# Consumption of work and the work of consumption

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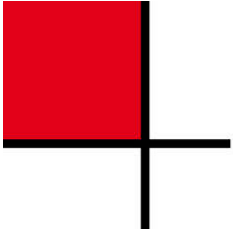
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# Consumption of work and the work of consumption

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*theory & politics in organization*

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# Work and consumption: Entangled*

Ekaterina Chertkovskaya and Bernadette Loacker

## Introduction

The broad themes of work and consumption have received substantial attention in *ephemera* (e.g. Beverungen et al., 2013; Bradshaw et al., 2013; Chertkovskaya et al., 2013). Following concomitant debates, this *special issue* aims to bring together these two realms. While work, understood as the process of production, and consumption, understood as the consummation of objects of production, have always been related to each other (Baudrillard, 1998/1970), the intensity of their interconnectedness and the plethora of its forms have lately captured particular attention among organisation studies scholars and social scientists more generally (e.g. Dale, 2012; Gabriel et al., 2015; Pettinger, 2016).

First, elements of consumption have been entering the realm of work and employment in ways that exceed the customer focus that emerged with the rise of the 'service economy' (du Gay and Pryke, 2002). Consumption now tends to be sublimated into work itself (Bauman, 2000, 2007), so that workers are asked not only to invest energies into the production of material, objectified value (Hochschild, 1983), but to align their very subjectivities with this work and the organisations that command it (Dale, 2012; Land and Taylor, 2010). As such, work is reconfigured as 'an activity through which people produce and discover a sense of personal identity' (du Gay, 1996: 78). This entails a form of self-commodification and self-consumption, which is impelled by the institution of the 'consumer' as the master category of identity (Lury, 2004) and consolidated by the images connected to acts of seemingly sovereign consumption (Besen-

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* We would like to thank rashné limki for her involvement and contribution to the editorial.

Cassino, 2014; Reddy, this issue). This is the phenomenon that we roughly refer to as the 'consumption of work', or consumptive work, in this issue.

Second, the practices of everyday consumption now often contribute to the production process – a phenomenon we refer to as the 'work of consumption', or productive consumption. That is, consumption has become subsumed under the division of labour (Glucksmann, forthcoming), as evidenced through practices such as 'self-service' and, more recently, through 'co-creation' (Cova et al., 2011). While the former is by now normalised, for instance, via the use of self-checkins at airports and self-checkouts in supermarkets, the latter is a relatively new form wherein consumers are refigured as 'prosumers' (Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010), i.e. those who engage in the so-called co-production of end goods and services, by sharing, for example, their knowledge, ideas, or 'data' about themselves (Charitsis, this issue; Merz, this issue) – in service of potential exploitation and valorisation (Hanlon, 2016). Much of this (non-paid) activity has been stimulated by new technologies, particularly the worldwide web and new techniques of scientific knowledge production (Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010).

The interconnections between work and consumption are signalled in the title of this special issue as the 'consumption of work' and the 'work of consumption'. While this conjunctive formulation seeks to undermine traditional distinctions between the spheres of work and consumption, it does, however, not do full justice to the variety of ways in which these spheres can interact (see Gabriel et al., 2015). The contributions to this issue challenge common attempts at ordering and categorising work and consumption by highlighting the inevitable connections between the productive and consumptive aspects of work and consumption (e.g. Charitsis, this issue; Merz, this issue; Reddy, this issue). In so doing, they draw attention to the *entanglement* of work and consumption and how this entanglement, more generally, organises the conditions of living, i.e. who we are, what we do and how we relate. We thereby use the term entanglement in the precise sense advanced by Karen Barad, to suggest that work and consumption are not simply intertwined with one another, 'as in the joining of separate entities', but 'lack an independent, self-contained existence' (2007: ix).

As such, the contributions to this issue gesture towards the entanglement of work and consumption as a site of social contestation, thereby referring to the contemporary 'spirit of capitalism' (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005) as an inherently ethico-political system. Indeed, the fantasies that surround work and consumption mask ethico-political processes behind them – i.e. deprivation and depletion of living beings and ecosystems, the reproduction and justification of global geo-social divisions, or the creation of a monoculture with subjectivities that contribute to these. While doing so, they maintain the hegemony of

capitalism and capitalists (Dunne et al., 2013; Hoedemaekers, this issue). That this is often achieved by highlighting the new autonomies, 'freedom' and 'choice' concomitant with the rise of consumer capitalism (Gabriel et al., 2015: 630; Korczynski, 2007), emphasises, in our view, the essential entanglement of work and consumption.

While we will stay with the analytics introduced in this special issue, our aim is not to consolidate but instead to further complicate these analytics and their political and ethical implications. The rest of the editorial will unfold as follows. We will start by introducing the contributions to this issue and how they speak to the broad themes mapped in the introduction. Building on this, we will provide an overview of the blurred realms of work and consumption within the overarching imperative of productivity and productivism. The remainder of the editorial will be devoted to explaining how consumption and work are not merely interconnected but entangled realms. We will further address some core political and ethical issues that are inherent to this entanglement.

## The contributions: Challenging established orders

This special issue starts with Deepa Reddy's note, which shows how closely work and consumption are intertwined in the context of post-liberalisation India, where material progress and consumption came to symbolise the 'good life'. It is shown how work has become an aspirational undertaking, seen as both a path to and a mechanism of consumption. At the same time, such an individualised understanding of work and the subjectivities it constructs conceals labour, its insecurity and precarity. Using the example of the Nokia manufacturing plant, it is shown how labour realities become visible again in times of capital flight, highlighting the fragility of new work arrangements and the subjectivities they are surrounded by.

While Reddy's note vividly describes what we have referred to as consumption of work in the call for papers of this issue, it goes beyond it in reminding us that behind such work aspirations there is human labour, conditioned by and vulnerable to the demands of capital. The next contribution in the issue, an article by Vassilis Charitsis, in turn, looks at the work of consumption, i.e. (the labour of) consumption as a productive and value-creating undertaking, and often an opportunity for capital accumulation.

Charitsis brings our attention to digital prosumption, which has become important in economic value creation in the era of Web 2.0. In contrast to scholarship that positions prosumption as co-creation of consumers and

producers, this article brings its politics to the forefront. It zooms in on the phenomenon of self-quantification, made possible by increasingly popular self-tracking devices, and positions user generated data as a form of prosumption labour. Drawing on Dallas Smythe's concept of the 'audience commodity', it is argued that through data generated via self-quantification, the subject becomes both the 'prosuming self' who creates value through tracked life, and the 'prosumed self', an active and entrepreneurial subject that is governed to produce the kinds of data that bring value for firms.

The issue Charitsis' article ultimately illuminates is the commodification and valorisation of life through self-quantification practices. The work of consumption, or prosumption labour, on top of being an opportunity for capital accumulation, also governs people's lives and subjectivities. How life has been succumbed to particular understandings of work and consumption, as well as the difficulties to resist these, is exactly what the article by Casper Hoedemaekers brings up.

In his article 'Work hard, play hard' Hoedemaekers discusses the images of work and consumption that so-called 'shock media' produce. While at first glance these images tend to question and undermine idealised representations of current work and consumer subjectivities, Hoedemaekers' Lacan-informed paper illustrates that the 'space of transgression' these media produce is not or is not used as a space for effective critique. Consuming alternate images of work and consumption promises to provide opportunities to (temporarily) escape from the 'ego ideal' underlying prevalent modes of working, consuming and living. Yet, as Hoedemaekers proposes, it may bind individuals even closer to identities and ego ideals fostered within and beyond contemporary organisation.

Barbara Samaluk's paper on post-socialist migration to the UK builds upon the critique of the images of work and consumption through a postcolonial approach. The author offers a critical history of the 'orientalisation' of the region that contemporary geo-political discourse has labelled 'Central and Eastern Europe' (CEE). This conceptualisation of CEE locates its subjects as not-yet-modern due to the difference in their consumption possibilities – specifically, their limited consumption capacities and the lack of access to 'western' goods. Samaluk argues that, within this epistemological framing, neoliberalism becomes posited as a modernising project, so that engaging in associated imaginings of consumption constitutes an act of 'catching-up'. Through interviews conducted with post-socialist CEE migrants in the UK, Samaluk highlights how the legacy of orientalisation produces racial and gendered complexities in their experience of work, and how migrants negotiate these realities with their desire for consumption.

The final paper in this issue, authored by Sibille Merz, demonstrates how neoliberal multiculturalism mobilises racial difference as a site of capitalist valorisation. In particular, the author offers a critique of genetic testing companies that seduce African Americans into becoming 'prosumers' as a means to uncover past histories lost to the violence of slavery. In so doing, these companies not only reinforce geneticised notions of racial difference but also reproduce the colonial history of exploiting this difference in the extraction of un- or under-remunerated labour. As such, Merz's analysis highlights how, even as the lines between work and consumption are beginning to blur globally, raciality remains a critical strategy of power for the extraction of surplus value.

Following the full papers, this special issue includes four book reviews, addressing aspects of consumption and/or production integrative to the contemporary socio-economic and political configuration of capitalism.

Peter Watt reviews *Consuming higher education: Why learning can't be bought,* which offers insightful accounts on how the (UK) higher education has become a sector of consumption and consumerism. The book in particular challenges and problematises the implications that increasing consumerism has on academic work and work practices.

In Kenneth Weir's review *of Selling the Splat Pack: The DVD revolution and the American horror film* we learn more about current commodification tendencies occurring within the (US) horror film industry. These tendencies are, among other things, associated with distinct tensions between readings of horror as art and understandings of horror as a product and commodity.

The review by Oliver Mallett of *Identity and capitalism* discusses identity as a popular yet highly contested category of organisational theory and practice. With reference to contemporary flexible capitalism, identity is portrayed as a category and construct that is all but given. To the contrary, dynamics and frictions of current production and consumption modes tend to result in an increasing complexification and precarisation of identities, their formation and regulation.

In the last review included in this special issue Nathan Gerard discusses *The wellness syndrome.* Following the book's critical tone and alignment, Gerard's review reflects on prevalent societal and organisational moral demands and imperatives such as 'be well', 'be fit' and 'be healthy'. It thereby evokes that, within the current capitalist complex, 'be well' often – and ever more so – means and implies 'be productive'. Gerard's review, once again, raises the theme of subsumption of life to capitalism, a theme that goes throughout this special issue. The possibilities for this subsumption are, among other things, created by

the increased blurred-ness of work and consumption, which we will now focus on.

## The blurred worlds of work and consumption

The spheres of production, reproduction and consumption were mainly considered as distinct in the context of industrial-fordist capitalism (Dale, 2012; Loacker and Śliwa, 2016). During this era, the production of goods and services took place within 'the factory' or 'the office' and, thus, within enclosed organisational boundaries (du Gay, 2007; Kallinikos, 2004). It was here that value, mainly functional and material, was located and produced (Thrift, 2002). The sphere of consumption, by contrast, was traditionally considered as the sphere where goods and services – the necessities for life – were bought and sold (Williams, 1976). The sphere of reproduction eventually belonged to the domestic and thus private realm, located beyond spaces of production and consumption and, hence, attempts of valorisation (Hanlon, 2016).

However, with the rise of post-industrial, post-fordist capitalism, in which the market emerges as the central regulative principle (Foucault, 2008), the boundaries between these three realms start to dissolve (Barratt, 2008, du Gay, 2007; Hoedemaekers, this issue). Within the post-industrial cycle, the production of goods and services, and hence value, no longer occurs within confined organisational boundaries, but rather across different social spheres (Kornberger, 2010; Loacker and Śliwa, 2016). Concurrently, a shift is observed from a focus on the material-functional value of goods and services to the intensification of their symbolic-cultural value, wherein the social signification of goods and services becomes more important than their specific content (Thrift, 2002). To wit, consumption is consolidated as a signifying process rather than a primarily utilitarian one (du Gay, 1996). At the same time, we observe that consumption is brought into the work and organisational realm where it becomes an integral part of production (Dale, 2012; Korczynski, 2007). Work becomes a *self*-signifying activity whereby workers are made up as 'entrepreneurs of themselves and their human capital' (Weiskopf and Munro, 2012), and thereby seduced into consistently cultivating and mobilising their personal, *unique* 'potentials' and 'potentialities' (Costea et al., 2012; du Gay, 1996). Consequently, workers are asked to approach work – and themselves – as a site of consumption itself, so that that the distinction between producer and consumer becomes increasingly blurred (du Gay, 2007; Gabriel et al., 2015). This 'self-commoditisation' of workers, in turn, enables the workplace and organisations to 'consume their employees' (Dale, 2012) as bundles of *objectified* potentials, abilities and ideas (Brannan et al., 2011).

Whereas it seemed characteristic for the industrial-fordist era to define the subject as a 'source of value' (Hanlon, 2016) in terms of his/her productivity, in contemporary market- and enterprise-invested times, the value of working subjects is thus equally defined by their contribution to consumption – that is, their capacity to consume at and beyond work (Bauman, 2007; Trojanow, 2015). That said, in our times, all social spheres – including the formerly domestic sphere of reproduction – seem to have been subjected to the market maxim and capitalist productivity imperatives (Land and Taylor, 2010) *and* to idealised demands for consumption (Gabriel and Lang, 1996). Consumption is thereby no longer considered to be an activity of simply using up (im/material) value which was produced elsewhere (Williams, 1976); on the contrary, the very act of consumption is itself turned into an act of production of, for example, value, symbols and a particular type of identity (Brannan et al., 2012). While work-related subjectivities and identities are still prevalent and influential, they increasingly tend to interact, collide and co-emerge with or as consumer identities (Dale, 2012), emphasising once more that who we are today and who we are made to be is no longer exclusively defined and assessed by the sphere of work, production and organisation, but, to a large extent, by what and *how* we consume in different spheres of life (Bauman, 2007; Thrift, 2002).

Having outlined the increased interconnectedness of work and consumption in light of – 'boundaryless' – capitalist productivity and valorisation rationalities, we will now proceed with showing how work and consumption are not only interconnected, but inherently entangled realms, as well as the politics and ethics of this entanglement. We will do this by elaborating on three main points. First, we will highlight the often concealed production side in consumption practices, bringing up both human labour/work and natural resources as central for the possibility of consumption (see also Dunne et al., 2013). The two remaining sub-sections will bring further nuance to this entanglement. We will bring to attention the geo-social divisions within the entanglement of work and consumption, thereby mainly visibilising the history of racial- and gender-specific subjugation that founded and enables the relentless expansion of global capitalism. This helps us to rethink the 'consumption of work'. Following this, we will argue that despite pronounced geo-social divisions, injustices and inequalities, we – including the more privileged of us – are all *animal laborans* (Arendt, 1998/1958), as elevating human life for constant production within the 'tribunal of the market' (Foucault, 2008) has become the ultimate expression of human activity. This eventually helps us to rethink the 'work of consumption'.

## The unbearable (in)visibility of production in consumption

Consumption may be referred to in two distinct but connected ways: the action of using up a resource and, under capitalism, the process through which commodities are used to gratify human wants (Campbell, 1987). While consumption is something people engage in no matter which mode of production they live in, it has become one of the central preoccupations and aspirations of capitalist societies (Baudrillard, 1998/1970; Bauman, 2007). This makes it possible to characterise these societies as consumerist (Gabriel et al. 2015); though the very possibilities to be preoccupied with consumption vary strikingly for different countries and groups of people, marked by geo-social divisions of our world. In any event, the preoccupation with consumption comes with substantial costs, both social and ecological. However, the production side tends to be invisible in the act of consumption.

The notion of 'commodity fetishism' (Marx, 2007/1867) has been a fundamental critique of consumption under the capitalist mode of production, posing labour, which is essentially based on reproduction and thus life (Hanlon, 2016: 6; Dalla Costa and James, 1972), as the primary resource consumed for the purpose of commodity production. In this process, products of labour acquire an exchange value, appearing 'as independent beings endowed with life, and entering into relation both with one another and with human race' (Marx, 2007/1867: 83). This ensuing 'commodity fetishism', wherein social relations appear as interface amongst commodities, hides the human substance of the society of producers (Bauman, 2007) and, as such, undergirds the politics of consumption. Here, even when consumers are aware of the – often exploitative, alienating and degrading – processes of production that make their acts of consumption possible, they mostly act *as if* they are not, and propagate this process by engaging in a collective forgetfulness (Billig, 1999; Dunne et al., 2013). Even if social reproduction and labour is not a mere necessity and has meaning for the people on (and beyond) the production side, acquiring the status of work (see Radin, 1996), this critique of consumption still holds.

While human labour was central to Marx's theory of value, with regard to nature and natural sources, it assumes abundance and a constant state of ecosystems. However, the multiple ecological problems – caused by intense usage of natural resources in production of commodities, as well as their long-distance transportation and utilisation (Brei and Böhm, 2011) – make it important to bring ecology into the picture. The reformulation of Marx's theory of surplus value in terms of appropriation of usable energy was first done by Sergei Podolinsky in 1883, but neglected at the time (including by Marx and Engels), and was picked up by ecological economists much later (Martínez-Alier and

Naredo, 1982). Similarly to labour, when consuming natural resources, we do not see the complex and oftentimes precarious flows used in and affected by their production, transportation and utilisation. The politics of consumption is then not only in concealing the human labour appropriated and used in production, but also the natural resources that made it possible, as well as harm to them. This holds not only for industrial, but also for the so-called post-industrial capitalism with its expansion of the service sector and the digital economy, which are still reliant on very material technology production, transportation and, often toxic, utilisation (Roos et al., 2016).

While this extended understanding of the notion of 'commodity fetishism' is a fundamental critique of consumption under industrial and post-industrial capitalism, it is important to note that geo-social divisions are inscribed in how labour and natural resources are defined, positioned and used up. Social and environmental challenges, frictions and injustices go hand in hand, with less privileged populations often being more affected by ecological problems and more vulnerable in struggles over natural resources. The notions of 'environmentalism of the poor' (Martínez-Alier, 2002) and 'working class environmentalism' (Barca, 2012), for example, denote how environmental struggles often involve subaltern populations, such as peasant, indigenous and working class communities, often in the global south, but not limited to it. Or, the notion of (ecologically) unequal exchange is used to describe how in international trade, labour time and natural resources are exchanged at a lower 'market value' when coming from some locations than from others, illuminating its imperialist and colonial features (Emmanuel, 1972; Hornborg, 2015).

The increased blurred-ness of the realms of work and consumption, referred to as the consumption of work and the work of consumption in this issue, adds two more layers to the production-side of the politics of consumption outlined above. First, when work itself becomes an aspirational undertaking and a site for consumption, the labour of those producing is forgotten about also by *themselves* (Hanlon, 2016). In other words, what we have termed consumption of work conceals labour realities from labour itself. This is demonstrated by Deepa Reddy's contribution (this issue), where work, and not only consumption, invisibilises labour. It restricts, among other things, unionisation or other forms of collective organisation of labour, making it difficult to shape the workplace or effectively 'mobilise' in times of crisis. This phenomenon does not have to be restricted to cases in the global south or in so-called low-skilled jobs, though this is where its consequences would be felt most sharply. For example, the willingness of middle class youth in the US to take 'cool' jobs in suburban cafeteria despite poor and precarious work conditions (Besen-Cassino, 2014) may also be a case of the invisibilisation of labour, where those contributing to and

engaging in production are not only not or hardly 'valued', but also do not actively try to change extant labour conditions, mainly due to the symbolic value such work has.

The second layer added to the politics of consumption outlined in this section is in consumers themselves being the labour that brings value. The literature on the work of consumption highlights that work and labour can come not only from producers, but also from consumers of commodities (Arvidsson, 2005; Lury, 2004). Glucksmann (forthcoming) actually positions consumers as part of the division of labour, with 'consumption work' often being undertaken by them to buy, (re)use and dispose of goods, services and ideas. Critical literature on prosumption, in its turn, has explicitly highlighted value creation by prosumption labour (e.g. Comor, 2011; Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010; see also Charitsis, this issue; Merz, this issue). Producing consumers and those engaged in consumption work often do not know or do not care that they are themselves the labour, but create value that is sold in 'the market', nevertheless. Here consumption becomes a way of invisibilising labour not only of producers, but of consumers too. In contemporary times, labour is hence also subsumed to capital – by modulating the, non-paid, activities of working and producing consumers and making them 'ready for valorisation' (Hanlon, 2016: 7).

We have now outlined the often invisibilised fundamental entanglement of production, work and consumption. While we argue the realms of work and consumption are by no means independent or having a self-contained existence (Barad, 2007), in this section we have further reflected on the politics of what has traditionally been referred to as the increased blurred-ness of the realms of work and consumption (Gabriel et al., 2015). In what follows, we will elaborate on the geo-social divisions of work and labour inherent to the entanglement of work and consumption.

## The geo-social divisions of labour: Unpacked

Conditions of work and consumption possibilities are marked by geo-social divisions, that is, for example, the global distribution of racial, gender, sexual, class, as well as geo-political and geo-economic divisions. Unpacking them allows us to bring nuance to the way consumption and work are entangled and see 'consumption of work' in a different light. To do this, we will first bring to attention a set of issues and problems encompassing slave labour, which we consider as a primary exemplar of the consumption and commodification of work and labour. We will then bring this discussion into the context of contemporary geo-social divisions.

In the introduction to *In the break,* Fred Moten (2003: 6) responds to Marx's invocation of a hypothetical 'speaking commodity' by referring to those enslaved by and within the US – labourers who were commodities before the labour power was abstracted from their bodies. Notably, according to Moten, slaves had value *prior to,* not merely in and as an effect of exchange. The slave is a commodity and, as such, represents exchange value and use value (Marx, 2007/1867). While the former is realised in profit or surplus value determined by the market (*ibid.*), the use value of slaves is a material relationship, contingent upon the master's consumption of them as commodities. This consumption proceeds through the expropriation of their productive and (given that rape by masters and forced copulation between slaves were also a means of 'commodity' production) reproductive capacities. It also comes with a symbolic depletion, fulfilled through subjective degradation.

This degradation is accomplished through what Spillers (1987: 67) refers to as the 'theft of the body' that inaugurates the slave. As such, the original relation between body and person is severed, only to be re-materialised as 'slave' through the external imposition of meanings and uses – i.e. as commodity on the auction block – and degraded, being under the master's literal and metaphorical whip. In this circumstance, the captive-turned-slave body provides 'a physical and biological expression of "otherness"' (*ibid.*: 67), which is the condition of possibility for the master to locate himself *qua* Master and Man. At the same time, the work of a slave is the site and activity of self-consummation whereby s/he actualises him- or herself *qua* slave. The denial of subjectivity signified therein – instituted by the proposition of his or her non-personhood and confirmed by self-consumptive work – is mobilised in the production of surplus value. In sum, the slave is forced to reify and consume his or her work in order to realise material as well as symbolic value for the Master *qua* Man.

Insofar as the analytic 'consumption of work' indicates the blurring of the line between work and life or the subsumption of life under work and consumption (Hanlon, 2016), slavery is a primary instantiation of this circumstance under the capitalist mode of production. While plantation slavery has meanwhile been (mostly) abolished, we now argue that the particular form of 'consumption of work' it was surrounded by did not cease. It continues, although in mitigated forms, in the situation of many workers, as, for example, types of 'neo-tayloristic work' or so-called 'McJobs' (Ritzer, 1996) suggest (see also Fleming and Sturdy, 2011). Indeed, the ethical-economic circumstance that instituted slavery persists for those positioned on the 'other side' of the geo-social division of labour. In 'Scattered speculations on the question of value', Gayatri Spivak (1985) describes the contemporary arrangement of capitalism as the appearance of advanced productive forces that obscure, yet at the same time are made possible by, the

appropriation and suppression of productive forces elsewhere. In other words, she highlights a distinction – by no means a clear-cut one – that may be drawn between workers who appear 'super-adequate to themselves' versus those who are 'super-adequate to labour', with differential conditions of and possibilities for work and consumption (*ibid.*).

Moreover, consumptive work is concerned with the production of subjectivities that are activated not only under the complex guise of self-expression and self-actualisation (Hoedemaekers, this issue), but also mobilised for the creation of surplus value, utilised in the name and interest of capitalist production (see also Böhm and Land, 2012). Workers who are 'super-adequate to themselves' have the 'possibility' to engage in what Spivak (1985: 80) calls 'affectively necessary labour', i.e. labour undertaken due to the affects it promises to create. Here, akin to the consumptive worker, the subject seems to (also) accumulate value for him- or herself through the consumption of own labour power (mental, physical and emotional capacities) and self. That this is made possible through the rendering of some workers as 'super-adequate to labour' – i.e. reduction to use value, and the consequent degradation and devaluation of subjectivity – illustrates once more how the subsumption of life under work is fundamental to the capitalist system.

Following Spivak (1985), it is crucial to note that, on a geopolitical landscape, the subjectivities or self-actualisation of workers 'super-adequate to themselves' are made possible and promoted through the suppression of a segment of workers 'super-adequate to labour'. As such, the materially and symbolically productive activity – i.e. that which produces economic and, supposedly, subjective value – of the consumptive worker and the working consumer is contingent upon the reproductive and life-consuming work, or more precisely, the work that uses-up life of those not or not-yet super-adequate to themselves. At the same time, even for these workers, work may be the contested site and activity for promoting desires for, and commitment to, achieving 'valuable' (consumer) subjectivity (Reddy, this issue; Merz, this issue). In sum, workers are asked to consume their work as a means to actualise themselves *as* consumer subjects which, in turn, produces the material and symbolic conditions for the proliferation of so-called super-adequate subjects.

This account of prevalent geo-social divisions of work – and slavery as its political-economic progenitor – reveals, on the one hand, a near indistinction between work and consumption, in particular from the perspective of slaves and workers closely tied to labour for which the consumption of work coincides most obviously with the consumption of self and life (see also Dale, 2012). On the other, it reveals how the forms of work undertaken by these workers are

contingent upon and inform the material and symbolic consumptive possibilities of more privileged, 'super-adequate' subjects (and masters in former times) and, therewith, what and how they can consume, as well as what and how they can be and become.

Overall, contemporary geosocial divisions of work and labour tend to be substantive, with arguably most of the world's population (primarily in the global south) not having access to consumption or work beyond necessity and having their work appropriated and consumed by others (see also Skeggs, 2011). We thus argue that these divisions deserve more attention in discourses and accounts of modern work and consumption. Despite partly acknowledging the complexities, frictions and precarities encompassing current work, consumption and living modes (e.g. Böhm and Land, 2012; Dale, 2012; Dale and Burrell, 2013; Hanlon, 2016), more often than not, these accounts remain western- and northern-centric in their focus and approach, thereby invisibilising and reproducing extant divisions and, generally, the colonising power of 'western knowledge' (Castro-Gómez, 2007).

## We are all *animal laborans*: Subsumption of life to work and consumption

Notwithstanding the geo-social divisions within our global societies, the irony is that the lives of the more privileged of us have also been subsumed to work and consumption for capitalist accumulation and reproduction (Charitsis, this issue; Hoedemaekers, this issue; Samaluk, this issue). This is the third aspect marking the entanglement of work and consumption, which we would like to further discuss by drawing in particular on the work of Hannah Arendt.

In *The human condition*, Arendt (1998/1958) critiques Marx for his failure to distinguish between labour and work. Her address is directed, in general, at the glorification of labour in modern society as the primary descriptor of one's productive activity. This elevation, in her opinion, leaves unconsidered the political implications of labour in its historicity, blurring thereby the distinction between products of labour and their relation to life- and world-making. Referring to the basis of labour in antiquity, Arendt remarks upon the condition of the subject of labour – i.e. the *animal laborans* – as one of enslavement and animality. Here, being subject to the needs of his or her body and hence attending to the commands of another, he or she was deprived from involvement in human activities. Labour, in its strict sense, produces nothing but life (Dalla Costa and James, 1972), with no end-point to the process of labouring – a repetitive and continuous cycle that ends only with the death of the labouring

organism (Arendt, 1998/1958). To be liberated from labour, however, is to have the capacity to materialise the world.

Liberation from labour enables *homo faber,* one who produces objects that 'guarantee the permanence and durability without which the world would not be possible at all' (Arendt, 1998/1958: 94). Arendt distinguishes this form of productivity from labour, designating it as work. *Homo faber* – as the one who fabricates the objects that generate an enduring world – is thus the subject of work. This is in contradistinction to the figure of the *animal laborans* who is a servant to nature and the world. Moreover, while the *animal laborans* produces objects primarily according to, and used (up) by, the exigencies of life, the products of *homo faber* are an effect of reification. To wit, the products of work emerge from an 'image or model whose shape...not only precedes it, but does not disappear with the finished product, which it survives intact, present, as it were, to lend itself to an infinite continuation of fabrication' (*ibid*.: 141). While the products of labour leave no (direct) material trace in the world, products of work materialise the world. Consequently, Arendt notes, it is not labour but work that is the true human expression.

One may think that the distinction between *animal laborans* and *homo faber* would be marked by the broad geo-social divisions that were identified in the previous section, with subjects 'super-adequate to labour' being assigned the role of the former and the subjects 'super-adequate to themselves' having the role of the latter. However, according to Arendt, contemporary societies are not divided between *animal laborans* and *homo faber,* but fully constituted by the former. This is because the elevation of labour as the ultimate expression of human activity demands of it a repetitious and eternal character. Under this condition, the products of labour must be constantly consumed and cannot bear an enduring quality:

> ...the endlessness of production can be assured only if its products lose their use character and become more and more objects of consumption... In our need for more and more rapid replacement of the worldly things around us, we can no longer afford to use them, to respect and preserve their inherent durability; we must consume, devour, as it were, our houses, and furniture and cars as though they were the 'good things' of nature which spoil uselessly if they are not drawn swiftly into never-ending cycle of man's metabolism with nature. (*ibid*.: 125-126)

Indeed, it seems that the lives of all of us, including the relations to ourselves and others, have become subsumed to the imperative of productivity and productivism, wherein work, consumption and their increased interconnectedness are mobilised for relentless capital accumulation and capitalist valorisation (Hanlon, 2016; Land and Taylor, 2010). The contemporary society of *animal laborans* does not only consist of those subject to the evident

bondage of necessity, i.e. those being 'super-adequate to labour'. It simultaneously consists of those subject to perpetual consumption and work, and especially so, to the superfluities of life. The latter seem to be able – and asked – to express their (still normalised) subjectivity, whereas the former lack the possibility of such expression and performance. What is more, the distinction between privileged, 'autonomous' and deprived, dependent subjects of work/labour and consumption is increasingly contested and dynamic (see also Jeanes et al., 2015). The refinement of labour now produces the possibility, indeed the imperative, for unfolding oneself 'in the world' – mainly through acts of productive consumption, whether within or outside of work and organisation (Dale, 2012; Korczynski, 2007). Following this line of thought, we deduce that contemporary subjectivity is (still) informed by the consumption of work, but within extant 'cultures of performativity' (Thrift, 2000) it proceeds just as much on the basis of the work of consumption. In fact, what we see is that productive and produced selves and consuming and consumed selves are increasingly intertwined and thus simultaneously constituted within the current capitalist configuration or world.

Hence rather than 'making this world', subjects appearing super-adequate to themselves are continuously reproducing and trying to fit into it, by eternally working, consuming and, generally, appropriating and capitalising on themselves, their capacities, potentials and relations (Hanlon, 2016; Samaluk, this issue). This, however, does not necessarily bring 'fulfillment', 'self-actualisation' or 'well-being', with societies consisting of many workers being characterised by anxiety, depletion and fatigue (Han, 2015; Salecl, 2004). The inability to continuously 'invest' in and develop one's 'human capital' and 'human potentials' – and hence perform the 'fast subject' (Thrift, 2002) anywhere and anytime – is concomitant with the risk to become quickly marginalised and excluded (Skeggs, 2011; Weiskopf and Munro, 2012). Those who do not or cannot participate in extant 'games' of hyper-productivity and hyper-consumption are essentially considered irrelevant, redundant and, thus, as 'waste' within the rationalities underpinning the contemporary capitalist system (Trojanow, 2015). While certain cultural, ethnic, and occupational groups are more obviously disadvantaged and marginalised than others, in current times, precarious work – and precarious lives (Butler, 2005) – are increasingly widespread, also amongst those commonly understood as 'super-adequate to themselves' (see also Bauman, 2007). The risk of not creating enough value in the entangled realms of work and consumption and hence being or becoming a 'subject of non-value' (Skeggs, 2011) (and thus redundant) is one we all tend to live with, and ever more so.

## Conclusion

A central aim of this special issue is to go beyond a technical, instrumental and apolitical portrayal of the entangled realms of work and consumption and to further discuss this complex beyond a narrow focus on the organisational realm (Gabriel et al., 2015). The contributions to the issue help us problematise the categories of consumption of work and the work of consumption by highlighting that they cannot be detached from each other – and from social and human life. Moreover, they highlight the ethico-politics of the increasing interconnectedness of the realms of work and consumption, which is more often than not mobilised for capital accumulation, thereby reproducing and justifying social divisions, as well as shaping who we are and who we should aspire to be(come).

It is this latter point that we have elaborated on in the editorial, arguing that consumption and work are not only interconnected but entangled realms, with one lacking an existence independent from the other (Barad, 2007). The contribution we thereby aimed to make is three-fold. First, we visibilised the production side, including labour/work and natural resources, that is often concealed in the act of consumption. This visibilisation highlights the fundamental entanglement of work and consumption. Second, we showed how geo-social divisions are framing and refining this entanglement, creating subjects with different conditions of work and possibilities of consumption, whereby better conditions and larger possibilities for some imply more precarious and exploitative conditions and limitations for others. Third, we suggested that despite this division and the opportunities and 'choices' that more privileged working and consuming subjects have at their disposal, we are all *animal laborans*. We also discussed some of the ethical and political implications accompanying this conjuncture.

The entanglement of work and consumption within a seemingly boundaryless market- and productivity-centric world is aimed at value creation. The value produced is, however, accelerated and uncertain, reproducing capitalism with all its divisions and crises. Whatever is considered as value and valuable hence appears to be dynamic, transient and distinctively short-term oriented (Hanlon, 2016; Thrift, 2002); what is valued today may be devalued tomorrow (Böhm and Land, 2012). This results in increasing pressures to be simultaneously and persistently productive and consumptive. Despite strong efforts to produce value, whether via engagement in work or consumption, it seems that an increasing number of people do not succeed to (continuously) produce enough of it and are hence considered to be not productive, consumptive and 'good', 'usable' and thus 'valuable enough' (Skeggs, 2011; see also Schlosser, 2002). An effect of such an arrangement is then not only the producing of (exchange) value and the

reproducing of capitalism (on the basis of work, labour and consumption activities), but also the producing of a lot of waste. This is not only waste in the ecological sense, generated from excessive consumption and production, but also 'human waste' (Trojanow, 2015), consisting of those whose lives do not matter and are used up as a resource for (re)production. It further consists of those 'bundles of (supposedly) limitless potentials' who are asked to 'enjoy' work and consumption, which is often physically and mentally challenging and draining in itself (e.g. Loacker and Śliwa, 2016).

Though oftentimes the entanglement of work and consumption – characterised by appropriation, exploitation and divisiveness – seems unalterable, there may be possibilities to organise production, work and consumption differently, whether in specific contexts or in more systemic ways (see e.g. D'Alisa et al., 2015). Following Leonard Cohen's line of a song, 'there is a crack in everything, that's how the light gets in', we suggest that possibilities for change and alternative organising are also and precisely evoked by the complexities and frictions of the current capitalist configuration, and the multiple crises that have become inherent to it (Brand and Wissen, 2012). While exploring these alternatives has not been the focus of this editorial and special issue, there is an ongoing interest in and commitment to their exploration in *ephemera*, as highlighted by already published (e.g. Swann and Stoborod, 2014; Bialski et al., 2015) as well as forthcoming issues, such as 'Organising for the post-growth economy', 'Whither emergence?' and 'What are the alternatives?'.

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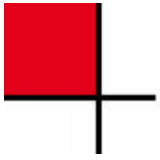
# Work without labor: Consumption and the imagination of work futures in India*

Deepa S. Reddy

**abstract**

How do consumption practices reconfigure work into an aspirational undertaking? This note considers how changing economic priorities, attitudes towards material progress, and labor relations in post-liberalization India produce a valuation of privatized, individualized forms of work imbricated with consumption, over older forms of labor. The realities of laboring and of labor relations are increasingly obscured by the recasting of work as both path to and mechanism of consumption. At the same time as consumption establishes the parameters for the imagination of the good life, it becomes the means by which to claim the value of work itself, thus nurturing what Appadurai has dubbed the 'capacity to aspire'. This note relies on the case of the Nokia manufacturing plant in the Sriperumbudur SEZ in order to study these processes. It reveals how work in the new economy invisibilizes labor realities, which are starkly and ironically revealed once again in the face of capital flight.

## Introduction

One hears a lot of exuberant talk these days about the futures of work. Offices will be scaled back, we're told, as employees work from home or the networked coffee-shop of their choice. Work will be parceled into micro-tasks that can be

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outsourced and crowdsourced, done by lots of dispersed people in lots of dispersed places. Mobility and freelancing will become the dominant metaphors of our multi-tasking flex-ruled times – a fallback for conventional job instabilities and a route to more fine-tuned control over life, leisure, and employment choices. Workforces will become '3D': 'distributed, discontinuous and decentralized' (Ullekh, 2013). Peer-to-peer networks will replace old hierarchies. We will demand of our work and our employers more than we ever did before; we'll even teach them a thing or two about what technologies make work efficient and enjoyable. In general, millennial sensibilities will rule.

Few of these forecasts are localized for India, but global enthusiasm reverberates disproportionately and faith in the capacity of technology to widen work futures is immensely strong (PWC India, 2014). Such realities make it difficult to ask, following William Gibson's celebrated observation (that 'The future is already here – it's just not evenly distributed'), what futures are already present, and what the consequences of their uneven distributions might be. While it is true that some younger office crowds in Indian metros can contemplate and even demand flex-futures shot through with millennial whimsy, bare laboring realities still exert themselves, and forcefully. The contrasts are especially hard to ignore in India: running in parallel to prized 'office work', there is casual work, self-employment (including street vending and domestic work), un- or semi-skilled labor, daily-wage labor on construction sites, seasonal agricultural labor, factory work, sometimes even specialized artisanal work that has long since been downgraded to manual labor – much of it low-wage, bereft of much possibility of reinvention.

While there is a substantial corpus of academic writing on informal labor (Breman, 1996; Hill, 2010; Joshi, 2003; Nair, 2011), there are almost no accounts of how the hopes, aspirations, and exultant neoliberal forecasts given to some types of work percolate into others, setting the parameters within which workers then constitute themselves (Agarwala, 2013 is an exception). The question of how to reconcile contrasting but overlapping narratives of work, some with anticipated, emancipatory futures and others without any apparent future but their own stubbornly menial presents – or, of how to understand 'work' as produced in the ebbing and flowing interactions of neoliberal capital on the one hand and the patronage and protectionism of old Indian welfare models on the other, remains an open one.

This note explores this theme by looking first to Arendt's distinctions between work and labor for an analytical framework. The next section briefly reviews how labor practices central to governance in the decades after India's independence were supplanted by future imaginings built around consumption. The third

examines the emergence of a new class of Indian workers alongside the much-vaunted, globally-coveted new Indian consumer, whose labor had perforce to be masked in order for the promises of 'work' in the new economy to become realizable. The final two sections use the case of the 2014 Nokia manufacturing factory closure near Chennai to examine how the mythologies of consumption conceal labor-in-work – and then how labor re-emerges as a set of relationships in the face of capital flight.

## Arendt and the labor of work

At least in conventional narratives of upward mobility, the operative distinction is between 'work' and 'labor', where labor is – verily as Arendt has described – that relentlessly repetitive 'activity which corresponds to the biological processes and necessities of human existence' (1958: 7). Life depends on labor in Arendt's account – but because we labor to survive biologically, laboring means being 'enslaved by necessity' (*ibid*.: S3). Labor is thus is by definition a less human and more animal activity: those who labor are *animal laborans*. What it produces 'is almost as quickly consumed as the effort is spent' (*ibid*.: 87), whereas work involves the use of tools to command natural forces and create durable objects of transcendent value. Work is 'the fabrication experience' which transforms *animal laborans* into *homo faber* or working man, thereby establishing usefulness and utility 'as the ultimate standards for life and the world of men' (*ibid*.: 157). In this formulation, laboring is private, hidden, and unrecompensed, whereas work produces worldly artifacts that pay, show, and endure.

And yet, Arendt characterizes ours a 'society of laborers', for the common understanding of work as the prerogative to 'make a living', or fulfill the basic need to subsist. Whereas Marx was concerned with elevating labor to the status of work, Arendt is intent on reminding us of the inherent laboring character of work itself. As work becomes automated, mechanized, and numbingly repetitive, it bears ever more the 'unmistakable mark of laboring' (*ibid*.: 125). What it produces, however, is not use-objects, but an abundance of consumer goods for use. Labor-in-work now feeds the 'ever-recurrent needs of consumption', and consumption becomes the desired outcome of work itself. For it is in the world of durable objects, Arendt writes, 'we find the consumer goods through which life assures the means of its own survival' (*ibid*.: 94) – consumption becomes the overriding means of subsistence. Work not only bears us from a life bound by necessity into a world of durable objects, but ironically it facilitates, far more than just laboring, a transcendent and sustaining consumption.

Consumption, however, is a forgetful activity. Marx's brief comments on fetishism remind us of the daily, customary exchanges by which we equate, compare, and evaluate products in relation to other products, incognizant of the social realities of labor that produced these (1915). Others note that the pleasures of consumption can materialize only by excising labor relations from our conceptions of production (Billig, 1999; Bradshaw et al., 2013). Such forgetfulness, I argue however, is itself productive: through its very excisions, consumption establishes a framework by which to hope, dream, and imagine the good life. In other words, consumption sets the parameters for the formation of work itself. The allure of work, or the 'good job' with the 'big company', is not just that it delivers us from labor into a transcendent life of consumptive possibility, but that it nurtures, however unevenly or symbolically, what Appadurai has called the 'capacity to aspire' (2004). The remainder of this note examines the unstable place of labor in developing such aspirational capacities in post-liberalization India.

## The valuation of material progress

The valuation of material progress in India has a history which helps explain why a deliverance from labor at all becomes possible, or necessary. Principally, there has been a deliberate turn away from the Gandhian commitment of earlier decades to 'simple living-high thinking' and toward neoliberal consumerist sensibilities. Writing of the developmentalist state in the decades just after Indian independence, Rajagopal notes that citizenship and national belonging were at the time understood as economically necessary for the collective project of national development (2011: 1005). The key arena for organizing, the expression of collective dissent, and for seeking improvement (other than electoral process) was industrial labor conflict, monitored and regulated by the state itself. The work of governance was organizing labor: marshalling development, mediating conflict between labor and management, even running unions as extensions of political party work.

Several key developments radically shifted this older emphasis from labor as a basic public good, necessary for national prosperity, to work as the only reliable means to private advancement. The economic stagnation that set in in the 1960s caused the ranks of 'educated unemployed' to swell dramatically, leading to a wave of professional emigration that would become India's 'brain drain' (Khadria, 2007). The state's constitutional commitments to social uplift allowed subordinate social groups to lay increasingly assertive claim to state-managed resources, fostering widespread middle-class discontent. Culture, community, and religion, gained profound electoral salience from the late 1970s onwards,

owing largely to the Congress Party's strategic nurturance of identitarian politics. Rajagopal (2011) notes that the decline in trade union conflicts in this period was accompanied by a concomitant rise of religious conflict: political and cultural battlegrounds were shifting from developmentalist spaces regulated by the state into the unregulated spaces of identity. Not only was political society (Chatterjee, 2004) asserting itself thus, relationships between labor and business were changing, too, with workers' rights and political power being passed over in favor of monetary compensation and cash benefits (*ibid.*: 1041). Underpinning each of these shifts was the despairing conviction that the Indian state was both unequal and unwilling to attend to the needs of its populace, functioning much like a private party in what was clearly devolving into a patronage democracy.

The liberalization of the Indian economy in the early 1990s only consolidated these emergent values and discontents. Relaxed import restrictions in the decade prior held out the 'promise of membership for Indians in a global 'ecumene' of world-class consumption' (Mazzarella, 2003: 33); advertising and media then further established 'consumer-led liberalization' as a tremendously attractive 'alternative social ontology to centralized state planning' (Mazzarella, 2002: 12). The middle class' erstwhile faith in the security of public sector 'government jobs' gave way readily to an aspiration for private sector employment, which paid better, offered more perks and more possibilities of advancement, and thus carried far greater promise of affluence. The result was the production of a 'normative civic culture' based on the rights of consumer citizens rather than workers (Fernandes, 2006: 189). 'Indian consumers' were not just being produced, but were suddenly globally accessible and sought-after; private consumption displaced public production as the 'principal labor' of late capitalism (Appadurai, 1996: 66-85).

## Visibilizing consumption, invisibilizing labor

Far less glamorous and visible than the production of Indian consumers, however, was the concomitant production of a new Indian labor force. The vast expansion of the consumer economy created equally vast numbers of service-sector jobs in industries from sales and marketing to banking, hospitality, event planning, and organized retail. The IT (Information Technology), ITes (IT Enabled Services), and Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) boom of the late 1990s and 2000s was only the most celebrated aspect of these wider transformations of Indian economic landscapes for its establishment of India as a global back-office processes service provider.

There is much more to be said about the ITes and BPO industries' growth and impact on Indian physical, cultural, and work landscapes, than I can cover in this note (see Upadhya and Vasavi, 2007). Briefly, these were industries that developed in the wake of the unprecedented success of the offshoring of software development services (commonly grouped as 'IT'), capitalizing on lower costs and India's large, English-speaking, educated youth demographic. The emergent 'knowledge industry' had a two-tiered hierarchy: highly prized, globally mobile, white collar software engineering and other technically skilled jobs in IT on the one hand, and less esteemed, less mobile positions in data entry, telemarketing, technical support, medical transcription, and other back-office work in the BPO and ITes sectors, on the other (Patel, 2010; Radhakrishnan, 2011). The 'call center' became an iconic representative of the industry – as did 'phone clone' and 'dead ringer' workers trained to speak and interact as Americans, functioning in one mindspace while existing in another as 'virtual migrants' (Aneesh, 2006; Mirchandani, 2012; Nadeem, 2011; Poster, 2007).

The impact of the BPO boom really cannot be understated. Critics highlight the complications of working 24-hour cycles to keep with global time-clocks, risks for young women workers, internal harassment, and low job security among other causes of high worker attrition. These, however, were set against the industry's celebrated potential to '"leapfrog" India into a post-industrial service economy and resolve the problem of widespread unemployment, especially of the educated youth' (Vasavi, 2007: 215). What the BPO phase of India's economic history did was to open out routes to an imaginable and highly desirable future: professionalized, financially comfortable and globally positioned in a way that really only private companies would be. Large private companies established the standard for lucrative employment, taking over where the public sector had stagnated. IT and other multi-national groups (MNCs) became 'good companies' who set standards for what India could achieve, given the right impetus. Desperate for a steady stream of workers, companies actively engaged in selling jobs to applicants via campus recruitments, luring them with images of plush workplaces, career prospects, and invitations to 'reach out to the world' (*ibid.*: 217). Finding a job was already becoming an act of consumption.

Behind the euphoria of the 'Incredible India' and 'India shining' slogans (of India's tourist marketing and the Bharatiya Janata Party or BJP's 2004 political campaign respectively) and the elevation of country into a corporate 'motherbrand' (Mazzarella, 2003: 39), however, was a fundamentally altered relationship to work. Workers no longer existed as collectives (the BPO industry is famously not unionized) but as 'neoliberal subject[s] – individualised and responsible for his/her own self-presentation, self-government, self-management and self-advancement' (Gooptu, 2009: 46). Further, work produced pay – more

pay than ever before – so much so that 'disposable income' and 'purchasing power' counted among the more empowering phrases of these decades. Attractive salaries made individual consumption possible as never before, and vastly enabled service sector expansion.

With such focus on individual agency and consumption as the new tools of self-making came the invisibilization of labor. The roles of worker and consumer were largely collapsed, the latter taking precedence as the object of desire and measure of progress; the service sector worker was also consumer of other services, as never before. Labor activists are quick to point out that the status of 'worker' is effaced at many levels, most especially for workers themselves, by industry euphoria and the very international configuration of the hidden, outsourced 'back-end'. The promise of 'heavenly' working conditions in air-conditioned offices and modern glass-and-steel buildings, with rows upon rows of computers – those technological symbols of progress, affluence, and deliverance from physical hardships – only adds to the effacement. Workplaces are presented as 'fun' college-like 'campuses', and, at a titular level, everyone is an 'executive' or a 'team lead', symbolically an extension of management, no matter how menial their actual work (Dey, 2012; Ramesh, 2004; Vasavi, 2007).

Ramesh notes that several of these strategies emerge from new paradigms of Human Resource management, which replace the older 'personnel management' of conventional manufacturing and service sectors (2004: 494-496). Tasked with 'detach[ing] the workplace feeling from the workers' (*ibid.*: 495), HR departments provide training, organize team social events, invoke trendy youth cultures in posters and 'fast food' meals, and generally try to strike an optimal work-fun balance. Their purpose is ostensibly to build loyalty and maximize productivity by bolstering the social importance and prestige of work. And yet, these very strategies also aim to minimize the routine, repetitive and laborious character of work, deflect attention from sources of frustration, and mask endemic issues:

> lower security of employment, adverse impacts of flexible employment practices, inappropriate social security measures, rigid work organisation with stringent control mechanisms, dismal scope for career/skill improvement, near absence of worker collectivity, weaker social dialogue mechanisms and so on. (Remesh, 2014: 42)

What gets projected instead is an impressive façade built of enviable incomes, westernized work environments, peppy youth culture, higher-than-normal labor standards, and the impression of work as a lifestyle (Vasavi, 2007).

Here, indeed, is work without labor – work stripped of its laboring character and detached from relationships of control and domination, mystified, fetishized, and presented as one among a suite of commodities to which the upwardly mobile worker-consumer now had free, easy access. Indeed, the only people talking consistently about collective experience or labor were those attempting to organize workers, and in that climate, union leaders were increasingly regarded as old-world troublemakers blocking the future forward advances of private development.

## Consuming Nokia

Consumption, however, is a fragile mythology sustained by the capriciousness of capital and undergirded by unstable political arrangements. The case of the Nokia phone manufacturing plant based in the Sriperumbudur SEZ (Special Economic Zone) and 'hi-tec' hub near Chennai reveals the practices that shroud labor relations in the allure of consumption when capital is assured, only to reassert its existence in the face of instability and uncertainty.

Nokia's presence in the Sriperumbudur SEZ from 2005 onward owed to the then ruling DMK's (Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam) courtship of the Finnish phone giant, and its success in outbidding other Indian states vying for Nokia business with unparalleled monetary and infrastructural incentives (Dutta, 2009). Adding to that heady victory, Nokia's component manufacturers soon joined the SEZ. As a result, Nokia was held up as the embodiment of industrialization in Tamil Nadu, along with Hyundai and Saint-Gobain Glass, one of 'the three pillars of Sriperumbudur' (Mishra and Leena, 2014). The DMK's own Vallthu *kattuvom thittam* or the 'We live' recruitment scheme then aided Nokia's own initiatives to identify new employees (Finnwatch et al., 2011). Soon after beginning operations in 2005, Nokia employed 8,000 and supported an additional 20,000 in component manufacturing. Many of its employees were first generation industrial workers from agricultural backgrounds, just out of school or having quit their educations to jump on the Nokia bandwagon, enthusiastic about the reputations of foreign companies as 'good employers' who would pay high salaries with solid benefits (*ibid.*).

Changing consumer tastes for everything from electronics to fruits (more expensive than vegetables; heralding dietary changes and spending habits) and 'pencil pants' (George, 2009) would soon reveal that Nokia represented, far more than simply lucrative employment, an aspirational framework. Employees noted their ability to purchase services like healthcare, defray their marriage costs, and saw their jobs as a path to the lesser hardships of a middle-class life (NITS,

2014). Indeed, these were the very signs of India's promised prosperous future, now finally filtering down to lower castes and lower-income communities, just like they had for others with the IT/ITes/BPO boom. Consumption was not an activity just enabled by work, but '[d]eeply place-, position- and history-rooted', the means 'for people to claim the value of their work' (Marques, 2010: 544).

What Indian workers consumed though, as we saw even in the BPO industry, was not merely products which money could now buy, but the idea of work-without-labor – supported by company practices and simply by the Nokia brand. Finally, for young men and women less educated than those absorbed by the BPO industry but no less entitled to the same futures, here was a brand with the right disposition: Nokia was after all the name that dominated the mobile market until even the late 2000s, releasing a series of low-cost dual-SIM phones for the India/Asia market starting in 2011 – named 'Asha', Sanskrit for hope. The company's culture was 'open, transparent, performance- and development-focused' – one official cited traits that are not easily found in other manufacturing companies (in Mishra and Leena, 2014). It conducted large recruitment drives in neighboring villages, actively promoting the Nokia brand, pushing prospective employees to understand quality in terms of brand recognition and trust. The company hired women and trained operators to work assembly lines; it bussed its employees from nearby villages to production facilities, distributed glass engraved awards to high-performers, provided lunches and free camera phones, celebrated 'Tejas day' to mark the company's founding anniversary in a huge celebration each year, and conferred the pride of high volume production to its growing workforce in purple embossed handsets with the words '500 million [handsets manufactured], 5 years' (Matthews, 2012: 12).

All told, the company provided services as families couldn't and government wouldn't. Indeed, companies in the SEZ had been improbably classified as 'public utilities', ostensibly in order to ensure promised infrastructural incentives like water and continuous electricity supply – services glaringly unavailable and not-promised to local communities, but also specifically to 'curb labor indiscipline' (Dutta, 2009: 24). And yet, these were the wider trade-offs to be made for good work: 'I think it balances out because we get employment opportunities', one Foxconn employee remarked plainly (in Matthews, 2012: 14). Nokia, along with the other component manufacturing companies clustered in the SEZ, represented a work-around, if not to civic rights, then at least to the products and services that a salary could buy, and the prestige of working for a recognized global brand. It was thus not long before Nokia employment became a status symbol with intimately local significance, enough to distinguish families from each-other based on who had a Nokia employee, and who didn't (Mishra and Leena, 2014).

In all these quotidian ways, Nokia lived up to worker expectations of how a foreign MNC like Nokia, would operate in liberalized India, and actively nurtured employee identification as simultaneously producers and consumers of its product. In so doing, it refigured what workers were able to consume: that is, not just what their wages enabled, but the idea of the 'good brand' that Nokia represented, in whose image workers constituted themselves, by which they marked their own material progress, claimed the value of their work, and charted their futures.

## Visibilizing labor relationships

But the romance would only last so long. The SEZ's protection from 'labor indiscipline' began giving way in 2009, to emerging details of Nokia's heavy reliance on contract labor in all possible non-manufacturing jobs (contract labor is banned in the manufacturing sector), the resulting job insecurity, and several issues over low wages. Tensions between management and labor resulted in a massive strike that year – a first within a SEZ – leading to the unionization of Nokia's workforce in South Asia. Two more strikes followed in 2010, also over wages and the suspension of 63 workers for 'indiscipline' (Cividep, 2010). An extended battle with the Indian and Tamil Nadu governments over taxation revenues then precipitated a finishing withdrawal. In April 2014, an acquisition by Microsoft reduced the Sriperumbudur plant to contract-status. Ironically, just before May Day, 6,000 employees were offered a voluntary retirement scheme and all others a mandatory retirement option.

Such ruptures point obviously to the volatility of industrial relations in the Sriperumbudur SEZ, and to the facts of labor and shifting political arrangements with the state that were otherwise glossed in stories of Nokia's roaring successes. Union organizers of course drew attention to labor relations by citing legalities and worker rights, but workers themselves evoked social relationships in far more personal ways. When the factory closed, many had found themselves with no employment future to speak of, having dedicated themselves to the one company and one skill set for years in an environment which privileges 'freshers' (Radio Potti, 2014[1]) – and they were quick to note that it was their very loyalty that was now leaving them stranded.

In exchange for new-world visions of affluence, Nokia had bought over the old-world loyalties of its employees who then counted themselves in so many kin-

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[1]    Radio Potti is a small collective gathered to broadcast content about local issues every weekend, and had several episodes addressing the Nokia factory case.

metaphors as members of the extended 'Nokia family' – for whom they sacrificed to the point of trading in their employment futures, and who in turn supported their very real extended families. Desperately seeking job security and assurance in the wake of the Microsoft merger and the uncertain future of the plant, these workers invoke relationships of moral obligation, responsibility, and patronage that a patriarch in traditional Indian society or the welfare state could be held to provide. Except that there is no patriarch or (functioning) welfare state here. There is just the good brand: Nokia one day, and Microsoft the next.

The tragedy of the Nokia factory case is that it is not just labor that was made invisible to the precariat of India's new economy, but also capital. While union organizers seek protections against the vagaries of global capital, it is clear that workers neither really understand nor really care about tax imbroglios or the impetus driving global acquisitions and mergers or capital fluidity. One worker, Ramya, insists that Nokia should settle its tax issues, but 'in a just and correct manner, without affecting the workers, assuring us job security', appearing entirely unaware of how linked the two issues are (Radio Potti, 2014). 'Whether they're paying tax or not, is their own personal problem; they should speak it out', continues another, Sarala. 'Now because of these two [referring to the Tamil Nadu government and Nokia], we are ones getting affected' (*ibid.*). These comments and others call to mind conflict as it might occur between family-members or groups in a face-to-face community. What is at stake is simply moral obligation: the responsibility of Nokia as a partner with the government to pay its taxes so that it can stay true to its fundamental mission to provide local employment. What capital might mean beyond these commitments is unclear.

## A forgone consumption

For the nine years of its operation, Nokia employment provided the means of navigating towards a tremendously attractive 'horizon of hope' (Appadurai, 2013: 295) by fusing work with consumption. The young men and women who everyday donned white anti-electrostatic aprons and shoe covers at the Nokia factory came from impoverished and rural socio-economic backgrounds with only uneven access to state resources and benefits, and work futures framed only by the possibilities of development. For them, work at the Nokia plant was a brokered arrangement which made way for the MNC to deliver the material and symbolic things the developmentalist state had failed to provide: prestige, recognition, consumer goods, better medical care, better capacities to help family, even water and food. The state represented a failed aspirational framework, as much as it made the political arrangements for the promissory futures of consumption. When those failed in the end, the open link between

what futures could be imagined and what presents could be materially procured was broken, too. Labor was visible once more, but this time as a sort of denied livelihood, a return to the prior state of *animal laborans*, and a forgone consumption.

Aspirations, Appadurai tells us, are never simply individual 'as the language of wants and choices inclines us to think', but are 'formed in interaction and in the thick of social life' (2004: 67). My argument in this note has been that consumption represents one critical site of this interaction which frames the imagination of the good life, and constitutes work. It is not by any means the only aspirational framework in Indian society, maybe not even the most creative or ethical one, but certainly a dominant space of desire that cuts across social differences in a way that development has not, and politics does not. Work as consumption, or the work of consumption delivers us into this admittedly fragile, imaginative, aspirational space, away from hardships and material deprivations, 'map[ping] the journey from here to there and from now to then, as a part of the ethics of everyday life' (Appadurai, 2013: 292).

Until the point of collapse, that is, which reveals once more all that consumption conceals. A union-backed film (NITS, 2014), hunger strikes, and despairing worker narratives crawling the web never allowed us to forget the stark realities of losing work, or being stripped of the frameworks that allowed labor to acquire, express, and perform its value. Workers marked the stages as they fearfully noted precipitous drops in production, no more high-end phones, machines moved to Hanoi, shifts being restructured for fewer workers, and other details that give form to the sheer speed of capital flight.

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Email: reddy@uhcl.edu
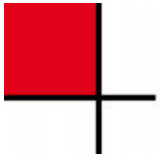
# Prosuming (the) self

Vassilis Charitsis

## abstract

Web 2.0 has placed prosumption at the very centre of economic value creation. Digital prosumption has been usually associated with user-generated content. However, recent studies argue for a need to also treat user generated data as a form of prosumption labour, as it is the appropriation and exploitation of these data that fuels digital capitalism. In this paper I analyze self-tracking as a form of digital prosumption. When people use the increasingly popular self-tracking devices, they produce huge amounts of data about themselves, referred to as self-quantification, which firms draw on to create value. The paper aims to expand on the notion of data production as prosumption labour by focusing on self-quantification. I draw on Dallas Smythe's concept of the 'audience commodity' to analyze the commodification and valorization of life through self-quantification practices. I argue that through the generation of data the quantified-self becomes the 'prosuming self' that generates value through her own tracked life, but also the 'prosumed self', an active and entrepreneurial subject that is governed to produce the kinds of data that can create value for firms.

## Introduction

Throughout the years the focus of marketing thinking and practice has shifted from distributing products to the market to marketing products to the consumers and, increasingly in our days, to engaging consumers in the marketing process (Lusch, 2007). In fact, it has been acknowledged that marketers can no longer build and manage successful brands alone, but they need consumers' help and dynamic cooperation (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2006; Brown et al., 2003; Cova et al., 2007). Thus, the separation between consumption and production becomes blurred as the consumer is involved in production processes and thus evolves into a 'prosumer'. As Cova and Cova (2012) underline, the emergence of the

empowered prosumer has been hailed not only by co-creation discourse (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004; Vargo and Lusch, 2004) but also by postmodernist researchers (Firat et al., 1995; Firat and Dholakia, 2006) and consumer culture theorists (Arnould and Thompson, 2005).

The social features of Web 2.0 have played a major role in this shift from the passive consumer to the active prosumer, as the Internet has been the main ground where these co-creation activities take place (Bonsu and Darmody, 2008; Cova and Dalli, 2009). It has been argued that Web 2.0 platforms have not only enabled marketers to engage in constructive dialogues with consumers, but also empowered the latter, allowing them to take an active role in decision-making and production processes (Füller et al., 2010).

However, previous studies have also provided a critical gaze on prosumption, focusing on control and exploitation of prosumers for commercial purposes, through this very freedom that was supposed to empower them (e.g. Arvidsson, 2006; Fyrberg-Yngfalk et al., 2013; Zwick et al., 2008). Digital prosumption has been usually associated with the content that users generate on Web 2.0 platforms. User generated data are also crucial for the creation of economic value (van Dijck, 2009), and for that reason consumers' generation of data has been conceptualized as a form of digital prosumption (Fuchs, 2013). In this article, I argue that more recent technological advancements allow for new modes of prosumption to emerge as 'smart' tracking technologies are increasingly becoming part of our everyday lives and offer numerous possibilities to users to track and quantify their activities and develop what has been termed as the 'quantified self'[1].

Self-tracking (or self-quantification) is becoming an increasingly popular phenomenon that aims to promote 'self-knowledge through numbers' (see http://quantifiedself.com), or in other words data. Numerous tools and devices are introduced every day in the market that allow users to track and quantify every aspect of their lives and by doing so, generate huge amounts of data. Examples include traditional pulse measurement devices, smartphone applications that measure sleep quality and health monitoring wristbands that not only measure the activity level of individuals, but also guide them towards an 'optimal' activity level during the day. The companies that sell these products get the data which can then be used to develop new products and services, inform

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1    The term 'quantified self' was coined by Gary Wolf and Kevin Kelly, editors of Wired magazine, in 2007. They later founded the Quantified Self Labs company and launched the quantifiedself.com platform with the intention of bringing together users and makers of self-tracking tools and providing support to the growing Quantified Self community worldwide.

the marketing of their existing products or further enhance their brand value by connecting consumers to one another through competitions on different kinds of brand community platforms and social media.

This paper aims to expand on the notion of data production as prosumption by looking beyond Web 2.0 platforms and focusing on self-tracking and self-quantification practices. Drawing on Dallas Smythe's notion of the 'audience commodity', I explore the commodification of life through self-quantification. I argue that the quantified self becomes the 'prosuming self' through the generation of data, but also the 'prosumed self', an active entrepreneurial subject that produces the 'right' kinds of data which satisfy market expectations and requirements. In other words, the consumption/use of self-tracking technologies engenders two distinct but interrelated forms of prosumption: one that relates to the production of data (the 'prosuming self'), and the other that concerns the production of the self-quantified subject herself (the 'prosumed self'). I further argue that these forms of prosumption generate value, as they constitute labour time that is necessary for the production of a specific commodity: life itself.

The paper is organized as follows: first, the notion of prosumption in relation to co-creation discourse is discussed, followed by an overview of the phenomenon of self-quantification and a brief review of relevant recent studies. The concept of the 'audience commodity' is then presented and its relevance to self-quantification is discussed. Following this analysis the notions of the 'prosuming self' and the 'prosumed self' are introduced and explicated. In the conclusion the main points of the paper are summarized and its contribution is highlighted. This paper aims to provide a critical theoretical analysis of the emerging popular phenomenon of self-quantification. While this is a conceptual paper, illustrative examples are provided throughout the text to support, explain and clarify the points and arguments made by the author.

## Prosumption

First coined by Alvin Toffler, in 1980, the term 'prosumption' aimed at breaking up the consumer-producer divide. In fact, according to Toffler, prosumption was prevalent in pre-industrial societies as there was no distinction between producers and consumers, but that changed with the industrial revolution that separated the producer from the consumer. Ritzer (2010), however, takes a different stance, arguing that the distinction between consumers and producers is inaccurate as consumers are – and have always been – involved in production processes in the same way that producers engage in consumption practices. In this, he follows Marx, who in the Grundrisse (1973: 90) contested the division

between consumption and production, arguing that the 'act of production is therefore in all its moments also an act of consumption' while at the same time 'consumption is also immediately production'. Postmodernists also dismiss this binary division between production and consumption as they view it as inherently superficial (Baudrillard, 1981; Firat and Venkatesh, 1993). What is less disputed though is the fact that the proliferation of social and digital technologies has placed prosumption at the very centre of today's economic value creation (Cova et al., 2011; Ritzer, 2010; Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010), fulfilling Toffler's (1980: 27) prophecy for the 'prosumer economics of tomorrow'.

While prosumption evidently did not emerge with the advent of Web 2.0, it is the social nature of Web 2.0 and its universal acceptance and popularity that contributed to the steep rise in prosumption activities in recent years (Fuchs, 2013; Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010). Due to recent advances in information technology consumers now have the opportunity to engage with organizational processes which would not have been possible just a few years ago. Via various online platforms, consumers nowadays engage in research and development activities, generate product ideas and even become involved in decision-making processes (Humphreys and Grayson, 2008). They may also act as word-of-mouth marketers, enhance a brand's identity and meaning, and even stage experiences for other customers (Cova et al., 2015). Prosumption therefore encompasses a whole range of activities that may not lead directly to the production of goods or services, as in the traditional Tofflerian conceptualization of the notion of prosumer, but can provide significant benefits for companies. In fact, it is argued that the proliferation of smart technologies diminishes consumers' agentic role in prosuming practices, as prosumption becomes increasingly automated (Ritzer, 2014). Therefore, prosumption can also include processes that take place during consumption without consumers' direct knowledge, intention or even involvement.

## Prosumption: Co-creation vs. exploitation

This section will present and analyse prosumption from two different and opposing angles. First, a positive approach that celebrates consumers' empowerment and active involvement in all aspects of business processes as co-creators of value will be presented. Then, a contrasting view that focuses on the exploitation of consumers' unpaid labor will be developed and discussed in more depth, as it informs the theoretical approach of the present paper.

*Co-creation*

Digital prosumption is the main manifestation of the popular concept of value co-creation in consumer markets, which has been hailed as the future of marketing theory and practice (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004; Vargo and Lusch, 2004). In fact, it has been argued that co-creation's transformative role extends far beyond a firm's marketing department as it spreads throughout the organizational structure, bringing into being the co-creative organization (Ramaswamy, 2009). Proponents of co-creation have envisioned a new direction for marketing practice where the consumer is an equal partner, a constant co-producer of meanings, messages, products and services.

Co-creation has been broadly defined as 'the participation of consumers along with producers in the creation of value in the marketplace' (Zwass, 2010: 13). The tenet of co-creation is that 'the consumer is always involved in the production of value' (Vargo and Lusch, 2004: 11), as co-creation develops from a fundamental understanding that modern day consumers have evolved from oblivious to informed, from isolated to connected, from passive to active (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004). The crux of co-creation is that it does not distinguish production and consumption as two separate practices, on the contrary co-creation discourse adopts a continuous-process perspective as the separation between production and consumption becomes blurred (Vargo and Lusch, 2004). In this perspective, consumers are actively involved in production processes and ultimately in the creation of value. In co-creation discourse, even products, tangible goods, are viewed not as the final product offering to the end user as their production is not completed in the manufacturing process, but rather production is seen just as an intermediate phase and the product itself as just an opportunity to provide services for and in conjunction with the consumer (*ibid.*).

Therefore, the marketing landscape has changed as companies have realized that they can no longer design products, develop production processes, create marketing messages and control sales channels on their own, but they need the active involvement of consumers in order for all these processes to be successful (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004). And, according to co-creation theorists, consumers are more than eager to become involved in these processes as they wish to interact with firms and 'exercise their influence in every part of the business system' (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004: 6). Motivated by individual (autonomy, competence, enjoyment and relaxation, self-identity, coping) or social (community, relatedness, public sense of accomplishment) needs and interests (Chandler and Chen, 2015) consumers, thus, evolve and transform into prosumers.

*Exploitation*

Firms have realized that they have substantial benefits to gain from the prosumption economy and have been actively trying to engage with consumers and involve them in value creating processes. However, while co-creation has been hailed as a democratizing process that bestows power to consumers, it should not be overlooked that it is a calculated effort to attract and appropriate unpaid labor (Bonsu and Darmody, 2008). Not only prosumers augment the value of products and services they use, but – what is more important – they also create value that would not be available otherwise (Bonsu and Darmody, 2008). Following this logic, Zwick et al. (2008: 166) assert that 'co-creation economy is about experimenting with new possibilities for value creation that are based on the expropriation of free cultural, technological, social and affective labour of the consumer masses'.

As value is created and organizations benefit from uncompensated work that consumers carry out, it is argued that exploitation takes place. In Marxist terms, exploitation of labour is the process that allows capitalists to appropriate the financial gains of selling products that have been created by workers and only return a fraction of the value of said products to waged labourers (Rey, 2012). To highlight the exploitative nature of prosumption, Cova and Dalli (2009: 333) introduce the concept of working consumers 'who, by the means of immaterial labour, add cultural and affective elements to market offerings'. They emphasize that there is a great asymmetry in the distribution of profits as the common practice is not to compensate working consumers for the value that they create, and even if they do, organizations only return a tiny fraction of it (Cova and Dalli, 2009). Therefore, it is suggested that prosumption is just an entrapment and working consumers end up being subjected to continuous exploitation (Comor, 2011).

This phenomenon is nowhere more evident than on the Internet where the success of a website is guaranteed when users become producers of content as well, and not on an ad hoc way, but through continuous and active involvement with the website (Bonsu and Darmody, 2008; Terranova, 2000). In fact, like the capitalist factory, web platforms are created in such a way that allow the owners to appropriate value created by others, in this case the web users (Rey, 2012). Dean (2010) also draws comparisons between industrial capitalism that was based on the exploitation of labour, and what she calls 'communicative capitalism' that relies on the exploitation of communication. According to Dean, communicative capitalism 'is that economic-ideological form wherein reflexivity captures creativity and resistance so as to enrich the few as it placates and diverts the many' (*ibid*.:4). In other words, Web 2.0 (and communicative capitalism in

general) relies on the appropriation and exploitation of the active participation of users who create content, interact with each other, develop and cultivate relationships, provide suggestions and solutions and even express their dissatisfaction or anger towards the nature of the medium. In online platforms, while users expect no financial compensation for the content that they produce, it is this very content that creates value for the owners of the platforms (Rey, 2012).

Van Dijck (2009) places more importance on the data that are generated on web platforms, as she asserts that the role of users as data providers is even more important for value creation purposes than their role as content providers. It can be argued that prosumption embodies the ultimate form of exploitation because while a regular worker usually produces some amount of surplus value, the – unpaid – working consumer creates nothing but surplus value (Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010). Therefore it is important to understand that consumers, usually without realizing it, do work and create or add value to products and services they use (Cova and Dalli, 2009). The fact that they may not know, or even care, that they produce value for companies makes exploitation easier and effectively poses greater danger as along with exploitation comes social inequality (Rey, 2012). Looking even beyond the appropriation of unpaid labour, it has been argued that working consumers are double exploited.

The notion of 'double exploitation' has been strongly associated with feminist studies and analyses that underline the exploitation of women's labour both in the workplace and at home (Hartmann, 1976; Dunaway, 2001). Going further back, Jones (1949) highlighted the triple exploitation (and oppression) of black women workers on the basis of their class, gender and race. More recent critical approaches to consumer studies have emphasized the double exploitation of working consumers in co-creation processes, who are expected to pay – sometimes even premium prices – for products and services that they have helped to develop (Cova and Dalli, 2009; Zwick et al., 2008). Gauntlett (2011) informs us that similar critical studies on the exploitative nature of Web 2.0 draw attention to the double exploitation of users, who on the one hand provide the content that attracts visitors and revenue; while on the other hand through their online activities they generate data that are again used and exploited by the owners of Web 2.0 platforms. Day (2015) explores precisely the links between women's unpaid housework labour and digital prosumers' free labour. As Dean contends, networked media practices 'emerge and persist as components of a vast commercial entertainment culture that has found a way to get the users to make the products they enjoy and even pay to do it' (2010: 37). Therefore, in prosumer economy the main role of marketers is not to promote products and services, but to cultivate the enthusiasm and the active participation of prosumers in order to sell (to) them more effectively (Bird, 2011). In fact, the

active entrepreneurial consumer is an integral element of prosumption as co-creation constitutes a form of neoliberal governmentality that aims to 'bring about particular forms of life in which consumers voluntarily provide unwaged and exploited, yet enjoyed labor' (Zwick et al., 2008: 176). Marketing's shift towards collaborative, relational and co-creative practices signifies precisely a strategic turn for capitalist accumulation and consumer control (*ibid.*), with the ultimate aim of appropriating prosumers' 'free labour' (Terranova, 2000).

However, the application of the Marxian notion of exploitation in online environments and its relevance to prosumers' 'free labour' is not universally accepted even among critical researchers. Hesmondhalgh (2010) argues that the notion of exploitation is a specific historical, explanatory and ethical concept that has been loosely and unconvincingly used in relation to the term 'free labour'. Arvidsson (2011: 266), on the other hand, while acknowledging that 'uneven forms of value exchange' definitely exist in digital environments, dismisses the Marxist analysis of exploitation. He maintains that the very essence of 'free labour' is that it bears no value and therefore cannot be seen as a source of surplus value. Arvidsson and Colleoni (2012) further argue that the labour theory of value is incorrectly linked to online prosumer activities for two reasons. First, because creation in online environments is poorly linked to time, and second, because value is accumulated not in direct commodity exchange but in financial markets. Thus, they suggest an alternative view of value creation that postulates that value is primarily linked to an 'affective law of value',

> ...where the values of companies and their intangible assets are set not in relation to an objective measurement, like labor time, but in relation to their ability to attract and aggregate various kinds of affective investments, like intersubjective judgments of their overall value or utility in terms of mediated forms of reputation. (ibid.: 142)

While users' affective investments in online environments should not be underestimated, an analysis that focuses solely on users' affective labour is problematic as it dismisses other elements that play an even more important role in value creation processes. As both Fuchs (2012a) and Andrejevic (2015) stress, (labour) time is still inextricably connected to value creation and rejecting its role in value creation processes is inaccurate. In fact, as Andrejevic (2015) shows, more time spent on a website translates into more content viewed and produced, greater exposure to ads and more data generated and aggregated about user behaviour. It is precisely these generated data that are commodified and sold to advertisers (Fuchs, 2013). Facebook, as well as most online platforms, base their entire business model on capturing information, in the form of data, provided by users (Andrejevic, 2015). While it may be a pleasurable activity, it is this very activity that produces commodities and profits and thus becomes exploited as

labour time is extended into leisure time (Fuchs, 2013). Thus, looking beyond users' affective involvements, Andrejevic (2015) argues that an accurate understanding of value generation process should highlight the role of users' data.

## Self-quantification

The user generated nature of Web 2.0 has been pivotal in bringing the prosumer economy into the spotlight as digital capitalism relies on the appropriation of value – in the form of content, services and particularly data – generated by consumers. The ubiquitous social media platforms are the prime example of this phenomenon. But as capitalism has historically relied on finding 'new ways to generate value in order to sustain new profits' (Arvidsson, 2008: 329), it constantly seeks for new ways to commodify and extract value from human activities, and in that quest, new technological advancements have allowed for new modes of prosumption to emerge. The following analysis will demonstrate that these modes of prosumption do not only require consumers to generate content, design products or develop services, but are based on the subsumption of consumers' wholes lives.

From networked household appliances that gather data and give users the opportunity to remotely monitor and manage their home, to interconnected smart cars that can collect data and improve road safety; from environmental sensors that can detect public health risks to sensors and devices used by businesses to track and influence consumers' behaviours, there are endless possibilities afforded by modern technology to track, monitor and control inanimate objects and create what has been called the Internet of Things. But this developing tracking culture is not limited to objects, but spreads to human beings as well as. This is exemplified and epitomized in the self-quantified movement. Self-tracking 'refers to a multitude of practices that center around systematic recording of personal behaviors and responses' (Barta and Neff, 2014: 9).

In other words, self-quantification explores the numerous new possibilities provided by mobile and digital devices as well as the social features of Web 2.0 platforms to monitor, measure, represent and discipline the human body (Lupton, 2013). Relating to the notion of the Internet of Things, self-quantification aspires to enhance human abilities through self-knowledge, by collecting and analyzing data for everything related to the human body and mind that can be measured (Prince, 2014), although critics question whether it can actually improve the experience of living (Albrecht and Michael, 2013). While the

Internet of Things may have various remarkable possibilities, incorporating human beings into this vision essentially turns them into – measured – objects that not only must be scrutinized and transformed (Klauser and Albrechtslund, 2014), but may be used, controlled and manipulated for commercial, political and economic interests, while at the same time putting another nail in the coffin of the human right to privacy (Albrecht and Michael, 2013).

Self-quantification can take many different forms as every single aspect of a person's life can be monitored and quantified. Physical as well as mental and emotional state, somatic activities, consumption habits, financial behaviours and social conducts can all be subjected to self-tracking. Devices and applications have been developed that allow users to track activities and behaviours for every stage of their lives and generate huge amounts of data.

For example, the quantifiedself.com community provides an extensive – but not complete – list of available tools that users can use to track, monitor and quantify different aspects of their lives. Out of the total 505 tools listed on the website (June 2014), 185 can be used for health tracking, 124 for fitness, 122 for lifelogging, 87 for goals, 76 for lifestyle, 60 for medicine, 59 for mood, 57 for location, 55 for productivity, 54 for food, 36 for energy, 34 for sleep, 33 for money, 20 for learning and 19 for relationships, while, of course, most of those tools can be used for more than one category of self-tracking and self-quantification. Understandably, fitness is one of the areas where self-quantification has become most prevalent as it has attracted the interest of both companies and end-users (some of the most popular self-tracking tools are FitBit, RunKeeper, Nike+, Mapmyrun, Strava, Fitocracy, Jawbone Up, My FitnessPal and Runtastic). These tools allow users to track specific fitness activities (running, walking, cycling, basketball, strength training etc.), providing detailed data information for different variables (pace, distance, duration, location, heart rate, calories burned etc.), and in conjunction with mobile and Web 2.0 technologies promote the socialization of those activities through online and mobile communities.

The socialization, along with the overall success, of commercial self-tracking applications is also fostered by the gamification of self-quantification. Users are encouraged to compete in challenges with each other or they can even set up a challenge just for themselves. Based on their self-tracked data, they are rewarded with points, virtual badges and awards. They can even receive penalties or lose points for not tracking their activities or for failing to complete a challenge. Gamification has been defined as the 'use of game design elements in non-game contexts' (Deterding et al., 2011: 1) that relies on 'encouraging playful subjectivities so that users voluntarily expose their personal information, which is then used to drive behavioural change' (Whitson, 2013: 163). Whitson (2013)

sees gamification as a means of promoting the acceptance of otherwise contentious technologies. In fact, through gamification of everyday activities tracking technologies actually aim to make surveillance pleasurable for users (French and Smith, 2013) and for that reason surveillance becomes 'participatory' as users under their own volition submit data and information about themselves and their activities (Albrechtslund, 2008). In that sense, the gamification of self-quantification promotes a post-panoptic culture of constant participatory surveillance and control of the human being that can be seen as a manifestation of Deleuze's (1992) notion of the societies of control. The post panoptic gaze is not restricted within the confines of institutional boundaries but spreads throughout the social landscape (Martinez, 2011) as surveillance is mobile and flexible (Bauman and Lyon, 2013) and thus becomes constant and cumulative (Palmås, 2011).

Some of the tracking tools available to self-quantifiers employ this logic of constant participatory surveillance as they can be used not only for tracking particular fitness activities but allow and encourage the monitoring of users' whole lives. For example, the Nike+ Fuelband, the Jawbone Up and the FitBit trackers are wearable devices in the form of hand bracelets that can be worn all the time and gather data for every activity that the user performs, including sleep. Following the tenets of gamification users can set up their own personal goals, compete in challenges against other users and earn (virtual) trophies and awards for achieving their goals, winning a challenge or generally for their overall progress. However, fitness and life tracking tools are not the only ones that promote a competitive ethos. Lupton (2015) presents an excellent analysis of apps that not only track the sexual and reproductive lives of the users, reducing sexual activity to numbers, but much like the fitness and life tracking devices, they incorporate gamification elements that turn sex into a competitive sport.

## The self-quantified commodity

In the late seventies Dallas Smythe (1977) introduced the notion of the 'audience commodity' in order to address what he perceived as a 'blindspot' in Marxist analyses of mass communication media. Smythe claimed that Marxist tradition had mistakenly focused solely on the role of mass media as ideological apparatuses overlooking their economic function in capitalism. Therefore, he argued for a need to reorient and analyze 'the media more in terms of surplus value and exploitation and less in terms of manipulation' (Fuchs, 2012b: 695). The crux of the notion of the audience commodity lies in the fact that in capitalism all non-sleeping time is actually work time, in the sense that people work and create value beyond their official working hours either as members of

audiences or in the production and reproduction of their labour power (Smythe, 1977). Based on that premise, he maintained that audiences form and constitute the commodity that is being sold by media channels and bought by advertisers. It is therefore in – and through – their time that audiences 'work' and produce value, which is then appropriated by media owners and marketing and advertising agencies.

Dallas Smythe, though he did not explicitly use the term, in essence described the double exploitation of the labour force: workers first are exploited at the workplace in direct production processes and then at home too, during leisure time, as recipients of advertising messages from mass communication channels (Lebowitz, 1986). Smythe (1977) maintained that the content of mass media communications itself is merely a 'free lunch' offered to audiences in order to attract and maintain their interest and at the same time cultivate favourable attitudes towards the advertisers' messages. In a similar way, self-quantifiers' continued interest is promoted and safeguarded through the interactive affordances of virtual communities and the gamification of the self-quantified experience that turns self-surveillance into a pleasurable activity.

Dallas Smythe's work on the audience commodity has received its share of criticism over the years. Lebowitz (1986) argued that the audience commodity was based on a false premise as media do not have property rights over the audience (commodity) and therefore cannot sell it. Thus he maintained that the role of the media does not lie in production (of an audience commodity) but in accelerating circulation of existing commodities. Meehan (1984), on the other hand, accepted that media produce and sell a commodity, but argued that this commodity is constituted solely by the ratings. Dallas Smythe was also criticised – both from scholars who embrace his notion of the audience commodity (Fuchs, 2012b) and those who stand more critically towards it (Caraway, 2011; Hesmondhalgh, 2010) – for not including sleep into his conceptualization of work time. However, the first who pointed out this criticism was Dallas Smythe himself, who acknowledged in the footnotes of his article that the exclusion of sleeping time from work time may have been incorrect, as sleep in that sense, can be seen as a necessity for the reproduction of labour power. Indeed, as Marx explained:

> Within the 24 hours of the natural day a man can expend only a definite quantity of his vital force. A horse, in like manner, can only work from day to day for 8 hours. During part of the day this force must rest, sleep; during another part the man has to satisfy other physical needs, to feed, wash and clothe himself. (Marx, 1976: 341)

But in the era of self-quantification, sleep is no longer just a physical function necessary for the reproduction of labour power – through self-tracking it becomes a commodifiable, value producing activity in itself. As it has already been presented, tracking devices like the Nike+ Fuelband and the Jawbone Up can continue monitoring the user and produce data even while sleeping. Tools like the Sleep Cycle, the Sleep as Android, or the SleepBot are specifically geared towards tracking sleeping patterns, while other tools aim to enable users to track their dreams (Shadow, Dream:ON, Dreamboard). Therefore, the users of these – and other related tools – can still generate data during their sleep. Considering that a recent report has estimated that American consumers spent 32.4 billion dollars in a single year for sleep related aids (Mackey, 2012), it can be understood how important these data can be for the 'sleep industry'. Therefore, I argue that self-quantification not only intensifies the transformation of leisure time into labour time (Till, 2014) but converts every single moment of a person's self-tracked life, including sleep, into labour time.

Data, in the form of demographics that include among others age, sex, income level, family composition, urban or rural location, ethnic character, ownership of home, automobile, credit card status, social class and so on, are a determining factor of the value of the audience commodity (Smythe, 1977). The digital audience commodity of the Internet can be more accurately identified, valued and exploited as online activities are constantly monitored and advertising messages are geared towards specific online behaviours, users and groups (Fuchs, 2012b). Data gathering is automated and enables Internet platform owners to target their users with the relevant advertising messages. Popular social media platforms typically do not commodify and sell access or content to users, but treat the data generated by them as a commodity that is sold for advertising or other commercial purposes (Fuchs, 2012b).

In the realm of self-quantification, data are the king as commodification of life itself is made possible through the process of self-tracking while users generate vast amounts of data about their own lives and activities. In that sense, the user's self-tracked life becomes both the subject and the object of prosumption and his/her activities provide the necessary data upon which companies develop their products and services. Another direct link between self-quantification and the commodification of life can also be found in the recent emergence of a number of online and mobile platforms that offer monetary compensation to users who share their data. Datacoup promises to pay users up to $8 a month if they share data about their online activities, credit card transactions and – soon, as they state – activities tracked by Fitbit. The Pact app works as a motivational tool for leading healthier lifestyles and it works by connecting users who make monetary pacts related to specific goals. The users who fail to achieve the goals pay the set

amount of money to the users who manage to reach their goals. Leap4Life is also promoted as a health and fitness motivational platform as users earn points, based on their tracked data, which they can later redeem to buy products or exchange for cash.

## The 'prosuming self'

While consumers use these self-tracking devices and get personal information in the form of data about their activities, firms also gather the user generated data and amass huge amounts of data sets, or Big Data as it has been popularized recently. This allows not only to get information about individuals and their (consumption) habits, helping to develop personalized marketing strategies, but also to observe and analyze consuming patterns for many different and diverse parts of the population. For example, Nike has developed the NikeFuel weather activity platform that showcases the physical activity that users of NikeFuel trackers perform throughout the United States in different temperature and weather conditions. Lupton (2014a) explores how data generated and collected by patients and shared in online health platforms may be used for commercial purposes. Till (2014) argues that self-tracked exercise is a form of 'digital labour' that not only generates surplus value, but leads to double exploitation as users pay in order to use tracking devices that gather data, which will then be used for the promotion of more products to the very same users that generated the data.

Because self-quantification leads to the generation of vast databases of consumer behaviour, it becomes extremely attractive to marketers, as marketing nowadays is more than ever driven, shaped and guided by data (Zwick and Denegri-Knott, 2009). Database marketing refers to 'customer production processes that rely on the exploitation of the multitude of consumer life' (*ibid.*: 221). Self-quantification not only provides incomparably larger and much more precise data sets in relation to the data of the audience commodity of the analog era, but has the potential to surmount the accuracy, the depth and the diversity of the data generated by the users of Web 2.0 platforms. As a result, consumer data generated through self-quantification practices can lead to the valorization of the quantified body (Lupton, 2015), as self-tracked lives are commodified and become a primary source of value creation. Therefore, the use of self-tracking tools as well as mobile and internet platforms and websites that allow users to monitor and measure their bodies and minds and reduce them into quantifiable digital data becomes a form a prosumption (*ibid.*), as the quantified self turns into the prosuming self.

## The 'prosumed self'

While it has been previously suggested that self-quantification is a voluntary practice, and that has certainly been the norm so far, it should also be noted that this is not always the case. As Lupton (2014b) observes, while self-tracking was initially associated with a specialized subculture that consisted of techno nerds, health fanatics, chronically ill or just plain narcissists, as it becomes a mainstream trend it ceases to be just a private and voluntary activity. On the contrary, because of the enormous financial and other potential gains that can be extracted from self-tracked data, users are increasingly urged, persuaded, pushed or flat-out forced to engage in self-tracking practices and share their data with various entities (*ibid*.). Thus, Lupton (2014b) proposes a typology of five different – but sometimes overlapping – modes of self-tracking: (i) private, (ii) communal, (iii) pushed, (iv) imposed and (v) exploited. She suggests that although there is a slight difference between pushed and imposed self-tracking – 'pushed' indicates that the user can still refuse to self-track while in imposed self-tracking the user has no such choice – they are both initiated by external actors and not the user.

The insurance industry has been identified, both in academic journals and in the media, as such an external actor that is particularly eager to make, one way or another, people engage in self-tracking activities. French and Smith (2013) caution that self-tracked data could be used by employers or insurance firms in order to penalize users for activities that they deem excessive or indolent. Leonard (2014) also maintains that insurance companies could offer discounts for users who can prove with their data that their calorie intake or their exercise activities do not deviate from prescribed norms and guidelines. It is suggested that in the US such insurance practices are promoted through the Affordable Care Act that allows employers to charge (up to 30%) lower insurance rates to employees that maintain a healthy lifestyle or penalize and charge higher rates for unhealthy behaviours, like smoking (Dudley, 2014; Zamosky, 2014). Fitbit, one of the most successful companies that develop self-tracking devices, has invested heavily in corporate wellness programs as firms hope to minimize insurance costs with the help of the data that their employees generate about their lifestyles outside the working environment (Olson, 2014). Insurance companies from their part are developing schemes that offer lower premiums to customers who are willing to share their data (Newman, 2014). Some of the companies that have used Fitbit's corporate wellness programs are BP, Diageo and Autodesk while, according to news reports, Appirio, a San Francisco based IT consulting company managed to save $280,000 in insurance expenses by employing such a program (Gohring, 2014).

Therefore, it becomes clear that not all data produced through self-quantification are the same, just like the watching time of different audiences is not the same as some market segments are more valuable than others (Jhally and Livant, 1986). And in the same way that the value of the audience commodity is determined by how appealing the specific audience segment is to advertisers (*ibid.*), the value of the self-quantified commodity is defined by how useful the generated data are to a number of external actors (brands, advertisers, employers, insurers, information brokers). Therefore the quantification of the self produces people and subjectivities, in a similar way that the 'consciousness industry' aims to produce 'people who live and work to perpetuate the capitalist system built on the commodification of life' (Smythe, 1981: 9).

Thus, I argue that the quantified self becomes the 'prosumed self' that not only produces data, but produces the 'right' data, which resonate with subject positions promoted by neoliberalism, e.g., active, responsible and entrepreneurial self. This neoliberal logic of the entrepreneurialization of the self posits not only that we are responsible for our own well-being, but also that we are not responsible for others (Bradshaw, 2011). Previous critical studies have linked the healthism discourse to the promotion and formation of the responsible, entrepreneurial citizen under the auspices of neoliberalism (e.g. Ayo, 2012; Lupton, 2013; Roy, 2008). Self-quantification amplifies this logic as it not only follows the tenets of healthism, but makes the entrepreneurial subjects visible by recording and registering data for their activities. This is manifested through insurance schemes that are based on self-tracked data that aim not just at reducing insurance premiums and costs, but at determining the eligibility for health care and even employability of individuals, thus adding to the already intensified competition that spreads way beyond criteria such as professional skills and qualifications into life itself (Chertkovskaya et al., 2013). Following this logic, the (quantified) self must be seen and treated as an enterprise that, just like any other enterprise, has to gather and provide solid data about its own well-being. As Maturo (2014) maintains, self-quantification can be seen as a form of Taylorism, which is employed not on the firm, but on the individual.

## Conclusion

In his fascinating book, *24/7 Late capitalism and the ends of sleep*, Jonathan Crary (2013) reveals a very bleak picture of our contemporary consumer societies, where (almost) everything is colonized by capitalism and turned into a commodity. The only thing that has not, yet, been transformed for the purposes of capitalism, constituting an 'incongruous anomaly', is sleep, as sleeping time 'subsists as one of the great human affronts to the voraciousness of

contemporary capitalism' (Crary, 2013: 10). However, this paper makes the point that self-tracking brings an end to this 'anomaly' and turns, even sleep, into a (surplus) value producing activity. Building on recent studies that treat self-quantification as a form of 'digital labour' (Till, 2014) and 'prosumption labour' (Lupton, 2015), this paper has introduced the notion of the 'prosuming self' to highlight that with the use of commercial self-tracking tools, the quantified self becomes the 'prosuming self' that constantly produces value through the generation of data.

In addition, the 'prosuming self' is positioned as just one side of the coin, as I further contribute to the increasingly growing literature on self-quantification by introducing the notion of the 'prosumed self'. I see self-quantification not only as a neutral data generation mechanism, but as a mechanism that is used to produce specific subjectivities and subjects that are able (and required) to produce the 'right' kinds of data. Through the – voluntary, pushed or imposed – consumption of self-tracking devices, users produce their own new subjectivities of active, responsible, productive, entrepreneurial employees, students, citizens, etc. Through the notion of the 'prosumed self' I emphasize that what is crucial in self-quantification for value creating purposes is not just the generation of data, but the generation of satisfactory data that are beneficial for firms.

Finally, this paper contributes to critical studies on prosumption. Through a re-examination of Dallas Smythe's concept of the 'audience commodity' I argue that self-quantification can be seen as an exemplary form of prosumption that aims to capture, appropriate, and exploit every single aspect of consumers' lives. Previous seminal work on prosumption illuminated that the prosumption economy is based on putting consumers to work (Ritzer, 1993; Zwick et al., 2008) in a number of different market settings like the gas station, the fast food and the ATM machine (Ritzer, 1993) or more recently in the digital environment of online platforms (Bonsu and Darmody, 2008; Denegri-Knott and Zwick, 2012). This paper demonstrates that self-quantification is a prime example that the prosumption economy is moving beyond the simple appropriation of consumers' work in specific and isolated contexts. In fact, I assert that through a single consumption behaviour – the use of commercial self-tracking tools – consumers' whole lives are being put to work and turned into a commodity.

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# 'Work hard, play hard': Fantasies of nihilism and hedonism between work and consumption

Casper Hoedemaekers

## abstract

This paper aims to interrogate a specific space of transgression that opens up in identity work that spans the life worlds of work and consumption, which can be seen in cultural representations and advertisements that deliberately present themselves as vulgar, sleazy, racist or sexist (or a combination). I argue that this transgressive space is constructed in opposition to the idealized images of work and consumption that shape subjectivities. I will first explore notions of work and consumption, as well as the increasing overlap between work and life. Drawing on Lacanian theory, I then argue that these seemingly rebellious counter-responses can be seen as minor transgressions that do not question but rather support an underlying fantasy of self-actualisation. Based on a reading of an empirical vignette of a specific magazine, I argue that the trangressive gesture in consuming shock media derives its *jouissance* from a temporary negation of the ego ideal of self-realisation that underlies contemporary modes of being at work and in consumption. The transgressive gesture in consuming the imagery of shock media amounts to the positing of an alternate ego ideal, which takes the shape of the cynical hipster for whom the notion of others' estimation of them is anathema. Work identities are here met with a nihilist indifference to organizational 'committed' selfhood and careerism, while 'authentic' consumer identities are interrupted by an obscene preoccupation with sleaze, hedonism and sarcastic denunciation.

## Introduction

> Vice is known for its raw, unsparingly honest editorial voice... Vice's editors are either totally tuned-in geniuses or prankster revisionists. Or maybe both. (The Wall Street Journal)

> The first-movers of culture have embraced a continuum that includes the hip, subversive aesthetic of Vice Magazine. (New York Times Magazine)

> Often so far and away the funniest print publication in the world that it's sort of embarrassing to compare anything else with it. The Vice zeitgeist is hard to define, but you know it when you see it. (Business Week)

> The most arrogant people I've ever met. I want to be in business with them. (Van Toffler, President, MTV) (As quoted in Vice Magazine, 2009)

Enter *Vice Magazine*, possibly the hippest lifestyle magazine on the planet. *Vice Magazine* is a Canadian magazine that was started in 1994, which has grown to be distributed for free in 22 countries worldwide. It generally covers fashion, music, art and travel, and can be seen as a major trendsetter in terms of advertising, popular journalism and fashion aesthetics. Companies line up to advertise there and the readership are loyal and ostensibly trendsetting among their peers. But it has also actively embraced a strategy of offending and deriding what it regards as politically correct or square, both in its subject matter, its treatment and its style. These 'shock tactics' may occur on grounds of representations of violence, discrimination and stereotyping on ethnic, sexual or gender grounds, sexually suggestive or pornographic images, drug abuse, bullying or animal cruelty, among others. While controversial images or representations are in themselves nothing new, it is noteworthy that this aesthetic has become enthusiastically enlisted in corporate advertising, media coverage and online prominence of business. Photographic work such as that of Terry Richardson (a *Vice* regular) has featured in major fashion advertising campaigns, relying heavily on imagery of sexual exploitation and depravity. While the adage of 'sex sells' and the rebellious appeal of counterculture has long been applied by marketers and advertising (Frank, 1996), there is a crucial difference in the advertisements featured in *Vice*, because there is a reflexive element of provocation here. One question that arises here is what makes *Vice Magazine* alluring to its readers and its advertisers. With an edition of over 1.1 million copies worldwide, it certainly seems to be. This partly explains why corporate giants choose to associate themselves with a medium as controversial as *Vice*, but given that brands in all their immateriality are the resources of these companies, what makes it worthwhile to risk these brands on an outlet that deliberately sets out to shock and upset?

In this paper, I will argue that some salient aspects of identity and enjoyment in contemporary neoliberal capitalism can be seen in this particular case study. By turning to psychoanalytic theory, I will question the idea that the shock tactics such as those of *Vice* are efforts to call into question the status quo of contemporary norms of the social, the economic and the cultural. Rather, I will argue that it is illustrative of how temporarily overstepping social, political and

cultural codes can help to reinforce those same codes. I will suggest in this paper that this transgressive nature of *Vice* magazine provides insight into the way in which our subjectivity is caught in a fantasy that affects aspects of work, consumption, leisure time and so on. In order to further explore these issues, this paper seeks to examine a specific shared space between consumer and employee selves. I argue in this paper that subjectivity in neoliberal societies is increasingly cast within an ideal of employability, authenticity and social productivity, and the implicit socio-cultural expectations to conform give rise to transgressive counter-tendencies. The main contribution of this paper then is to link seemingly transgressive media representations and advertisements to specific subject positions produced within contemporary neoliberalism, linking to existing critiques of the subversive potential of self-transgression (Cederström and Grassman, 2008; Fleming and Spicer, 2003; Glynos, 2008b). This paper highlights key elements of the ideological function of self-transgression as a hegemonic device, in terms of work, consumption and social community.

On the one hand, the ideology of consumption within contemporary capitalism is reliant on an ostensible freedom to buy what we desire, and thereby make us 'more ourselves'. In its ultimate expression, consumption not only gratifies, it provides an artifice for the emergence of an 'authentic self'. However, upon purchase of a prized commodity, our desire immediately displaces itself to another imaginary object as the original commodity then seems robbed of its mythical desirability. This is the classic ideological conception of advertising, where we fall into the spell of a marketing promise and become enamored with the immaterial value of a brand. But we can go further than this, as consumption so often manifests itself in so many other guises: besides routine mundane purchases, there is a distinct category of spontaneous and even guilty pleasures in what we buy. Here we draw secret and forbidden enjoyment from fatty foods, overindulging or whatever it is that might provide comfort at a given moment. The point is that the pleasure involved is a forbidden one, and hence in equal measures laced with guilt and scolding, if only unconsciously. This, I will argue, plays on a transgressive fantasy of obscenity, that which one would never want to embody, and relies on the 'proper' fantasmatic investment of the subject in an ethos of consumptive authenticity.

Capitalist society turns on the linkage that the commodity draws between working life and consumption. In the context of working life, there have been a number of shifts over recent years that have affected subjectivity at work. Scholars have noted an increasing internalization of control, reflected in a progressive shift from direct supervision to self-disciplinary technologies. This is exemplified in managerial vocabulary such as competence, self-development and employability, and it can be argued that the guiding beacon of identification

within this context is that of the competent and satisfied worker, who combines commitment to the organisation with a genuine sense of achievement. This identification is similarly undercut by a perverse desire to subvert and transgress it, I will argue this expresses itself (as one of many possible outlets) in strands of nihilism.

These transgressive tendencies operate on an underlying ideal of self-realisation, of attainment of some higher, deferred self. I argue that a particularly salient place in which they find their culmination is the excessive space of 'shock' media such as *Vice*. In the seemingly extra-symbolic dystopia of *Vice Magazine*, these fantasies are channeled into the alter-ego of the hipster, the degenerate, the hedonist, joined in their derisive laughter by a slew of corporate giants.

## Subjectivity and consumption

Given the dominance of capitalism in contemporary society, it seems reasonable to explore the question of selfhood from the perspectives of work and consumption respectively. Even in the most basic economic instance, our need to work is informed by our consumptive needs and desires, and the need to reproduce our labour power. We work to pay for the car that takes us to work in the morning. The notion of the self is central here not just because it is continuously informed by capitalist discourses, but moreover because the concept of the free individual takes such a central place within the ideology of contemporary capitalism. The freedom to choose, whether as employee, citizen or consumer, is a lynchpin in the political and economic order. This ostensible freedom is what guarantees us a place within society, as active and willing participants and as productive members. It ensures that we buy into the system in which we find ourselves, by means of the rhetoric that we can always vote with our feet, vote with our votes or vote with our wallets. This freedom is located at the precise point of slippage between the signifier 'individual' and the subject, as we can understand it within contemporary critical social theory. From Marx's (1990) formulation of commodity fetishism onwards, the notion of the subject has been problematized to the extent that we cannot think it in terms of interiority or transcendentalism without considering the economic conditions in which it has been produced, and it is the spheres of work and consumption in which the subject is constituted as economic.

We could say that the shaping influences of media and culture are most observable to us in our everyday when we are faced with advertising. In fact, the lives we lead are invariably influenced by the consumer culture of which we are part. Advertising addresses us, and implores us to act upon what we see. A

product may appear as a clear answer to a need we never realized we had. This notion that advertisements shape our wants and desires has long been explored in critiques of advertising (Packard, 1957) and in cultural studies (Barthes, 1972), as well as in many other areas (Klein, 2000). In a classic structuralist critique, Williamson (1978) has argued that advertisements are above all instrumental in producing a system of meaning. Advertisements here are referents within a network of signifiers, and by virtue of their interrelated position, they manage to evoke a particular signification. Advertisements draw on symbolism that is at once familiar, but deployed in an unconventional manner: 'emptied structures of real knowledge are used as the frame for "ideological castles"' (Williamson, 1978: 174). In such a way, we recognise aspects in ads that are familiar to us and that aim to establish meaningful connections to chains of signifiers in which our very being is based, such as family relationships, health, social status and so on. Social myths surrounding such central aspects of our lives are referenced and symbolically linked to the image of a particular product. These social myths are indicative of human anxieties and insecurities and the excessive need for reassurance provide an opportunity for erecting an ideological artifice.

Furthering these insights, Stavrakakis (2007) argues that advertising consistently appeals on this level of emotion, and not on the level of rational choice. It rather plays on the paradoxical nature of human desire and enjoyment to attain its effects. Indeed, this can be seen in the analysis of Frank (1996), who demonstrates how from the 1950s onwards advertising techniques have started using subverting and lampooning of advertising practice itself, by painting a caricature of it as crude attempts at brainwashing. In this way, the ad can mask itself as being something else than an ad (a social commentary for example, or a satire), and in effect a critique of 'the other brands' (see also Williamson, 1978: 176-178). As Frank shows, the vocabulary and frame of reference for these 'trapdoor' ads actually derives from counter-culture and political radicalism of the late 1960s and early 1970s. In this sense, marketing techniques have incorporated the radical critiques of marketing as such into their functioning, in what may be considered a supreme ideological move: to present themselves as wholly un-ideological.

It is important to extend our understanding of how this works: ads can apparently satirise a common-sense critique of advertising itself, casting it as a crude attempt at persuading us to buy something we do not need. And in this satire of 'the other ads', it *still operates to persuade us to buy*. The quintessential example of this is the Volkswagen campaign cited by Frank and many others, which was hugely successful in its ironic treatment of the American car

industry's pseudo-innovations.[1] This use of irony has since become a staple of the marketer's repertoire. It seems then that although such self-lampooning of advertisements hardly hampers the ad's underlying intent, provided the joke is funny. Perhaps it is because the ironic distance paradoxically allows for greater willingness on the part of the addressee to listen to what is propounded.

It is not enough to say that advertising influences us – in a much more radical sense, it produces us. Our needs as we experience them are not merely informed by the spectrum of marketing devices that surrounds us, but they are created and evoked. Any notion of natural or independent consumer needs must be consistently rejected, as we find our linguistic and semiotic *frame of reference* reshaped by the symbolic interplay of advertising imagery with the wider chain of signifiers in which we as subjects find ourselves. As Stavrakakis (2007) rightly points out, Lacanian psychoanalysis provides a highly productive conceptual apparatus to interrogate this process and make sense of the way in which advertising channels human desire and enjoyment. Subjectivity can be understood as constituted within a symbolic chain of signifiers, which anchor existence in a social sense by virtue of the shared nature of language. However, this imposition of and reliance on language for the subject's being always retains a violent character, and the signifiers that come to represent the subject to others can never do so fully. That is, a modicum of subjectivity 'spills over' from the determination by the symbolic order (language), and it is in this extra-discursive remainder that the subject's desires, fantasy and enjoyment play out.

Within marketing, it is exactly this remainder that is targeted: it plays on the notion that there is something just out of our reach that will fix the situation. In drawing on familiar signifying fragments, as Williamson suggests, the ad aims to suggest something beyond the immediate connotations of the signifiers involved, by presenting an image of a particular form of enjoyment. It reiterates the idea that something is lacking and puts forward a promise of alleviating this. A car advert might stress the additional safety that the car in question will bring to its buyer, or the increased status that results from that make. If we would see the subject as a rational-choice agent, these would represent data into an informed and reasoned decision-making process. However, if we see the subject as a fundamentally desirous being, which is plagued by a sense of inadequacy or lack, we might come to a different conclusion. Here, the advertisement then becomes a vehicle for something that lies just outside our personal world. What the ad does is to link the act of consumption to this potentially riveting outside.

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1    An example of this is the classic Doyle Dane Bernbach ad for Volkswagen, displaying a picture of a Beetle with the tagline 'The '51 '52 '53 '54 '55 '56 '57 '58 '59 '60 '61 Volkswagen'.

Lacan calls the relationship of the subject to such desire 'fantasy', and this concept is vital in understanding how advertising operates on us. The self *as consumer* is at once determined as lacking and as desiring subject and in its most effective form, advertising sits in this nexus between the lacking and desiring dimension. The truly fantasmatic dimension in consumption can be seen when the commodity appears to the subject as an extension of itself, as the very thing that would allow them to be *more* themselves. Consumption then not only gratifies, it provides an artifice for the emergence of an imaginary self. Consumption can here be conceived of as a way to chase a sense of completeness of oneself, and a way of sweeping under the carpet the way in which our subjectivities are indebted to the contexts we inhabit. In this sense, consumption can be seen as a fantasmatic quest for authenticity.

Another side of desire can be seen in consumption, however. Here the act of consumption does not appear to achieve anything so lofty as to bring us closer to ourselves. Here consumption is a mere escape from oneself, an enjoyment that is fleeting. Here the fantasy turns itself onto the subject in a self-destructive manner reminiscent of Freud's death drive. Rather than investing libidinally in an idealised ideal-ego, we counteract the image we aspire to by sinning against it. In such moment, we may access an illicit, forbidden enjoyment.

The point that we must take from Lacan is that neither of these two acts hits the spot. The enjoyment that the subject obtains in its encounter with the fantasy cannot live up to it to the extent that it would extinguish its desire, which must be seen as structural to the subject itself.

I will explore these two notions of consumption in more detail later on, when I turn to the role that *Vice Magazine's* aesthetic can be understood to play in contemporary society. I would like to first explore the other side of selfhood in modern capitalism, which is that of the self at work.

## Subjectivity, work and life under capitalism

There has been a great deal of research into selfhood in contemporary work organisations, much of which concerns itself with the ways in which work is performed under managerial strategies of control. This is increasingly relevant, since a number of commentators have identified an ongoing shift in managerial control from structural and bureaucratic forms of control to more individualised and internalised forms. This means that the human subject has increasingly become a site of investment for power.

In the classic sociological conceptualisation, organisational control takes place within labour process, in which we find the employee with the intention of selling their labour power. It is up to the capitalist to convert this labour power into actual labour, and it is at this precise point that control of the labour process arises. From the Victorian factory settings studied by Marx to the modern open-plan office, organisational control has developed and diversified into a range of different technologies that enable and constrain the self at work. Some commentators have described part of this as a move from direct forms of supervision to more indirect forms, encompassing individualisation and interiorisation. In other words, the locus of control has moved from groups and classes of employees to individuals, and from outward forms of behaviour to the subjectivity of the employee. This has been productively conceptualised from a Foucauldian perspective by describing management practices as indebted to a managerial discursive apparatus that engenders the subject as 'human resource' and outlines instrumental coordinates for its deployment in time and space (e.g. Townley, 1994). Such ontological 'positing' of the subject not only makes people in organisations knowable and manageable but also creates an artifice for identification.

Such identification has been the object of a considerable corpus of research that draws on the notion of identity (Alvesson et al., 2008). This stream of research produced useful insights in terms of the ways in which management practices address themselves and unfold themselves to the subject. However, what has been lacking in many cases has been a conceptualisation of subjectivity in relation to the field of social and economic relations in general, and to the capitalist nature of work organisation in particular. Identities appear in organisational research both as an expression of discursive determination and resistance, but without a convincing account of where this distinction emerges. The ongoing quest for an acceptable theoretical account of structure and agency in organisations can be seen as symptomatic in this respect, including the prevalent romanticisation of resistance (Fleming, 2002).

In commenting on the increasing influx of notions of play and wellness in management ideology, Costea et al. (2005: 141) suggest that such weaving together of 'soft capitalism' with workplace control practices 'probably cannot be explained in the traditional linear terms of capitalist domination of labour' and 'will require investigations beyond traditional sociologies'. Recently, a number of accounts took up the gauntlet by starting to interrogate management practice and ideology by means of Lacan's work (Cederström and Grassman, 2008; Driver, 2009; Hoedemaekers and Keegan, 2010; Jones and Spicer, 2005; Roberts, 2005). What we see here is that it becomes possible to view the subject as caught in a signifying assemblage, which is at least in part tied together by the name of a

particular organisation. The organisation becomes a signifier that ties a particular field of signification to itself, in which the subject is signified as belonging to that field. The subject gains its meaning from its place in the symbolic structure of the organisation, where signifiers such as 'human resources', 'performance targets' or 'commitment' may work together to imbue it with a duty to dominant power relations. At the same time, the Lacanian notion of the subject leaves the door open for understanding subjective trajectories, which might take the shape of identification, fantasy, transgressive acting out or the pursuit of *jouissance* in various forms. Such a Lacanian conceptualisation allows us not just to see subjectivity as shaped by ideology, but furthermore to view subjectivity as a site for the expression of contradiction within capitalism.

In contemporary approaches to managing people at work, we see a strong focus on the qualities of the individual, and how those qualities may be utilised most efficiently by the organisation. Concepts like competences are aimed at melding together behavioural aspects, personality and attitudes with particular organisational goals. As such, they can be seen as an attempt to re-articulate the self through an organisational lens (Townley, 1994), both in way in which a subject experiences introspection and the way in which a subject may relate to others. In Lacanian terms, we might say that it represents an attempt to create a very specific Other against which a particular subject comes into being. However, this Other represented by the management ideology of the self fetishises interiority and authenticity. Conventional management theory relies on mainstream psychology for its concept of the self, and here we see that the ego is seen as paramount in much the same way as by the ego psychologists that Lacan castigated for their blinkered view of subjectivity. This psychological notion of the self is cast in largely static terms, and personal development is largely theorised through the metaphor of dormant 'potential' circumscribed by natural abilities of the individual ('personality'), and the relationship to social context represented in terms of 'attitudes', 'coping', etc. Within this ideological frame, personal development is subsequently made possible by 'commitment' or 'intrinsic motivation' for completing given work tasks with ever-greater efficiency and effectiveness. Managerial control here relies on an emotionalisation of organisational conduct, legitimised by the disciplinary discourse of psychology (Illouz, 2007).

This is embedded within a logic of self-investment, which mirrors the wider financialisation of everyday life (Martin, 2002) in that it relies on the logic of indebtedness, investment and maximisation of returns. The responsibility for this self-investment is placed with the employee, as is brought out very clearly in Cremin's (2011) account of employability. The centrality of this logic within the management of contemporary work organisation is evident from accounts such

as that of Cederström and Grassman (2008) and Fleming and Sturdy (2011) that demonstrate how some organisations have started using the idea of 'having fun at work' as an integral part of their organisational culture and as such their control strategies. This has been accompanied by a shift in mainstream management discourse from compliance to commitment to managerial goals. In contemporary work, it is no longer sufficient to do a job adequately or even well. One's heart must be in it. This resonates with McGowan's (2004) formulation of the society of enjoyment, in which the subject finds itself in a fantasmatic bind to the superegoic command to 'Enjoy!'. The modern worker, then, seems not only to seek to work hard but also to play hard, preferably at the same time. An increasing stream of research in organisation and management studies has acknowledged the importance of desire and the ideological fantasy in the workplace (Bohm and Batta, 2010; Glynos, 2008a; Kenny and Euchler, 2012).

Summarising, we can say that control in the labour process has shifted from technologies that aim to document, catalogue and reshape employee behaviours to technologies that appear to work more directly on employees' self-conceptions, and that increasingly rely on subjects' desire to control their activity.

## Work and life: An increasingly blurred distinction?

In order to further situate these insights into how control operates in capitalist work organisations, it is important to connect this work to wider analyses of the political economy and of the shifting nature of labour in particular. This is important not only to understand how dynamics in the labour process in work organisations are themselves articulations of broader movement in capital and its relationship to labour, but also because work is increasingly taking place beyond the scope of conventional work organisations. Some have argued that production is increasingly focused in digital and network-based infrastructures, and accordingly, products themselves can as a result best be understood as based within these contexts. Spectacular growth can be seen in IT-related sectors such as social networking and gaming, but also in sectors such as fashion, media, music, software design and advertising has caught the imagination.

Whereas much manufacturing activity and the provision of many services has increasingly been outsourced to the East, Western economies have kept a strong foothold in conceptual and design-based forms of production. This has led some observers to argue that production in the West is increasingly characterised by creative work. Florida (2003) in particular has been an influential voice in this respect. His work makes the case for a growth in what he calls the 'creative class', which supposedly represents an increasingly important contingent of

overwhelmingly freelance workers who are the primary motor of economic growth in Western economies. Florida is quick to link the creative class to its predominantly urban habitat and makes a case that hip, bohemian city districts provide a way of attracting and connecting these agents of creative capital.

However, Florida's optimism about the creative class is not shared by everyone. Much research has focused on the precarious nature of labour in the professions that are commonly grouped under the creative industries, and the poor standards of compensation and economic security in freelance work and contracting more generally. Huws (2010) is quick to dispel the oft-positive sheen given to creative work by emphasising that complex set of control types can operate on the creative labour process, including client paternalism and asymmetric market power, alongside more traditional forms of control such as Taylorist (output-based) and bureaucratic controls. Hesmondhalgh (2008) and Ross (2009) note the flight that the term 'creative industries' has taken, and point out that it has arisen in a variety of business and policy contexts where is has largely supported vested interests and further broader neoliberal encroachment, while the gap between the image of creative labour as cutting edge and its overwhelmingly exploitative and low-grade manifestation continues to grow.

This rather less optimistic view of creative labour can be linked to research that has sought to understand the systemic framework in which new forms of labour have emerged. Here it makes sense to look at the so-called 'immaterial labour' thesis that has broadly drawn inspiration from Italian autonomist Marxism, associated with Hardt and Negri among others. Proponents of the immaterial labour thesis have argued that contemporary labour is increasingly characterised by information-based and symbolic skills and imbued with affective qualities (Hardt and Negri, 2000), and represents the vanguard of labour in its conditioning by capital. Lazzarato argues that this growing tract of immaterial labour does nothing less than to set out to reshape the aesthetic framework through which we perceive the world around us. Immaterial labour 'produces the informational and cultural content of the commodity' (Lazzarato, 1996: 133), and can be seen as a blurring of consumption and production.

This is a point that we find in Virno (2004) as well. For Virno, the capacity for production in the immaterial sense is by definition a shared capacity, as the content of the product is inherently bound up with the social space in which it arises. Virno refers to this as the 'general intellect', the labour power of the public in an immaterial sense. Because of this bind of work with the social space, the distinction between work and non-work loses its meaning:

> Labor and non-labor develop an identical form of productivity, based on the exercise of generic human faculties: language, memory, sociability, ethical and aesthetic inclinations, the capacity for abstraction and learning. From the point of view of 'what' is done and 'how' it is done, there is no substantial difference between employment and unemployment. (Virno, 2004: 103)

What unites these disparate accounts of future work in the West is the idea that it is increasingly difficult to separate work from life. For the theorists of immaterial labour, the labour that is carried out is intimately bound up with their subjectivities as it draws on the affective capacities of the workers, and demands of them that they constantly engage in the work of representation and reproduction of symbols around. This affective and communicative nature of immaterial labour is inseparable from the position that the workers have in their social context. Quite the contrary: their position in a network of social significance is *necessary* for them to re-signify the content they produce, and reflected in their emotional investment in it. The blurring of life and work is most poignantly the case where freelance labour occurs. The investedness of the creative worker here has directly economic grounds apart from the ontological conditions that make it possible. Creative workers rely heavily on their reputation within the networks in which they operate for the generation of further paid work. Creatives rely on their portfolio of previous work to acquire new jobs and they develop skills to market their abilities and carve out reputations in what is often a competitive field of work. In reviewing the literature on managing creative work, Townley et al. (2009) argue that social capital is a necessary aspect of operating as a creative worker, and that it is networks of peers rather than market or hierarchical discipline that accounts for the comparative value of one's output. We find a vivid expression of this in Arvidsson's (2007) account of 'community-based advertising' in Copenhagen, where an advertising agency cleverly (and opportunistically) enlists prominent figures in the creative underground for Volkswagen. This underground is built up of a highly stratified set of positions built on carefully built reputations, cultivated by navigating complex questions of recognition, resources and mutual support. What Arvidsson documents relentlessly in his account is the value that access to these 'ethical', homegrown networks represents to companies wishing to associate their brands with them, which operates exactly on the non-economic and non-instrumental nature of the networks in question.

But also in more conventionally organised forms of work we can find the idea that work and life are not the separate entities they were deemed to be when 'organisation men' ruled the roost. Costea et al. (2005) argue that Anglo-Saxon management has embraced what they call a Dionysian rationality that now supplements its historically restrictive character. By this the authors aim to separate out the frivolous emphasis on play, happiness and wellness that have

begun to take up an increasingly important place in managerial vogues, and understand it in relation to the traditionally authoritarian and disciplinary character of much workplace management. These aspects are increasingly deemed part of organisational life and become incorporated in the way that management seeks to sanction work and reshape worker's behaviour. In this, we can see a holistic approach to selfhood in the workplace, since the assumption underlying this incorporation of 'soft practices' into workplace management is that such self-work will ultimately lead to a more committed and therefore more productive workforce.

Ross (2005) describes in detail the context of so-called Silicon Alley in New York during the dotcom boom years, where a number of IT firms pioneered approaches to managing work that drew very deliberately on a notion of egalitarianism and creative freedom, along with rich imagery of countercultures. Ross makes it clear how at pains IT firms were to distance themselves from the traditional trappings of white-collar corporate culture. Among other things, what this did was to give employees a sense of belonging in organisations that resulted in very long hours and a strong emotional attachment to the firm brand and the social group of employees. Through extensive coaching and team building, along with the creation of designer corporate cultures, firms enabled the integration of 'serious fun' into work strongly weakened the difference between on-the-clock and off-the-clock time. And while Ross is quick to locate these management practices in the economic high tide (and tight labour market) that the dotcom boom represented, it cannot be denied that they are a clear expression of the cutting edge of workplace management and highly effective at coaxing performance out of workers.

We are, as Fisher (2008: 22) puts it, increasingly 'working from home and homing from work'. Work is now considered a necessary, potentially fulfilling and satisfying aspect of a virtuous life. While contemporary critical organisation studies have pointed out how this operates as a mode of self-disciplining that replaces more direct forms of control in the workplace, it is important to extend this notion of the blurred life/work distinction to encompass our understanding of consumption as well. Consumption is a necessary complement of labour under capitalist conditions, after all. The pursuit of satisfaction and self-affirmation, traditionally the province of consumption, can now be seen to occupy an important role in our work identities. I will contend in what follows that with the blurring of the distinction between work and life, a stronger normative pressure on our self-perception has emerged. In our endless Facebook posturing, our richly documented social lives, our holidays, our CVs and portfolio careers, we now measure ourselves against the standards of being interesting, productive and profound that transcend the work/life divide. The posturing that

we undertake for the benefit of those unknown and unknowable others privy to our exploits is nevertheless a pressure that we must at times duck away from. The obscenity and transgressiveness of *Vice* occupies this dark corner that we secretly desire, by being just outside the realm of what we might like to embody.

## In search of excess: *Vice*

Above, I have outlined how consumption and production in developed economies are saturated with dynamics of identification and self-development. At the same time, such dynamics also display a paradoxical nature, in which subjects apparently undercut and sabotage them through acts of transgression. In order to explore some facets of how transgressive logics pervade the pressures of self-presentation and aspiration, I would like to look more closely at the signs, aesthetic and discursive elements of *Vice Magazine*. This magazine has clearly prided itself on its controversial nature, but it has also commanded increasingly status from the vestiges of mainstream media companies and corporations looking to address its readership via advertisements. *Vice* managed to position itself as a major trendsetting source for graphic design, art, music and so on. But more importantly for my purpose in this paper, it also appears to be at the forefront of new and exciting trends in marketing and advertising, with large cutting-edge brands such as Nike, Diesel, American Apparel and many others seemingly eager to advertise in *Vice*. The appeal of *Vice's* aesthetic has now ventured far beyond its pages, with photographers with strong *Vice* profiles such as Terry Richardson, Juergen Teller and Ryan McGinley in high demand, and producing ad campaigns for the likes of Lee, Sisley, Wrangler, Belvedere Vodka and Vivienne Westwood. Often these have drawn heavily on *Vice's* trademark elements of sex, indulgence, violence and cynicism. I will explore the most controversial themes in *Vice* briefly in the analysis section below.

> We've been saying it for a few years now, but it's media kit time so here we go again: *Vice* is the coolest magazine in the world. There, we said it. But we're not just grandstanding. It's weird to have someone tell you how amazing their magazine is, but we're totally serious. We can prove it with cold, hard math. And nobody can argue with math.

> Our audience is made up of, in marketing speak, 'trendsetting metropolitans aged 21-34', as witnessed by news outlets as varied as the New York Times, CNN, ABC News, Wired, Britain's The Independent, and Adbusters, among a great many others. Our editors are regularly featured online and on TV as talking heads, and our stories are obsessed over by the coolest consumers in the Americas and around the world.

> What's more, *Vice* has recently been an ideal platform for brands like Nike, EA Games, Scion, HBO, Adidas, Harley Davidson, Xbox, PlayStation, Honda, Jeep,

Red Bull, Diageo, Miller Brewing, and hundreds of others to reach the highly sought-after, free-spending demographic that we speak to.

The reason? *Vice* is the first free, internationally distributed lifestyle magazine on Earth, ever. We pass out over a million copies of every issue around the world—spanning 28 countries. With simultaneous issues from Tokyo to São Paulo to New York to Berlin and back, each issue of *Vice* is being read and collected by smart and funny young people the world over every month. Plus, each edition has the latest news and opinions from people on the ground in each of our territories. What other magazine can do that? Not one.

And don't forget, *Vice* is FREE. Because it's distributed through the living, breathing fashion boutiques, bars, record stores, galleries, and cafes where our audience actually shops and socializes, every single copy of *Vice* gets picked up. That's right, a 100% pick up rate—three to four times the rate of any competitive publication. It's because of this targeted distribution that *Vice* has a global army of fanatical readers who await each new issue as fervently as if it were bottled water in the desert or something. (Vice Magazine, 2011: 3)

For this paper, I have analysed in depth 20 back issues of *Vice Magazine* from the years 2009-2011. In addition to this, I have drawn on two anthologies of *Vice Magazine* (*Vice*, 2006; *Vice*, 2009) In analysing these magazine issues, content analysis was applied to the articles and editorials, and a semiotic analysis was used to trace visual elements. In the semiotic analysis as well as the content analysis, special attention was paid to elements that can be considered deliberately provocative, or that glorify transgressive behaviours, or that display an aesthetic associated with illegality or rebelliousness. The purpose of this was to trace ways in which *Vice* sets out to mark itself out from a projected orthodox 'establishment', and attempts to put forward a deliberately countercultural stance.

The central questions guiding my analysis were the following:

- What are the main aesthetic objects and themes in terms of visual and narrative continuity?
- Who is addressed by these images and features?
- What is the narrative arc, and which are the most important narrative elements?
- Where editorial or authorial viewpoints are put forward, what is being advocated/denounced? And how is this argument constructed?
- Where humour is used, what forms does it take?

Images from the 20 magazines are used below in the paper to illustrate tendencies and aesthetic elements that are analysed in general terms. The space available here does not lend itself to analysing examples iteratively, which is why

I have opted to provide this more general discussion of the main themes that we can find in this publication in this period. I do not wish to claim that the images presented in this paper are representative of the whole output of *Vice Magazine*, (which does include and is increasingly moving towards serious investigative journalism) but that it is a fair sample of an aesthetic that it is well-known for and that to a large extent it has pioneered within mainstream media since the early 2000s. I would also suggest that a large part of its popularity is based on the controversial elements that I analyse below.

## Analysis

Led by these questions, I have distilled a number of key themes from the content of this sample of magazines.

One major theme in *Vice* and other shock media outlets is that of outright hedonism. This appears in the form of a celebration of indulgence in intoxicating substances such as drugs and alcohol, and a proliferation of sexually gratuitous images and stories. In terms of intoxicants, features include an alcohol and drug duel between two people to see who is left standing after copious amounts of whiskey and cocaine, retrospectives of local drug haunts, boastful interviews with drug dealers, 'shrooms reunion' and plenty of coverage of drug experiences. In terms of sex, there is a strong emphasis on fashion features by Terry Richardson, who is know for incorporating the elements of pornography into his shots, as well as the exploitation and S&M-tinted nude work of art photographer Richard Kern. Journalistic features include 'Cum or Moisturizer?', 'Gays or girls? Slobbing the knob for science', and many more such explicit titles.
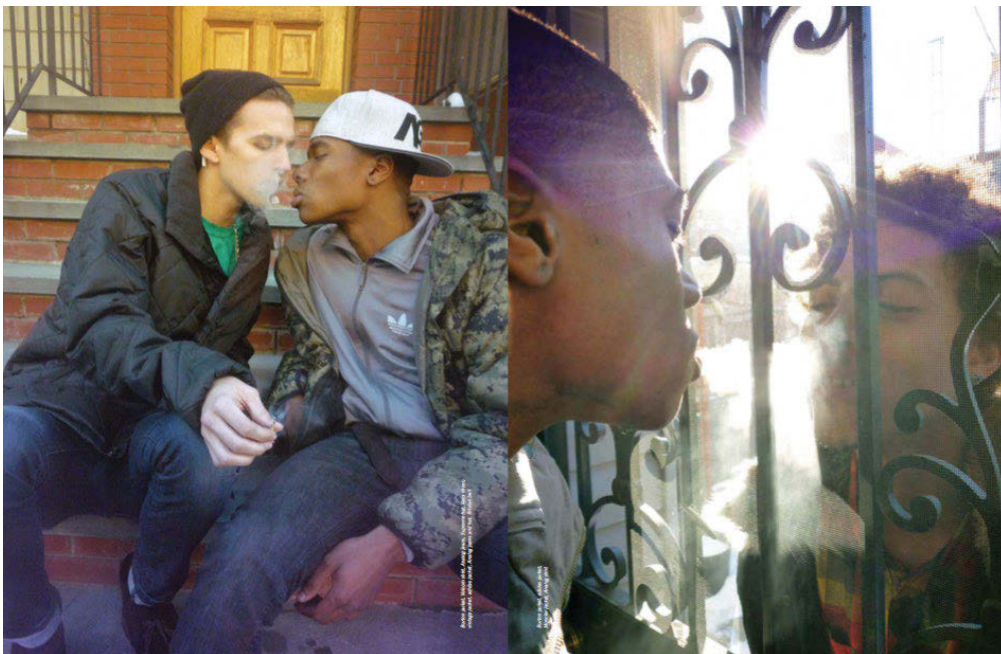
*Figure 1: Fashion feature taken from Vice Magazine, 18(2): 38. Illustration of theme 1: Hedonism.*
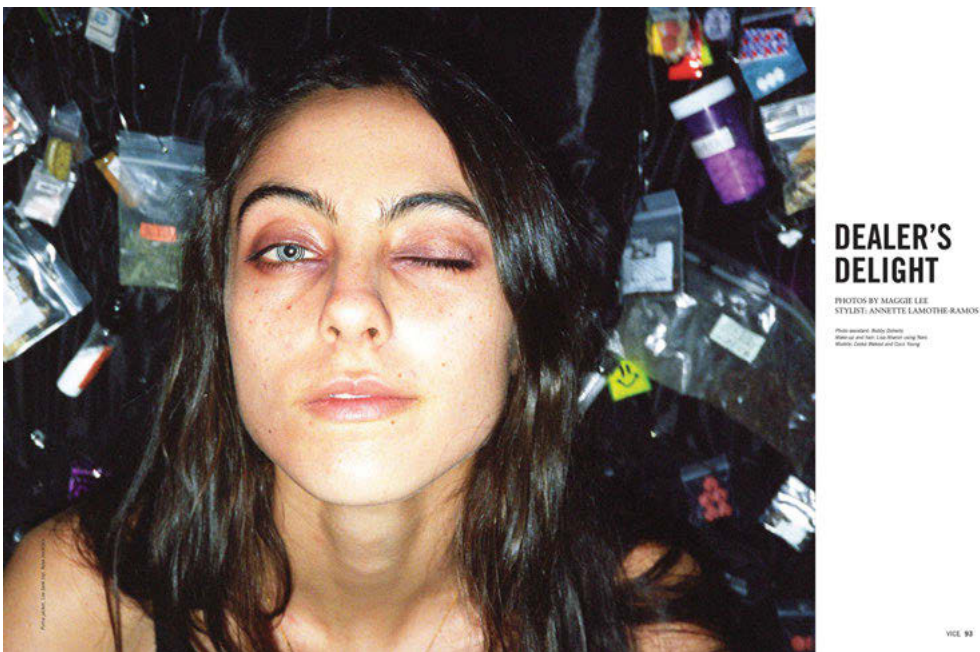


*Figure 2: Fashion feature taken from Vice Magazine, 18(5); 47. Illustration of theme 1: Hedonism.*
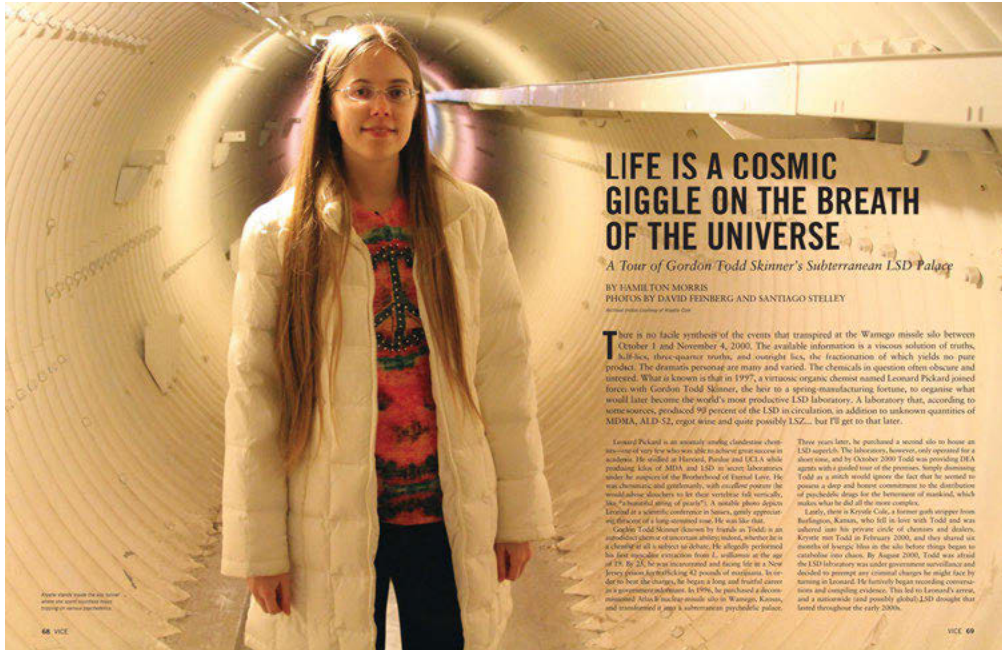
*Figure 3: Article spread taken from Vice Magazine, 18(5): 35. Illustration of theme 1: Hedonism.*



*Figure 4: Fashion feature taken from Vice Magazine, 18(5): 50. Illustration of theme 1: Hedonism.*

Furthermore, there is a particular form of celebration of violence, driven by a fascination for criminality and other manifestations of the societal underbelly from the perspective of their perpetrators. Extended interviews with drug dealers (as already mentioned) and small-time criminals are an example of this. Another way in which this is displayed in the magazine is by treating controversial subjects with a tone that is sure to cause offence, exemplified in a feature like 'One rape please (to go): I paid a male whore to rape me because I wanted to'. Prostitution also features prominently, as can be seen in 'The *Vice* guide to being a whore in 2004', in which questions of abuse and sexual violence are also commonly downplayed.



*Figure 5: Article spread taken from Vice Magazine, 18(2): 20. Illustration of theme 2: Outlaws and outsiders.*

*Figure 6: Article spread taken from Vice Magazine, 18(2): 33. Illustration of theme 2: Outlaws and outsiders.*

Another distinct aspect of the 'shock' strategy in *Vice* and other publications is that of pouring ridicule on any forms of identity politics and equal opportunities discourse. Tellingly, the five sections in the *Vice* (2006) anthology are Sex, Drugs, Rock 'n Roll, Crime and *Special People* [italics in original]. The feature 'I call bullshit' (*Vice*, 2006: 295) exemplifies this, 'calling bullshit' on sexism and transgenderism, among other things. Furthermore, the most popular feature in *Vice*, the Fashion Do's and Don'ts, also draws very strongly on this theme. Here, people who have been photographed on the street or at parties are objectified and judged in ways that usually draw heavily on racist and sexist stereotypes.

*Figure 7: Article spread taken from Vice Magazine, 18(2): 25. Illustration of theme 3: Ridiculing identity politics.*



*Figure 8: 'Dos and Don'ts' feature taken from Vice Magazine, 18(3): 36. Illustration of theme 3: Ridiculing identity politics.*

*Figure 9: 'Dos and Don'ts' feature taken from Vice Magazine, 18(2): 36. Illustration of theme 3: Ridiculing identity politics.*

But it is important that we do not simply restrict ourselves to *Vice*'s editorial line here. Crucially, the themes described above are mirrored in the advertising that features in *Vice Magazine*, for brands such as Diesel, Wrangler, Crooked Tongues, Fly53 and American Apparel. In these images, we can see the same themes mirrored that we find in *Vice*'s photographic and journalistic content.
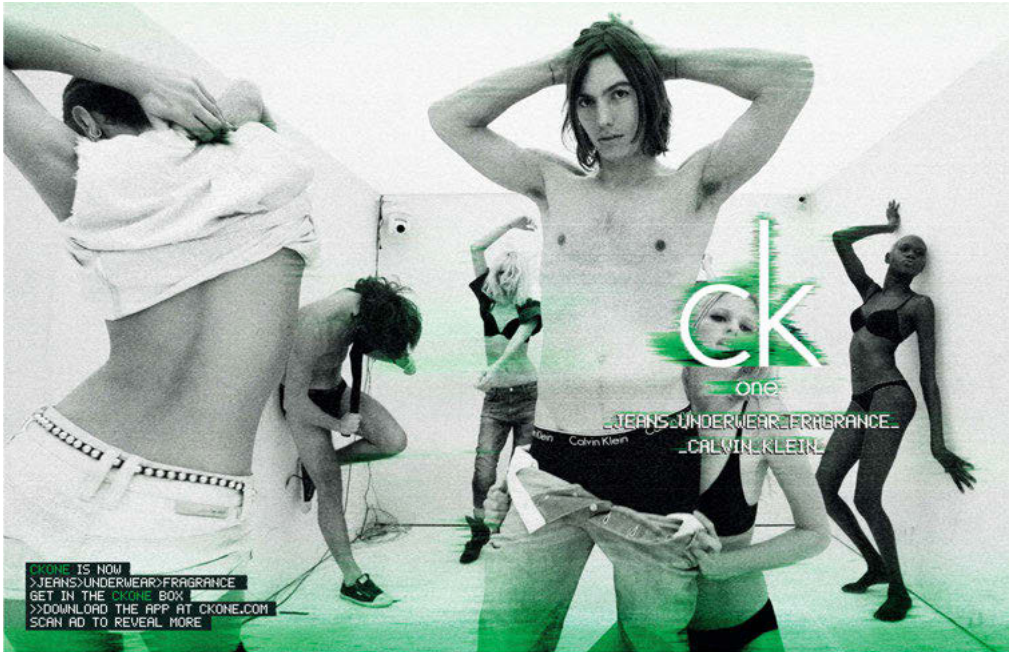
*Figure 10: Advertisement in Vice Magazine, 18(4): 3. Illustration of themes 1, 2 and 3 in Vice advertising.*



*Figure 11: Advertisement in Vice Magazine, 17(10): 20. Illustration of themes 1, 2 and 3 in Vice advertising.*
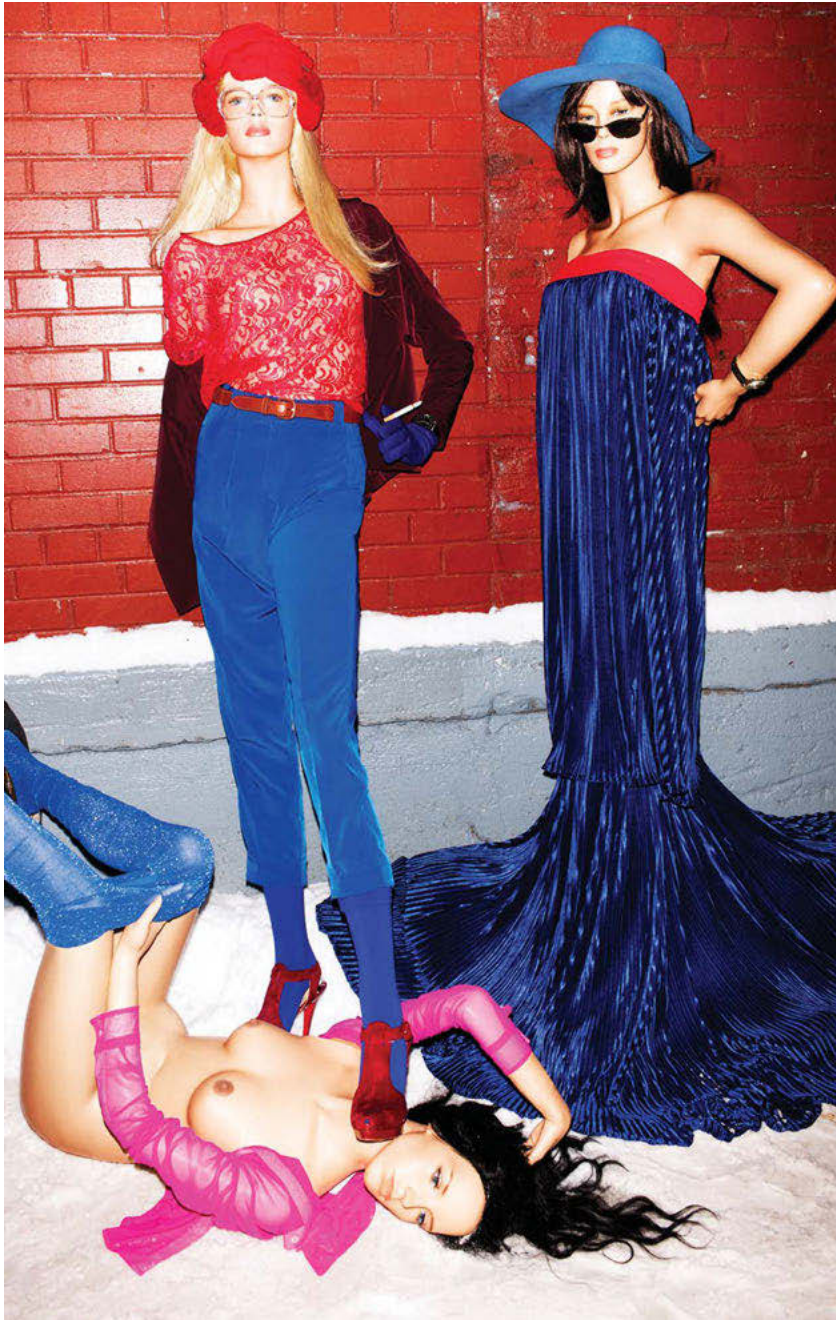
*Figure 12: Advertisement in Vice Magazine, 18(2): 56. Illustration of themes 1, 2 and 3 in Vice advertising.*
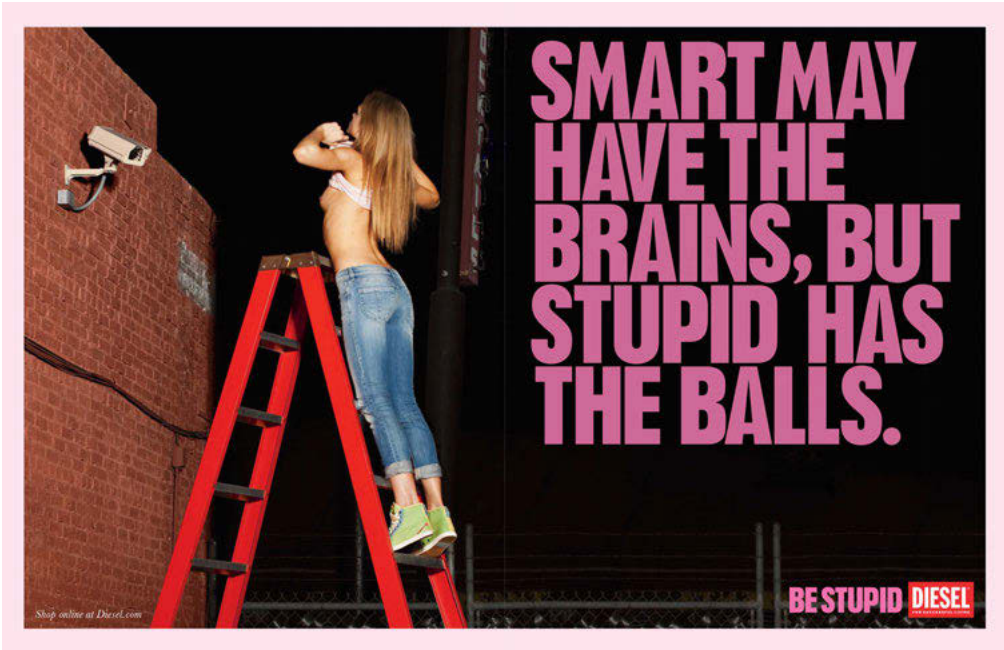
*Figure 13: Advertisement in Vice Magazine, 17(2): 2. Illustration of themes 1, 2 and 3 in Vice advertising.*

I think it is worth exploring why companies believe associating brands with explicit and controversial themes and images is going to further their appeal, and why *Vice* manages to command its success. The key here is not to moralise, as there is undoubtedly worthwhile journalism in the magazine and much of what it does is merely a continuation of a long history of rebellion and edginess in youth culture. It is clear that the capitalist economy, in the form of major companies applying their marketing efforts to potential customer brackets, is not only taking note of this, but also replicating the logic in these pages. The themes highlighted above show the controversial nature of *Vice*, which it heavily markets itself on, as is evident from the press kit excerpt in text box 1. From each of these themes it is apparent that they are reacting against something normative, at which their provocative stance is directed, whether taunting or playfully.[2]

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2    Other media texts with a distinct element of social and moral rebelliousness include viral advertisements that play on controversial themes (Hoedemaekers, 2011). These viral advertisements are generally video clips that are circulated on video-sharing websites, allegedly banned from being shown on TV (which in many cases they are not). They generally aim for humorous punchlines that play on excessive sexual overtones, violence, ethnic and sexual stereotypes or animal cruelty. A similar logic may be observed in the TV programme *Jackass*, which seeks to similarly seek out and transgress limits of comportment in everyday society, combined with an excessive bodily enjoyment resulting from dangerous stunts and capers.

In reference to the first theme identified above, the hedonistic emphasis on sex and drug use, I argue that it reacts implicitly against a notion of delayed gratification as well as a dismissal of readiness for labour. Here we see that there is an exaggerated preoccupation with breaking social mores on sexual inhibitions, as well as a glorification of intoxication. In reference to the second theme, that of the obsession with societal outsiders and criminality, we can see how notions of obedience of authority, societal status and success are points of reference in constructing a seemingly dangerous, edgy counter-stance. And in reference to the third theme, the lampooning of 'political correctness' and identity politics, we can see how here a notion of the proper and the 'good life' are being overturned for cheap laughs, by turning the gaze of self-discipline upon others in a seemingly spiteful way.

The question I wish to explore is how we can understand this in terms of the dynamics of work, work/life and consumption that I have outlined already, and the crucial role that identification and desire play in this. For this purpose I will turn briefly to psychoanalytic theory to further explore this case and what significance the attraction of the *Vice* aesthetic holds for understanding the blurred boundary between work and leisure, and production and consumption. The question of how the subject is addressed is crucial to this, both in advertising and the engagement with work and leisure.

I suggest below that the very thing they rebel against is the central identification with self-actualisation that underlies consumptive and productive forms of self. Below, I will look at how this transgression can be read in *Vice*, or what the magazine itself refers to as 'much more than a way for its employees to get laid...a lifestyle, a degrading and disgusting lifestyle of sex and drugs and rock and roll and death' (Vice, 2006: back cover).

## Discussion and reflections: Fantasy between work and consumption

Above, I briefly touched on the role desire plays in advertising. Here I argued that consumption can be understood to manifest itself in two ways, broadly speaking: firstly, it presents itself as an iterative search for commodities that will make us more authentic, that pertain to our sense of self, and secondly it provides a mode of escapist momentary enjoyment. These are both manifestations of what Lacan understands by desire, as I will make clear below. I also argued that the notion of the self and practices of self-disciplining have become central reference points in control strategies at work. Finally, I have argued that under the growing post-Fordist relations of production, such as those epitomised by the cultural industries, the distinction between work and life

becomes blurred, and the social context in which subjects exist becomes enlisted in immaterial labour. In what follows, I will suggest that each three of the life worlds of work, life/work and consumption are underpinned by a specific idealised image that captures elements of a subject's desire. In turn, each of these fantasmatic relationships to an ideal is transgressed in specific ways, and we can find expressions of this transgressive side of the subject's desire in *Vice*.

For Lacan, a subject is conditioned by the implicit and explicit demands of the complex social relations in which it exists, which manifest themselves in pressures and expectations placed upon us through our upbringing, our class belonging, education, the workplace, peer groups and so on. This normative dimension of the Other is located within language, in the signifiers that structure our lives and which form the 'material' for our selves. This is an asymmetrical relationship, in which the subject is constantly in anxious anticipation of what the Other wants from it. However, such a structuralist conception of the subject fails to account for the very idiosyncrasies of human existence, and it is at this point that Lacan's notion of the fantasy comes into play, so to speak. The fantasy is the subject's relation to an excluded object, something that is not and can never be part of the symbolic universe in which we as subjects live. Just outside the social limits in which we live out our lives, fraught with insecurities, anxieties and aspirations, lies what Lacan calls the object *a,* or the impossible object of the subject's desire, but equally something that intimidates the subject. This object grafts itself onto a variety of different surfaces, and so channels the desire of the subject. All this happens in the broad ideological frame provided by the fantasy, which provides a narrative coherence to the universe of the subject, and in a way makes sense of the universe that the subject occupies. In this sense, the fantasy is already flawed because it fails to fully account for the deep contradictions between the centered position we as subjects afford ourselves and the constitutive and authoritarian nature of what governs us. The fundamental gap between these is what Lacan refers to as the Real, the irreducible and intimidating lack of sense we experience in the discord between our imaginary self and the symbolic Other that defines us.

Instructive for our purposes here is Žižek's (1998) reading of the notion of the fantasy in Lacan. He suggests that the fantasy is characterised by two different dimensions. On one hand, there is the stabilising dimension of the fantasy, 'which is governed by the dream of a state without disturbances, out of reach of human depravity' (Žižek, 1998: 192). This is the fantasy that outlines the ideal, the 'beatific'. On the other hand, there is also a destabilising dimension to the fantasy, which 'encompasses all that irritates me about the Other' (1998: 192). For Žižek, these are not countervailing logics, but complementary ones. The destabilising fantasy allows for the explaining away of all inconsistencies in the

stabilising fantasy. This is an ideological operation in which a circuit of *jouissance* can function as a safety valve, in which the desirous relationship to an idealised, impossible object is interrupted. Such a momentary suspension is both enticing by virtue of its suspension of the guilt-ridden libidinal investment in the object, and the specular and bodily promise it represents in excess of the normative demands of the everyday. But as Žižek often points out, ideologically the function here is one of continuity, of 'business as usual' in which the consistency of our relation to the Other is not altered. This line of argument has been taken up by some critical scholars in organisation and management studies to point out how practices that outwardly carry the hallmarks of workplace resistance are ideologically complicit in furthering organisational control (Cederström and Grassman, 2008; Fleming and Spicer, 2003). As Glynos (2008b: 687) argues, 'the ideal and the enjoyment procured through transgression are co-constitutive: one sustains the other'. Examining the symbolism of *Vice Magazine* allows us to connect to such an ideological functioning of transgression in a wider sense. Here, we can reflect on transgression within the aspirational identifications of people as consumers and as members of social communities, as well as in the workplace. Here too, we can see McGowan's (2004: 124) point that '(i)n the act of *making a show* of one's indifference to the public law…, one does not gain distance from that law, but unwittingly reveals one's investment in it'.

If we think of consumption as I outlined it above, we can understand the double notion of the fantasy in its context. I argued that consumption in its more considered, desiring form is characterised by an underlying fantasy of authenticity. Here, the commodity-appearance receives the glow of the fantasy, whereby it is seen as something that will bring us closer to our real self. I.e. this car/piece of art/watch/gym membership will allow me to realise my real potential and truly reflect my true me, not to others but to me, etc. However, at the same time we catch ourselves in consumption that undercuts this, that is driven by its own illicit nature, such as unhealthy foods, overindulgence in drink, bad movies and so on. Following Žižek's distinction, we call this a destabilising fantasy of hedonism. This transgression then does not counteract but instead reinforces the strength of the Law (here the commonly held fantasy of consumption as pursuit of authenticity): the only reason I still feel like a fake is because of my transgressions, leading to guilt and a further attachment to the pursuit of authenticity. The stronger this attachment to authentic, ascetic enjoyment, the stronger the attraction of the base enjoyment of the hedonistic fantasy. Enjoyment, it seems, is never unambiguous or unproblematic for Lacan, which is why he reserves a specific concept for it, *jouissance*.

In the empirical example of *Vice,* we can see such hedonism very clearly (theme 1 above), in the way in which intoxication is celebrated and sexuality is presented

as fleeting and transactional. Here, the drive takes center-stage, where base instincts are there own justification. This clearly undercuts the figure of self that aims at authenticity, purposefulness and deeper meanings. Instead, we have fleeting flashes of pleasure, nakedly mixed with regret, embarrassment and excess. This is a readily visible part of the iconography of *Vice*, and we can see this expressed in its fashion shoots, its features and its human interest journalism. The advertisements in figures 10 to 13 illustrate this excessiveness and performative counter-dependence.

We can similarly read the realm of work through this heuristic. The stabilising fantasy here can be seen as one of employability, in which one embodies what the Other desires of them in an ongoing and self-motivated fashion, and one cultivates an intrinsically motivated attitude that inexplicably can transplant itself across tasks, jobs and contexts in a chameleon-like manner. However, apart from this utopian form, fantasy also takes a more contradictory and dystopian shape. It can imply the exact overturning of the subjective horizon in which we find ourselves. Rather than desire a promotion at work, we may indulge our desire to resist or sabotage that which the organisation wants us to achieve. Innocently, we may waste away our time surfing on the Internet when really we should be getting on with things. But it may go further, such as when we inexplicably (from the limits of our alienated subjectivity) do things to harm performance targets, team outcomes, and so on. The destabilising fantasy here takes the form of what I will call nihilism, in the sense of an absence of overarching authorities, legitimating narratives or discipline. The transgressive moment in the fantasy at work is one of conceiving oneself outside the realm of self-disciplining: to embrace skiving, slacking off, shirking, and to work to rule (the absolute minimum effort required). The real point is of course that such 'rule' to work to is in large part self-defined and internalised. Again, we see the impossibility of this fantasy, as well as its complementary role to the stabilising fantasy of employability. And if only we could be committed *enough,* we could be happy at work.

In the example of *Vice*, we see instances in which transgressive desires are expressed of this normative demand to be employable, to be what the Other wants from us. Here we see a frenzied celebration of incapacitating ourselves with intoxicants (theme 1 above), a fascination with those who operate on the fringes and in the underworld, and a rejection of the idea that 'hard work pays off' in favour of less lugubrious pursuits (theme 2 above). Satisfaction must not be delayed, it must be instant. To pursue such an illicit scenario does not stop us from turning up for work on Monday morning – a process of 'blowing off steam' never hurt anybody, we work hard and play hard. Skiving here takes the shape of

indulging (physically or not) in mind-altering activities, in unfettered enjoyment that does nothing to makes us more self-actualised workers.

When we read the conditions of work/life and immaterial labour through this prism of the dual fantasy, we can venture that there is a fantasy of virtuosity that underlies it. Virtuosity here appears as a flawless capacity for immaterial production, for resymbolisation and informational aptitude in social production. This virtuosity, for Virno (2004), is characteristic of the post-Fordist worker/subject. This virtuosity is first and foremost located in language, which envelops the social context in which immaterial value is produced. In the context of cultural industries producing intellectual property through software, media and social networking, to name but a few, the notion of a circumscribed end product, a clear labour process and a separable set of tasks fades to the background. Here the ideal becomes one of virtuosity, of responding with fluency, sensitivity and skills to the efforts of others, in perfect harmony with the wider social context. The virtuoso creates social significance above all else, is attuned and well-connected. Such is the stabilising fantasy here, and when one is on social media, such a fantasy is readily recognisable. At the same time, we can see a destabilising transgressive fantasy that perturbs this ideal. Here we find the figure of the cynic, who desires distance from the social laboratory, aiming to remove himself from the scene. This is the hipster who cannot but offer disparaging judgment on those who try to belong. At the same time, we can recognise the parasitic nature of this very tendency as it is only by belonging to a given social context that we can even take up a cynical stance, as is typified by the paradoxical sameness of the figure of the hipster to all others who wear the same trousers, the same ironic moustache and the same knitted jumper.

In the example of *Vice*, we can see in the theme of ridiculing identity politics (theme 3 above) the spitefulness with which the social fabric is attacked, as well as the ironic celebration of criminality and *outré* figures that seeks to suspend the relation that we have to those around us and the social mores and norms that stabilise this. The *Vice* Do and Don'ts are an example of such scorn, as is the unlikely celebration of underworld figures that we find in the magazine. The communal social laboratory is here an object of derision, and within a transgressive moment we can gleefully overstep the mutuality upon which we otherwise rely.

We can now put these ideas together. What we find here is precisely the transgression of the overarching fantasy that structures contemporary employee and consumer identities, that of self-realisation. Within a particular strand of contemporary media, the carefully crafted self that is embodied by the careerist or the authentic consumer is overturned by providing a cynical discourse in

which the 'legit' self has no place, and indeed is symbolically ousted. Here, the employee is ridiculed for their obedience, the immaterial worker for their posturing, and the consumer for their naivety. It is at this precise point that we can begin to understand the very particular forms of media and advertisement that manage to portray themselves as avant-garde and edgy. This serves to underline the integration that these forms of media have within contemporary capitalist practice, and more importantly the appeal that professional marketers believe they have on positive brand association. Within the spectrum of *Vice* and other media like it, the narcissistic attachment to a self-image that embodies authenticity is suspended, and is channeled into a disruptive fantasy of obscenity. In consumption, the self that emerges emphasises the excessive aspects. It aims to intoxicate itself, to binge on what it takes in. Obscenity appears here as a perverse desire to embody elements that have no relationship to the image of the 'authentic consumer'. The disjointed pleasures of hedonistic sex and drug use are placed against those elements of consumption that aim to supplement our purportedly virtuous and coherent self-image, an image that moreover complements our worker-selves. And with respect to work, the ideal-image of the employee who balances excellent performance with professional and spiritual development is equally suspended. Here, we see the figure of the criminal emerge, he who enjoys without bounds and escapes the rules by which those who work in pedestrian jobs must abide. Or alternatively, we see here the celebration of the party animal/underachiever, or even of the addict, whose life appears as unmediated by the normative demands of capitalist work organisation, or the mores of a virtuous life.

Within the realm of controversial publications such as *Vice*, the pursuit of status, competence and authenticity is overturned, as the central celebrated figure here is no longer the yuppie who plays hard and works hard. Instead, we see that this figure is mercilessly derided, and a space of negative identification emerges. The hero in forums like *Vice* is the underachiever, the hipster or the degenerate, but they are only unified in their rebellion. The gesture of transgressing the pressures of socio-economically sanctioned normality is what makes it possible for such alteregos to coexist. Through the dystopian fantasy, work becomes meaningless, social networks become pathetic posturing and consumption becomes sleazy. Within this act of transgression, the seamless complement for the ideology of self-actualisation emerges. We know very well what we are doing, and still we are doing it (cf. Žižek, 1989, paraphrasing Sloterdijk, 1984).

Production and consumption constitutes us as subjects, and it provides a linguistic and semiotic infrastructure through which we can experience the world. Therefore, examining them is not merely an aspect of the world we live, but more radically it is an aspect of a shared being within contemporary

neoliberal society. The genre of 'shock media' that is examined through *Vice* in this paper manifests itself as something that is formulated *against* the internalised demands of the everyday. It is also evident that this *against* evokes a palpable level of *jouissance*, judging from the explosive popularity of these media. To understand what is the target of this transgressive gesture leads us to examine something widely shared that underlies a shared aspect of being. It is all the more relevant because the j*ouissance* of the 'shock' transgression is tied so successfully into capitalist production (both in its material and in its ideological sense).

But this integration of transgressive logics into capitalist production is also at the same time potentially explosive. By analysing the appeal of these transgressive channels, which we saw in *Vice's* appeal, we are tracing the circuits of *jouissance* that the subject is enticed into, and that it ultimately receives its consistency from. This lays bare the paradoxical construction of contemporary subjectivity, in terms of its reproduction within consumption and work. The ideological fantasy is crucially split into opposites, and for that reason constantly evolving. There are a number of observations we could make on this basis. Among other things, this highlights how seemingly critical or rebellious moves can in fact be strengthening the status quo. But at the same time, the balance between such opposites in the libido is volatile, and a desirous relation to those elements which stand in transgressive relation with the status quo provides potential for more sustained (rather than momentary) action against the fantasy of self-actualisation.

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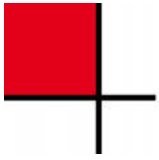
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# Migration, consumption and work: A postcolonial perspective on post-socialist migration to the UK

Barbara Samaluk

## abstract

This article explores the links between transnational migration, consumption and work within a postcolonial and post-socialist world. By exploring contemporary Polish and Slovenian migration to the UK through a postcolonial lens, this article aims to provide an understanding of the post-socialist space beyond the western knowledge production. The article exposes the historical orientalization of post-socialist central and eastern Europe (CEE) and its subjects, which, throughout history, has marked its peripheral status within Europe and evoked the (self-)colonial 'catching up' model that constitutes CEE imagined communities as well as informs CEE migrants' agency, and defines their diversity and their positioning in the West. In particular, the article stretches the understanding of orientalism in relation to transnational consumption and migration processes, and the neo-colonial binary division of capitalism and socialism that characterizes the post-socialist world. The article demonstrates that this binary division acts as an orientalizing device that legitimizes the framing of neoliberalism as the modernizing project, and affects CEE migrants' positioning in the UK and their strategies to reclaim their value. Ultimately the article contributes by offering a critique of neo-colonial epistemic violence that legitimizes the global expansion of neoliberalism to places and spaces previously shielded from unregulated market pressures.

## Introduction

Under the current globalized neoliberal economy, consumption has become central to transnational employment relations and migration processes (Ong, 1999; Samaluk, 2016a). Consumption – transformed through commodity flows, promoted through culturally chosen ideas of consumer agency, and mediated through global and deterritorialized mass-media and information technologies –

has also become part of the capitalist civilizing process (Appadurai, 1996). This civilizing process informs contemporary imagination, fuels action, and can act as an important stimulus for migration. After the new wave of migration from post-socialist central and eastern Europe (CEE) to the UK, there has been plenty of research exploring the racial, gender and class segmentation of labor. This work has mainly looked at CEE migrants through the prism of economic immigration, exploring the managerial practices, customer service experience, and the shaping of workers' identity within the receiving country and in relation to native, other migrant, and black and ethnic minority workers (Anderson, 2000; McDowell, 2009a, 2009b; Wills et al., 2010). This work gives important insights on the complexity of a racialized class logic that drives the contemporary UK's economy; however it falls short in providing a more holistic picture of the on-going colonial logic underpinning transnational economy and CEE migrants' positioning, agency and diversity.

In order to better understand these processes, the exploration of CEE labor migration should start with migrants' places of origins that, I suggest, have been characterized by on-going colonial logic. This logic has been transforming existing structures of production and consumption within CEE and concurrently acts to inform workers imagination of the West, their exit strategies, and their positioning within diverse UK's labor market (Samaluk, 2014a, 2014b, 2016a). In order to take into account this often neglected history, the paper draws upon theoretical and empirical work that has utilized postcolonial approaches to study the post-socialist space (Buchowski, 2006; Böröcz, 2001; Chari and Verdery, 2009; Samaluk, 2014a, 2014b, 2016a; Stenning and Hörschelmann, 2008; Verdery, 2002). By exploring contemporary CEE migration to the UK through a postcolonial lens this article aims to understand the post-socialist space beyond western knowledge production, uncover how Polish and Slovenian migrant worker-consumers are positioned in the UK, and their strategies to reclaim their value. The article commences by elaborating on the theoretical approach and methods used. It then provides a historical overview of post-socialist space through a postcolonial lens, and further analyses Polish and Slovenian migrants' experience and strategies within transnational exchange and on the UK labor market. Finally, the article discusses its findings and contributions.

## Understanding post-socialist space beyond the western knowledge production

A major contribution of postcolonial critique has been to challenge western knowledge production that represented colonial subjects through orientalizing discourse, and to redefine these subjects as agents in their own lives, who are to

speak on their own terms (Mohanty, 2003; Said, 1978/2003; Spivak, 1988). Postcolonial critique thus serves as an important inspiration to ask ourselves whether the post-socialist can speak within dominant western knowledge production or whether this knowledge production needs to be challenged in order to understand post-socialist subjects and their agency on their own terms. Post-socialism, in contrast to postcolonialism, has often been simplistically used as a geographical label rather than an analytical category that needs to be carefully scrutinized (Owczarzak, 2009). In order to challenge this, many authors have turned towards postcolonial approaches to analyze the complexity of post-socialist experience (Böröcz, 2001; Buchowski, 2006; Chari and Verdery, 2009, Stenning and Hörschelmann, 2008).

As Stenning and Hörschelmann (2008) argue, postcolonial critique can be useful for theorizing post-socialism because it encourages us to uncover the presence and persistence of a colonial binary logic within the East and the West, and makes us think about epistemology that keeps it alive. This coloniality is maintained by the soft power of western academic ideologies and paradigms that rarely recognize knowledge production coming from post-socialist CEE or explore the region or its subjects beyond this binary logic (Kuus, 2004; Miroiu, 2004; Owczarzak, 2009; Taylor and Śliwa, 2011; Slovova, 2006). A postcolonial approach makes us consider our methodologies and encourages us to give voice to those who are too often only objects of analysis rather than analysts of their own condition. This article thus seeks to challenge the simplistic marginalization of post-socialist experience to the discourse of globalization, and rather attempts to expose the complexity of history, geography, sameness and difference that characterize the post-socialist world.

One of the major concerns within postcolonial critique has been the orientalization of colonized places and colonial subjects arising from them. For Said, 'orientalism' represents a set of mainly discursive practices that, in short, reflect the 'Western style for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient' (1978/2003: 3). Engagement with postcolonial approaches can help us uncover the orientalization of post-socialist CEE and its material effects. This demands engagement with a particular history that characterizes the post-socialist world and entails an epistemic move towards rarely recognized knowledge production (Buchowski, 2006; Chari and Verdery, 2009; Kiossev, 2010; Owczarzak, 2009; Samaluk, 2014a; 2014b; 2016a). Careful consideration of history within the post-socialist space enables the uncovering of how both, the recent and more distant past still shape post-socialist experience, internal diversity, its relationship with the West, and the West itself.

Unlike most of postcolonial theorizing that links the critique of on-going colonial power to spaces 'outside Europe', the scrutiny of post-socialism also turns towards marginalized spaces within Europe. Most applications of postcolonial theorizing to post-socialist experience have focused either on the process of decolonization after the end of the Soviet Bloc and also earlier European empires, or the process of neo-colonialism linked with global expansion of neoliberalism and enacted in CEE through transition and Europeanization process, foreign investment, trade and aid (Böröcz, 2001; Buchowski, 2006; Hipfl and Gronold, 2011; Samaluk, 2014a, 2014b, 2016a; Stenning and Hörschelmann, 2008). Apart from engaging with historical, cultural, political, and economic dichotomies of 'colonies' and the 'metropole', the application of postcolonial critique to post-socialist context demands also engagement with the binary logic of West and East, and capitalism and socialism (Owczarzak, 2009). Departing from this emerging scholarship, this article aims to provide a deeper understanding of the agency of moving post-socialist subjects, who have at the end of the 20th century again started migrating West, and their experiences within the contemporary globalized European metropolis characterized by super-diverse populations.

## Method

In order to better understand these processes, this article departs from a macro historical and socio-economic context that characterizes the post-socialist world and CEE migrant workers' positioning, diversity and agency. The presented analysis draws upon primary and secondary data sources gathered within various research projects exploring migration from post-socialist CEE to the UK. On the macro level, it engages with literature, and provides examples from political and media discourse, and popular culture, in order to explore how post-socialist CEE countries and subjects have been historically positioned within the (post)colonial order. The micro level analysis draws upon 50 in-depth interviews conducted between 2008 and 2014 with Polish and Slovenian migrant workers and students, in and around London. The sample consists of 33 Slovenian and 16 Polish participants, amongst which were 33 women and 17 men, between 17 and 42 years old. Interviews explored reasons for migration, expectations before migration, and workers strategies within transnational exchange and in the UK. The gathered data was analyzed through the process of coding (Charmaz, 2006). Findings are presented further below.

## Post-socialist space viewed through a postcolonial lens

What is today known as a post-socialist CEE has been distinctively characterized by a complex imperial rule that, on one hand, homogenized and demi-orientalised so called Eastern Europe and, at the same time, created a complicated set of internal ethnic stratification (Batt, 2007; Hipfl and Gronold, 2011; Wolff, 1994). Since the Enlightenment, the European East came to be identified as underdeveloped, poor, superstitious and irrational (Todorova, 1997). This perception was even further enhanced by the bloc divisions in the twentieth century, encompassing two spheres of interests based on the ideology of socialism, on the one hand, and capitalism, on the other. The Cold war dynamic was built around the dichotomies of East and West and capitalism and socialism (Verdery, 2002). In this binary position, the countries and people of socialist East were, from the Western perspective, supposed and imagined to be the same, and this imaginary was used in order to justify Cold War ideology and to idealize capitalist societies (Forrester et al., 2004; Stenning and Hörschelmann, 2008). This perception was quite different from the perspective of CEE countries themselves, which never ceased to feel distinct from one another (Marc, 2009; Todorova, 1997). During the socialist period, this distinction was, among other things, enacted through 'nesting orientalisms' (Bakić-Hayden, 1995), i.e. the local gradations of the Orient based upon historical and socio-economic imaginaries of what the East and the West consists of.

Unlike European empires, the Soviet empire 'aimed to integrate its dependencies into process of accumulating not capital but allocative power through accumulating means of production', and by creating closed zones that would disable or at least limit western influences and exchange (Verdery, 2002:16). Therefore, under socialism, nesting orientalisms were importantly linked to possibilities for movement, and the consumption of Western goods, that arose from variegated CEE socialisms. In this regard, there were considerable differences between former Soviet bloc countries that had closed borders, and former Yugoslavia that allowed free movement to the West. Moreover, there were also differences amongst the Soviet bloc countries, which importantly shaped possibilities for consumption and imagination of the West. For example, by exploring oral histories of Poles Taylor and Śliwa (2011) demonstrate that during socialism there was considerable movement of persons within the Soviet bloc countries and later also outside, which enabled access to different consumer goods. Moreover, Poles maintained (globally) extended family ties within large expatriate populations that were sending prestige consumption goods from the West, and shaping the imagination of it (*ibid.*).

Western goods also had great symbolic value in former Yugoslavia therefore free movement was exercised quite frequently by Slovenians bordering Austria and Italy. According to Luthar (2006), who researched the memories of Slovenian shoppers, these shopping trips had great symbolic value and meaning that offered Yugoslavs not only an escape from the culture of shortages, but also from a less pleasant encounter with feelings of otherness and inferiority when faced with the West. These consumption trips and diverse history have always served former Yugoslavs to differentiate themselves from, and construct their superiority in relation to, Soviet bloc countries (Marc, 2009; Todorova, 1997). For instance, in former Yugoslavia, the word 'Czech' was used as a derogatory marker for someone defined as less modern on account of their consumption capacity and their inability to access and possess Western goods. Capacity for consumption thus formed the basis for the judgment of taste that serves as the cultural distinction of groups, and can be embodied in dress or other symbolic signs (Bourdieu, 1984/2010). Judgment of taste was by former Yugoslavs used to orientalize the Soviet bloc countries and its people through their restricted movement and the lack of consumption of Western goods.

As did former Yugoslavs distance themselves from former Soviet bloc countries, so did countries within create their own local Easts. This is very evident in the concept of 'Central Europe' that has emerged as a Cold War appeal from the Czech, Hungarian and Polish dissidents to the West. In an (in)famous article, Kundera (1984) talks about Central Europe as a kidnapped, brainwashed, and displaced West, that insists in defending its identity by providing historical links to Habsburg Empire and by problematic distancing from 'the Eastern Europe', exemplified by 'less civilised' Russia (Kuus, 2004; Stenning and Hörschelmann, 2008). The above examples demonstrate how at the same time as orientalization is taking place, occidentalization is also in progress, in which these demi-orientalized groups 'occidentialize themselves as the West of the "Other"' (Bjelić, 2002:4).

The peripheral status of these groups within European imperial history has always entailed an in-betweenness that cannot simply be explained by the traditional dichotomy of colonizer and colonized. In this regard, Kiossev (2010, 2011) talks about 'self-colonizing cultures' that not only traumatize themselves in relation to the West and willingly adopt its values, but have also constituted themselves upon European Enlightenment ideas of nationhood, rationality, progress, and racial hierarchy. For peripheries within Europe, the Europe did not only encompass an empirical encounter, but has always acted as a '"master signifier" in the symbolic and cultural order and underlying values' (Kiossev, 2011: 2). This symbolic and cultural order did not only result in the mimicking of the norm, as explained by Bhabha (1991) in the case of colonial encounter, but

also has always acted as the constitutive element of the self. Within the European periphery, 'self-colonization was entwined with the act of imagining their "imagined community"' (ibid.: 5). On the one hand, post-socialist subjects have always perceived themselves as European, and have been constituting their imagined national communities upon the Eurocentric imperial model characterized by whiteness, maleness, and Christianity, which still today shapes local and global racisms towards black minority ethnic and religious groups (Imre, 2005; Ponzanesi and Blaagaard, 2011; Samaluk, 2014b). On the other hand, their in-between status also entails that CEE subjects have always themselves experienced racisms within Europe (Hipfl and Gronold, 2011; McDowell, 2009b; Samaluk, 2014a, 2104b).

These racisms within Europe are closely linked to nation building and national liberation struggles, which create all sorts of internal and external exclusions in an attempt to create an imagined community (Balibar, 1991). If this is not recognized, then the racial character of 'xenophobia' or 'intolerance' geared also towards the poor, white, religious or ethnic minorities or migrants can simply be denied and dismissed as stereotyping. In order to understand these complex racisms within Europe, it is important to go beyond ethnic and black and white paradigms, and take into account that racial difference, marked by embodied markers other than skin color, such as markers of ethnicity, language, nationality, religion or class, are equally important in the racialization process (Garner, 2006; Samaluk, 2014a, 2014b). The history of Europe is full of these ambiguous internal racisms, which took most extreme forms in prosecution and extermination of Jews, Roma, and Slavs during the 2nd World War, in war and violence against religious and ethnic minorities in former Yugoslavia, in the historical racialization of Irish in Britain, and the continuation of contemporary racisms against CEE migrants, Roma, or Muslims in many European countries, or in the current construction of 'lazy Greeks' living on the expense of other EU nations. The recognition of these racisms is crucial in uncovering the colonial logic of contemporary neoliberalism that does not forcefully challenge nation states' sovereignty, but is, amongst other things, expanding through foreign direct investment, Europeanization process, and global consumption and cultural flows (Appadurai, 1996; Böröcz, 2001; Samaluk, forthcoming; Sassen, 2010).

Towards the end of 1980s, socialist CEE countries represented one of the last obstacles for the global expansion of neoliberalism and the EU market. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, Western Europe was confronted with the challenge of defining itself and its new role in relation towards its East and the rest of the world. EU expansion eastwards should thus be explored in terms of the interests and power relations that have formed in this process between East and West. In this regard, Böröcz (2001) argues that EU enlargement eastwards was

characterized by institutional elements of colonial imperial mechanisms such as unequal exchange, coloniality, export of governmentality, and geopolitics. According to research analyzing European Commission (EC) opinions on applicant countries, CEE was reinvented in the process of EU enlargement, with the selective aggregation of facts and fiction drawing on the familiar ideological Cold War divide and on the selective assessment of applicants' economic and political development with regard to an idealized EU state (Kovacs, 2001; Kovacs and Kabachnik, 2001; Sher, 2001). CEE was, upon a Western ideal, was assigned a homogeneous, ideological and obsolete socialist history that needed to be overcome by modern capitalist forms of production and exchange. Since post-socialism operates within the binary logic of obsolete socialism and modern capitalism, it masks itself as post-ideological, while in fact it imposes capitalist ideology, which is represented as the only remaining solution (Kuzmanić, 2008). Rather than the European social model, it was neoliberal politics that penetrated deeply into the future vision of re-united Europe (Bohle, 2006; Stenning et al., 2010).

The main incentive behind the EU enlargement eastwards, first vigorously promoted by Margaret Thatcher's administration, was to secure the liberalization and deregulation of CEE's political economies and thus open up the CEE markets for trade and investments (Bohle, 2006; Vaughan-Whitehead, 2003). Privatization of CEE was coupled with tax preferences for foreign investments that enabled economic neo-colonization by EU-based corporations that are today the biggest investors in CEE (Böröcz, 2001). This neo-colonization was promoted and enacted by various powerful (trans)national actors through discourses of 'return to Europe' (Stenning et al., 2010; Samaluk, 2014a; 2014b). These discourses were also home grown, wherein the self-colonial logic present within CEE has always rendered the politics of import models and of 'catching up' with Europe (Kiossev, 2011). According to Močnik (2002), one of the mechanisms by which relations of economic oppression and exploitation were introduced by political means was the self-image of 'young democracies' that had to implement 'democratic' standards. Again the (self-)colonial logic of 'catching up with Europe' resurfaced, but this time the 'democratization' process of 'the return to Europe' was also defined upon a new access to consumer markets, consumer choice, and rights as democratic expressions of individualism (Berdahl, 2005).

Among other things this completely transformed retail and consumption landscapes. While production was closing down and unemployment rose, there was a rapid spread of hyper-markets featuring multinational brands that brought in different consumption and work practices (Smith, 2007). Structural changes implemented under neoliberal transition also dramatically transformed everyday life in CEE in the spheres of work, housing, and social care, which often resulted

in increasing social stratification, unemployment, and emigration (Fihel and Okolski, 2009; Śliwa, 2009; Stenning et al., 2010). Changes were also characterized by new forms of nesting orientalisms within CEE that turned towards the 'losers' of transition, i.e. the new poor and unemployed, who became constructed as uncivilized and themselves responsible for not making it within the capitalist market of 'free' choice (Buchowski, 2006). The 'transcending of socialist past' thus also entailed the transformation of a state-dependent post-socialist subject into a proper self-dependent entrepreneurial 'European' person, who constantly needs to work at self-improvement (Ozoliņa-Fitzgerald, 2015). I have elsewhere argued that this (self-)colonial logic also guides CEE worker-consumers' self-making strategies to take up various low-skilled and low-paid working and training opportunities in the West (Samaluk, 2016a). In this paper, I will demonstrate how this neo-colonial logic affects the way CEE migrants are received and orientalized in the West and guides their strategies to re-claim their value.

## Orientalization of CEE migrants in the UK

An analysis of the media discourse of the UK populist press found that CEE migrants are homogenized as 'Eastern bloc migrants' who are running away from the 'bleak concrete slums of Iron Curtain Europe' and coming to the UK for one and only reason, to better themselves by offering cheap labor, or as 'welfare tourists', 'welfare spongers' or 'benefit scroungers' (Devine, 2004; Eastham and Hickley, 2004; Nicoli, 2006). After the economic crisis, these media portrayals were reinforced and legitimized also through increasingly racist political rhetoric and immigration policies[1] that justified further closure of UK borders for non-EU migrants and the scapegoating of CEE migrants for economic troubles and the diminishing welfare state. The scapegoating of CEE migrants is legitimized through orientalizing discourse. Similar to the problematic Third World referent, post-socialist countries are in the UK simply homogenized, and regarded as poor and underdeveloped:

> As soon as they know post-communist country, oh it was really horrible and they come from a poor sort of country, almost a third world country in their eyes. That's how I feel people often react to, when I tell them, where I am from. (Alenka)

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[1] The Government proposed a campaign to deter Bulgarian and Romanian immigrants, which was received with great criticism in these two states (Travis and Syal, 2013).

Alenka's example shows that the underdevelopment of the post-socialist space is constructed through the binary logic of capitalism and socialism. It is reduced to the imaginaries of the Soviet Bloc countries that are being portrayed as having a 'catastrophic economic situation' with high unemployment and only basic social security and medical provisions (Laughland, 2004: 59; see also Eastham and Hickley, 2004a). Since CEE workers are seen as coming from poor countries, they can simply be regarded as being satisfied with lower wage:

> There were quite a lot of frictions of how much I was going to get paid. There was this stereotype idea; this one is coming from abroad, from a poorer country, so he will be satisfied with lower wages. (Jernej)

Jernej's case shows that orientalization of CEE countries can serve employers to legitimize unequal treatment of CEE workers. The orientalization of CEE workers is, within the media discourse, furthermore reinforced by fears that 'Britain could be inundated with unqualified doctors and nurses from Eastern Europe' that could put patients' lives at risk (Nixon, 2004; Sun, 2004; Yapp, 2004). The orientalizing discourse thus depicts CEE professionals as a threat to UK professional standards and norms and, according to Sonja, in general constructs CEE migrants as being less educated:

> It's discriminatory, you know, like Eastern Europe is something worst then they the westerns and that we're something worst and less educated. (Sonja)

It is, then, no surprise that CEE workers often experience deskilling and devaluation and need quite sufficient labor time to acquire additional qualifications and work experience that are recognized in the UK labor market (Currie, 2007; Samaluk, 2015). As most of my informants were over time able to achieve professional mobility, some also remained fixed in low-skilled jobs assigned to CEE workers. These examples speak of the racist character of CEE workers' devaluation on the UK labor market, which is often hidden in mainstream research and also disables legal protection of CEE workers against discrimination, because national and class differences are, neither in the UK nor on the EU level, straightforwardly about discrimination.[2]

The stereotypical image of CEE worker, symbolized by the biggest Polish group, is that of a vegetable picker, plumber, domestic or service worker, and this is also how workers' bodies get symbolically consumed and utilized in the West (Anderson, 2000; Downey, 2008). For instance, CEE female migrants are one of the most common types of migrant domestic/care workers and they are often

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2    Implementation of EU anti-discrimination law in the member states: A comparative approach: http://www.era-comm.eu/oldoku/Adiskri/01_Overview/2011_04%20Chop in_EN.pdf.

just as highly educated as women they relieve from domestic tasks (Anderson, 2000; Currie, 2007). Moreover, Zuzana's example demonstrates that CEE migrants' class position effected by their orientalization is reinforced within local communities that mutually share new colonial subjects for various domestic servicing jobs:

> I was au-pair ... and I was also ironing and washing their stuff... I found it a bit odd and too much. I felt, God, Zuzanna you've got master's degree, what are you doing... And the family had another couple of people who were living in the same area. And one day they said, because I only got paid 50 pounds a week, they said, would you like to clean our house for three hours. I said yes... (Zuzanna)

Zuzanna, a qualified and experienced Polish teacher, who entered the UK as an au-pair, with the aim to improve her English before searching for a job at her skill level, was turned into a (hired-out) cleaner. Despite obvious personal and professional devaluation, Zuzanna still took the cleaning job in order to improve her poor material condition. Due to their poor pay and work location, domestic migrant workers are particularly vulnerable to exploitation (McDowell, 2009b). Zuzana's example demonstrates that the economic exploitation and racial differentiation of CEE workers is reinforced also through consumption processes and, moreover, has important gender dimensions. On the one hand, CEE women in the UK have been historically utilized as a desired commodity in domestic and front-line service sector jobs (McDowell, 2009a, 2009b; Samaluk, 2014a, 2014b). On the other hand, their sexualized image can also pose a threat to the national body.

Prior to the 2004 EU Enlargement, the UK press expressed fears 'that the entry of 10 new states into the EU next year will make it easy for pimps in countries such as Lithuania, the Czech Republic and Hungary to send prostitutes into western Europe' (Chapman, 2003). This was accompanied by popular fears of epidemics of highly contagious diseases coming from the East, especially when 'East European vice girls' and 'criminal gangs controlling them will target Western European clients', as well as fears of 'health tourism' (Daily Mail, 2004; Eastham and Hickley, 2004; Hartley et al., 2004; Marsh, 2003). This orientalist discourse is also very prevalent in mainstream popular culture[3] and affects the way CEE women are received in the UK. Irena explains her encounters with British men, who often regarded her as poor and in search of a rich male:

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3    A movie called Birthday Girl shows a tale about a British bank clerk ordering a bride
     to arrive from Russia. Also Capussotti (2007) shows how Italian movies have helped
     to reinforce the sexualised image of CEE women. Moreover, award winning CEE
     movies usually deal with problematic issues, such as discrimination, trafficking,
     prostitution or ethnic conflicts (Marc, 2009).

> I think mostly if I go out and I meet men... sometimes they make fun, like Eastern Europe, that women just come to pluck men of their money, this boyfriend that I have, he always keeps telling me that he has no money, that I wouldn't think for a second. (Irena)

This orientalist representation of CEE women translates into structural racism that affects their social status and determines the way they are received in the UK. For example, Agniezska explains how she experienced a loss in social status when she arrived to the UK and became sexualized and perceived as easily available for dating:

> When I arrived for the first time, definitively social status changed, because it was first time I ever came across labeling and across national stereotypes that were directed towards me as a Polish woman...I came across lots of very negative associations about Polish women, that they will be dating everybody, that they are very easy... I think this sexual labeling was quite strong. (Agniezska)

This sexual labeling also affects the way CEE women are treated on the UK labor market. Sylvia, an au-pair, who was earning additional money working in a coffee shop, explains how she was kept off the books and harassed by her manager:

> After one month working they still didn't want to give me a contract. And then I realized that this manager was kind of tricky, he wanted to go out with me...I kept refusing. And I think he realized that I won't do that... he called me once, telling me you haven't washed your kettle properly... you have no job anymore. (Sylvia)

Since she refused to go out with the manager, Sylvia was simply dismissed. Apart from employers, CEE women were also heavily exposed in relation to customers. This is vividly explained by Veronika, who did not have any guaranteed income while working as a fundraiser:

> When I worked as a fund-raiser and they said: 'OK, I'll sign if you go out with me!' And I said: 'Well I can't do that!' (...) And I had a few guys saying: 'Give me your number'. No, no, no! ... I had a lot of male customers, who actually signed up. One guy, he was just staring at me and I was filling the form and he was just staring at me and he then asked for my number, he gave me a kiss at the end. (...) We were only paid upon commission. I barely made enough money to survive. (Veronika)

Veronika's example shows how unpleasant encounters with male customers can be, and that the choice to perform a sexualized identity for the orientalizing gaze is primarily driven by an economic need. This can be particularly challenging for migrant workers who are required to re-learn cultures of emotional and embodied labor in the new context with different norms and expectations (Dyer et al., 2008; Samaluk, 2014a). Although most women I spoke to were resisting this newly imposed positioning, findings also demonstrate that some had little choice but to strategically perform the roles attached to them in order to enhance the consumption of their imaginary identities and thus earn a living wage.

## CEE workers' strategies to re-claim value in the UK and across transnational markets

This section explores Polish and Slovenian workers' strategies to re-claim their value in the UK and across transnational markets. As shown in the previous section, CEE workers are orientalized through the binary logic of socialism and capitalism, often simply homogenized through the 'Eastern European' referent, and thus assigned a subordinate class position on the UK labor market. Most commonly CEE workers feel resentment, distancing themselves from these generalized perceptions or mocking this newly imposed positioning. They do so also by evoking the (self-)colonial logic:

> I don't like being called Eastern European, it's just silly. I always kind of say, no it's actually Central Europe, because if you look at Ljubljana, it's to the West of Vienna. You wouldn't say Austria is in the East either, I always tell them that. (Alenka)

Alenka's example shows that she is trying to resist the 'Eastern European' referent by positioning Slovenia in relation to Austria on a geographical map. CEE workers often tend to use the positive image of Austria and historical link to Austro-Hungarian empire not only to establish a link to 'European culture' (Hipfl and Gronold, 2011), but as we see from Alenka's example, also to distinguish themselves in relation to the 'Eastern European' referent. This enables them to re-claim their value by portraying themselves as more Austrian/European/Western. By doing that they also start occidentalizing themselves as the West of the Other. Within the neo-colonial logic, this occidentalization is evoked by establishing links to capitalism and speaks of travelling nesting orientalisms, which are constructed upon the ability to 'transcend socialist past'. Marjan's example shows how Slovenian workers generate self-value by distancing themselves from former Soviet bloc countries:

> It is a huge difference, we knew that, because we had a different system. We were allowed to travel. And the biggest difference between other eastern European countries and Slovenia was that we were allowed to have private businesses. So I had private business before democracy and they couldn't. We were a bit better adapted to capitalism. (Marjan)

Marjan's example shows how orientalization is built upon historical and socio-economic differences that encompass different relations to capitalist production and consumption. In this regard, Slovenians emphasize their ability to have private businesses, to travel, and to access Western goods during the socialist years. Also Vesna's example demonstrates that some perceive themselves as being better adapted to capitalism and as such more modernized:

> I would say that Slovenian people are a bit more modernized... But these eastern
> countries and Hungary, they are still a bit like that, socialistic. (Vesna)

These examples demonstrate how nesting orientalisms, built upon the binary
logic of socialism and capitalism, are used by Slovenian migrants to re-claim
their value by distancing themselves from workers from former Soviet Bloc
countries. Contemporary Slovenian migrants claim their superiority by
presenting themselves as being more capitalist, although one could argue exactly
the opposite regarding their structural origin. Unlike many CEE countries that
went through neoliberal shock therapy that was rapidly eradicating socialist
institutions, Slovenia took a gradualist approach to transition which enabled the
preservation of more socialist elements within their transitional political
economy (such as maintenance of public assets and services, and workers'
standards and rights) (Mencinger, 2004). This indicates that, in the
contemporary post-socialist world, the binary division between capitalism and
socialism act as an orientalizing device that legitimizes the framing of
neoliberalism as *the modernizing project*.

This modernizing project is also geared towards disciplining neo-colonial
subjects through the means of globalized consumption. Although consumption
trips to the West have lessened due to the opening of Eastern markets, they still
continue and also today form an important part of valuation process. In this
regard, Dyta explains how her social status has improved once she moved from
Poland to London and was able to access and afford the style of a young person:

> In terms of clothes or food, I would say that probably it was like a better status... it
> was easier to buy stuff that you would like to buy as a young person, but it was
> quite difficult with housing, because I was not able to get my own flat. (Dyta)

Although unaffordable housing was perceived by all my interviewees as a fall in
social status, the increased choice for consuming fashion and cultural trends,
and for self-making, was seen by many young workers as an incentive to move to
the metropolis. This choice is often illusionary and limited to high earners
and/or those who are willing to compensate in other areas of life, for instance
housing or family life. Amongst my informants were hospitality staff and
domestic workers who could earn as little as £10-15,000 per year and, on the
other hand, various professionals, bankers, and managers who made over
£60,000 per year. This difference of course affects their consumption capacity
and strategies to re-claim their value. Accounts of my informants were often
ambiguous, showing a love-hate relationship to London. On one hand, there was
thrill and symbolic value behind the choices London offers, but there was also
the anxiety behind their choice to migrate as some of them were facing economic
hardship, poor housing, and personal and/or professional devaluation. In this

regard, Ong (1999) argues that there is a need to take into account the political economy of time and space which can expose class stratification linked to global capitalism and uncover that not everyone can take equal advantage of mobility and transnationality. Yet, regardless of migrants' life-quality, the western metropolitan location further also acted to enhance CEE migrants' value within their places of origin, as explained by Peter:

> Well I guess everybody treats you with a bit more respect I think ...my friends treat me with a bit more like OK, he was abroad, he knows things. (Peter)

The self-colonial imagination of the West present within CEE thus earns migrant workers a particular form of respect and a symbolic prestige. Miha further explains how this symbolic value attached to the West can simply be interpreted as a success story:

> When I go back people look at me as a great success and that I had great courage to move. And if you mention then that you live in the UK, they connect this with that you are already a millionaire or you will be soon. Let's say, I was interviewed for a local newspaper and in my interview, I tried to be like, I stated it's a piece of cake, you just go. (Miha)

As seen above, this (self-)colonial imagination of the West and the value attached to the metropolitan centers also pushes some migrant workers to exaggerate or paint a distorted picture within their places of origin in order to preserve this newly earned symbolic value. This not only maintains the superior image of the West but can also be used by migrant workers as a strategy to hide their true condition. Although this has been observed also in relation to migrants from other postcolonial spaces (Ong, 1999, Kelly and Lusis, 2006), there is specificity in relation to CEE subjects. This comes in the form of an explicit association with capitalist structures rather than an association with 'Western-ness', and hence implicitly capitalism, as in the case of migrants from the global south. For CEE workers, the opportunity of being trained within the proper Western capitalist organization represents a self-making strategy based upon the anticipation of future profits that will come once they transcend the socialist past (Samaluk, 2016a). This can also have very detrimental effects on those who are yet to migrate West and experience the true nature of its structural conditions.

## Returning the gaze

CEE migrants' reflective encounter with the West also evokes a critical comparative gaze that challenges the (self-)colonial logic, offers new insights upon increasing social stratification in the UK, and retrieves memories of possibilities that are being erased through the neoliberal colonial project. Anna

recalls how she was surprised to discover so much poverty in seemingly developed West that is perceived as paradise in Poland:

> I was surprised that West, that we see as paradise is not paradise at all. People live in poverty and apparently it is a better world. I just started realizing that people here are actually quite poor and they had less and everything is less quality. (Anna)

CEE migrants' reflective encounter with the West can thus challenge the (self-) colonial logic embodied in CEE migrants' history and the binary neo-colonial divisions still present within Europe. Most informants have expressed their bewilderment of the enormous distributive injustice they encountered in the UK. In this regard, Marjan describes the enormous income and wealth inequality he encountered in the UK as a low paid worker servicing the local and global elites:

> They tailored us; bespoke suits, they spend hundreds and hundreds and they paid us minimum wage. This is this discrepancy. Only for one occasion, the Queen was invited. And for that occasion they paid tailors, just to properly dress us. They paid us peanuts; they paid so much for that. Such suits can cost 3000-4000 pounds. And the same in [international hotel chain], it was one party. They cost a few million pounds. It was for 400 hotel managers from all over... It never happens in Slovenia, so London is crazy place. (Marjan)

Marjan's account exposes the on-going colonial logic in which neo-colonial subjects are simply treated as commodified assets that act as hangers for the symbolic display of the wealth and status of modern masters consuming their bodies and services. Apart from segmenting diverse workforce in racial, class, and gender terms, UK managers also discipline workers to perform particular identities that define organizational corporate 'doxa' in terms of embodied labor towards customers (Witz et al., 2003). Service workers are thus groomed to enhance customers' higher status by performing to their distinctive taste embodied in uniform, language, and their subordinate class position. This gives wealthy modern master-consumers increasing power to enact colonial relations[4] and to violate workers' rights without much consequence. There is an increasing divide in income and wealth distribution in the UK, and London in particular, as well as an emerging polarization of job quality and employment conditions, which makes it one of the most unequal societies in Europe (McDowell, 2009b; Wills et al., 2010). Moreover, Marjan's bewilderment over this inequality also offers a comparative gaze exposing that, in Slovenia, due to its socialist history,

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4   For instance, currently the UK Equalities and Human Rights Commission investigates a case of a Rochdale minicab firm that allows customers to choose the race of their driver. Guardian: http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2014 /oct/22/equalities-watchdog-to-investigate-white-drivers-policy-of-roch dale-minicab-firm.

this enormous distributive injustice is still publicly regarded as unacceptable and also somehow regulated.[5]

Furthermore, Aleš explains about differences in traditions of service work between Slovenia and the UK that result in very different relationships between customers and workers in these two countries:

> Back home [Slovenia] is seen more like, it's more equal kind of relationship between customer or whatever kind of work you are doing. They don't see you as doing them a kind of service; they just see you providing them with result. (Aleš)

Aleš's example indicates more equal relations amongst the two in Slovenia, suggesting a less commodified view of services. These differences are a product of historically diverse forms of production and exchange present in CEE that can also result in CEE workers' quite distinctive display of attitudes towards customers, which are not desired in the UK economy where the customer always comes first. In this regard, McDowell (2009b) shows how hotel managers in London were often not satisfied with CEE workers' performance; i.e. they did not perform their identities in such a way as to sufficiently increase the symbolic value of customers. Just as some CEE workers display different attitudes towards customers, so do they often critique privatization and commodification of public services:

> British people are the only people I've heard talking out loud about how... whether to go to university or not should be determined by your parent's earnings and not your intellectual potential... Even when we are talking to people who have been living here longer and are not that keen on leaving the country, they all say they will never have kids in this country... The country is divided. I think private schools are great, but you have to pay a lot and not everybody can afford it. (Magda)

Magda expresses her bewilderment of the distributive injustice she encountered in the UK, which segregates spaces, disables equal access to basic services, turns citizens into consumers of privatized and commodified services, and institutionalizes inherited privilege. Also, research shows that the 'elite' British class occupies leadership positions and has very restricted upward mobility into its ranks (Savage et al., 2013). The above example demonstrates that distributive injustice in accessing basic services also importantly shapes CEE migrants'

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5    The Law prohibits managers in public enterprises for their salaries to exceed the 5 time of an average wage: http://www.delo.si/novice/politika/lahovnikov-zakon-ostaja-tudi-za-banke-v-likvidaciji.html. Recently the Minister for education had to resign due to public pressures, because as a University professor she was generating disproportianately high income through additional research project contracts: http://www.rtvslo.si/slovenija/ministrica-v-odstopu-o-honorarjih-ni-bil-proracunski-temvec-trzni-denar/360099.

decision not to raise children in the UK. Unlike in the UK, where class differences are awkwardly positioned in relation to other differences, because they are not straightforwardly about discrimination (Haylett, 2003), redistributional justice still forms an important part of CEE workers' history and thus informs their re-valuating and resistive strategies. This also has important gender dimensions, as is visible in Slovenian women's resistance against the poor work-life balance and childcare services in the UK that take away their historical ability to remain on the labor market once having children (Samaluk, 2016b). Many female informants thus revealed plans to return once they had children. Moreover, contrary to popular perceptions in the UK of 'welfare scroungers' from CEE, many informants have also been as consumers migrating back to CEE for better quality and cheaper specialist healthcare and other services. CEE workers' comparative gaze thus not only exposes how neoliberal colonial project increases divisions on various local and global scales, but also retrieves memories of possibilities grounded within socialist and feminist arguments that combine politics of recognition with politics of redistribution (Fraser, 1997).

## Discussion and conclusion

By exploring contemporary CEE migration to the UK through a postcolonial lens, this article provided an understanding of the post-socialist space beyond western knowledge production and thus offered new insights on the on-going colonial logic underpinning the transnational economy, CEE migrants' positioning in the UK, their agency and diversity. It exposes on-going colonial processes that characterize post-socialist world and thus contributes to growing body of research that utilizes postcolonial approach to study the post-socialist space (Böröcz, 2001; Buchowski, 2006; Chari and Verdery, 2009; Stenning and Hörschelmann, 2008). The article exposes the historical orientalization of CEE and its subjects, which has throughout history marked its peripheral status within Europe and evoked the (self-)colonial 'catching up' model that constitutes CEE imagined communities and informs various racisms and nesting orientalisms. Similar to Bakić-Hayden (1995) and Buchowski (2006), the article extends Said's depiction of orientalism by showing that the east and west binary is also importantly linked to the binary division of capitalism and socialism.

Particularly the article expands the understanding of orientalism in relation to transnational consumption and migration processes. It demonstrates that, during Bloc divisions, nesting orientalisms were importantly linked to possibilities for movement and the consumption of Western goods that arose from variegated CEE socialisms, and have further intensified with global

expansion of neoliberalism that dismissed class politics, while delivering diversity and identity politics to the market (Duggan, 2003; Lentin and Titley, 2011). In this regard, the analysis shows that post-socialist transition and Europeanization process was a form of neo-colonialism that again constructed CEE as obsolete and in need of modernizing; this time in the name of transcending the socialist past. The article demonstrates that this neo-colonial process, on one hand, results in the orientalization of CEE migrants in the West. On the other, it evokes the (self-)colonial logic of 'catching up with Europe' that informs migrants' strategies to reclaim their value also through travelling nesting orientalisms. As such, the article exposes spatial and cultural class stratification amongst diverse CEE migrants and demonstrates that the binary division between capitalism and socialism acts as an orientalizing device that legitimizes the framing of neoliberalism as *the modernizing project*. This modernizing project is also geared towards disciplining neo-colonial subjects through the means of globalized consumption. The findings presented demonstrate that CEE workers' consumption of the West, and the (self-)colonial imagination of it, guides workers' exit and transnational strategies, and inform their choice to work and live in the West. In this it complements existing research providing a more in-depth understanding of CEE (labor) migration to the UK, various types of migration, and reasons why CEE migrant worker-consumers are, despite their often precarious condition, willing to work and live in the western metropolis (Samaluk, 2016a).

Nevertheless workers reflective encounter with the West also evokes a critical comparative gaze that challenges the (self-)colonial logic, offers new insights upon increasing social stratification in the UK, and retrieves memories of possibilities that are being erased through neoliberal colonial project. The postcolonial approach to studying post-socialist space thus offers a powerful critique of the epistemic violence grounded within within the on-going colonial binary division of seemingly modern capitalist West and obsolete socialist East that characterises also today's post-socialist world and suppresses any alternatives to global expansion of neoliberalism. Exposing this epistemic violence is thus important also in recognizing and giving voice to emerging struggles within the European periphery against the neoliberal-induced austerity, and in building (trans)national solidarity amongst diverse and often divided groups.

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# 'Health and ancestry start here': Race and prosumption in direct-to-consumer genetic testing services

Sibille Merz

## abstract

This article argues that online direct-to-consumer genetic testing (DTC GT) companies such as deCODEme, 23andMe, and Pathway Genomics are not only paradigmatic of the participatory turn in scientific research, but also of the conflation of production and consumption in post-industrial capitalism. It analyses the activities of one of the largest DTC GT companies, 23andMe, to contend that, far from constituting a gift exchange, consumer participation represents a central aspect in the production of the company's (bio)value. However, targeting especially African Americans and other participants with African ancestry with research projects such as Roots into the Future and the African Ancestry Project, 23andMe cannot be understood outside the racial logics of contemporary genomic research practices, and of (bio)capitalism more broadly. The article therefore focuses on the interrelations between production, consumption and the reproduction of racial categories in this particular form of corporate online research. It concludes that 23andMe relies for its success on both the labour of African American 'prosumers' and on the prior system of racial signification through which corporeal matter and genetic information only appear interesting. As such, it exemplifies that raciality operates precisely through the inclusion, not exclusion, of racial subjects, here into the circuits of user-generated value creation. The specificities of black (im)material labour therefore cannot be grasped by contemporary theories on post-Fordist capitalism but need a deeper engagement with the structural legacies of slavery, colonialism and racial violence.

## Introduction

But standing on the shores of what is known as the 'Slave River' near the Cape Coast of Ghana, where men and women were once bathed before they were sold

into slavery, Mike felt a sense of peace instead of horror. 'We had a ritual', he said' (Mike, 23andMe consumer).[1]

The California-based direct-to-consumer genetic testing (DTC GT) enterprise 23andMe, founded in April 2006, is currently one of the largest and most popular personal genomics companies (Tutton and Prainsack, 2011). As part of their African Ancestry Project, 23andMe offers free test kits to users of their services who have four grandparents from one or several of the African countries worst affected by the slave trade in order to provide African Americans[2] more insight into their own geographical ancestries. 23andMe claims to unite families by helping customers to 'find DNA relatives and track [their] ethnic background', hopes to 'improve diversity in research' and to 'empower' African Americans 'both with their own health and ancestry information'. Mike's story is therefore only one of thousands by African Americans who have used the company's genetic testing services by 23andMe to fill in gaps in their family history and trace their ancestors several generations back. For many, this opportunity presents a much longed for personal and political goal and, in Mike's words, a 'powerful and healing experience'. The African Ancestry Project has thereby built on 23andMe's previous Roots into the Future study which, as the company states, aimed to increase the understanding of the interrelations between DNA and health, especially for diseases more common amongst African Americans. In 2012, the company presented its research findings, drawing on the analysis of the genetic material of 10,182 African American participants, which reportedly confirmed genetic associations for BMI, height, osteoporosis, type 2 diabetes, lupus, and migraines.

23andMe's recent move to include African Americans into their research – a study in 2011 had shown that around three-quarters of the company's customers self-identified as being of European descent (Schubarth, 2011) – follows a larger trend of minority inclusion and diversification of bioscientific research practices, often as a result of the political struggle by patient groups and activists for equal

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1     All quotes are taken from the 23andMe website and blog, www.23andme.com and blog.23andme.com, last accessed on 25 October 2014. My findings are equally based on the analysis of the main 23andMe materials, including the company website, blog, privacy statements, press releases, and Facebook posts, focusing on the entries and comments related to Roots to the Future and the African Ancestry Project, as well as two research articles available by 23andMe researchers (Eriksson et al., 2010; Do et al., 2011).

2     I here follow 23andMe terminology and use the term 'African American', rather than the more inclusive and political concept of 'black' to highlight the necessity of having African ancestry to be included into 23andMe's research projects. When I use 'black' I refer to the political concept that denotes people racially marked as black, independent of their concrete ancestries.

representation. As Steven Epstein (1995) illustrates, for example, HIV/AIDS activists in the US successfully fought for their inclusion into clinical trials and constituted themselves as credible participants in biomedical knowledge production during the 1980s. However, the services and practices by 23andMe differ significantly from such earlier endeavours. As Anna Harris, Sally Wyatt and Susan E. Kelly (2013) show, through the analysis of over 600,000 genetic markers across the human genome and marketing personalised risk profiles directly to their consumers to build up research databases, 23andMe distinguishes itself from earlier participatory projects by the digital dimensions of its research practices, and the large datasets the latter enables them to produce. Both allow the company to offer entirely new kinds and scales of customer involvement in scientific research. As a consequence, 23andMe, and its research arm 23andWe, owe a large percentage of their success (and annual revenue) to their concept of 'web-based', 'participant-driven', 'customer-based', and 'self-selected' research (Eriksson et al., 2010; Do et al., 2011).

Existing scholarship on DTC GT companies has critically engaged issues such as the ethical dimensions of providing genetic (risk) information to participants outside of the clinical context (Prainsack and Wolinsky, 2010); questions of data security and privacy (Hall and Gartner, 2009); different subject formations emerging from participation in genomic research (Tutton and Prainsack, 2011); and the reliability of self-reported data (Levina, 2010). However, it has not robustly addressed the implications of these developments for the broader economic and cultural structure of contemporary capitalism. The contribution by Harris et al. (2013) represents a notable exception here. Drawing on Tiziana Terranova's concept of 'free labour' to describe the various activities of online users through which they contribute to the creation of economic value, for example for Google (Terranova, 2000; see also Moulier Boutang, 2012), they argue that by contributing genetic information through online surveys and spit kits, consumers of 23andMe's services are central to the production of the company's scientific success and economic value. While 23andMe does *some* work 'in terms of organizing the analytical and research network and providing a platform for exchange', as Harris et al. (2013: 250) write, this work can be characterised as merely adding to what is often seen as an altruistic donation or gift exchange by the consumers of the company's services. As they therefore argue, 23andMe consumers are central to the production of biovalue for the company. While the company's research might be rewarding for consumers in terms of acquiring information about their own genetic risk factors, 'ultimately 23andMe accumulates the greatest (financial) benefit' (Harris et al., 2013: 243).

In this article, I follow Harris et al. in their focus on the labour that is involved in research participation and the consumer contribution to economic value creation.

However, I expand their argument in mainly two ways. First, I read the services by companies such as 23andMe as illustrating the changing forms of value creation in contemporary capitalism, rather than merely representing recent changes in medico-scientific research. I argue that the practices by 23andMe are paradigmatic for larger transformations in the capitalist mode of production that not only distort the boundaries between production and reproduction but also between production and consumption. Drawing on the concepts of 'free labour' (Terranova 2000), 'prosumption' (Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010; Toffler, 1980) and 'clinical labour' (Cooper and Waldby, 2014), I highlight the ways in which forms of commercial online research dislocate the relationship between production and consumption. Second, I focus on 23andMe's services that specifically target African Americans, and thus on the racial logics underlying DTC GT projects. As the abundant literature on the reification of race as a quasi-biological category suggests, the economic and cultural practices of companies such as 23andMe cannot be understood outside the racial logics of contemporary (bio)capitalism. With projects such as Roots into the Future and the African Ancestry Project, 23andMe capitalises on the revival of scientific ideas about a shared genetic makeup amongst members of what is perceived as the same 'racial' group. 23andMe hence not only benefits from the unremunerated contributions by their consumers but also through the assumption that African Americans differ from their white counterparts *qua* biology. Such an understanding misses the complex interplay of genetic and socio-cultural factors, not least the enduring legacies of colonial racism and slavery. Drawing on Denise Ferreira da Silva's (2007) and Barnor Hesse's (2007) arguments about race as a structuring attribute of European modernity that marks specific bodies for economic exploitation, I show that 23andMe's interpellation of racial subjects re-produces the effects of racial violence at the level of signification, and hence allows for the continued extraction of value from their unremunerated labour. By bringing together these two bodies of literature on the interrelations between information capitalism and medico-scientific research, and on the re-emergence of the scientific interest in race, I contribute to a critique of the distortion between work and consumption in contemporary biocapitalism more broadly, and to its racial underpinnings more specifically.

To build this argument, I first sketch some of the central arguments on the forms of labour and prosumption in the era of Web 2.0 to show how production and consumption become increasingly blurred. I particularly focus on what Melinda Cooper and Catherine Waldby (2014) have termed 'clinical labour' to describe the experiences of today's surrogates, organ donors and clinical trial participants as another form of (often free) labour in contemporary capitalism. 23andMe consumers, as I argue, perform both free/online and clinical/material labour to create profit for the company. The second part of the paper links this

literature to the recent resurgence in genomic and biomedical interest in conceptualising race as a scientifically meaningful category and draws out how 23andMe capitalises on the reawakened acceptability of race as biological reality. This, I contend, shows that the production of scientific or 'expert' knowledge about race continues to produce African Americans as essentially different, and hence recuperates the logic of racial signification lodged in the discourse of modernity. I argue, following Silva (2007), that raciality constitutes a strategy of power that is productive of specific bodies and spaces, rather than operating merely through exclusion. As such, the neoliberal discourse of equality and the inclusion of African Americans into the circuits of biocapitalist value creation does not mark the end of racial violence but represents its very foundation.

## Production and consumption in post-industrial capitalism

In order to describe the shift from industrial to post-industrial forms of labour and larger transformations in the capitalist mode of production since the early 1970s, Tiziana Terranova (2000) develops the concept of 'free labour' to understand the strategies of valorisation in the digital economy. Drawing on Maurizio Lazzarato's notion of 'immaterial labour', defined as the labour that 'produces the informational and cultural content of the commodity' (Lazzarato, 1996: 133), she argues that such a conceptualisation provides a useful lens through which to analyse the labour performed in the digital media industry. It particularly illuminates the free labour of internet users participating in reading and commenting on websites, blogs, chat rooms and mailing lists.[3] Fifteen thousand 'volunteers', for example, hosted AOL chats for several years without being offered compensation for their labour. While some have turned against AOL and asked the US Department of Labor to investigate whether the company owed them back wages, most stayed on, attracted to the creative possibilities their contributions may offer. As Terranova argues, criticising perspectives that represent the internet as the manifestation of principles of self-organisation and democratisation, the provision of such free labour is 'a trait of the cultural economy at large, and an important, and yet undervalued, force in advanced capitalist societies' (2000: 33).

The direct extraction of surplus value from online contributions in the form of genetic information and self-reported data on phenotypic traits, habits and

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3   Engaging the various legitimate critiques of the concept of immaterial labour (see for example Dyer-Witheford, 2001) is beyond the scope of this paper; I contend that its main argument, the increasing significance of cultural content, services, and other intangible commodities for the generation of value, remains central to our understanding of the shifts from industrial to post-industrial capitalism.

lifestyles, as well as communications in chats, blog posts and community forums by 23andMe's customers, is therefore paradigmatic of the forms of valorisation in post-industrial capitalism. Consumers of 23andMe's services double as producers of online content and are therefore, in the process, transformed into 'prosumers' (Fuchs, 2010; Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010; Toffler, 1980). Even though prosumption is not an entirely new phenomenon (Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010), the recent spike in the significance of web-based, user-generated content points towards the increasing centrality of prosumption as a model of value creation. While the degree of exploitation might often be difficult to assess, as users seem to enjoy what they do and voluntarily devote long hours to it (or, as in the case of 23andMe, receive 'wages' in the shape of crucial information about themselves), they argue that such business models exploit their consumers similar to the way in which subsistence wages were paid to workers in industrial capitalism. While the early capitalists 'underpaid' their workers to reap high profits, today they 'overcharge' their consumers not only by having them bear the costs of production, but also through their production of increasingly 'unreasonable' profits (*ibid.*: 20).

However, the labour performed by 23andMe customers also involves the very material ways in which human *in vivo* biology is enrolled into the contemporary labour process through the transfer of bodily tissue or the production of experimental data. As Cooper and Waldby explicate, the 'life science industries rely on an extensive yet unacknowledged labor force whose service consists in the visceral experience of experimental drug consumption, hormonal transformation, more or less invasive biomedical procedures, ejaculation, tissue extraction, and gestation' (2014: 7). These contributions to pharmaceutical and biomedical capital, they state, constitute a form of 'clinical labour' rather than an altruistic donation that could be grasped through the lens of bioethical evaluation and standards. Instead, they need to be located in the realm of capitalist value production. What distinguishes this new form of low-level service work in the knowledge economy from others such as cleaning or catering, however, is that their labour is fully internal to the creation of value in the biomedical industries: the data generated by clinical trial participants, for example, is immediately fed into the development of a new drug application (*ibid.*: 9). Hence, while Cooper and Waldby acknowledge the contributions of critical theorists such as Lazzarato and Terranova on the centrality of the forms of free immaterial labour in post-Fordist capitalism, they rightfully point out that existing work too easily glosses over distinctions within the post-industrial economy. It often ignores the endurance of industrial as well as the rise of specifically post-Fordist forms of material labour and their gendered, classed, and racial divisions.

The economic and cultural practices of 23andMe, as this brief review has illustrated, are paradigmatic of the logics of post-Fordist valorisation and the conflation of production and consumption. The free, immaterial labour of contributing information online, as well as the free – but very much material – clinical labour of submitting saliva samples for genetic analysis constitute central revenue generators for the company. Indeed, 23andMe's business model closely resembles that of Google. It is perhaps unsurprising that Google founder Sergey Brin had been married to 23andMe co-founder Anne Wojcicki and has invested USD3.9 million in his wife's company (Pálsson, 2009: 295). But not only overlaps in personnel and financing illustrate the bond between Google and 23andMe. A brief glance at its privacy statement reveals the extent to which the company, like Google, directly or indirectly valorises user information: 23andMe may, for example, provide 'Personal Information to...third-party service providers' or 'disclose to third parties, and/or use in our Services...Aggregated Genetic and Self-Reported Information', including information about disease conditions and other health-related data, as well as information about personal traits, ethnicity and family history. While users may decline to participate in additional surveys and request to keep their personal information anonymous, the company reserves the right to share the anonymized, aggregated forms of consumers' genetic and self-reported information. It also utilises user content, that is, all information transmitted 'whether publicly or privately', as 'text, software, music, audio, photographs, graphics, video, messages, or other materials', as well as web behavioural information such as IP address, browser type, operating system, clickstream data, Internet Service Provider, referring and exit pages, and date and time stamps. This data, as the statement elaborates, can be sold on to any third party the company wishes to cooperate with: '23andMe may enter into commercial arrangements to enable partners to provide our Service to their customers and/or to provide you access to their products and services'. Harris et al. (2013) rightfully take this as evidence that user contributions through the internet constitute a central resource for the company's accumulation of pharmaceutical and diagnostic biocapital.

Indeed, 23andMe is currently involved in Alzheimer research which may lead to new findings about, or potential treatments for, the prevention of the disease. It has already filed patent applications for novel polymorphisms associated with Parkinson's disease after a successful cooperation with the Michael J. Fox Foundation and the Parkinson's Institute (Ray, 2011). According to the market research start-up Crunchbase, this business model has allowed 23andMe to yield over USD111.9 million from eleven different investors such as Russian billionaire Yuri Milner, Google, Johnson & Johnson Development Corporation and, most lately, the US National Institutes of Health (Anon., 2014). Hence, what Terranova and others have identified as the free labour that is central to capitalist

valorisation in digital economies, 23andMe illustrates by reaping the profits created through the contributions of its consumers. The labour performed by consumers thereby consists of both the submission of information online and of saliva samples for DNA analysis, and hence also constitutes a form of what Cooper and Waldby have termed clinical labour.[4]

As I argue in this paper, however, the contributions of African Americans present a particularly valuable resource for 23andMe. Richard Tutton and Barbara Prainsack (2011: 1088) highlight the company's assumption that 'customers interested in genealogy represented a significant market share', driving the company's decision to split their services into separate strands for ancestry tracking and health testing (as well as increasing the fees for both strands). The respective projects targeting African Americans, the African Ancestry Project, and Roots into the Future, promise to provide statistical information on different ancestries and geographical origins, allowing African Americans to recreate their genealogy distorted by the slave trade. The company also claims to have found evidence hinting at African American's genetic susceptibility for numerous health-related conditions and diseases such as osteoporosis, type 2 diabetes and migraines. This focus on 'African American genomes' can only be understood through the recent re-emergence of bioscientific interest in race as a biological category and the economic interest in product differentiation and personalised service delivery.

In the next section, I briefly trace this re-emergence of race as a scientific variable to explore how the new expert discourse on race shapes 23andMe's business model, and inflects the understanding of how the conflation of production and consumption in the contemporary economy is deeply structured by the racial logics of neoliberal capitalism. As I will show, 23andMe's concept is indicative of how science continues to produce knowledge about race – albeit in a flattened, egalitarian, neoliberal frame – that has been central to the inscription of race in modernity.

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4   In contrast to the labour performed by surrogates, clinical trial participants, or tissue donors, who generally receive at least some form of compensation, the labour of 23andMe customers remains entirely unremunerated. Similarly, it does not take place in a carefully controlled, clinical environment but is based on the post-Fordist logics of outsourcing labour processes to the home and the individual contractor. As such, the labour performed by 23andMe customers challenges existing concepts of both free and clinical labour, and points towards the increasing trend of digitising and commodifying health services, centrally based on the contribution of (potential) patients and the valorisation of their data.

## 23andMe and the new value of race

Scientific research into racial differences has only recently recovered from the horrors of World War II. While the idea that race had a biological basis was not entirely abandoned in the aftermath of the War, as often assumed, but was reinterpreted and added an egalitarian claim (Reardon, 2005), the decades up to the 1990s were characterised by the politically and ethically motivated colourblindness of bioscientific research, careful to avoid the charges of scientific racism. In the early 1990s, however, this insistence on sameness made way for a race-positive paradigm of diversity and inclusion. The renewed interest in race was, in part, sparked by the potential for commercial gains by pharmaceutical companies such as NitroMed, the company behind the world's first race-specific drug BiDil, and private ancestry testing services such as 23andMe. The search for medically salient racial differences is certainly in line with the broader neoliberal interest in commodifying racial disparities and fuelled by the prospect for lucrative intellectual patents. It was, however, a whole set of factors and developments in policy, research, and anti-racist activism that triggered this new interest in racial difference (Epstein, 2008). The failure of the Human Genome Project to include ethnic and racial minorities, for example, led to the launch of the Human Genome Diversity Project as an 'affirmative action' response, called for by anti-racist activists as well as scientists who often view their own work as a vital contribution to the elimination of racial inequality (Bliss, 2012; Fullwiley, 2008).[5] The fusion of biomedical and governmental aims has led to an 'inclusion-and-difference-paradigm' in biomedicine or the 'inclusion of members of various groups generally considered to have been underrepresented previously as subjects in clinical studies; and the measurement, within those studies, of differences (by sex, race, ethnicity, and age) with regard to treatment effects, disease progression, or biological processes' (Epstein, 2008: 802).

The increasing popularity and technological sophistication of genomics has thereby led to the re-emergence of the belief in significant biological differences between social groups conceived as races, as well as their differential disease predispositions. Shortly after the findings of the Human Genome Project

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5    Stanford population geneticist and founder of the Human Genome Diversity Project, Luigi Luca Cavalli-Sforza, for example, states that one of the aims of the HGDP was to 'make a significant contribution to the elimination of racism' (Cavalli-Sforza, 2005, cited in Olson, 2001). Diana Fullwiley (2008) in her ethnographic study of the Genetics of Asthma Laboratory at the University of San Francisco's (UCSF) General Hospital has also shown that genomicists, and biomedical scientists more generally, often have a vested interest in producing racial difference for anti-racist and egalitarian aims, and name their own biography and experiences of racism and exclusion as one of the main reasons for their career choices (see also Nelson, 2008).

revealed that we share 99.9% of our genetic code with every other human being, the US National Institutes of Health launched the Pharmacogenomics Research Network that assumed that the 0.1% that we do *not* share was actually quite considerable for the understanding of human diversity (Fullwiley, 2008). Some population geneticists were soon convinced that genomic research had finally confirmed the existence of five major continental populations that correspond roughly to what are commonly understood as races (Andreasen, 1998; Edwards, 2003; Risch et al., 2002). Even though most of the current research on genetic ancestry and disease predisposition does not insist on the existence of biological race per se – wary, perhaps, of the political and ethical implications – and perceives race as a biosocial assemblage, it often uses race as a proxy for variations in the distribution of single nucleotide polymorphisms (SNPs) and other genetic markers, allegedly until the discovery of a less biased term to describe such differences.[6] As such, genomics may revive older discourses of biological determinism, even though it departs significantly from the argumentation of nineteenth century scientific racism.

As Nadia Abu El-Haj (2007) shows, in the early stages of racial science, race thinking was primarily typological thinking; researchers aimed at producing scientific truth about race through measurability. Here, research into race constituted a 'taxonomic enterprise' which involved collecting more and more data 'on the basis of which racial differences were specified and demonstrated, garnering a body of scientific evidence regarding those differences believed to index the distinctions between "natural kinds"' (Abu El-Haj, 2007: 286). Once Darwinian ideas took hold, however, it became increasingly difficult to perceive races as static, unchanging essences. In the wake of World War II, 'race' had been redefined as 'population', which allowed for the possibility of existing genetic heterogeneity and changeability. It also allowed for these genetic differences among populations to be quantitative or relative rather than qualitative and absolute (Gannett, 2004); typological thinking was replaced by statistical thinking. In contrast to both typological and population thinking though, genomic ideas about race focus on the individual rather than on the population as a whole. In line with the molecular optic of contemporary bioscientific research practices, race has been 'molecularised' (Fullwiley, 2007). Unlike earlier practices in the phenotypically based race sciences, today's molecular biological laboratories establish correlations of disease risk and racial

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6   Pharmacogenomics is a case in point: while the ultimate aim of personalized medicine is to tailor pharmaceuticals to the unique genetic makeup of an individual, race has been used as the concept that comes closest to describing actual genetic subgroups of the population.

difference by 'reading race in the DNA' (Fullwiley, 2008: 697).[7] While genomics may not have ultimately confirmed the existence of biological races, it has certainly resuscitated the public, and seemingly scientific, debate about real existing genetic differences between so-called races without unleashing an ethical crisis over the stakes of race-positive research.

*Roots into the Future*

The services offered by 23andMe draw on – and significantly benefit from – this new understanding of race. Roots into the Future, for example, aims to 'increase understanding of how DNA plays a role in health and wellness, especially for diseases more common in the African American community'. It establishes an unmediated link between the genetic makeup of African Americans and their likelihood to develop hypertension, heart failure, or type 2 diabetes. While the attention to racial health disparities is, without doubt, much needed, the representation of a purely genetic relationship between racial group and disease predisposition is misleading at best, and dangerous at worst. The geneticisation of causality risks ignoring that existing inequalities are most often the result environmental racism, lack of health care provision, segregation in unhealthy neighbourhoods or constant exposure to stress (Duster, 2004). Higher rates of heart disease and hypertension among African Americans, for example, have mistakenly been interpreted as associated with intrinsic genetic factors rather than as, for instance, an outcome of constantly elevated levels of cortisol in the blood. High cortisol levels are often produced by the human body under stress and lead to severe disruptions in the endocrine, metabolic, cardiovascular, and immune systems (Roberts, 2011). Similarly, the exposure to industrial toxins or environmental pollution more generally has been shown to be linked to increasing cancer rates, and to neurological and developmental disorders such as autism (Pellow and Brulle, 2006). As racial minorities disproportionately tend to live near toxic waste facilities in highly segregated neighbourhoods, they bear a larger share of the harmful effects of such a hazardous environment. Environmental racism, the racial division of labour as well as everyday forms of racist discrimination, rather than only genetic makeup should also therefore be the target of scientific attention, and government policy and funding.

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7   As Jenny Reardon (2005) has shown though, scientists have insisted on the existence of race-related traits and the possibility of different mental or intellectual capabilities having racial origins throughout. Drawing a boundary between scientific and social notions of race allowed them to advocate for racial equality in society, while at the same time continuing to use and work with race as a scientific, biological concept. While scientific notions of race, according to them, should not be instrumentalised for any particular political or social end, their existence as such cannot be refuted.

Instead of accounting for such external factors though, hypertension has been prematurely explained by companies like 23andMe as causally correlating to a mainly biological predisposition. The effects of environmental racism have been reinterpreted as genetically determined conditions, occurring disproportionally amongst African Americans. This misconception of race as genetic and biological reality misses that race is a political invention, albeit one that has direct or indirect effects on the biochemical, neuro-physiological, and cellular dimensions of the body. Not genetics, but the articulation of biological matter and its environment, or the 'biocultural *interactivity* of racial formation' (St Louis, 2004 41, emphasis in the original) confer explanatory force upon the concept. As science scholar Anne Fausto-Sterling (2008) equally argues, race should be understood as an interdependent nexus of biological, cultural and social dynamics; while race does not exist biologically, human biology is certainly influenced by the performativity of race and the differential experiences of living in a society structured by racism and exploitation.[8]

However, the conceptualisation of race as an *a priori* medically significant category functions as a highly remunerative generator of pharmaceutical and biotechnological profits. Manufacturing drugs narrowly targeting a specific racial group, for example, has been shown to increase chances for patent protection and drug approval (Kahn, 2008), centrally contributing to the accumulation of capital. This creation of capital contrasts sharply with the alternative of devoting a significant share of government spending towards ameliorating the outcomes of a racially discriminatory health care infrastructure. What has recently been identified as the new biopolitics of race (Bliss, 2005; Roberts, 2011; Rose, 2006) is therefore not merely the scientific redefinition of race as a genomic category, but equally the transformation of that category into racially specific products by pharmaceutical companies and genetic testing services. Race, it seems, has become central for the creation of value in an allegedly post-racial society, and in a capitalist era in which difference rather than sameness secures the constant expansion of profit margins (Rothstein and Epps, 2001). As I will show, scientific knowledge about race continues to invoke theories of genetic inherence as legitimate tools for marking certain populations as different, therefore permitting their economic exploitation; as such, it constitutes not only a denominator of a specific social identity but also a strategy of power which produces certain bodies and spaces as innately different (Hesse, 2007; Silva, 2007). As Barnor Hesse notes, the anthropological and sociological conflation of race with physiognomy

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8    Ironically, 23andMe focuses on specifically complex diseases and traits, which are the result of the interplay of both genetic and nongenetic factors, rendering 'the predictive value of the genetic markers tested...typically very small' (Tutton and Prainsack, 2011: 1086).

obscures its structural function, namely to bring into being what he describes as a distinctively modern 'onto-coloniality' (2007: 658-9).

*The African Ancestry Project*

The African Ancestry Project, the company's research arm for tracking African American ancestries, equally aims at serving the African American community and diversifying bioscientific research. The Project promises to restore racial justice, providing African Americans with a sense of belonging by tracing their ancestry to a specific ethnic group in contemporary Africa. Such knowledge often constitutes, as Dorothy Roberts argues, a 'valuable possession that most Americans have always been able to claim if they wanted to' (Roberts, 2011: 233). The description of the project reads: 'For many African Americans searching for their ancestral roots, finding where their family story begins on that great continent is nearly impossible, because the slave trade severed those connections'. Hoping to 'empower' their consumers by giving them access to their genetic data and information about different ancestors as well as aiming at improving diversity in research, 23andMe displays its commitment to the values of racial equality and justice.

The logics of the African Ancestry project, however, are deeply flawed. Admixture tests, such as those used by 23andMe, deploy DNA samples to assign percentages of a consumer's lineage to large continental populations, mirroring what are conventionally understood as races. They thereby reify the idea that distinct and pure populations, or races, even though often not labelled as such, existed at some point in the past. This is an erroneous idea: races in the sense of genetically homogenous populations do not exist in the human species and there is no evidence that they have ever existed in the past (AAPA, 1996).[9] Also, the adequacy of a statistical probability always depends on the study design, and particularly the size and reliability of the reference database used in comparison with a customer's DNA. Even though 23andMe 'filters aggressively' to 'ensure a clean dataset', the reference set remains necessarily incomplete. In the case of missing reference samples for matching up a consumer's DNA, the software programme used will automatically compensate for such a lack with the closest match available in the database – which may be from an entirely different population. Many studies of genetic clustering have also relied on samples taken from widely separated and socially defined populations. Once samples were analysed from individuals who were more evenly distributed geographically,

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9   Moreover, for most African Americans, discovering that they have white (as well as Native American) ancestors in addition to their African heritage hardly comes as a surprise given the common yet most brutal form of 'admixture' during slavery: rape.

clustering becomes much less evident (Roberts, 2011). As human genetic variation is clinical rather than categorical, many individuals may also affiliate with two or more continental groups as their geographical origin. Hence, genetically based ancestry will always be accompanied by sizeable uncertainties. While for some 23andMe customers such as Mike, cited in the epigraph of this paper, learning about one's ancestors allows for a certain peace of mind and sense of belonging, others experience what Alondra Nelson refers to as 'genealogical disorientation' (Nelson, 2008: 770) following new, unexpected, or even contradictory test results that collide with familiar and not necessarily purely biological kinship concepts. Such genealogical disorientation is particularly common given the myriad sampling methods and statistical approaches to genealogical testing used by different companies, leading to diverging and often competing outcomes.

Nonetheless, 23andMe promotes the authority of genomic science for the determination of ancestral information and contributes to the belief in racial continuities traceable over generations. Capitalising on African Americans' history of slavery and sense of uprootedness, genetic testing services therefore disguise what is a highly contestable statistical probability as a definitive scientific evidence of a person's geographical ancestry. Most lucratively, it seems: a recent report by market research firm IBIS on ancestry research services in the US shows that these have registered a growth of over 10% in the last four years, creating an overall revenue of over USD1 billion from 2009 to 2013 (Anon., 2013). Worldwide, the over 400,000 23andMe customers have contributed significantly to what experts estimate to be a USD2.3 billion market of genealogy products, likely to increase to USD4.3 billion by 2018 (Lee, 2014). The valorisation of what are presented as specifically African American genomes, and the unremunerated labour of African American prosumers, therefore have to be understood against the backdrop of both the grammar of post-industrial capital, and the operations of raciality as indicative of black dispossession.

## Racial value and the logics of neoliberal capitalism

Both examples, Roots into the Future and the African Ancestry Project, illustrate how technological and scientific developments in genomics have reinstalled public belief in the existence of race as a biological reality, but also how this conceptualisation of race functions as a highly remunerative source for pharmaceutical and biotechnological capital. African American 23andMe consumers are therefore prosumers or co-producers in two main senses. First, through the consumption of the company's services, they are producers of online content and thus *use* value for themselves as the commodity thus produced

'directly satisfies [their] wants' (Marx, 1867 [2001]: 61). Retrieving information about potential disease predispositions or geographical origins may represent significant affective and ontological security, and contribute to a sense of identity. 23andMe prosumers are also co-creators of *exchange* value for the benefit of the company. As Ashlee Humphreys and Kent Grayson (2008: 8) have highlighted, the most important dimension of such a form of value co-creation is that prosumers engage in the production of exchange value, rather than merely of use value, 'that is co-opted by the company and resold for surplus-value', representing a fundamental change in economic organisation. While consumers have, for a long time, taken over steps in the creation of use value, for example when they dispense their own drinks at a fast-food restaurant, use self-issue machines at the supermarket, or assemble their own furniture, the production of exchange value, as they highlight, is a fundamentally different process. 23andMe consumers not only produce use value for themselves in the form of contributions to  knowledge about human evolution and genetic predispositions for certain diseases. Crucially, they also provide genetic material and personal information for the production of a research database that is being valorised by the company. Therefore, they are central for the company's success in the marketplace qua the creation of exchange value. As Harris et al. (2013: 247) suggest, the building of a racially diverse and representative database may, in the long run, be an even 'greater revenue generator than the genetic tests themselves' given the emphasis on racial representation and diversification in contemporary research practices. Similar to Google as the emblem of cognitive capitalism, or enterprises like Amazon whose customers are often unaware that the information they provide through purchase patterns or product ratings has significant exchange value for the company (Zwick and Dholakia, 2004), 23andMe depends on the free provision of such data for their creation of profit. African American customers of 23andMe's services in particular constitute an indispensable source of free labour, both immaterial and material/clinical, for the company.

By consuming 23andMe's services, however, the company's prosumers also engage in the reproduction of the very idea of real existing biological races as representing human genetic variation. True, race has never been a purely biological concept and has been conceptualised as an assemblage of nature *and* culture throughout – as Peter Wade aptly argues, 'the whole apparatus of race (racial categorizations, racial concepts, racisms) has always been as much about culture as it has about nature' (Wade, 2010: 45; see also Hunt, 2011; Hesse, 2007). Nonetheless, the authority and legitimacy that biology in the form of genomic science is bestowed by the participation of racial minorities, and particularly African Americans themselves, in projects such as Roots into the Future, rehabilitate a racial realism long thought defeated. Through the

authoritative language of science, the racial hypothesis is granted external validity and moved 'from the realm of spurious commonsense opinion to that of acceptable formal knowledge' (St Louis, 2004: 35). Given their central function for the creation of the company's economic as well as cultural capital, 23andMe customers *qua* their political and affective quest for belonging and identity therefore, paradoxically, also recuperate racial science, albeit in specifically neoliberal disguise.

In post-industrial cultural and economic practices, racialism, hence, is by no means dismantled but continues to operate through the productive strategies of scientific knowledge, most importantly genomics, and the neoliberal principles of market fundamentalism, individual responsibility, and the privatisation of care and community. Neoliberalism as a particular form of governmentality (and post-Fordism as a specific mode of production) follows the historical trajectory of liberalism as the conflation of modernity and racial violence in which the racial Other is produced to delineate a zone of disposability and demarcate the limits of liberal freedom. As Jodi Melamed (2006: 2) puts it, while historical articulations of race and capitalism have shifted,

> with white supremacy and colonial capitalism giving way to racial liberalism and transnational capitalism and, eventually, to neoliberal multiculturalism and globalization – race remains a procedure that justifies the nongeneralizability of capitalist wealth. Race continues to fuse technologies of racial domination with liberal freedoms to represent people who are exploited for or cut off from capitalist wealth as outsiders to liberal subjectivity.

While Melamed most likely refers to forms of neoliberal racism that are more immediately recognisable as such, for example ongoing racial segregation, occupation, securitisation, physical violence, and death (Goldberg, 2008; Lentin, 2015), I suggest it might be fruitful to also focus on those more subtle instances of racial violence and dispossession that become almost intangible under the neoliberal doctrine of empowerment and diversification. I follow Silva (2007) in arguing that the inclusion of racially subordinated subjects only illustrates that raciality is productive and inclusive rather than strictly exclusionary. As she notes, accounts of racial subjection as exclusion from universality often omit the operations of raciality as a strategy of power that functions precisely through the enunciation of formal equality, assuming the obliteration of racial difference as being resolved in the contemporary post-racial, multicultural, or race-positive social configuration (Silva, 2007). Contemporary, plural multiculturalism, however, is constituted by the simultaneous recuperation of racial categories as cultural specificities and the flattening out of racial hierarchies through the corporate, managerial culture of neoliberal capitalism. It therefore reifies the notion of racial difference albeit in a 'horizontal egalitarian frame instead of the

vertical hierarchical axes that denote supremacy and inferiority' (St Louis, 2004: 38).

23andMe's interpellation of racial Others as consumers therefore not only disguises the latter's centrality as co-creators of economic value for the company itself, but also how the apparatus of raciality re-produces the effects of racial violence at the level of signification. When contemporary science argues for fundamental differences between human groups, it recuperates a much older system of signification that made race its primary unit of analysis, since, as St Louis argues, 'disinterested corporeal matter is fundamentally uninteresting' (2003: 83). The signification of specific diseases, genes or SNPs as *black* diseases, genes or SNPs, for example, is only legible in a particular social system in which differential value is attached to, here, blackness. Projects like Roots into the Future and the African Ancestry Project therefore rely for their success on both the material and immaterial labour of African American prosumers *and* on this prior system of attaching racial meaning to specific bodies through which corporeal matter or genetic information only appear interesting. As Silva argues, raciality today authorises instances of 'symbolic violence, which ensure capital's access to the total value produced by affectable persons and places' (Silva, 2014: 5). Behind tales of (post-)racial progress, the commodification of African Americans' search for ancestry and equal health reinstalls a much older logic of racial signification that rests on positioning the black body as inherently different. The neoliberal ethos of inclusion and difference thereby allows for the continued extraction of value from bodies marked as racially different without necessarily denoting them as inferior.

In some sense, then, 23andMe customers might be seen as a neoliberal *doppelgänger* of Henrietta Lacks, the working class black woman who involuntarily lent her name to the HeLa cell line now commonly used in biomedical research, having had her cervical cells harvested by scientists at Baltimore's Johns Hopkins Hospital without her consent or remuneration (Skloot, 2010). If we subtract from the practices by 23andMe the neoliberal language of personal liberty and freedom of choice ('informed consent'), individual responsibility ('take charge of your health and wellness today') and equal participation, diversification and empowerment ('research of, by and for the people, directed and advanced by you') parallels to Lacks' case abound.[10] The

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10  Interestingly, 23andMe anticipates criticism and mistrust by African American communities. As the company assures, 'in contrast with Tuskegee, our research platform has received and is being conducted only with standard Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval of the final protocol', referring to the infamous Tuskegee syphilis experiment during which the US Public Health Service studied the natural progression of untreated syphilis in rural African American men in Tuskegee,

(neo)liberal ethos of inclusion and non-discrimination in both instances hides that this inclusion is sought for the benefit of scientific research and commercial gains without offering adequate remuneration to the main contributors of the raw material while at the same time reproducing blackness as a location of dispossession. Surely, 23andMe customers participate as a result of their own decision-making and are informed about the consequences of their participation. Many, if not all, are certainly familiar with Lacks' story yet value the information retrieved through research participation as beneficial to their own health or understanding of genealogy. Nonetheless, while 23andMe's pursuit of racial equality in health care and the provision of ancestral information might be central for millions of African Americans, its method of valorising user-generated information and the simultaneous reification of racial concepts conceal that, once again, black labour is central for the advancement of scientific research and the accumulation of capital but remains not only unremunerated, but also largely unacknowledged as such.

## Conclusion

This article has shown that online DTC GT companies such as 23andMe illustrate the increasing conflation of production and consumption in contemporary capitalism, constituting a paradigmatic incidence of prosumption, or the co-creation of exchange value by consumers of the company's services. Critical theorising has highlighted the ways in which consumers and users are at the very core of value production in today's digital and biocapitalist economies. However, while these theoretical achievements are central to our understanding of such processes, they often omit to account for the myriad ways that raciality continues to operate through the productive strategies of scientific knowledge and neoliberal capitalism itself. Raciality not only continues to demarcate a dividing line between material and immaterial forms of labour, no matter how contested (Dyer-Witheford, 2001), but also operates through the inclusion of racial subjects into the very circuits of immaterial labour and web-based forms of production and consumption. As the very condition of possibility for (neo)liberalism and modern onto-epistemology, raciality not only produces the racial body as appropriate for the labour performed in today's industrial factories, coltan mines or garment sweatshops. Through the neoliberal inclusionary move and the practices of productive consumption, it *also* reproduces the racial Other as inescapably different and therefore accessible for differential capitalist

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Alabama. This anticipation of criticism and the positioning of the company as active against racial discrimination represents not only what Catherine Bliss has termed 'anti-racist racialism' (Bliss, 2012: 15), but also the silencing of (scientific) racism under neoliberalism.

exploitation in online genealogical research practices. Alarmingly, personal genomics thereby represents only one, even though a particularly characteristic, example of the interrelation between productive consumption and the valorisation of scientific ideas about race in contemporary capitalism. The interrelations of raciality and capitalism in the era of Web 2.0 certainly merit further critical analysis of the logics that govern both the creation and distribution of economic value, and the (re)production of racial bodies.

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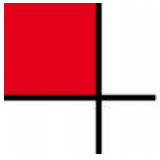
# Higher education, consumed!

Peter Watt

## review of

Williams, J. (2013) *Consuming higher education: Why learning can't be bought.* London: Bloomsbury Academic. (PB, pp. x + 166, £25.99, ISBN 978-1-4411-8360-6)

## Introduction

*Consuming higher education* provides a much needed socio-historical diagnosis of how Higher Education (HE) has become a consumerised sector. Through the systematic analysis and critique of government policy and university history, which are interwoven with a set of of interviews and anecdotes from the sector, Williams tells the story of how HE has reached a widespread institutional ethos of consumerism, and charts the impact this has had on all facets of academic life. The book should be read by anyone with an interest in the present state and future of HE.

The book serves to both chart the rise of HE's consumerisation through the construction of 'the student' as consumer (referred to throughout as the 'student-as-consumer'), and in doing so makes the case for why, as the subtitle to the book claims, 'learning can't be bought'. In doing so it clearly and convincingly articulates the impact that consumerism has had on students, academics, knowledge, and the destiny of the university, as students are not only placed at the heart of university-life, but in being so have come to consider themselves, and are considered by others, as consumers.

## Just another lament of the sector?

The originality of the book lies in its contribution to current debates on the nature, purpose and future of universities. While the book provides a number of instances that will be familiar to those engaged in HE and these debates, such instances are retold through the analytical lens of consumerism being at the heart of the system, with various accounts of today's students seeking to *have* a degree rather than *be* learners. In a number of ways *Consuming higher education* can be interpreted as a focused extension of previous contributions (e.g. Molesworth et al., 2010) that have dealt with the fall-out of marketisation and the implementation of 'fee-paying' students. However through the cultural-historical and sociological interrogation of consumerism's impact, the book escapes any potential of joining the ranks of yet another reductive lament on how the neoliberal marketistion of HE is changing everything for the worse. Rather, the book's overriding concern is with understanding the 'complex causal web' between the construction and proliferation of the 'student-as-consumer' as a central aspect *of* the deeper discursive nexus of the neoliberal regime (see also Naidoo and Williams, 2015). As the title of the introductory chapter declares, 'It's not about the money' [1-15]:

> *Consuming higher education* argues that it is neither the payment of tuition fees, nor the presence of commercial activity at the university which markets itself in competition with other institutions, that automatically leads to the corruption of education or the wholesale transformation of students into consumers. [14]

'Rather' – and it is upon this premise that the book's analysis begins – 'understanding this troubling process requires a deeper examination of the historical development of the university sector, and the interrogation of the contemporary social, political and cultural trends which help transform students into consumers' [14].

In order to do so, chapter 1 provides a brief historical account of the student's place in what is brought to attention as being a perpetually changing institution. By bringing attention to the central tenets and convictions of educational thought in the work of Wilhelm von Humboldt, John Stuart Mill, Hannah Arendt, Henry Newman, and Matthew Arnold, the book makes the case for the history of the University as one that is rooted in a dialectic between various conceptions of vocational and non-vocational perceptions of knowledge and HE's place in society. In doing so, the opening chapter serves to trace the current orientation of UK and US governmental HE policies and initiatives – which strives to place students at the *heart* of the sector – as being representative of the most recent instance of a deeper historical nexus between the liberal notion of education for

its own purpose, towards a more instrumental connection to the employment prospects and social mobility of individuals.

By charting the history of this dialectic across UK and US universities, Williams brings to light how the social question of education is not new in itself, but has shaped the university as we know it, and implicated students in a range of forms of engagement throughout this historical narrative. As a result, *Consuming higher education* reveals the myth that the consumer-centric state of the contemporary academy is not necessarily 'new' as such, but has recently taken on a specific discursive formation whose operation around the figure of 'the student-as-consumer' contains a new intensity which challenges what education *is*, or can be, *for*.

## The rise of the 'student-consumer'

It is against this full, albeit 'brief', acknowledgement that Williams traces the most-recent consumer-oriented semblance back to the mid-1990s when a series of consolidative government policies led to the creation of a higher education market, which served to concretise the notion of education being akin to any other commodity in the social imaginary.

From this, chapter 2 seeks to understand the sensibility of the 'student-as-consumer' by aligning their prevailing comportment to 'their' education in light of recent government reports and media representations. In doing so the attitudinal shifts that many people working in HE (in various capacities) will have experience of are traced. In this, Williams argues that,

> Universities are no longer routinely concerned with the passing-on of knowledge, through education, to new generations of citizens. This has been replaced by new goals. Now universities are more often charged with serving non-educational purposes relating to individual employability, social inclusion and even personal transformation. How this plays out in practice, and the impact this has upon students, is the focus of the remainder of this book. [41]

Through this central suggestion, the book places a particular onus on the impact that recent government policy has had in constructing the 'student-as-consumer' and its contribution to the changing nature of HE institutions. While the mid-90s saw the creation of the higher education market, more recent developments have enhanced the perception that students are consumers and universities are merely service providers. In 2010, the now infamous Browne Report accounted for and helped further perpetuate the myth that HE leads to higher net earnings over a working lifetime, leading to the belief that students' paying and going to university is a financial investment in themselves, to which they will gain

financial returns. In 2011 the British government produced a 'White Paper' *Higher education: Students at the heart of the system*, setting out the eleventh new 'framework' for the UK sector since the Robbins Report of 1963. As Williams points out, '[t]his means in practice that roughly every three years universities in the UK have undergone fundamental ideological and practical upheavals [44].

By interpreting reports such as these, Williams goes some way to articulate their impact on the psychology behind students' understanding of HE and university life. Through the discursive association with HE as a means towards securing social and personal betterments like 'employment,' 'social mobility' and 'social justice', Williams argues that these reports were central to changing the values, behaviours and expectations of students. Since the most recent student-centric documents have been brought in alongside rising tuition fees, we will never know whether putting students at the heart of HE would have constructed them as consumers alone, however it can be deduced that the financial issue has only consolidated the matter.

Following this, Williams goes on to account for the abundance of ways that the 'student-as-consumer' is seen to cope with their newfound subject-position. The central one being that they are acting as responsible consumers, ensuring that they get their money's worth. Of course there is no way of evidencing any correlation between the contact-time students receive from tutors and the value for money they get from having the accreditation at the end, which is just one of the many ironies that emerges from the attempts to reconcile education with consumer imperatives.

> For the students who consider their focus to be negotiating their way through university, HE comes to be about the fulfilment of their rights in a technical sense, such as the 'right' to a specified number of contact hours with lecturers or a 'right' to have assessed work returned within a specific period of time. [114]

To this extent,

> [t]he focus on active participation matches the agenda of the student-consumer, who campaign for value for money in terms of contact time with lecturers. [97]

Such demands on academics' time are just one outcome. Others include a shift from wanting to gain knowledge and explore specialist subject-areas, as much as 'do what is necessary' to pass their degree with the required '2.1 in any discipline' to secure graduate-level employment. In response to this, many universities have come to attach statements to their modules that demonstrate to students how they have responded to previous feedback with 'you said, we did' claims on their 'virtual learning environments'. In addition to this practice bearing all the hallmarks of service-based accountability, the standard commitments to putting

slides up prior to lectures, and taking increasing interest and offering advice and support to the students' employment aims and prospects are presented as standard. Such responses both add to academics' everyday workload, and while these imperatives may be more pervasive in some universities than others, with the increasing emphasis on the student's status as a consumer it is only a matter of time before these principles are rolled out more extensively. Indeed, in the most recent UK government Green Paper since the books' publication, students' 'employability' has been posited as a forthcoming 'measure' of 'teaching excellence' in the self-same manner that the 'impact agenda' has been implemented as the measure for 'research excellence' (Fearnall-Williams, 2014; Martin, 2011; Pettigrew, 2011). In their own right, these examples make for a familiarly depressing read, however their implications make way for a dynamic between students and academics that is neither conducive to learning nor to the requirements of a satisfactory consumer transaction.

## The rise of the academic as 'service provider'

It is from these opening contextually-oriented chapters that chapters 3 and 4 function to explain how consumption is itself constructed, both prior to (chapter 3, 'Constructing Consumption'), and while students are *at* University (chapter 4, 'Teaching consumption and consuming learning'). In doing so, questions are raised regarding academics' own complicity in further cementing the position of the 'student-as-consumer', which are explored more fully in chapters 5 and 6.

If chapters 1 through 4 can be viewed as collectively establishing the construction of the 'student-as-consumer' (with chapters 1 and 2 emphasising the historical context and chapters 3 and 4 elaborating on how the 'student-as-consumer' is discursively constructed), the remaining three chapters take up a focus on the central themes and implications of this subject-position. It is unsurprising that chapter 5, therefore, deals with 'The Question of Identity' [105-121]. As Gabriel and Lang have contended, 'identity is Rome to which all discussions of Western consumption lead' and 'the Western consumer readily transfigures into an identity-seeker' (2015: 86-87). However, in addition to the previously explored historical changes to the identity of 'the student' 'within a changing university' (chapter 1), the consequent change in values towards education extend this question of identity to those who provide this increasingly consumerised service: 'the academic'. An inevitable fall-out in the rise of the 'student-as-consumer' being part of a wider historical shift from 'lonely scholars to service-users' (2013: 106-110), is that it is academics themselves who have gone from mere scholars preoccupied principally with research (which, in turn, informs their teaching) to 'service providers'. With the rise of the consumer ethos projected towards

education and learning, Williams acknowledges a plethora of additional demands on academics' workloads that have proliferated. These are both in the form of an increased demand for time spent with students (both in the classroom and meeting them individually to help them negotiate essay titles) alongside managerial demands and responsibilities, including the rising institutional imperatives to adhere to, engage with, and justify one's work and content in relation to 'quality' measures, assurances and standards (see Louise, 2003; Morley, 2003; Roberts, 2002), student satisfaction surveys, alignment of course- and module-content with the employability agenda, issues related to inclusivity and diversity, concerns with preserving and the passing on of 'values' (rather than a body of knowledge), and most recently the monitoring of participation and attendance.

For Williams, it is due to the rise of the 'student-as-consumer' that HE has become dominated by the above-mentioned agendas, whose requirements and standards have become a core aspect of academics' everyday lives and workloads. These, in turn, raise a number of questions related to the identity of 'the academic', as much as 'the student' today. One particular outcome of this is the heightened schism that has emerged between 'the academic' and 'student', which the book makes various references to throughout.

By bringing attention to this schism, questions are raised once again as to who the book is for, and should be read by. At the beginning of this review I suggested that the book would be of interest to anyone concerned with the present state and future of HE, however this would suggest that 'students' would benefit from reading this book as much as anyone who deals with them during their time at university. The reasons why I would suggest that students would benefit from reading this book, and/or engaging with the questions it raises regarding the purpose of university, is on account of them experiencing their own frustrations due to their position as consumers. Indeed, while 'students-as-consumers' can be placed as the central perpetrators of consumerism, they are not the villains of this narrative anymore than victims themselves. It is therefore through Williams' articulation of this schism that the book *reveals*, and in part *falls into*, the category of one of the many ironies that the marketised approach to education encourages: as Frank Furedi (2009: 2) has suggested 'one of the distinct and significant dimensions of academic and intellectual activity is that it does not often give customers what they want' [102].

As both a diagnosis and a product of this schism, the success of the book's execution does not merely lie in relating to the prospective academics who will read it and recognise the problems that it diagnoses. To this extent, rather than blaming students as such, the book is careful in making the additional case for

students themselves falling victim to the trenchant imperatives of HE's conformity to this vacuous and ungrounded consumer model. This model leaves students both dissatisfied *as* consumers as well as being left short on a what a higher education could offer them: specifically, it has the 'perverse effect of preventing students from gaining a sense of intellectual satisfaction, or enjoyment, from their course at precisely the time when universities most seek to have demonstrably satisfied their students' [92]. Both these outcomes are a product and demonstration of the books' claim that the consumer model of HE is fundamentally opposed to all the ideals on which HE is based, and stands in contrast to a relationship as a 'conversation between the generations' which is structured by purpose and content. Despite all the talk of employability, inclusivity, freedom, choice, and satisfaction, under this latest of models students are as disempowered, lost, and more anxious and 'alienated from the academic disciplinary communities' than ever before [86].

Rather than a preoccupation with academic inquiry, the questions that students are encouraged to consider during their time at university come as questions related to themselves as consumers: *As a consumer, how should I act? How do I ensure that I am treated appropriately as a paying customer, and do not fall victim to an exploitative service provider?* Such preoccupations are another instance of the irony at the heart of this consumer model:

> On the one hand, learners are presented as rational actors within an educational free market. But within the same documents, learners are also presented as vulnerable in the face of the market and in need of national government to act as an arbitrator in the face of universities that may seek to exploit potential consumers. [17]

As previously discussed, this accentuates the them/us schism between lecturers and their students, and also collapses the notion that 'a sound education' is a 'real need', rather than one that is 'false' by virtue of it being 'superimposed upon the individual by particular social interests in his repression: the needs which perpetuate toil, aggressiveness, misery and injustice' (Marcuse, 1964: 4-5, in Gabriel and Lang, 2015: 131). In short, the 'student-as-consumer' is a victim of what comes through as the central premise of Williams' book: that 'learning can't be bought'.

It is in this capacity that while students might attempt (and ultimately fail) to negotiate their education *as* consumers during their time at university, they become well-practiced in *being* consumers. Therefore, by the time they realise that learning can't be bought (if indeed they ever do), they have prepared themselves *as* consumers and are seemingly ready for a world wherein work itself has become a site of consumption (Gabriel and Lang: 2015, 209-225; Dale,

2012). It appears that what students may learn (at the expense gaining an 'education') is that while education can't be bought, consumerism can be learnt, and in coming to realise this (whether consciously or not) academics are themselves complicit in perpetuating the logic of consumerisation, despite its contradictions.

## The rise of the consumable university: From *in loco parentis* to duty of care

Although premised on different reasons for those commonly associated with victimhood, the liability of 'students-as-consumers' 'to experience intense feelings of anger, indignation, frustration and despair' (Gabriel and Lang, 2015: 133) is positioned against the consumer ideal of 'satisfaction'. Williams takes this up with a different focus in the penultimate chapter, where a further responsibility of managing the 'students-as-consumer' is addressed: their transition from youth to adulthood. Although Williams is clear to point at that the Universities' role in managing this transition is a 'traditional' one, under the current regime of consumerisation, academics appears to be assuming extended parental responsibilities for student's welfare, which in turn positions parents as 'co-consumers' [123-128].

As a result of this development, the central argument for this chapter is that rather than encouraging a responsibility for, and the cultivation of, the personal autonomy and accountability associated with adulthood, the notion and extant measures of 'customer care' reinforce the students' position as dependent and vulnerable consumers. These, in turn, reinforce a sense of infantilisation and the previously-suggested position of inevitable victimhood. However, rather than elaborating any further on the generational implications of entitlement, narcissism and heightened sensitivity that Millennials' experience of mollycoddling has arguably propagated (see Ellis, 2014a, 2014b), Williams brings these developments back to her previous consideration of Hannah Arendt, who she addressed in order to support her articulation of why the higher educational ideal of 'a conversation between the generations' (2013, 18) has been jeopardised. In doing so, Williams contrasts Arendt's notion that '[t]he teacher's qualification consists in knowing the world and being able to instruct others about it, but his authority rests on his assumption of responsibility for the world' (Arendt, 1954: 186; in Williams, 2013: 129), with the current state of  customer 'service' and 'care'. In doing so she makes the case for the 'duty of care' in the contemporary university having replaced *in loco parentis* 'which is more about meeting the demands of parents that their children will be well looked after than meeting [the] historical, social, cultural and educational obligations' [133].

It is with reference to this that Williams reveals the sentiments behind her own conviction on the issue of the book, and what is ultimately at stake in handing higher education over to the vulgar and ungrounded-rationale of the current consumer model:

> Education, and higher education in particular, represents the historical accumulation of society's collective knowledge and understanding. The content, rather than the form, of higher education represents a nation's intellectual heritage: the knowledge, skills and traditions that are considered worth passing on from one generation to the next. [18]

It is telling that with the rise of consumerism and the intensive form that the 'student-as-consumer' takes, academics are inundated with increasing managerial pressures and administrative responsibilities themselves. This heightened demand appears to be set to only intensify as the student-as-consumer becomes evermore entrenched in the heart of the HE sector. This is largely because, as Gabriel and Lang (2015) have suggested, the figure of the consumer is itself unmanageable, and the only way that management appears to know how to deal with 'the unmanageable' is more management. With every gesture academics make to cope with the pressures the consumer-model of HE demands, the more they go to feed the monster of their own demise.

Therefore, the response to this phenomenon requires an unashamedly academic one, that takes us back to the question of what HE is and for who or what it should serve. Williams suggests that anything other than this makes academics idly complicit in the perpetuation and entrenchment of constructing students as consumers and passively conforming to the neoliberal impetus that has taken hold of the HE sector. In this way, a better-known thesis of Arendt's can be reflected on: that the lack of an adequate response when the times demand it is the mark of a lack of imagination and conviction which amounts to a parallel danger of deliberately complying with abuse (Arendt, 2006). For educators, this is all the more pertinent because, as Arendt notes, the responsibility of the educator is in the passing on of society's knowledge from one generation to another.

## Reconciling resistance, reconnecting with the past

The final takeaways from the book are diagnostic in nature, and Williams leaves it up to the creative responsibilities of the reader to negotiate and perhaps resist the consumerisation of the sector. However, Williams does provide six 'proposals for change' [149-50] which are based on reestablishing the educational values that brought universities about historically. These proposals are all concise and based

on a form of reconciled resistance to the consumer imperative with a gesture towards returning to educational values on their own cultural, social and historical merits, and understanding our place in university history as part of the dialectic between liberal and instrumental forms of teaching and learning accounted for in chapter 1:

> lecturers and students need to debate together the purpose of university. The result of meeting short-term employability or satisfaction goals means that higher education too often gets reduced to its most technical parts: assessment feedback within a given period of time; emails answered within a set period; or lecture notes made available in advance, for example... Only when the purpose of education is placed at the heart of the university, rather than job training or social inclusion, can a debate on whether higher education is to be funded from the public or private purse, and how much money it should receive, become truly meaningful. [50]

However, for many who have found themselves working in business and management schools, the collapsed distinction between vocational and non-vocational education and knowledge is not as clear-cut as the traditional means through which liberal education was enframed. Studies focused around business, management and organisation, for instance, often traverse the vocational/non-vocational seam and are undertaken by students in a particular way where the challenge is mounted from the outset by negotiating this terrain by academics whose ideals are often non-vocational (studying business, management and organization as an object of social-scientific inquiry). Many business and management school students have signed up in order to learn 'for' rather than 'about' their chosen specialism. Therefore, Williams' final proposals hint at something specific for those dedicated to understanding the theory and politics of organization: that our 'discipline', or lack thereof, represents a unique opportunity to negotiate our domain in our own terms, and in doing so bring the discourse of the 'student-as-consumer' into our modules, programmes and curricula in a way that requires students to account for and critically negotiate their own constructed subject-position through their engagement with subject-specific material:

> By placing challenging subject matter, rather than students, at the heart of the university curriculum, lecturers can begin to reveal alternative models of what a university is for – not customer service or the delivery of a product, but a far more satisfying and transformative a discovery and interpretation of all that is known about the world. [102]

Whether in business and management schools or not, this is what academics should be doing, and anything other than this is a gesture of conformity to the new consumer standards that are shaping HE. One's conformity to these standards might not be explicit, purposeful or strategic, however a failure to

resist this makes us idly complicit in the very agendas that *Consuming higher education* has brought to attention and begins to make gestures towards overcoming.

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# Buying the Splat Pack

Kenneth Weir

**review of**

> The final girl… alone looks death in the face, but she alone also finds the strength either to stay with the killer long enough to be rescued… or to kill him herself. (Clover, 1992: 35)

Horror has changed; the oft-repeated generic convention and plot line of the final girl described by Clover (1992) has been supplanted by a range of newer tropes and situations where nobody (final girl or otherwise) is safe. This change has also resulted in a shift in audiences' perspectives: before we would identify with the final girl at the conclusion of the film and the narrative, but now we identify with the killer and monsters of horror. This shift has introduced new terrors for audiences to explore, and has also brought with it an opportunity to study horror from a different perspective.

Horror, traditionally, has been studied from various perspectives, including expanded philosophical treatise (Carroll, 1990), psychoanalytical evaluations (Clover, 1992), and examination rooted in generic convention and stylistic devices (Cherry, 2009). Bernard, however, positions his analysis against these wider appraisals of horror and instead takes an explicit political economy approach that centres on the business of horror and engages in notions of the horror film as a commodity; a reading which is contrary to the philosophical and

cultural interpretations of horror, and a reading that suggests a tension of sorts between readings of horror-as-art and horror-as-product.

## Introducing the Splat Pack

In a post-millennial context, especially in the UK, such debates and tensions over horror as art or as commodity have come to the fore in mainstream media outlets with the release of horror films that actively court controversy. Films such as *Hostel, A Serbian Film*, and *Grotesque* have drawn ire from film reviewers and writers over what is seen as excessive violent (and often sexually violent) imagery, leading to renewed calls for a more censorious BBFC (British Board of Film Classification) that would, therefore, take an active approach to censorship and moral guardianship[1] (Jones, 2013). Within the US, a similar tension is present, and David Edelstein (2006), reviewer for the *New York Magazine*, referred to *Hostel* and similar films as torture porn, claiming that the aesthetics of these films represented a porning of horror that glorifies victimhood and violence; exemplifying this for Edelstein was the blood spurts of victims which were filmed and portrayed on screen as if the blood spurts were part of a climaxing 'money shot' from a porn scene. It was not just the films that attracted media attention as the directors of such films were heralded by some as belonging to the Splat Pack – a name evoking the 'swagger' of the 1950s rat pack, and the vitality of the 1980s brat pack (16). This cool group of directors were also viewed, in the mid-late 2000s, as a group of political and socially relevant filmmakers whose collected works were stressed by media publications as being complicated pieces of profound social or political commentary. *Hostel*, for example, is claimed by its director to be 'social commentary masquerading as exploitation' (5) and hence the aesthetics of violence contained in the film harbour a deeper meaning worth contemplating rather than dismissing off-hand. Consequently, Bernard appreciates the ironic position of the US media surrounding its treatment of the Splat Pack: in one sense, they, and their output, is to be ignored on the basis that it is fetishistic and nihilistic violence, whilst a different section of the US media clamour praise upon the Splat Pack and ascertain worthwhile political allegories from what appears to be, at least on the surface, sadistic gore.

It is this paradox that Bernard interrogates, and does so in two parts. The first part of analysis situates horror as a product and Bernard conducts an industry analysis of the production of horror. The second part of the analysis locates how

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1    Although beyond the scope of this review, interested readers can read more about the UK context in Jones (2013) dedicated study of the UK reception to extreme films and torture porn.

specific films of the Splat Pack have been received and interpreted, with an over-arching focus on how the horror of the Splat Pack has thus been consumed.

## Producing horror as commodity

Fundamental to Bernard's analysis is the treatment of the horror film as a commodity, which is advanced in two ways. First, in chapters 1 and 2, the horror film is a product imbued with hyped marketing emerging from a specific industrial and social context, which entails the Splat Pack films to be read, marketed and sold by film studios and producers as social and political commentary. Equally, the efforts of the marketers have also mythologised the Splat Pack as an oppositional group of radical independent directors whose political subversion has located them outside of the mainstream. Films would also be heavily and routinely cut or castigated for their violence and gore, with the MPAA (Motion Picture Association of America) often acting as antagonists to their art which, reciprocally, ensured an immediate audience for their films, particularly as horror fans may be drawn to the challenging and visceral nature of the films. Crucially, this was also a position invoked by the Splat Pack in media interviews and press releases, as group members such as Rob Zombie and Eli Roth revelled in their ability to unsettle and provoke audiences; for example Zombie professes: 'My movies are supposed to be shocking and horrible. I don't want it to be fun' (21). Alongside the marketing campaigns, such sound bites allowed the Splat Pack to make comparisons to vaunted genre directors of the past, and thus to carve out identities as 'auteurs', wherein their attitude, subversion and independence becomes almost as important as the film itself.

Another facet of Bernard's political economy is presented in chapters 3 and 4, wherein he charts the rise of home viewing and DVD, a format which has enabled the horror film to find new and significant viewership (and film studios have found contributions to revenues and profit margins). Here the horror film becomes infused with extra-textual DVD features which explore how the film was made, and sub-textual analyses are also found on the DVD commentary tracks where the Splat Pack are able to (re)assert their preferred interpretation of their films, strengthening notions that their films are highly complex pieces of social or political commentary, rather than the common mainstream treatment of horror film which views it as exploitation or trash. Being packed with such extra features and marketed as a 'special edition', this ensures that the film is viewed, or at least can be seen, as a collectable commodity.

Additionally, the specific context of the US film industry is also important in ensuring that the films have a prolonged life as commodities on DVD, as the

cinematic version of the films can often be cut or censored, but the DVD releases would have such footage restored and released as 'uncut' or 'director's cut' versions, enhancing them for horror fans and again containing an element of collectability. Such practices, for Bernard, are not unique to the films of the Splat Pack as they have become a common practice for mainstream film studios as they seek to supplement their profit margins and revenue streams with additional, special and uncut releases of horror films. This 'revolution' in the DVD market is a more important narrative for Bernard in establishing the growth of horror film production than the aura of the Splat Pack and the apparent political content of their films.

## Consuming the Splat Pack

Analysis of the Splat Pack then shifts in part two of the book, with treatise on specific films, where Bernard unpicks the sub-and intra-textual meanings of the Splat Pack's work. Chapter 5 is devoted to Eli Roth's *Hostel* series, and Chapter 6 details Rob Zombie's efforts. Chapter 7 re-treads similar ground to chapter 5 in its examination of the *Saw* series, and chapter 8 shifts attention towards international films, namely *Haute Tension* (from France) and *The Descent* (from the UK), in order to shed critical light on the European horror context.

In chapters 5-7, Bernard's account of the commodity is such that the medium of DVD enabled the Splat Pack to shift more prominently into the mainstream due to the financial success of the DVD versions of their respective films. Bernard also examines the espoused political and social meanings attributed to the films in their respective chapters, finding that the deluge of extra features produces a jarring effect whereby the claimed wider meanings and positive interpretations of the films – as valued social or political commentary – are hacked away by the content of these features and, indeed, the actions and words of the Splat Pack on DVD audio commentaries. Rob Zombie, for instance, is revealed in chapter 6 to revel in the on-screen violence during his audio commentary session for *The Devil's Rejects*, which underscores the class-based meaning and violence that forms the heart of the plot. The film is based around class violence where characters belonging to the middle class are stripped of power and tortured by lower class 'white trash' representing a 'subversive' (132) striking out by the underclass. However the DVD special features celebrate hyperviolent and hypermasculine portrayals of 'white trash' and reveal a deeper subtextual and ideological contradiction: on the one hand, the film is lauded by critics and commentators for being a progressive examination of class politics. Yet, on the other hand, any element of a class-based analysis of society is stripped away as the DVD, being designed as a collectable, and even bourgeois commodity, is

meant appeal to the same middle class[2] being chastised on-screen, negating any political meaning to the violence perpetrated against characters that the middle class DVD viewer would readily identify with. Hence consuming the extra features on the horror DVD may devalue any political meaning, and we are left only to appreciate the film as a commodity – any political or social commentary contained within the actual film become eroded by the contradictory meanings and imagery that are assembled in the DVD special features.

However, in chapter 8, the case of *Haute Tension* and *The Descent* is markedly different. Whilst DVD had enabled the Splat Pack to shift from the margins to the mainstream of US cinema, *Haute Tension* and *The Descent* retain a marginal element of opposition to mainstream audiences, owing to both the European and US reception of both films. In the US, Bernard recounts the critical and fan reception of both films and in doing so invokes the cultural politics of fandom: 'while the *Saw* films are profitable – horror fans may go to see them even though they know the films are 'laughable' and 'dumb' – they are not valued by real horror aficionados' (167). Here the mainstream acceptance of the Splat Pack, notably the *Saw* franchise, ensures that a certain element of genre fans will resist viewing, and instead satiate their appetite with more obscure offerings. *Haute Tension* was released, cinematically, as a hybrid subtitled/dubbed film and performed poorly at the box office, but the DVD release featured additional scenes and restored gore effects, as well as other special features designed to appeal to the real horror fan. The release on DVD for both films, given the level of 'material scars' from studio tampering, enabled 'true' fans and 'cine-literate' fans to appreciate the films on different levels, which is not possible with the mainstream-approved Splat Pack, as the metatextuality of the films is simply not present *in Hostel, Saw* or Zombie's *Halloween* remake.

## Splat Pack as commodity

For horror scholarship, the book makes an important contribution, in that Bernard rejects the views of wider philosophical, psychoanalytical and cultural interpretations of horror, and chooses to focus on horror as commodity and thus broadens understanding of contemporary extreme cinema. In the book's introduction, Bernard makes the claim that a cinematic (or DVD) experience with horror is popularly linked, by media commentators and those inside the film

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2    In this chapter, Bernard (132-4) also notes that film studios attempted to market DVD as a middle class consumer commodity designed to cash-in on the home cinema revolution – target consumers for DVD were the same consumers with high disposable income that also purchase high-end consumer goods, such as plasma screen televisions.

industry, to political outcomes, and the horror film can become successful in posing some form of political challenge against – quite often – Western hegemony and demonstrates the horror of social oppression and injustice. It is somehow bizarre to assert that by squirming through a viewing of *Hostel* one is learning about the injustices of torture and mistreatment of prisoners at Abu Ghraib, which is asserted in the assemblage of media that accompanied the film's release (cinematically and on DVD). In rejecting this view, Bernard's analysis goes beyond traditional perspectives of horror scholarship, and instead focuses on the modes of horror production, consequently making a strong contribution that resists coding affect as participation in a political act. Instead, the affective experience is negotiated by confronting various strategic messages designed to sell a film, a DVD, and the auteurship of the Splat Pack.

However, despite this, what I do find problematic in Bernard's analysis, especially in chapter 8, is evocation of genre cultural politics presented in the dialectic between 'true' aficionados of horror and general fans or mainstream consumers, because this denies the pleasure of horror that may transcend (sub-)cultural positions (cf. Hills, 2005). I also object to this divide because 'true' fans can be as susceptible to marketing and studio schemes as non-true fans or mainstream consumers – anecdotally, I consider myself a 'true' horror fan but I also own four different versions of the film *Re-Animator* (a UK cut version on VHS, a US uncut DVD version, a UK uncut DVD special edition version, and a UK special anniversary Blu Ray version) – which denies the power of marketing rhetoric that Bernard has asserted in the preceding chapters. It also suggests that true fans possess a resistance that others do not, and thus privileges the position of the true fan in this analysis. To be sure, consumption can transcend cultural positions, in that 'true' or sub-cultural fans may be even more susceptible to invest in the marketing schemes that advertise unique or collectible experiences of horror.

For those interested in the politics of organisation and organising, the book is also of note in that it develops an understanding of the production and consumption of extreme cinema, and hence locates a concern for contemporary marketing, accounting and business scholarship. Given the recent controversies and ostensive moral panics, particularly in the UK, regarding the release of post-millennial extreme cinema and extreme horror, the book invites a reflection on how controversy can be used as a marketing strategy, as well as how controversy can act as a means of authenticating the claims of political or cultural opposition (cf. Thornton, 1995). That Bernard postulates that these films are made for profit also suggests that there is scope for further interrogation on how horror can be seen as both art and commerce, rather than dismissed outright as an immoral commodity. Such a position can also be taken to disrupt the populist claims of

moral guardianship that horror, and extreme cinema – as commodity and art – is symptomatic of a wider social decay, especially when the aesthetics, marketing strategies and modes of production utilised by the Splat Pack have been active in creating such a view.

In this sense, the text can also provide a lucid framework to understand how business decisions can shape cultural and social interactions – in that business decisions in the horror industry can determine what is consumed, and how marketing acts as an active force in determining or shaping attitudes towards horror, and extreme cinema. Hence the frenzy of moral panic and even the attachment of socio-political relevance is as much a function of marketing communications and studio interactions as the opinions and experiences of critics, censors, fans and academics. To be sure, pre- (Barker et al., 2001) and post-theatrical (Tompkins, 2014) marketing discourses have embraced controversy and encoded this as part of the film, or cinematic, experience for audiences – that audiences are not only watching an extreme film, but they are consuming political critique, and in some cases transgression. Equally the converse applies: business and marketing materials can prefigure reception across contexts and can be active in stimulating moral panic surrounding consumption of a particular commodity.

Aside from the potential for marketing scholars, within this position there is also an appeal to organisation studies scholars, as discursive forms of power also become a relevant area of study within such moves by studios and their marketers to court controversy and use this as a base to shape consumption. Additionally, the contradictory meanings of the films explored by Bernard may also interest organisation studies researchers, as there are certain industrial discourses and mechanisms of power that seek to assert and normalise an authoritative meaning of the Splat Pack and their respective films, despite the presence of alternative and contradictory interpretations.

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# Identity as a category of theory and practice

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**review of**

Identity has emerged as a major theme in management and organisation studies. This is perhaps unsurprising since questions of who one is or who one might become are particularly important in organisational settings (Watson, 2008). An insightful and widely cited introduction to a special issue in the journal *Organization* by Alvesson, Ashcraft and Thomas note that 'Identity has become a popular frame through which to investigate a wide array of phenomena … linked to nearly everything: from mergers, motivation and meaning-making to ethnicity, entrepreneurship and emotions to politics, participation and project teams' (2008: 5). They suggest that the concept's adoption reflects an academic fashion but argue that its popularity is predominantly due to identity's widespread application and its value for a range of different perspectives, including functionalist, interpretivist and critical approaches. Given its widespread and varied use in management and organisation studies, the concept of identity itself seems worthy of consideration and critical reflection.

Generally, the adoption of identity to understand organisations and develop organisation theory has been taken up unproblematically. This is in contrast to other areas of study such as ethnicity where questioning identity has a longer and more powerful tradition (see e.g. Brubaker and Cooper, 2000; Gleason, 1983). *Identity and capitalism* by Marie Moran represents a fascinating review of a range of these literatures, drawing out some of the often unquestioned or obscured

limitations in identity scholarship that may also be of relevance and value to management and organisation studies. This review will follow Moran in outlining a contested history of the concept of identity before highlighting key debates and discussing what emerges from this critique, which is, for Moran, the need to consider identity as a category of practice.

## A genealogy of identity

The core claim at the heart of Moran's book is that the increasing focus on identity reflects not simply a fashion in the social sciences but the creation of the concept of identity itself. The book is based on Moran's PhD thesis and draws on Raymond Williams' work to suggest that identity is a contemporary keyword. For Williams (1973: 15) keywords are 'significant, binding words in certain activities and their interpretation; they are significant, indicative words in certain forms of thought'. Moran suggests that identity is a keyword that is deployed in making sense of the self and society. She emphasises the need for a 'recognition of the novel and conflicting ways in which the word began to be used in its history, despite the concealment of this shift by the nominal continuity of the term' [5]. By tracing this history and contesting the concept's present deployment, Moran suggests valuable insights into its character and influence.

Moran begins by focusing on how identity was understood prior to the 1960s. The historical change she highlights in the usage of the word identity is well-illustrated through discussion of texts traditionally associated with the concept's development. For example, Moran discusses Mead's *Mind, self and society* and observes that the word identity is absent altogether. Moran therefore disputes the traditional heritage of the concept, pointing out that a 'closer reading of these original texts reveals the startling fact that none of these theorists, scientists, activists or writers credited with discussing or explaining identity ever actually used the word identity themselves' [14]. Where identity is used, Moran suggests that, prior to the 1960s, the word referred to a sense of sameness. For example, she presents the case of William James whose work is often seen as important to the development of the concept of identity (Brown, 2015). However, Moran argues that James's use of identity is part of a very restricted discussion on sameness and continuity of the self that differs from the word's modern usage.

Identity as sameness contrasts clearly with the modern, more active sense of identity that is familiar in the management and organisation studies literature. For example, Brown's (2015: 20) definition, from a literature review on the topic, defines identities as 'people's subjectively construed understandings of who they were, are and desire to become'. Alvesson et al. (2008: 6) also define identity

loosely as referring 'to subjective meanings and experience, to our ongoing efforts to address the twin questions, "Who am I?" and – by implication – "how should I act?"' They suggest that, viewed in these terms, personal identity draws together feelings, values and behaviour such that group identities become resources in its development (see also Watson, 2008). As opposed to early considerations of maintaining a sense of self-unity, identity has therefore come to mean something more active, dynamic and self-reflexive, with a strong component of normativity in terms of what constitutes a desirable self.

Moran describes three key ways that identity is currently used: (1) legal, which is closer to the original sense of identity as sameness, in terms of the official recognition of the continuity that facilitates personal responsibility, reward and punishment; (2) personal, the core of a sense of self that is more about difference and what makes one unique; and (3) social, referring to membership of social groups. Moran suggests that the shift in the meaning of identity is in both the sense of personal identity as about how one differs from others but also in social categories as identity markers. This is captured in the work of psychoanalyst Erik Erikson who suggests that identity 'connotes both a persistent sameness within oneself (selfsameness) and a persistent sharing of some kind of essential character with others' (1959: 109; cited on [95]). Moran suggests that this shift, first captured by Erikson and other of his contemporaries, is markedly different from the history of identity as it is usually traced.

The difference in what Moran proposes can be seen through comparison with an essay by Hall (1992) where he traces three conceptions of identity: the Enlightenment subject, the sociological subject and the postmodern subject. While Hall's conception of the Enlightenment subject is similar to the sense of identity as sameness, the sociological subject is a description of an emerging sense of identity. It is 'formed in relation to "significant others", who mediated to the subject the values, meanings and symbols – the culture – of the worlds he/she inhabited' (Hall, 1992: 275). Key to the sense of self as rooted in social interactions are the works of Mead and Cooley, and Hall argues for their relevance because the development of the modern concept of identity is not about the word identity but, instead, about how one answers the question 'who am I?'.

While Moran notes no mention of the word identity in the familiar work of authors such as Mead that focus on self, this risks over-simplification. If identity is about the self and its construal, then the insights gained from this early work are important to understanding identity in its current form. While the specific *word* may not appear, a heritage for the *concept* of identity, expressed by Hall in his talk of the subject can be traced to the earlier work of Mead and the symbolic interactionists. This route has been frequently traced through Goffman's insights

into the presentation of the self in the 1960s (see e.g. Brown, 2008; Gleason, 1983; Walby, 2001). Moran fails to clearly refute this line of argument, frequently relying on textual searches for the word identity as opposed to tracing its genesis as a concept. The modern concept of identity, suggested by the attempt to answer the question 'who am I?', may be traceable to alternative words and ways of thinking about the self that elude a fixation on the particular word.

The change in the emergence of a modern sense of identity that Moran detects is, for analysts such as Brubaker and Cooper (2000), noticeable in the lack of precision in the word, which, together with its cognates, can be found throughout the history of Western philosophy. In the 1960s the concept of identity was being developed in different ways by psychoanalysts, psychologists and sociologists. As Brubaker and Cooper note, this period also saw the concept's emergence in social analysis and public discourse, partly in response to the weakness of class politics in the United States. This led to the popularity of identity but also to the later diffuse usages of the word and lack of conceptual clarity. As Brubaker and Cooper (2000) suggest, if identity no longer refers to sameness, but now refers to, for example, a fragmented, multiple sense of self, then identity may not be the correct or even a useful concept to deploy for this range of different contexts and objectives. However, even if the changes after the 1960s are not definitive, they remain important and, more specifically, for Moran they also remain tied to the influence of capitalism. The key contribution of her book therefore lies in questioning the concept of identity and this is where the keyword approach is particularly valuable in tracing what identity does.

## Disputing difference

What Moran is particularly concerned with are the ways in which the concept of identity 'is itself bound up with the possibilities for subjectivisation in contemporary western societies' [5]. She argues that the changing nature of what we talk of as identity, and the expectations associated with this, constitute a disciplinary mechanism derived from the broader capitalist system. This can be related to debates around the self and control (see Rose, 1996), for example in examining the managerial regulation of identity (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). However, Moran also draws upon broader debates that have received less attention in the management and organisation studies literature that critique the implications of the concept of identity itself. Moran provides valuable overviews of relevant debates around consumerism and political identity as well as class and identity, the latter of which is worth detailing here in relation to some of the literature that Moran draws upon.

Moran highlights the work of Gimenez (2006: 430) who discusses the ways in which 'individuals construct themselves as subjects – making sense out of nonsense – out of elements they themselves have not entirely produced but have encountered through the combined effects of ideological interpellation and of their material conditions of existence.' For example, difference, and therefore a sense of our unique selfhood, partly relates to social distinction and differentiation through forms of consumption. For Moran, one of the key ways in which the concept of identity emerged was in parallel with the modern prominence of consumerism. Consumption not only commodifies and bolsters our sense of personal identity but is entwined with the concept of identity itself which can, in turn, promote an emphasis on consumption. It is through the marketing of an idea of selfhood, that we discover our 'true self' and construct our personal identity, through our consumption.

The use of identity in the social sciences is too often treated as apolitical, producing research that may, as its influence amasses, distort the focus and insights of our understanding of the social world. Because the concept of identity is not itself examined, underlying assumptions may be retained in its analytical usage. Moran examines this potential through a discussion of the rise of identity politics. She describes the ways in which many marginalised, excluded and discriminated groups have reframed their identities in these group terms (for example by race, gender or sexuality) in order to understand their oppression and to find ways to challenge it. In this way, the concept of social identity has been deployed 'to subversive and counter-hegemonic effect in a new political model – identity politics' [114]. However, while accepting the significant gains made in the name of identity politics, Moran argues that they play into a politics of difference and can come to ignore social relations, principally in ignoring or obscuring class.

One of the risks in a focus on identity that Moran outlines is that it may minimise or ignore structural constraints. Moran draws on the work of Scatamburlo-D'Annibale and McLaren (2004) who have argued that the focus on identity in terms of difference as the primary means of understanding society and disadvantage has obscured our understanding of structural constraints. Such forms of analysis lead to answers involving greater understanding and representation, supporting an individualistic, rights-based society rather than significant structural change. Scatamburlo-D'Annibale and McLaren suggest that this has damaged what they term leftist theory and practice. They argue that 'much of what is called the 'politics of difference' is little more than a demand for inclusion into the club of representation – a posture which reinscribes a neo-liberal pluralist stance rooted in the ideology of free-market capitalism' (Scatamburlo-D'Annibale and McLaren, 2004: 186). They see in this the

extension of market ideology to encompass a willingness for all to be represented in the marketplace, without questioning the underlying flaws within this system of social relations. Moran provides the example that neoliberal capitalism can accept anti-discrimination measures that provide more women or ethnic minority CEOs, as long as the fundamental inequalities of society remain unchallenged.

For Scatamburlo-D'Annibale and McLaren (2004), such identity politics of difference and inclusion have led class to be included with other categories such as gender and race, removing any critical value in the concept of class outside of the resulting cultural or discursive understandings. The potential problems this might raise for analysis of management and organisations have yet to be fully explored. For example, Alvesson et al. discuss how, for more critically-oriented management and organisation researchers 'gender, race, nation, class, sexuality and age, become co-articulated by people "crafting selves" amid the resources and demands of particular work settings' (2008: 12). Scatamburlo-D'Annibale and McLaren suggest that such an analysis 'has had the effect of replacing an *historical materialist class analysis with a cultural analysis of class*' (2004: 188). The treatment of class as an additional form of identification and difference may suggest a potential limit to the critical, emancipatory approaches proposed by Alvesson et al. that focus upon identity as a means to understand power relations and to reveal means to 'liberate humans from the various repressive relations that tend to constrain agency' (2008: 9). For Gimenez, the focus on identity embodied in dominant ideologies seen in multiculturalism or diversity removes attention from the shared problems that transcend these differences, constraining and excluding involvement in 'educational, social and economic opportunities [that] could be the base for collective mobilization and organizing' (2006: 431).

Just as labour process theory has often failed to engage with individual identity and subjectivity, the 'missing subject' of Marxist analysis (O'Doherty and Willmott, 2001), studies of identity in management and organisation studies have too often failed to engage sufficiently with 'the part that is played by the social structures, cultures and discourses within which the individual is located' (Watson, 2008: 122). An excessive focus on identity can leave us unable to observe or engage with class-based, structural understandings of social relations. Class becomes simply another form of difference, a subject position that helps us to frame identity in terms of the subjective construal of one's self; obscuring the questions of power and exploitation that class has traditionally been used as a means to address. For example, Gimenez (2006) suggests that, with the heterogeneity of many populations in advanced capitalist economies resulting from labour migration, these questions continue to gain in urgency. She argues

for the need to overcome the artificial divide between class and identity politics, developing analyses with the potential to 'break the hold of identity politics upon common sense understanding and social science theorizing of the realities of class, ethnicity and race' [424]. Without such a move the focus on identity may support forms of power and exploitation, even amongst those who seek to challenge them.

Moran engages in detail with these arguments for a more class-based politics, though she also draws attention to their limitations. She highlights, for example, critics such as Walby (2001) who argues for the politics of equality in terms of both race and gender, seeing class as predominantly the domain of white men whose social analysis has tended to privilege the interests of their own race and gender. Nonetheless, such class-based arguments against a potentially individualistic, rights-based identity lens on society suggest some of the ways in which this approach may obscure or distort our understanding of social relations, power and exploitation. These debates demonstrate the need to engage critically with the concept of identity itself.

## Identity as a category of practice

Moran's insight into these debates is the failure of class-based, Marxist analyses to explain *why* the modern concept of identity emerged and has been taken up in the ways that it has, other than observing that it appears to serve the interests of capitalism. To question the concept itself, there is a need to consider identity not only as a category of analysis but also as a category of practice. Brubaker and Cooper (2000: 4), following Bourdieu, define categories of practice as 'categories of everyday social experience, developed and deployed by ordinary social actors, as distinguished from the experience-distant categories used by social analysts'. What Moran suggests is that more traditional forms of resistance failed those who were excluded and discriminated against in identity-based terms (even if this was in addition to their class position) and saw the potential for resistance in forging particular identity claims. For Moran, while such means of resistance were legitimate and, in some instances, successful, the concept of identity principally served to bolster a sense of stability to particular personal and social understandings. She therefore suggests that, as opposed to challenging the status quo, 'certain contemporary forms of identity politics positively reinforce elements of neoliberal ideology, especially where they converge in their promotion of cultural relativism, freedom of expression and the celebration of difference and diversity' [172]. It is this point of convergence and its implications that is worthy of greater study and reflection.

Moran therefore effectively argues for greater attention to and critical consideration of identity itself, as a category of practice. She builds on her analysis to argue that 'the use of the term identity to express essentialist understandings of individuals and groups only came at a point in history when those very essentialist understandings were significantly challenged or emphasised via their politicisation and commercialisaton' [155]. Identity in its contemporary sense is shaped by its context. Moran argues that our current understandings of identity and, through this concept, wider society, are particularly well-suited to neoliberalism and to consumption, that 'We have reached a time when identity operates primarily to facilitate consumption on a global scale, while at the same time informing a version of politics that remain compatible with the architecture of neoliberalism' [174]. If these implications go unquestioned in management and organisation studies the discipline risks failing to fully understand or to provide the possibility to critique contemporary organisations and economic life.

Identity-based approaches continue to provide valuable insights. However, the concept of identity is not apolitical. Through its individualistic focus on difference and its obscuring of social relations, class-based analysis and, potentially, other structural issues, identity risks distorting our understanding of society and our selves. Moran compellingly raises these issues, relating her arguments to existing interdisciplinary debates not only on the history of identity but its implications for consumption, group-based politics and class. However, further research and debate is required to more fully understand this concept and its implications, especially in relation to management and organisation studies. For Brubaker and Cooper (2000: 3), 'The "identity" crisis [is] a crisis of overproduction and consequent devaluation of meaning [that] shows no sign of abating'. Through the extensive adoption of identity to analyse an increasing range of social phenomena, which does not appear to have abated in the past 15 years, the concept may have become over-extended and lost its analytical value. Moran's book valuably suggests that the concept of identity continues to require questioning and critique.

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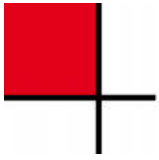
# The working unwell

Nathan Gerard

**review of**

'Be well'. This is what you hear now at the checkout counter at Walgreens, the largest drugstore chain in America. Employees offer this valediction as they hand over the receipt, and it comes across as eerily sincere. In fact, the phrase was so effective at rattling me out of my consumerist stupor that I said it back – 'Be well as well' – but it didn't quite come out the same way. It sounded mangled, faux-British, and for some strange reason I raised my voice at the end, turning it into a question. I left feeling confused.

And so it was with welcome relief that I stumbled across *The wellness syndrome* by Carl Cederström and André Spicer. Within the span of a few pages the authors managed to subdue my budding delusion of a local pharmacy-turned-ashram with employees-turned-gurus telling me, 'Be blissful. Be a beam of light'.

'Be well', the authors contend, is more than just a trite phrase. Like many wellness mantras, it carries the force of a pernicious injunction. Sure, we can experience periods of being well, but to aspire to the rarified heights of omnipresent wellness is impossible. And precisely because we can't live up to this injunction, we work incessantly at being well, only to end up feeling like a failure. Or to put the whole thing in the words of Karl Krauss, wellness 'is the disease of which it claims to be the cure' (Szasz, 1976: 24).

This strange bit of comfort serves as a veritable talisman along a perilous journey through the modern-day wellness bazaar, complete with CrossFit binges and Paleo purges, mindfulness training and evangelical dieting, and – most disturbingly – Wisdom Horse Coaching, for unlocking our leadership potential 'by learning how to lead a horse' [11]. Through sheer repeat exposure, readers gain immunity to these and other wellness pathogens. But the disease quickly spreads, taking on new and unexpected shape, and becoming particularly virulent as it turns toward the office. For it is here that our sense of failure serves a broader purpose: '[M]aking employees engage in fitness routines helps firms to sculpt the workforce', the authors note, 'creating a strong and compelling connection between the fit employee and the productive employee' [37]. The body, with its stubbornly unproductive need for sleep and recuperation, is the last holdout in a life of uninterrupted work. Move over YouTube cat videos. Make room for the walking desk.

\* \* \*

'We shall never be wholly civilized until we remove the treadmill from the daily job', wrote Henry Ford in 1922 [278]. The statement was strange, if only because this same Ford would go on to champion the assembly line as the 'new messiah' (Ford, 1928). Less strange was Ford's avoidance of wellness initiatives on the shopfloor, a place where squats and backbends proliferated long before the zealous HR manager would go on to champion them as 'deskercise'.

The point here is that in Ford's era, any sense of bliss was to be found well away from the office. But at some point this division between work and wellness collapses, and Cederström and Spicer trace this collapsed back to the Great Depression of the 1930s. It's no coincidence, the authors contend, that just as the market crash erased class distinctions, opportunistic writers began urging their readers to recite confidence-boosting mantras and visualize success. 'It isn't what you have or who you are', Dale Carnegie assured readers of his 1936 classic, *How to win friends and influence people*, 'It is what you think about it' (1936: 74). A better example from the same year might be Dorothy Brand's (1936) infamous, 'Act as if it were impossible to fail', a slogan born, as Joanna Scutts (2013) notes, 'at a time when the word "failure" was so often yoked to the word "bank" (some 9,000 American banks failed between the 1929 crash and the establishment of the FDIC in 1933)'.

Freud would have helpfully labeled all of this a neurotic symptom, and specifically a 'reaction formation': rather than confront the anxiety-provoking idea of our impotence, we make ourselves larger than life. Fast-forward 40 years

and we witness a resurgence of the same symptom. 'As the world takes on a more and more menacing appearance', Christopher Lasch presciently wrote in his 1977 book *Haven in a heartless world*, 'life becomes a never-ending search for health and well-being through exercise, dieting, drugs, spiritual regimens of various kinds, psychic self-help, and psychiatry' (1977: 140). Fast-forward another 40 years to the Great Recession, and we begin to recognize a pattern.

But Cederström and Spicer, to their credit, do not simply rehearse Freud or Lasch. They go one step further, adding the important addendum to today's age of diminished expectations: The injunction to be well, they argue, creates a self-obsessed but not nearly self-inflated subject. The monitoring and calculation inherent to the 'quantified self' movement – a strand of wellness involving the attempt to perfect the body through wearable technologies and 'life-hacking' – barely hides the repetition compulsion. Lasch's (1977) 'great turn inward' becomes the 'incessant turn round and round'; the never-ending search for health, the impossible ontological pursuit of 'being well'.

* * *

But seriously, what's wrong with a little wellness? I mean, have the authors ever been to Mississippi? Probably not. They live and work in Europe. But had they visited the portliest state in the Union, they might have felt compelled to support a modest public health campaign of exercise and dieting, coupled with a sensible ban on the Big Gulp at 7-Eleven.

'We should be spending lots more on public health and social programs to promote exercise, reduce obesity, and correct income inequality and lots less on harmful medical overtreatment', argues Allen Frances (2014), Professor Emeritus at Duke University. The evidence corroborating Frances's point is compelling: 80% of our health is determined by factors outside the purview of medicine, such as exercise, dieting, education, and socioeconomic status. A prime example is the costly war on cancer, which according to Frances (2014), 'has done much less to improve our health than the cheap war on tobacco'. Surely wellness is a lesser evil, Frances seems to rhetorically ask, compared to the bloated inefficiencies of a medical-industrial complex?

And perhaps there's another reason why we shouldn't be so quick to bash wellness. Take Steven Keating, the PhD student from MIT who meticulously mined his medical records and monitored his health to detect a brain tumor before his doctors, an act that essentially saved his life (Lohr, 2015). Now of course, the same risks Cederström and Spicer warn us about are at play here – a

self-obsessed victim of wellness, saddled with the outsourced work of his doctors (or what the authors ingeniously call 'the insourcing of responsibility') – but there is also something else: a patient empowered to cut through a system defined by structural inequalities in order to fight for what is ultimately his right – knowledge of his own body.

Cederström and Spicer may find sympathy but little substance in these retorts. Instead, they seem to insist that when it comes to wellness, we really don't have a choice. Happiness and health, if they exist at all, are elusive, not to mention overrated. They quote Beckett's Estragon in *Waiting for Godot*, 'What do we do now, now that we are happy?' [62]. Perhaps we shouldn't do anything at all. And perhaps it's the authors' very distance from America that allows them to subdue that pestering inner pragmatist who demands a plan of action for every imperfection, and who berates us for not being more mindful, more resourceful, and above all more exceptional like, say, the exceptional American Steven Keating.

And yet, by resisting the call to action, the authors run the risk of placing themselves at an exceptional distance from the mass (the reader can't help but feel that the welcome relief won from the tyranny of wellness relies, in part, upon a herd of deskercizing Dilberts). But more so, resigning oneself to a choice-less fate oddly mimics a future society where consumer preferences come pre-determined, and where goods arrive at our door even before pressing Amazon's '1-click'. Absolute silence. Perfect wellness. Pure bliss.

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Still, Cederström and Spicer have much that is important to say, and they do so with impeccable timing. *The wellness syndrome* arrives just as cryotherapy (Lee, 2015) and choreplay (Sandberg and Grant, 2015), vegan faux-nuts (Fiona, 2015) and kale sorbet (Pilon, 2015) all clamor for hashtags and hyperlinks in the cyber cacophony that is contemporary life. The authors deserve high praise for detecting a signal through all this noise. Sadly, we'll likely be too obsessed with our wellness to listen.

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