



## A tall tale

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### review of

Angela Lait (2012) *Telling Tales: Work, Narrative and Identity in a Market Age*. Manchester University Press (HB, pp. 224, £65, ISBN 978-0719085222)

### Contextualization

Telling Tales is a monograph written by Angela Lait, based on research carried out for her PhD project at Manchester University. The book is based on personal experiences from her employment at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA), as well as a U.K. publishing house, and aims to explore how the language of corporate business literature constructs the subjectivity of contemporary employees. Lait's core argument is that such efforts at identity regulation are increasingly resisted and challenged by contemporary employees. Failing to find satisfaction in constructing work-life identities by drawing on the prevailing repertoire of management tropes, Lait argues that office workers are increasingly choosing to emphasize non work-related aspects in their identity constructions. Drawing on narrative identity theory, she offers examples such as the increasing popularity of TV programmes and books on gardening and cookery, as well as autobiographical writing and life-style blogs about 'downshifting', as supporting evidence for the conclusions drawn from her personal experiences. These trends are all symptomatic, she claims, of a Western workplace culture that fails to provide the basis for narrating a satisfying representation of one's working self. Instead, we are increasingly choosing to represent ourselves in ways that express a nostalgic desire to return to older, more traditional bourgeois values and life-forms.

I will admit upfront that I had several problems with the point that the author is trying to make, as well as the theoretical perspective that underpins it. This review will therefore have a critical slant, and I will focus on some of the key problems I found with the theoretical basis for the book's argument. My critique takes aim more broadly at a genre of identity studies that draws on Richard Sennett's (1997) argument in *The Corrosion of Character*. It is my intention and hope that in thus broadening the aim, the review might be seen more as a vehicle for a critical discussion about certain strands in the body of (often critically oriented) management literature on identity theory, rather than motivated by a desire to pick on a particular work or author.

### Structure and summary of the book

The first chapter contains a number of well-argued and poignant analyses of the types of corporate language employed in the 'post-Fordist' economy, along with the ambiguity and inherent contradictions in these discourses: such as an ostensible concern for employee health, coupled with a vacuum of managerial responsibility for health-related issues. The selection criteria for this part of the empirical study are broadly corporate communications texts and internal policies – employee health policies, annual reports and other official documents – published by Lait's previous employer, DEFRA. Here, the book relies on rhetorical analysis to demonstrate inherent contradictions in the texts. While there are some brilliant flourishes of analysis here, the overall chapter is marred by an inescapable sense of being coloured by a fair dose of personal bitterness and resentment, harboured by Lait towards her previous employer. This comes out more blatantly in a number of instances, such as the analysis of the photograph of her previous boss, the Minister for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, included as a portrait in the Departmental reports. While Lait is trying to make a point about the visual clues contained in her portrayal, one cannot help suspect that she finds a certain gleeful satisfaction in describing her boss's pose as that of 'a child whose eyes are, of necessity, tilted slightly upwards in the pose of vulnerability made famous by the late Princess of Wales' [16]. Such instances of personal vindictiveness tend to leave a bad taste in the reader's mouth.

The second chapter elaborates Lait's theoretical take on narrative identity. The basic theoretical premise (as well as the key argument of the whole book) is identical to that advanced by Sennett (1997) in *The Corrosion of Character*. Like Sennett, drawing on Ricoeur (1995) and (implicitly) MacIntyre (1991), Lait argues that personal identity may be seen as a narrative representation of self, which takes the form of a life story. Drawing on narrative psychology (MacAdams, 1997), she argues that the structural coherence of such a life-story is key to

psychological wellbeing. Like Sennett, she argues that the conditions of employment in the contemporary 'post-Fordist' economy are having a harmful effect on the ability of employees to construct such a coherent life story. What's novel in her analysis, compared to Sennett's work, is the focus on textual analysis of corporate communication and business self-help manuals that seek to discursively align employee identity with organizational ideals of flexibility and market orientation. Lait's argument, unlike Sennett's, is anchored more in a rhetorical analysis of inherent contradictions in contemporary managerial discourses, and how this leads to unavoidable incoherence in subject positions constituted by them.

The third chapter complements the analysis of corporate communication texts with an analysis of a fictional work, Ian McEwan's novel 'Saturday'. Lait concedes at the start of the chapter that her selection criteria for the empirical material may start to appear incoherent at this stage, but tries to justify the move, by arguing that fictional works can express something akin to the Hegelian *Zeitgeist*, in literary form. While her analysis of the plot and main character of 'Saturday' provides some support for the general argument about psychological vulnerability of contemporary professionals, the chapter also contains a lot of general exposition on literary theory, such as the use of a first vs. third person narrator, which to my mind had little immediate bearing on the main argument of the book. As such, the analysis of 'Saturday' feels somewhat arbitrarily squeezed in as a way to compensate for the lack of empirical material drawn from actual worklife sources, other than that based on Lait's own employment and career.

Chapters 4, 5 and 6 elaborate on the idea of employees compensating for the inability to construct meaningful work-life stories, through escape fantasies about gardening and downshifting (Chapter 4), eventually prompting a wholesale imaginative reordering of existence through autobiographical narration of a personally salient life story (Chapters 5 and 6). While these are arguably significant contemporary trends – bookstore shelves these days have a high proportion of books in the genres of celebrity autobiographies and self-help manuals on how to become happy through gardening – Lait's account of their genesis suffers somewhat from theoretical underdevelopment. There is a blanket acceptance of Sennett's claim, along with similar claims made by the proponents of narrative psychology; namely and as aforementioned, that the construction of a coherent personal life story is key to psychological well-being, and as such a fundamental human need – one that was better satisfied during a previous 'Golden Age' era. There are a number of problems with this argument, which I will turn to in the next section.

## Critical discussion

### *Methodological issues ...*

First of all, I think there is a basic methodological problem with combining highly specific and limited empirical material on corporate communications texts, personal work experience, literary analysis of fictional works and general observations of contemporary trends, to make an argument that claims a high degree of universality. Lait's account of work conditions at DEFRA suffers from a heavy personal bias, which sits uneasily with the very broad and general character of her argument. In order to claim that the rhetorical contradictions she identifies in DEFRA's corporate communication texts give rise to incoherent work-life subject positions, and a consequent turn to alternative narratives for self-representation, I would have expected to find a richer set of empirical material, e.g. drawn from ethnographic observation, perhaps focusing on conversation analysis, or life story interviews with former colleagues. There is an inescapable feeling of reading one person's crudely rationalized jeremiad against the unfair treatment suffered in her previous employment, and why she has turned to gardening to feel better about herself. This essentially auto-ethnographic material is then peppered by a somewhat strained analysis of vaguely corroborating evidence drawn from an arbitrary collection of secondary material (novels, cookery books and blogs), to turn it all into a grand theoretical argument about an universal inability of employees in Western corporations to construct meaningful narrative representations of their work-life selves.

This is not simply a question of methodological nit picking; it renders the argument that Lait is trying to make rather incoherent. In order to make an argument as to why a certain aspect of contemporary work-life makes it more difficult to craft a narrative identity, I would have expected to see a theoretical definition of the requirements for a coherent, or otherwise satisfying, narrative identity, along with an analysis showing why Lait's observations in the first chapter (about contradictions in the neo-liberal discourse permeating corporate communications documents at DEFRA) contribute to render narrative representations of work-life selves in that organization incoherent/unsatisfying. Instead, the reader is offered a dubious link to the way that Ian McEwan has chosen to represent the inner life of a fictional medical professional in literary form. The problem is also partly one of weak theoretical fit, which leads me neatly into the next section of the critical discussion.

*... flawed theoretical grounding ...*

In my opinion, one solution to the analytical weakness of Lait's argument would have been to adopt a different theoretical perspective on identity. For instance, the discursive identity perspective establishes a much closer link between management discourse (as embedded in e.g. such corporate communications texts that Lait analyses), managerial/employee subjectivity and the enactment of work-life roles constituted by such bodies of text (Knights and Willmott, 1989; Grey, 1994; Strangleman and Roberts, 1999; Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). There is furthermore a dramatic dimension via the theoretical link to Goffman (1955), and the role enactment involved in the presentation of oneself as e.g. a leader, or knowledge worker. It would have been a simpler analytical link between observed discursive contradictions in the textual material and 'cracks in the façade' of managerial self-presentation, should the empirical material contain such observations. Such an analytical link is absent in Lait's argument. Instead she strongly relies on a blanket acceptance of Sennett's argument, that the insistence on flexibility and change in the 'market age' makes it increasingly difficult to represent one's personal work-life story as oriented towards the pursuit of an Aristotelian *telos*. Her own observations and experiences, as well as her analysis of *Saturday*, are simply bolted on as self-evident corroborations of Sennett's point, without need of any further analysis. While Sennett's argument is at least internally consistent, it is rather unclear why, say, Lait's observations on discursive contradictions in corporate communications texts should somehow impact managers' or employees' abilities to represent their work-life stories as oriented towards the pursuit of a *telos*, or construct an otherwise satisfying personal life story. However, one of the personal benefits to me of reading Lait's text has been to prompt a broader critical examination of Sennett's argument, which I'd like to take the opportunity to elaborate.

In *The Corrosion of Character*, Sennett (1997) draws implicitly on MacIntyre's argument that the idea of a personally satisfying narrative identity is more conducive to Aristotelian virtue ethics: life needs to be teleologically oriented towards the pursuit of an intellectual, practical or moral virtue, to be at all meaningful in its narrative representation. Sennett then claims that the pursuit of such a *telos* is made impossible by the insistence of flexibility and perpetual dynamic change in the contemporary economic order. The basic premise of this argument appears to be that employees in bureaucratic organizations during the Taylorist/Fordist era were both able and inclined to represent their work-life selves as oriented towards the pursuit of some intellectual or practical virtue. I have several problems with this argument. Firstly, the idea that a typical office career in a bureaucratic organization – based on, say, entering credit invoices in the general ledger – would somehow be more conducive to narrative representation as a life story in pursuit of personal virtue is somewhat preposterous. Secondly, the very idea of pursuing such a *telos* is arguably only

meaningful within a culture and moral order based on some variant of virtue ethics. Indeed, MacIntyre offers the heroic epic of Icelandic sagas as the paramount example of literary genre conventions shaped by such a moral order, rather than, say, the genre conventions of the French Realist tradition, or those of literary modernism; the latter two being literary movements more contemporaneous with the emergence of organizational bureaucracy.

Ever since Luther attacked the scholastic notion that human lives ought to be teleologically oriented towards the pursuit of virtue, Northern European and Anglo-American cultures have been somewhat sceptical towards the idea of virtue ethics – to say the least. Since man's original sin has rendered us incapable of understanding the good, Luther insisted on faith (*sola fide*) as the only recipe for salvation. This development ultimately opened up for a shift towards Kantian deontology and/or a positivist basis for the moral law, ethical standards that have shaped the development of Western European social order following the Enlightenment onwards (MacIntyre, 1997). Ever since then, bourgeois existence in Western cultures has been represented in literary forms that place more narrative emphasis on the intra-historical aspect of human existence, as minor characters embedded in a meta-narrative account of social progress. The teleological dimension was found rather in the way that Western civilization was perceived to move towards a historical destiny, obeying some Hegelian law of historic-dialectical improvement (Lyotard, 1984). For instance, the implicit meta-protagonist in the novels in the French realist tradition (e.g. in the works of Balzac, Flaubert and Stendahl) is society itself. Individual protagonists suffering misfortunes and a tragic fate do so, not primarily by having committed any personal moral errors, but rather because of society being at fault, prompting a moral injunction for social change (Auerbach, 1953). The very premise of Sennett's argument, namely that organizational bureaucracy is more conducive to narrative representation of work-life self as oriented towards the teleological pursuit of personal virtue (practical, moral or intellectual) – is thus, in my mind, based on a straw man argument, and a rather preposterous one for that matter.

The simplistic, not to say flawed, nature of Sennett's argument – and Lait's version of it – might well have been avoided by a stronger theoretical grounding, as well as more thorough engagement with the contemporary body of work on identity studies. An important figure here is Paul Ricoeur, and his phenomenological/hermeneutical enquiry into our perception of time, as well as his attempts to develop an ontology of identity. Ricoeur (1984, 1995) contrasts his take on personal identity as selfhood (using the latin term *ipse*) with what he considers as the wilful paradoxes (or *aporias*) of those, primarily Anglo-Saxon, philosophical traditions that have enquired into the idea of personal identity as sameness (*idem*). Clearly, we are not the same person over time, so the *idem*

notion is not applicable to identity in the sense of an understanding of self. Instead, Ricoeur bases his understanding of identity as selfhood on a narratological definition, thereby drawing heavily on Aristotle's concept of unity of action.

In the *Poetics*, one of Aristotle's requirements for tragedy is that the plot or action of the play can be grasped together, in the sense that each sequence of the plot will be perceived by the audience to follow logically upon the preceding one – or at least as a highly probable outcome of it. As Ricoeur convincingly argues, what determines the extent to which an audience will perceive a narrated protagonist's course of actions as logical (or at least highly probable) is culturally contingent, and more precisely depends on shared ethical standards regarding the right course of action under certain given circumstances. Ricoeur then proceeds to define his concept of identity as selfhood in an analogous way: as the ability of an individual in a given culture, to represent his personal life story as a more or less unavoidable sequence of actions, given the circumstances that were presented to him/her. In other words, the identity of the life story *with itself* is dependent on the ability to convey it to an audience, as the only righteous (or at least plausible) course of action, given the circumstances. This is arguable a more general definition of narrative identity as selfhood, than that of Sennett and MacIntyre, which seems to require an orientation towards pursuit of some personal virtue or *telos*. If doing your job and following the law is seen as the only righteous course of action (even though it might not be virtuous, in a personal/teleological sense), then the life story of a bureaucratic office worker is clearly identical with itself, in the sense of having no conceivably more righteous alternative. If such a view of office careers is less strongly shared in our culture than during the heydays of corporate bureaucracy, then I would venture to argue that it has very little to do with 'flexible capitalism' being less conducive to the pursuit of *telos* or personal virtue, as compared to corporate bureaucracy.

A contrary view to that of Sennett and Lait might instead be that the postmodern turn itself has generated an increasing preoccupation with the idea of a unique and authentic personal life story, which was less of a pressing 'need' in Western culture during a previous era, since personal destiny was conceived of as embedded in a deeply meaningful meta-narrative of social progress. This in turn may well have lowered the likelihood that people will perceive an office career in a bureaucratic organization to be a meaningful basis for selfhood. Following the postmodern legitimation crisis, we are all more sceptical towards key Enlightenment notions of progress and constitutionalism: that an intrinsically just and fair social order could be developed through a process of rational and progressive enquiry in the social sciences. The meta-narrative of progress that provided bourgeois individuals with such shining inspiration to engage in the

common struggle for a better society in an earlier era – often through persisting in tedious occupations, in the belief that it would contribute to improving the lot of future generations – has thus arguably been internalised as a narrative impulse towards more personal, sentimentally subjective life stories of triumph over adversity, or emancipation from conformist existential standards. The problem is of course that not everybody triumphs (and everyone cannot be anti-conformist and anti-authoritarian). The life stories of e.g. those that do not triumph in their office careers tend to take on a heavy tone of personal bitterness and resentment, especially when no good reasons can be recognized for one's misfortune. In a postmodern era of value pluralism, characterized by a plurality of conflicting discourses (Boltanski and Thevenot, 2006), it is of course increasingly easy to find recourse to arguments for why one's misfortune might be seen as undeserved.

The problem is that such ironic modes of narrative closure (Frye, 1957) – suffering misfortune without recognizing any valid reasons for it – lends a certain grotesque and absurd aspect to a personal life story (reminiscent of Kafka's novels), questioning whether Sennett's and MacAdam's ideal of narrative coherence is necessarily always something to strive for, at least in our own culture, shaped as it is by heavily ironic modes of narrative representation. For me, this is the crucial problem with Lait's analysis, as well as the broader suite of perspectives on narrative identity that rely on an implicit ideal of narrative coherence in the representation of self. As evidenced by Gabriel et al.'s (2010) analysis of managerial stories of job loss, narrative closure, in the representation of such an episode in one's life, may not necessarily be the most satisfying coping strategy. Rather, the group of interviewees who had managed to reach narrative closure in their accounts of career misfortune exhibited 'a lack of control and an inability to find solace in their story' (Gabriel et al., 2010: 1705). The more loosely structured accounts, which avoided viewing job loss as a key turning point (or *peripeteia*) in one's life story, were conveyed by the group of interviewees who expressed the least resentment and frustration about having lost their jobs. While MacIntyre may thus be right, that the notion of a personally satisfying narrative identity (in term of a closed and coherent personal life story, obeying Aristotelian narrative conventions) is most conducive to a moral order based on virtue ethics (participation of which is ineluctable), it is unclear whether many people would find the personal consequences of such a moral order very appealing. For instance, according to the *bushido*, the virtue ethic of the Japanese *samurai*, personal blame for misfortune and failure necessarily prompts *seppuku*, ritual suicide, in order to preserve one's honour. This might lead to a more satisfying form of narrative closure – in terms of coherence and dramatic effect – but it's unlikely to be a human destiny that Sennett or Lait would seriously consider more appealing, compared to the chronic anxiety that may well be the



curse of our contemporary middle classes, and their inability to find any solace or narrative redemption in subjective accounts of petty misfortune.

*... and dubious attributions of blame*

Another problem with Lait's analysis revolves around how the genesis of an ostensibly new economic order, post-Fordism, is externalised in her analysis. Lait expresses an ambivalent yearning for a period when working life was more ordered. But as argued by Boltanski and Chiapello (2005), the transition to, and theoretical justification for, more flexible forms of organizing work was legitimated partly by an appropriation of the radical humanist critique of corporate bureaucracy. Lait draws up a battle line between the new capitalist economy, and the traditional values of autonomy, self-determination and economic accumulation of a bourgeois class that she argues to have become squeezed by the new economy. But who then is the driving agent behind this transition, if not the bourgeois class itself? Perhaps it is more fruitful to conceive of Western social reality of today as a product of the Protestant bourgeois ethic having turned in on itself: a dialectical development whereby the social and bureaucratic strictures that were once seen as a guarantor of fair/equal treatment and meretricious reward (as compared to the arbitrary whims of the feudal aristocracy that ruled prior to them) have now become seen as inimical to autonomy and self-determination. We should perhaps be more open about the overlapping anti-authoritarian concerns of key right- and left-wing liberal arguments that have played a part in this intellectual development: Marcuse's (1991) critique of bureaucracy engendered a similarly disdainful attitude towards Fordism among progressively minded youths of the post-war generation, as that instilled by Mintzberg's (1983) arguments about the inadequate ability of bureaucratic organizations to effectively adapt to competitive changes, among neo-liberal advocates for 'the network economy'. The ideological divide that Lait draws up between a 'new' bourgeois white collar elite, and an older bourgeois class that values traditional crafts, is ultimately not very convincing. The causes of the transition to a more flexible economic order are culturally endogenous – not driven by some shadowy new social class that controls the world behind the scenes. This tension is brought out in Lait's argument that the more traditional bourgeois sub-class associated with handicrafts and gardening tend to vote Labour (rather than Tory) – whilst arguing elsewhere that the new Labour party has in itself been a major driving force behind the social and institutional changes she so abhors.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, Angela Lait does make some contributions to the perspective elaborated by Sennett, particularly in her rhetorical analysis of inherent contradictions in corporate communication and business self-help manuals, and how this might shape incoherent subject positions. She also offers some valuable insights into a possible link between such narratively unsatisfying work-life roles, and a number of contemporary life-style trends, but, as aforementioned, the central argument suffers from methodological problems and a weak theoretical grounding. In my mind, there is a broader problem about the implicit idealization of a coherent human subject, inherited from Sennett (1997). Narrative coherence in the representation of a personal life story is arguably only satisfying in the context of a more closely knit moral order, based on a shared understanding of what it means to be a good person. Lait's own representation of her work-life experiences is testament of how narrative closure in the representation of career misfortune tends to take on a heavily bitter and resentful tone, in a more fragmented and ironic culture such as ours. As she acknowledges herself, the stories of bourgeois downshifting on the other hand tend to come drenched in excruciating smugness, in their narcissistic stories of escapist triumph over the stupid drones that remain stuck in the capitalist machinery. Her argument that people attempt to find narrative redemption and solace in such coping strategies may thus be true on the one hand, but it carries an unresolved ambivalence about whether these strategies ultimately pay off. Are the escapist stories of downshifting or taking up gardening truly more satisfying as personal life stories, compared to those, say, that triumph in a business career? Lait's attitude of personal contempt for this class of people is not in itself a convincing argument. For a variety of reasons, we live in a culture and moral order, which is more fragmented than in previous eras, making narrative closure in one's representation of self increasingly difficult to achieve these days – so far I can agree with Sennett and Lait. But while this has certain drawbacks, any analysis of these drawbacks would do well to recognize the diversity of reasons for why such a cultural transition has occurred, in order to assess whether the coping strategies that Lait identifies 'truly' carry the potential for an alternative form of narrative redemption, or whether they are nothing more than symptoms of the very problem at hand.

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