Governing work through self-management

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While self-management has emerged as a robust way of getting things done in present-day work life and organizations, it also presents itself as a conception of considerable multivalency and ambiguity. In a broad sense, self-management seems to require that employees think, feel and act in ways that contribute to the realization and improvement of the individual worker, but only insofar as they concomitantly anticipate and contribute to the various needs of the organization (Manz and Sims, 1989; Thomas, 2002; Costea et al, 2008). In addition, self-management does not only show up within greatly diverse contexts but is also utilized by a range of groups and actors holding largely contradictory views on core political and organizational issues. Accordingly, self-management has been called upon both to intensify capitalist work practices and to overturning their exploitation, thus expressing at the very same time our fears of subordination and our hopes for emancipation. Whereas complications of this sort have already been noted by several scholars within Critical Management Studies (CMS) (e.g. Parker, 2002; Knights and Willmott, 2002), the aim of this special issue is to scrutinize even further the ambiguity and the multivalence pertaining to self-management. A starting point of this endeavour is the proposition that, regardless of the final end towards which it is mobilized, self-management presents itself equally as a problem and a solution relating to a variety of managerial, organizational, and existential concerns. In this issue, the complexities of managing work and organizations through self-management are analyzed as they show up in relation to fast food restaurants-workers, teachers and pupils in schools, artists, organic farmers, and health promotion experts. In the remainder of this editorial we will try to designate some of the common traits that seem to surround self-management as a way of governing work: first, by indicating to what degree self-management can be seen as a form of management and what the call to self-manage implies; secondly, by briefly touching upon some historical roots of this contemporary phenomenon. Lastly, we introduce the papers, the discussions, the conversation and the reflections representing the bulk of the special issue.

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The introduction of self-management to the field of management seems to begin with something like a replacement of the long, historically established, superior rank accorded to managers with a more widespread and fair distribution of management among empowered employees (Shipper and Manz, 1992). On closer inspection, however, this 'progress' comes at a rather high price (Grey, 1999). While self-management has been pushed as an emancipatory and glorious conception, downsizing, short-term employment contracts, and increased job insecurity have followed in its footsteps (Parker, 2002), all of which have apparently been intensified with the advent of the projective logic of the new spirit of capitalism (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005). Contemporary discussions on control and resistance in forms of management, centred on the subjectivity of employees, affirm the cost of self-management: questions regarding the production of the appropriate individual (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002), normative control (Kunda, 1992), neo-normative control (Fleming, 2009), and issues such as cynicism (Fleming and Spicer, 2007) or 'decaf resistance' in liberal workplaces (Contu, 2008), all indicate how self-management is a way of governing the behaviour of workers through their self-understanding and identity. As suggested by Costea, Crump and Amiridis (2008: 673), the preferred site of intervention is the 'subjectivity of workers' due to the fact that the significant displacement of the objects of organizational control in the end of the 20th century has been 'from external to inner attributes of the subject who is urged to self-manage'.

In light of the discussions available in the present special issue, it may be helpful to consider this displacement of managerial control with reference to three different but interrelated aspects, which we here, heuristically, designate: Managing by yourself, Managing your own self, and Managing through passions.

Managing by yourself – The first aspect of managing by yourself has to do with the capacity among employees to manage their own job-tasks, to coordinate these tasks with co-workers, and to take responsibility for the success (or failure) of these tasks (see also Manz, 1992). Here self-management denotes the employee as a subject capable of and willing to take responsibility for finding the best way to solve the task (Manz and Sims, 1989). Moreover, such faculties of judgment, decision-making and self-control are considered more efficient if they are unburdened by supervision and the meticulous outlining of task-prescriptions (Manz and Sims, 1989; Willmott, 1993). As summarized by Thomas (2002: 4): 'instead of complying with detailed rules, workers are now asked to be proactive problem solvers'. Or put more bluntly, being a self-managing employee implies that you manage by way of yourself. In the present special issue, this first aspect of self-management is discussed in the Paulsson paper, critically examining not only what self-management entails as a form of management but also how employees in fast-food restaurants try to cope with and resist the call to manage by way of themselves.

Managing your own self – The second aspect of managing your own self is to be seen in continuation of the first. In so far as self-management relies on proactive problem solving, it is also often stated that successful management by yourself implies involvement of the subjectivity that characterizes this self (Costea et al. 2008). To be able to manage yourself necessitates an investment of the individual's unique desires,

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feelings, cognitive capacities, aspirations and creativity into the work-process (Neck and Houghton, 2006; Pedersen, 2008). Efficient self-management therefore includes a level of 'existential exposure' at work (Fleming and Sturdy, 2009: 574). In this issue, the call to manage your own self in relation to existential exposure is reflected in the Bjerg and Staunæs analysis of how appreciative management practices presuppose and require not only the utilization of positive but also negative affects (such as shame), which come to partake in a demand for existential self-management.

Managing through passions – Besides managing your own self and by way of yourself, self-management also comes with attempts to identify the very want to self-manage. From a managerial perspective, self-management implies that employees are given a space to do the task at hand. However, to ensure that they fully engage in this task and maximize their productive potential, they are also expected to have a passion for the work they do (Fleming, 2009). Indeed, it is the passion, either for the purpose of the work-task, for doing the task well, or for receiving the status and recognition that the accomplishment of the work task might culminate in, that guarantees and mediates successful performance (Neck and Houghton, 2006). As a form of governing, then, self-management involves more than giving the employee increased influence over, and responsibility for, task-performance. It also involves the expectation that the employees are inherently passionate about their work, publically display this passion, and that they are able to manage this passion in ways that connect personal desires with organizational interests. This third aspect of self-management is investigated in Maravelias' paper, demonstrating how health promotion programs are significant in this regard, since they come to serve as the authority that help decide to what degree employees are in fact able to manage themselves passionately.

Emerging as a form of management, self-management can therefore be said to involve both, forms of task empowerment and existential empowerment (Fleming and Sturdy, 2009). While employees formerly were expected to comply with the standards dictating how the task should be performed, self-managing employees are today given a level of self-determination but are also expected to display an appropriate amount of enjoyment, since their productivity is viewed as critically dependent upon this. Employee self-expression and passion thus become signs of a convergence between the employee's concern for their own interest, well-being, career, and self-actualization, at the same time that they embody 'the organization's desire for productivity, performance, cost and risk minimization' (Kelly et al., 2007: 269)

Some historical roots of self-management

It may appear a relatively new idea in present-day organization and management thought that managing individual passions has to be called forth and utilized in order to insure productivity. However, this conception also has important historical predecessors that seem to have nourished contemporary understandings of self-management as discussed above. Following Michel Foucault's history of governmental reason (2007; 2008), some of these predecessors can be localized as pertaining to the problems of government that gained momentum from the middle of the 18th century. Thus, in the major works of political economists such as François Quesnay ([1758] 1973) and Adam

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Smith ([1776] 1999) modes of reasoning were set forth which in various ways pointed to self-regulating and natural principles that had to be taken into account if one was to govern in the best possible way. These thinkers discovered a naturalness running 'under, through, and in the exercise of' the art of government (Foucault, 2008: 16), with the implication that the economy was beginning to be conceived of as something having a spontaneous, self-regulating naturalness to it that had to be respected (Quesnay, [1758] 1973; Smith, [1776] 1999). The new reflective prism through which this liberal art of government became articulated was based upon the idea that the economy should be viewed as a natural force that could not be controlled through and through: a force that was beneficial not to interfere with too much and which consequently had to run its course for this mode of governing to function (Gudmand-Høyer and Lopdrup Hjorth, 2009). While initially formulated in conjunction with the political government of men in the late 18th century, this principle of governmental self-limitation, of letting things run their course instead of operating from the imperative that management has to be as all-pervasive and detailed as possible, is oddly similar to what we see recurring in contemporary discussions of self-management.

Seen in this perspective, contemporary forms of self-management can be viewed as resurfacing from this delicate liberal problematic between the 'too much' and 'too little' intervention (Gertenbach, 2008). Hence, just as developments within political economy entailed a reconfiguration of the art of government, management of organizations has gone through a similar transformation. And whereas political economy discovered a certain naturalness that had to be respected in order to attain governmental goals, management thought has today come across a similar problematic entailing that it also ceases to be beneficial (i.e. profit maximizing) beyond a certain degree of intervention. In this sense, self-management has become an essential precondition for certain contemporary forms of organization. Or, almost reiterating the historical logic of liberal government, management thinking that praises self-management today is to organizations what political economy was to the state. Just as political economy established the play of interests as a necessary part of a liberal economy, management has discovered self-management as a necessary and increasingly fundamental organizational premise that has to be mobilized in the creation of value (Boutang, 2011).

Self-management, however, also has other historical roots. It is not solely reducible to the rise of a certain form of management. In fact, self-management has an inherently progressive or even utopian ring to it, especially when presented with the prefix 'workers' in front of it. As Knights and Willmott (2002) have demonstrated, the various discourses on self-management and the self-managing worker draws heavily on the concepts of autonomy and freedom, no matter whether their primary concern is formulated in accordance with a managerial or a Marxian inspired conception of work. Here Knights and Willmott point back to the Enlightenment heritage as having left a long-lasting imprint on the way we conceptualize autonomy and freedom in relation to the self-managing employee. In the present issue, this historical relationship between self-management and the characteristics of the novel human maturity pertaining to Enlightenment thought is also reflected upon by several of the scholars participating in the closing round-table discussion.

In light of this heritage, it is perhaps no coincidence that the conception of self-management is also to be found in a recently published dictionary of alternatives (Parker et al., 2007: 316-17), presenting a range of entries on historical, fictional and theoretical notions to be utilized for imagining how currently dominant structures of economic and managerial forms of organizing might be challenged on their basic principles and, possibly, be replaced by more legitimate community-based modes of organizing. Such works not merely point to largely forgotten or ignored possibilities otherwise relegated to the dustbin of history, but also provide impetus to present considerations as to how organizational practices might mobilize self-management in accordance with utopian aspirations that has a foundation in former experiences. While history provides examples of such experiences, not least in former Yugoslavia (Adizes and Borgese, 1975; Vanek, 1975) as well as during the Spanish Civil War (Marshall, 2008), the paper by Skinner in this issue explores some of the problems evolving in the context of the more utopian and independent instances of self-management. Hence, she investigates the conditions of speaking freely and critically in a self-managing organic farming community and how consensus is reached when no one is a leader.

Finally, however, it is important to recognize that no matter how one is to assess the concept of self-management in relation to either worker self-management or the rise of a new form of management, it is obvious that both of them imply that individuals are actually capable of managing themselves within specific organizational contexts. Indeed, self-management is in both instances found to be superior to more traditional forms of managing – be it, as seen from the perspective of managers, because an organization relying upon self-management is more effective and innovative – or, as seen from the perspective of workers, because it is fairer and provides greater degrees of autonomy. For that reason, it is also evident that considerations pertaining to self-management already have gotten a fair amount of attention within CMS, but also that this attention has been invested with a rather strong prose running along the lines of co-optation, ideology, power, and suppression, but also resistance, subversion, emancipation, and liberation. Observably, the connotations attached to self-management in this regard, whether negative or positive, surely reflect the analytical and conceptual tools by way of which it is dealt with. More significantly, however, it also reflects the fact that something important and delicate is at stake, something that is impregnated with a highly charged sensitivity. What self-management exactly is, then, is contested. But the very fact that it is contested and associated with such heterogeneous assessments and conflicting normative aspirations perhaps attests to the fact that it is truly a problem pertaining to our 'actuality' (Foucault, 2007). In this sense, and despite the multivalence and the ambiguity, self-management seems to be one of the core concepts of our contemporary organizational vocabulary, indeed worthy of further investigation. As a consequence hereof, this special issue takes up this task by way of investigating how self-management presents itself as a problem worthy of consideration as it becomes manifest within a range of different contexts.

The contributions

The special issue comprises three sections, all of which are concerned with managing self-management but in different setups.

1. The papers – The first paper by Christian Maravelias takes its point of departure in the increasingly blurred distinctions between work life and private life, reflecting upon this using a concept of managementalization. Managementalization implies the efforts to manage the parts of individuals' lives that are generally considered to be excluded or closed for management. Taking health professionals as his privileged example, Maravelias considers in what way such managementalization unfolds, and how health professionals and their associated therapies do not solely come into view as significant points of authority in the management of self-managed individual lives and careers, but also how they come forth as authorities that manage the population by singling out the 'economically feasible' from the 'economically burdensome'.

The possibility of resistance to self-management is taken up by Paulsson in the next paper. Paulsson shows how responsibility without authority is a consequence of the introduction of self-management in fast food restaurants that leads to resistance and transgression of rules and expectations in the employees' struggle with the demand to self-manage. Employees who are managed through self-management techniques – i.e. by being assigned certain individual responsibilities – find themselves caught in a dilemma of trust between co-workers and management. Through a number of empirical examples taken from blogs written by fast food employees, Paulsson pinpoints the various resistance strategies of the self-managing employees.

The affective dilemmas instigated by self-management, touched upon by Paulsson, are further elaborated by Bjerg and Staunæs. In their paper, the authors delve deeper into the darker and irreducible forces of humanness in their analysis of self-management as an affective leadership strategy in the context of schools. Through the case of Appreciative Leadership and Management practices, they propose that affective leadership strategies are not only relevant for employees but are also used to manage pupils. Moreover, the authors point to how these strategies not only rely on positive but also on what we traditionally conceive of as negative affects, such as shame. Shame is, Bjerg and Staunæs affirm, a prerequisite for the managerial production of selves. To manage oneself one has to accept a certain context and a certain normativity in this context which implies that you may fail not only in your own eyes, but also in those of who you deem the significant other in that context.

Yet another context for self-management is taken up in the last paper. Here, Skinner elaborates on self-management dynamics in a self-managing organic farming community and inquires how consensus is reached when no one is a leader. To shed light on this problematic, Skinner introduces the concept of *parrhesia,* elaborated by Foucault, to her ethnographic study. Different forms of ancient *parrhesia* (lit. 'to say it all', 'to speak freely') are found to be active in the ways in which individual community members bring up and respond to issues about the 'organicness' of farming practices. Skinner shows how a combination of political, philosophical and monarchic *parrhesia* is brought to bear on the decision-making process, and how different kinds of *parrhesia* bring up different themes such as risk, courage, status differences, criticism, and self-criticism.

2. Conversation and reflections – In the issue's special section on self-management and Jørgen Leth's and Lars von Trier's collaborative movie project *The Five Obstructions*,

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management of self-management is discussed in relation to the production of art. A theme that recurs in the section is how self-management in an artistic setting works through strict rule-following and rule-breaking. What is investigated is what happens when rules imposed from the outside become a tool for self-management instead of a condition of control. The main part of this section is represented by the conversation between Leth and Sverre Raffnsøe on the movie project. However, Raffnsøe also provides this special section with a prologue clarifying the connections between self-management and the obstructions. Finally, Mary Jo Hatch rounds off this section with a reflection on the way in which the creative process displayed in *The Five Obstructions* is generated through principles and rules largely at odds with established managerial beliefs.

3. Round-table – The issue ends with a round-table discussion on management of self-management that took place at a workshop at Lund University in November 2009. Here a number of questions relating to the ambiguities and multivalence of managing self-management are discussed, both in terms of autonomy, productivity and normativity and in relation to the complex emancipatory heritage of the Enlightenment.

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