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

Peter Bloom

abstract

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

Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Employability and alienation: Who's in control?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Fantasizing the self between 'self-mastery' and alienation

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

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

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

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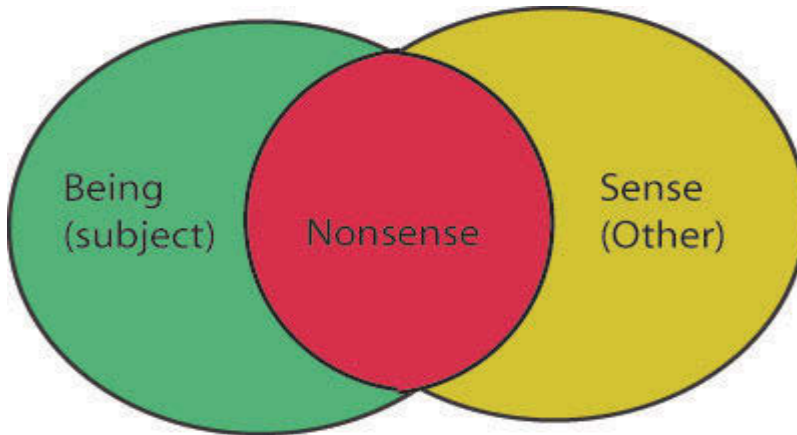
Figure 1: Being, sense and nonsense.

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

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

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

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

The paradoxical fantasy of employability

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Employability and the ironic struggle for self-exploitation

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Fight for your alienation!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Concluding discussion

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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the author

Dr. Peter Bloom is a lecturer in the school of management at Swansea University. His primary research interests include ideology, subjectivity and power, specifically as they relate to broader discourses and everyday practices of capitalism and democracy. His work has been or will soon be published in *Journal of Political Ideologies*, *Theory & Event*, *Research on the Sociology of Organization*, *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, *Organization* and *International Journal of Žižek Studies*.
E-mail: p.n.bloom@swansea.ac.uk