribe her as part of a collective. This rendition opens up new ways of conceiving the connections between work, the individual, and society. While within market models the main determinant of collective action is narrow economic interest—whether at the level of the individual or the interest group (Saad Filho 2008)—outside such models there are movements that aim to influence policy that have been built around other motives. Examples of such alternatives are found in environmental and human rights organisations, but also in the kind of local resistances being enacted to gentrification or fracking.

The third possibility revolves around reclamation. This involves a radical rethinking of what constitutes 'success', and, through this rethinking, reclaiming the institutions and practices that produce it. Some examples of this are already established—for example, forms of schooling that promote child-centred learning and well-being, and hospices that focus on a 'good death' rather than a technologically or chemically prolonged life. Reclaiming the concept of failure is helpful for aiding such endeavours. 'Failure' has been co-opted by neoliberal discourse into moments from which the individual is exhorted to learn, or into a source for shame. The papers in the collection, read together, allow for a different framing of failure, where it relates to a more restorative notion

of vulnerability; one which releases us from the struggle to shape ourselves to the market. But it does more than that, for it reminds us that we are not alone, that we are capable of community, and that if we are to flourish we must remake a sense of our connections with one other and with the world itself.

While we have offered these three possible perspectives as routes to considering a future beyond neoliberalism, as indicated by the essays in this collection, we would like to return to our declared aims in setting up the seminar series and in collating its elements. This process has led us to reflect on our own role as academics. Have we merely offered a platform for a range of writers? If we have done more than simply bringing together an interesting group of individuals, and if we wish to resist the temptation to round up the various and possibly unruly elements and pen them neatly for the reader under our interpretations, what should we be doing as publicly funded researchers? The spirit of this collection emerged, in part, from our resistance to the neoliberalisation of the academy—with all its individualism, consumerism, and hierarchisation—and the shaping of our work within it. To counter this, the academics' resistance cannot be at the level of the individual, and neither can the responses be atomised. In coming together in our disquiet, and in looking outside the academy for critical interrogations of the neoliberal life cycle, we have glimpsed a vision which neoliberalism itself would deny: there are alternatives.

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