



## Giving notice to employability

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### Introduction

The notion of employability has risen to prominence over the past 20 years, having gained remarkable traction in policy-making, organizational life, and society more generally. The term has become popular as an antipode to the policy goal of ‘full employment’ (Finn, 2000) and the conceptual lynchpin of a new career covenant that claims to supplant long-term organizational career bargains (e.g. Kanter, 1989). It is in this capacity that ‘employability’ gestures to a new arrangement, wherein the state and employers are no longer committed to nor deemed responsible for providing those they govern and/or employ with lasting and secure jobs. Instead, individuals’ capacity to take the initiative, relentlessly update and improve their knowledge and skills, and to be flexible and adaptable, i.e. to constantly work on their employability, has come to be understood as the crux of national, organizational and individual prosperity.

With employability becoming such a pervasive preoccupation, ‘protean’ and ‘boundaryless’ career models (Arthur and Rousseau, 2001; Hall, 2002) have been eagerly promoted. These, in turn, articulate a high premium put on individuals to be in a constant stage of development and to revamp their skill-set to seamlessly negotiate their perpetual shift from one job or organization to another. At the same time, demand-side labour market policies have been viewed as outdated (see Peck and Theodore, 2000), rubber-stamping work’s ephemerality and precariousness in an era which keenly acclaims employability as *the answer* to many of society’s ills. It is against this background that Hawkins (1999: 8) maintains that, now, ‘to be employed is to be at risk [and] to be employable is to be secure’. However, this notion of ‘security’ is in terms of employability; a condition which, as many have argued, can never be fulfilled (Costea et al., 2007; 2012; Cremin, 2010).

Resonating with this, individuals' responsibility for their 'marketability' in the labour market is posited to outshine the earlier arrangement of job security. In the light of employability, this figures as having seriously hampered individuals' self-realization and socio-economic progress. Perhaps, one could even say that 'work', too, has begun to be outshone by 'self-work' and 'self-management' (see Beverungen et al., 2013; Heelas, 2002; Lopdrup-Hjorth et al., 2011). Not only are individuals invited to realize themselves by becoming (ever more) employable, their realization as selves has turned into a prerequisite for their employability *per se* (Andersen, 2007; Heelas, 2002). This would go some way to explain the rise of coaching services and 'self-help' discourses, which resonate with these developments.

To all appearances, the rise of employability as a central feature of working-life has put the 'unleashing' of human resourcefulness on centre stage. Individuals, whether employed or not, are called upon to develop new and innovative ways to outstrip others in the pursuit of, what in all likelihood will be, an unrealizable, ideal 'employable self' (Southwood, 2011). Moreover, 'employability' has been invoked as a path towards social integration, with 'immigrants', 'women', 'the elderly' and people with various disabilities being invited to self-determinedly step out of their 'marginalization-cum-idleness' (Peralta Prieto, 2006).

In all these contexts, 'employability' continues to hold largely positive connotations. It is not only positioned as the key for one's own well-being in the labour market, but also, and somewhat ironically, as the very condition for employment (Cremin, 2010). It is seen as something that individuals inevitably strive for and manage throughout their working lives. However, this attractive picture of employability, as used by employers, recruitment agents, policy-makers, mainstream research, universities, and the media, says little about how concerns with employability interlink with broader societal changes and the ways in which individual subjectivities are affected. As a result, the key focus of this special issue is to *give notice* to employability. By critically engaging with the topic of employability – via exploring and challenging its resonance and scope – we hope to bring attention to what we deem to be worth 'noticing' and previously unnoticed. In doing so we have aimed to provide a platform for a broader audience to consider and engage with its implications.

## Employability's employment

The term 'employability' itself is not new. It has been used since at least the 1880s (Welshman, 2006), though its meaning has changed throughout the twentieth century. From the late 1980s onwards, its rhetorical formation has

come to be understood through the expression ‘initiative employability’ (Gazier, 1999). This term emphasizes the way that employability has come to signify how ‘employable subjects’ are required to constantly develop and assert themselves as, and to remain employable. Within this section, we take a look at some examples of earlier engagements with employability, followed by a more detailed discussion of ‘initiative employability’, the dominant way the term is understood today.

In the UK from the 1880s to the 1940s ‘unemployability’ was the term in use, referring to those unable and/or unwilling to work (Welshman, 2006: 578). The relationship between ‘unemployment’ and ‘unemployability’ is remarkable here. Mid-Victorian reformers equated the two, claiming that ‘defects of character automatically caused people to be unemployed’ (see Komine, 2004: 257). However, a distinction was later drawn between them. The unemployed were considered to be often able and willing to work, but being in temporary unemployment, while the unemployable were a permanent social feature (Webb and Webb, 1897, cited in Welshman, 2006). It was William Beveridge (1904) – the supposed ‘Father of the Welfare State’ after the World War II – who proposed a reverse-causality between unemployment and unemployability. He suggested that it was unemployment itself that was creating unemployables (Komine, 2004). Gazier (1999) identified this type of (un)employability as ‘dichotomic’ due to people being classified as either employable or not; with the ‘ability’ to work, such as having no physical/mental impairment or family constraints, being key to not being ‘unemployable’. The huge number of human losses in World War II led to smaller workforces and the need to recover production at the same time. As a result, the understanding of what being ‘able’ to work means changed, with ‘socio-medical employability’ becoming one of the widespread ways to refer to employability at the time (*ibid.*). This use of the term was focused on the labour supply side, which was largely geared towards getting a portion of people previously defined as unemployable into the labour market through rehabilitation.

Since the late 1980s, the dominant way in which employability has been referred to, it seems, is through ‘initiative employability’; an understanding that has also become central to the relationships between employers and individuals, as well as governments and citizens. This notion implies a very different relationship between employability and employment, as well as a different role of ‘ability’, in comparison to the previous conceptualizations of employability. Within ‘initiative employability’ individuals are positioned as being responsible for labour market outcomes they find themselves in while employers and governments become ‘enablers’, making ‘it possible for the individual to make necessary choices to

become employable' (Fejes, 2010: 99), but not guaranteeing employment. Furthermore, it is the individuals' perpetually maintained 'initiative', rather than the ability to do the job, which has become central to this understanding of employability.

As such, the rise of initiative employability is usually explained by organizations having to be more flexible in order to compete in the global market and governments not being able to build their labour market policies around stimulating demand for labour. Even though this makes it arguable that the rise of employability is a result of unavoidable changes, the intense positivity of the rhetoric is still striking. As we will argue shortly, it is on this rhetoric that much of the detrimental social impact and material changes brought by employability are based.

The emergence of initiative employability in organizations often meant a loss of job security for employees, but was presented as giving 'employability security' (Kanter, 1989), as a result of which employees would only be better off. 'Employability security' was presented as 'empowering' the employees (Clarke and Patrickson, 2005), allowing them to exercise choice in the labour market (Bagshaw, 1996). As a consequence, work has arguably become something that one can consume, in the sense that employers offer a set of tangible and intangible benefits in addition to the monetary remuneration, on the basis of which individuals are expected to 'choose' who to work for (see Brown et al., 2003; Dale, 2012). Employment itself has been reinterpreted as 'a temporary state, or the current manifestation of long-term employability' (Arthur and Rousseau, 2001: 373). This emphasis on employability 'displaces [the] orientation of the subject from their current job onto the longer-term goals of [employability] advancement or continuing employment *per se*' (Cremin, 2010: 136; amended).

Another central way in which initiative employability has engendered a positive rhetoric since the late 80s is in labour market policies. For example, in the UK the New Labour government first emphasized 'job security' as a labour market policy priority, but after a number of unsuccessful attempts to influence labour demand, their rhetoric shifted to constructing job security as employability (Levitas, 2005). Demand-driven changes were regarded as the prerogative of the 'very bad old days' (Layard, 1998: 27, cited in Peck and Theodore 2000: 729). Similar trends have been noticed in other countries across Europe (Jacobsson, 2004; McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005) and elsewhere (see Moore, 2010).

As others have shown, this notion of initiative employability downplays the influence of structural issues on labour market outcomes, access and inequalities (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005; Moreau and Leathwood, 2006; Morley, 2001)

and individualizes social problems (Holmqvist, 2009). Individuals are made responsible for their employment: being unemployed is seen as the result of not trying hard enough. We may even see a link between the present notion of ‘initiative employability’ and the mid-Victorian understanding of ‘the unemployable’ mentioned above: in both cases the individual is inherently blamed for their unemployment. The difference is that the mid-Victorian view did not have any infrastructural grounding in Britain at the time, whereas today there are programmes and practices provided by governments, employers and (increasingly) educational institutions, which purport to ‘enable’ (Fejes, 2010) people to become employable. If these programmes and practices do not materialize in one’s ability to find employment, more and more people might draw the conclusion that this must be the result of a person’s ‘defects of character’. Of course, this is rarely the case as unemployment is often the result of structural problems, which are masked by the notion of employability. Trying to cover structural problems in the labour market by a rhetoric that is exclusively positive (as embraced by governments, employers and other organizations) is one clear issue we have with employability. However, it is not the only one. In the next section we will address a few more issues that employability raises, by focusing on some of the ethical implications of the use of this term.

### **What is worth ‘noticing’ with employability?**

Employability purports to overcome distinctions of class, gender and ethnicity, as being more or less employable would cut through these existing social categories. However, in practice this is rarely the case. Rather than *overcoming* these distinctions, employability rhetoric simply ignores them by celebrating individual initiative and development. The problem, however, is that these social distinctions do not magically disappear when they are not addressed. Characteristics such as age, social background, gender, disability and ethnicity make some groups much less likely to be employed than others (e.g. Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005; Brown and Hesketh, 2004; Morley, 2001; Smetherham, 2006). The first way in which employability can be challenged, then, is on the ground that it promotes social exclusion rather than overcomes exclusion. Through a rhetoric that places an increasing demand on the individual, marginalized groups are more likely to be excluded from labour market positions than the non-marginalized, as the social mechanisms that contribute to their exclusion are silenced. When the problems of social exclusion in connection with employability are emphasized, it is often implied that there is nothing wrong with employability as a concept, but rather ‘unequal access’ to employability that is the problem (e.g. Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005). This we do not agree with, as we see the very concept of employability as being part of *the problem*. This

becomes especially clear when one looks at governmental programmes that seek to get these ‘problem groups’ into work, which is the focus of some of the contributions to this special issue (Diedrich and Styhre; Garsten and Jacobsson; Simms; Vesterberg). These cases show, for instance, that the jobs that these groups are targeted towards are often precarious or low-paid, and that the support is usually offered in extreme situations of labour market inequality, like long-term unemployment. Not focusing on the structural nature of unemployment risks problematizing these groups even further, at times in a colonial language (see Vesterberg, this issue).

Second, the overall agenda of employability is one that requires a very particular ideal notion of ‘self’ from individuals. This ideal can be understood as operating through the ‘self-work’ ethic (Heelas, 2002) or through self-government (Knights and Willmott, 1990). Being ‘skilled’ (Chertkovskaya, 2013; Williams, 2005), ‘flexible’ (Fogde, 2007) and a ‘learner’ (Fejes, 2010; Williams, 2005), as well as ‘sellable’ (Elraz, this issue; Fogde, 2011) and ‘enterprising’ (Berglund, this issue) may be identified as some of the key features of an ‘employable self’. The failure or refusal to identify and correspond to what employability promotes through this rhetoric is likely to result in becoming unemployable or not getting a job (e.g. Bergström and Knights, 2006). This results in individuals having to conceal the characteristics that do not fit into what is deemed to be employable, like shyness or mental illness (e.g. Elraz, this issue; Fogde, 2007), and conforming to whatever employers demand in a particular context (Chertkovskaya, 2013). However, not getting a job is not the only possible negative outcome. In Sweden, for instance, a country where the rhetoric of employability is particularly strong, not living up to the demands of employability has also resulted in finding employment at the price of being labelled as disabled (Garsten and Jacobsson, this issue). In this case, employability can be seen to set the standards of normalcy (*ibid.*). Furthermore, through employability’s denial, or ‘derecognition’ of limits (Costea et al., 2007; Cremin, 2010), it can be understood as a never realizable ‘project of the self’ (Grey, 1994), where work and life outside work, whether in employment or not, are mobilized in its name. The ‘principle of potentiality’, which is in ‘the exhortation that every individual ought to see itself as always capable of “more”’, is inherent to employability (Costea et al., 2012: 35). This, as Costea et al. (2012) and Bloom (this issue) argue, may result in tragic consequences for the individual, as the constant striving for ‘more’ goes hand in hand with a permanent sense of failure.

Third, employability rhetoric has gone beyond the area of labour market policy and employer-employee relationships. A particular issue that we would like to highlight is that it has become central to education policies and practice. Employability, and hence the attempt to convert people into ‘employable selves’,

now enters individuals' lives long before they enter the labour market, sometimes even at school (Berglund, this issue; Komulainen et al., 2009). So the statement that '[t]he project of employability begins at the cradle, if it has not yet been extended to the grave' (Levitas, 2005: 121) is not too exaggerated. The problems that this 'project' leads to are perhaps most visible within the area of higher education. Even though employability has only recently become a central focus of university life, it is already having a great impact on the ways that universities operate (Taylor, 2013; this issue). For example, employability is today widely used as an evaluation criterion for universities' performance and it has also become a criterion on the basis of which further financialization of the university (Beverungen et al., 2009) is justified (e.g. see Browne Review, 2010). The consequences for education are particularly worrying as the increasing focus on employability shifts the students' focus from education *to* employability.

Finally, it must be considered that employability is a promise arguably empty of any substantive meaning (Cremin, 2010, Moore, 2010); and one that empties all it touches. In its constitution as a 'potentiality' (Costea et al., 2012), the various categories that it purportedly claims to grasp and account for (e.g. skills, lifelong learning, being entrepreneurial, sellable) take different shapes in different contexts, often overlap or cannot be found. For example, the 'excellence' of one's (transferable/soft) skills is often positioned as key to getting into graduate jobs, but on closer inspection they either turn out to be mundane or not central to the activities they claim to enable people to do (Chertkovskaya, 2013). The problem is that the measure of each person's employability is judged on an individual basis, and that it therefore is easily used (rhetorically) at the expense of equality, responsibility, and the very ideals it is understood to embody. Furthermore, employability is also potentially emptying for the areas it becomes central to and people who attempt to navigate their way around its claims. It displaces people's attention from work and education to promulgation of itself (e.g. see Taylor, this issue), at the expense of the content of these activities. Ultimately, employability may be destructive for the subject. People do not only have to mobilize their (overabundant) individual qualities in its name (Costea et al., 2012), but to adapt to whatever employability demands. This very adaptation to the constantly changing context and demands, trying to re-craft the self around them, we think, may drain these individual qualities that were mobilized, and result in emptying the subject.

### **Employability: Hard to resist?**

The rhetoric of employability is tempting (while the practice is hardly avoidable), which is perhaps why resistance against it is not so easy to find. It seems all too

easy to unwittingly succumb to employability's rhetoric. For example, individuals may find themselves using the logic of employability to explain their failures in the labour market (see Sharone, 2007).

It would be encouraging if resistance were to be found among those who are supposed to enable others to become more employable. But, perhaps unsurprisingly, little resistance is found here: while there has not been much research on this theme, it seems that counsellors and employability advisors often choose to justify employability-driven practices as ones that ultimately 'help' individuals, and therefore refrain from communicating their concerns about employability to those *they* are employed to 'enable' (Chertkovskaya, 2013).

Even in potentially more 'likely' places, notably the protest movements that have taken place around the globe in 2010-2011 (see Mason, 2012), we find little evidence of resistance against employability. Indeed, despite the regular presence of anti-capitalist rhetoric, it may be argued that some of these protests have been demanding what capitalism has created and the lack of what seemed most strong in the aftermath of the global economic crisis. This has proved the case with employability, as some of the requests for change are embedded in its rhetoric (Valenzuela, this issue; Vlachou, this issue; Williams, 2013). For example, the student protests against the rise in higher education fees that took place over the UK in 2010, as well as much of the public debate on this issue, has primarily been challenging education becoming less accessible for all, but not necessarily the employability-centred education as such (Williams, 2013). In Chile, the largely left-wing student movement for 'quality' in higher education can also be associated with quality *in terms of* employability (Valenzuela, this issue). From this, it is clear how the concept that was framed as a result of a previous labour market insecurity (in the 1980s) has been recently fought for following another labour market insecurity (in the 2000s and 2010s). However, such fighting, even if supposedly anti-capitalist, fails to challenge employability directly.

However, there is some evidence of resistance to employability among academics and teachers (e.g. Kalfa and Taksa, 2012; Komulainen et al., 2011). Indeed, many academics see employability as an intrusive managerial challenge to the traditional ideals of higher education, which one frequently hears in daily conversations. However, even in the context of higher education institutions, the picture is not *that* hopeful. While employability may be lamented loudly by some, aspects of employability, such as the rhetoric of skills and future prospects, are often actively embraced by the same people. As Taylor (2013; this issue) points out, '[employability] has become a standard mode of discourse – not only for the media and government ministers, but also academics marketing their institution on parent-centred University Open Days'. It must also be considered that with

higher education being positioned as a central site for the development of one's employability, resistance (and indeed critical thought itself) is increasingly subjugated. With students 'investing' increasing amounts of money for the promises bound up in educational accreditation, the mere suggestion of resistance runs counter to the ethos many bring to university in the first place.

Overall, active resistance to employability has hardly been noticed in research (see Fogde, 2011; Sharone, 2007). This may have something to do with individuals' lack of power in the labour market: where actively resisting employability rhetoric, i.e. challenging what employers require, is likely to result in not getting a job (e.g. Bergström and Knights, 2006), losing it, or falling short on future prospects altogether (promotions, etc.). However, passive resistance to aspects of employability's rhetoric is more often observable (e.g. Chertkovskaya, 2013). For example, the culture of overstating one's actual achievements (particularly by graduates during processes of recruitment and selection), and conforming to employer-requirements, are often done in the knowledge that this is a rhetorical necessity to 'get in'. However, this kind of resistance – if indeed it can be considered resistance at all – is likely to be 'decaf' (Contu, 2008); at best challenging the rhetoric in very minor ways and at worst reproducing it (Fleming and Spicer, 2003).

Nevertheless, the ubiquity of employability, combined with the fact that it is premised on the requirement for individual action, responsibility and autonomy, suggests something of particular importance for resistance. With these two factors in mind, direct resistance to employability (it would seem) can only come from a private resistance that (in its collective manifestation) challenges the very neoliberal consensus that has posited employability as a right and requirement for all. It is a revolution of conscience that is needed; and it is certainly on educators who lay claim to the promotion of critical thought to provide the means of developing such a reflection. The contributions to this special issue, we think, provide an important step in this direction, and will now be introduced.

## Contributions

The papers in this issue give notice to employability in three ways. First, by adding to the ongoing discussion of ways in which employability has become colonizing. Second, by exploring the type of self that employability requires. And finally, by discussing the consequences of having to engage with employability.

We start the special issue with the article by Karin Berglund, which engages with all of these three themes. The article positions the 'entrepreneurial self' as central

to employability rhetoric. It looks at the case of school education in Sweden, where under the guise of entrepreneurship education children are taught to become 'enterprising selves'. There is much emphasis on positive thinking, the joy of creativity, and awareness of the value of their own interests and passions. However, according to the author, the consequence of living up to this ideal enterprising self is never being satisfied with who we are. Furthermore, the excitement and amusement that is portrayed to be associated with being entrepreneurial also involves fighting against all odds, which, as Berglund shows, is not so much fun.

The following two contributions look at another way in which employability has become a colonizing rhetoric, namely by trying to convert everyone into employable subjects. The articles by Viktor Vesterberg as well as Andreas Diedrich and Alexander Styhre look at how employability rhetoric addresses immigrants in Sweden.

Viktor Vesterberg shows how unemployed immigrants from Somalia are constructed as the opposite to an ideal-type citizen of 'advanced liberal societies'. Even though their 'entrepreneurial' abilities are acknowledged, which might help them to become employable, they are also constructed as patriarchal, idle and likely to engage in illegal activities, as well as unwilling to work in general. This construction takes place in contrast to the 'advanced liberal subjects' required by employability. Vesterberg demonstrates this by drawing on works of Edward Said, Michel Foucault and Nikolas Rose. In particular, he shows how the concepts of 'problematized Others' (Said) and 'advanced liberal subject' (Rose) help us in understanding how employable subjects are problematized as ethnicized un/employable Others.

In their contribution to this issue, Diedrich and Styhre focus on a labour market programme in Sweden, which aims to validate newly arrived immigrants' prior learning as part of their settlement support aimed at promoting their 'employability'. Specifically, the paper draws attention to the programmes' consequences, which stand in stark contrast to its purported aims. Instead of easing entry into the labour market, the validation tools help to construct immigrants as deviant *vis-à-vis* the Swedish norm and serve to question immigrants' prior learning. Moreover, rather than providing these individuals with the education and certificates needed, they are directed towards self-reflection, invited to regain confidence and to embrace their own responsibility for development. Thus, under the banner of such validation, Diedrich and Styhre alert us to ethnic divisions in the labour market that are reinforced and formalized rather than broken up.

The following three articles look at the consequences of employability. In his paper 'Fight for your alienation!', Peter Bloom establishes a link between employability and self-alienation. Whereas employability is often seen as a way to overcome a distanced relation to one's self, Bloom, drawing on Lacan, argues that it has the opposite effect: by constantly being encouraged to work on one's employability, one creates an unattainable fantasy of full self-realization. However, this fantasy of work without alienation does not put an end to exploitation. On the contrary, Bloom argues that the constant striving to maximize one's employability results in forms of self-exploitation.

While Bloom has looked at self-exploitation as the inherent consequence of the notion of employability, the next two articles look at the consequences of not living up to employability's rhetoric.

In Hadar Elraz's article the 'sellable self' is positioned as central to employability. For her, the failures to live up to the sellable self, while employability still needs to be maintained, result in a 'semblance' of the sellable self that needs to be demonstrated to those who make decisions about one's employability. A particular case of an individual with a mental illness is analyzed, where to maintain employability, he decided to conceal his health condition. While this seemed to help him to remain employable, at the same time it was associated with anxieties, which were shaping his relationships with colleagues and his behaviour at work in a certain way; a way that would not have been chosen had he not had to comply with employability's demands. As such, Elraz's example illuminates the struggle for all (working) individuals in the employability-centred labour market, not just those with mental illnesses.

In their paper, Christina Garsten and Kerstin Jacobsson show how being non-employable may become a disability, while being disabled can make one employed. They look at the practices of helping people considered marginally employable into employment in Sweden. For these individuals, it is through being coded as 'disabled' that they get employment. In the case considered, employability sets standards of normalcy in the labour market, determining what the acceptable and desirable individual characteristics are. The administrative categories, in their turn, work as 'technologies of government' and make these standards 'legible'. Moreover, the categories through which the individual moves are plastic and pliable, i.e. being coded or not coded as 'disabled' depends on political predicates and labour market fluctuations.

The two notes in this special issue reflect on employability in the context of neoliberal higher education; an area that has been increasingly colonized by employability. By reflecting on a series of cultural observations, Paul Taylor

addresses how ‘the employability agenda’ has become *the* central discourse of university and academic life. As this staunchly pragmatic and hopefully ‘impactful’ orientation of educational value becomes the norm, Taylor suggests there are two consequences: ‘managerialism’ and ‘academic self-hatred’. Both combine towards an ultimate end of an institution that once gained its legitimacy from culture, and now from its marketed ability to create employable citizens. Taylor’s note manages to consider the wider implications for the fate of universities, as they increasingly gain their legitimacy through an ‘anti-intellectual, employability-friendly’ ethos. In doing so academics are in danger of conforming to a new order that comes at the expense of critical thought, the life of the mind, and theory itself.

Francisco Valenzuela’s note brings the thematic concern of employability and higher education into a focus on the promises made by universities through ‘graduate employability’. Through a Lacanian-inspired assessment, the ‘powerful complementarity’ of higher education policies and the free-market are addressed through the notion of ‘quality’ as the central idiom through which ‘employable human-subjects’ are developed. To illustrate his conceptualization, Valenzuela brings attention to the student protests in Chile, where the demands for better access to quality education gave way to a strange and paradoxical inference. Despite these protests being anti-capitalist, by conceptualizing their demands through the neoliberal rhetoric of ‘quality’, the protesters are seen to mobilize a resistance that both reproduces and reinforces the very source of their affliction.

The first book review in this special issue brings up exactly this point. Reviewing Paul Mason’s widely discussed *Why it’s kicking off everywhere* (2012), Maria Vlachou argues that the student protests in many places across the globe may have been protests *for* employability. As a result, even though these protests and student movements might question capitalism, they do not challenge it and potentially even help to maintain it.

Nathan Gerard’s and Sam Dallyn’s reviews of Carl Cederström’s and Peter Fleming’s book *Dead man working* (2012) point us to the tragicomic consequences of modern work. With employability being one of the key aspects of today’s understanding of work, the reviews also help to project some of the consequences of living up to employability’s demands.

The two final contributions to this special issue bring us back to what we have suggested employability began as; namely, a structural issue of the labour market that continues to shape people’s (working) lives. Such shaping may be through the seemingly infinite number of internships individuals have to go through, as Joanna Figiel’s review of Ross Perlin’s book *Intern nation* (2012) highlights. Or,

this may be in what Melanie Simms looks at in her review of Shidrick et al.'s (2013) most recent book, which focuses on Teesside, a region with high unemployment in the UK. Here, short spells of precarious and often low-paid employment become the most that a lot of 'employable' people are able to get. So crafting oneself to what employability requires, imposing a certain self on individuals with often dramatic consequences of not living up to it, in no way guarantees secure employment or having work.

## Conclusion

As the collection of papers in this special issue demonstrates, employability is a notion that rears its head in a diverse number of places. Employability is not only a positively presented response to changes in the labour market that have come to define the relationship between employers and employees, governments and citizens; it is also a practice so deeply engrained in everyday aspects of life that the extent of its impact can easily go unnoticed. As such, this 'Trojan mouse of managerialism' (Taylor, this issue) can be understood as colonizing all it touches, emptying that which once determined its own value – be that 'policy', 'institution', or 'person' – of all but the principles employability puts forth. The contributions to this special issue call our attention to the way the contemporary preoccupation with employability tethers questions of equality and human development to an instrumental capitalist obsession with growth and renewal that may aggravate marginalization, exploitation and stigmatization.

Despite this rather bleak picture, we see this special issue first and foremost as an expression of hope. We hope that the issue's notice to employability reaches individual readers, who can think about employability in light of this special issue, and decide how to act upon it in their respective circumstances. We also hope that this issue will help preventing employability from spreading even further, to parts of the globe that so far have been unaffected by it. Most of all, we hope that this issue will help in re-channeling the vitality that employability aims to kindle, focusing on equality and human development without rooting them in capitalist progress and renewal.

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