On employability in higher education and its relation to quality assurance: Between dis-identification and de-throning

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> The [students´] agitating makes me think of something that was invented one day, if I recall correctly, by my good, late friend Marcel Duchamp, 'A bachelor prepares his own chocolate'. Take care that the agitator is not preparing his own chocolate. Jacques Lacan in 1969 [Lacan, 2007: 199]

Introduction

When discussing it with people of my generation – those who have recently entered the workforce after University, mostly in their thirties – we realize that our grandparents did not have to deal with 'employability' as a concern during their lives as workers. Had they heard of such a thing, it would not have made sense to them. We can imagine them startled by the abstract concept and insisting instead on dealing with a much more concrete problem, namely, 'employment'; where to find it and how to keep it. It seemed simple for them; either you had it or you did not, and that provided a solid statement about a man's (and a woman's) worth. On the contrary, for current generations entering the workforce 'employability' is an everyday concept we have learnt to accept. Despite it being somewhat complex and elusive, we can broadly relate it to the abilities we have developed in the past and to our own projection of an abstract, strategic future. As one human resources magazine puts it:

> [I]f individuals want to remain employable... they too, have to think about what skills they should be working to develop. Is it important to think about what's going to be in demand in the 2020 workplace? And how people are going to

> remain productive and attractive to employers through an increasingly longer working life? (Baron, 2011)

As a generation of fledgling yet motivated workers, we claim to know what 'employability' is and how to handle these apparently reasonable concerns by taking diverse courses of action. However, we can also realize that the 'work trends in year 2020' and the 'ever more extended work life' constitute massive and open-ended anticipations of our future which fill the prospect of our adult lives with anxiety. For authors like Colin Cremin (2010), drawing on Lacanian psychoanalysis, such anxiety is the effect of a particular form of subjectivity, which has been ideologically coded into the narratives of an 'employable' worker self and the practices that promote it. What is at stake here is a subjective split between a unifying sense of self – for Lacan, the imaginary – and the rules of the context in which it is found – for Lacan, the symbolic order or 'Other'. In congruence with Foucauldian readings (e.g. Sparrhoff, 2012), Cremin (2010) interprets this particular subject as caught up in a fantasy in which she desires to surpass the downs (and ups) of the concrete 'employment' game and to enter a new dimension. The offering there is that one can become an imaginary 'employable' self by going beyond the whims of any particular employer and over-demanding oneself to master a never-ending list of desirable skills and experiences (the symbolic order of professional labour). This Sisyphean endeavour embodies the constitutive excess of subjectivity that causes the split, which Lacan called the Real. Of course, this does not ultimately benefit the subject, but only capitalism and its champions, who can now expect the worker to enhance (and to govern) herself by her own in order to maximize the surplus value she can provide (see also Zupančič, 2007).

As the most current generation in the workforce we seem to go beyond our grandparents' horizon in this tragedy, hoping to somehow transcend (the imaginary of) 'employment'. While our predecessors were seeking a job as evidence of their self-affirmation, we can no longer seem to find our own image realized in 'the job'. For Cremin (2010), current modes of 'employable' subjectivity are calling us instead to become recognizable and desirable by a generalized, non-existent 'spectral Big Boss' that would gaze upon us and guarantee (in the name of the symbolic social order) that our 'next job' will be more satisfying than any other before.

Yet with the passing of time this new envisioning of 'employability' – the gaze of the Lacanian Other, the social order – will not only reach us but also the younger generations that follow right behind. They are the ones who will truly have to venture an answer about the work trends in the year 2020, or 2040 for that matter, and endure the restlessness of work. In this sense, there are essential

questions to be asked: how will this particular gaze be construed by those who are not yet workers; that is, secondary or higher education students? What discourses and practices will this Other of 'employability' start to demand from the student-subject? And how will these soon-to-be-workers make sense of them?

In what follows, a reflection will be sketched on how this subject-for-employability and its ideology of anxious self-improvement can be embedded in the domain of higher education (HE). Expanding on above-mentioned interpretations the goal of generating 'quality' in higher education will be analysed, considering the ambiguity in the meaning of this aim and the way it relates to the promise of graduate employability. Turning to Lacan, these ideals will be interpreted as establishing 'master discourses' which both empower and overwhelm the student-subject with the responsibility of self-enhancement, in the context of the new political economy for higher education. Diverse forms of subjective articulation around these master signifiers, namely 'dis-identification' and 'de-throning', will be analysed.

Quality assurance as a metaphor for employability

We should start by acknowledging that younger generations are already facing the problematic concept of employability. This is associated with the shift from 'higher education as a social institution' to 'higher education as an industry' (Gumport, 2000), which has been followed by a number of HE policies in the western world with the aim of strengthening the relation between the University and the (free) market (Miller, 1995; Gornitzka et al., 2005; Kwiek and Kurkiewicz, 2012). Notably, transnational policies like the Bologna Declaration (EUA, 2013) have explicitly emphasized employability as a fundamental goal for educational systems, along with other key aims. The most resonant among these is clearly quality: the goal of assuring that HE systems are egalitarian, accountable, 'efficient', and, above all, 'effective'. When considering these pro-enterprise HE policies, the goal of 'quality' appears to establish a powerful complementarity with the goal of employability. While the former is about enterprising outside, vis-à-vis the market, the latter is about enterprising inside, through 'efficient' and 'effective' management. Thinking critically, however, what we should read in this affinity is not only the coherence between outcomes of the educational system for the sake of 'development', 'equality' or any other purpose, but the symbolic connection between key signifiers representing the value[1] of

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1   By talking here about *value* I take advantage of the polysemy of the concept. Both 'quality' and 'employability' find their meaning on a domain – education – that is beginning to redefine its cultural and ethical *values* following a change in the *value* of knowledge according to the political economy of capitalism.

education itself and attempting to stabilize a new regime through its capacity to anchor discourse and subjectivity on specific practices (see also Fejes, 2010).

Following Cremin's rendition of Lacan, we can begin by appreciating employability as an undoubted 'quilting point' or 'master signifier' for the worker who dreams (and speaks) of an 'ontological closure or oneness with the boss' (2010: 134). Her dream of becoming employable is valid because there is a 'spectral Big Boss' (the symbolic social order, the Other) behind the imaginary boss, offering the promise of employability as something efficacious beyond its many possible meanings (or lack thereof). In the case of HE, the characters and the scenery are substituted by the imaginary HE institution, but the Other of graduate employability persists, based on the fact that the meaning of employability as an educational outcome has remained 'chameleonic', elusive and 'decontextualized' to this date (Harvey, 2001; Knight, 2001; Morley, 2001). What we witness then is a mere shift in the shape of the spectre, from a Big Boss behind all imaginable labour to a Big Educator behind all imaginable learning.

In light of such fading of meaning, the subject's overwhelming mission of becoming employable through education appears to be the only response to an urgent commandment; namely, to obtain a meaningful response from a Big Educator or Other that refers to the external side of the HE domain – the market – in any way possible. This, of course, includes choosing the most prestigious University, enrolling in the most enriching degrees, participating in the most CV-boosting activities, among many others. Yet, considering the vague and seemingly empty definition of the quality signifier in HE (Cheng and Tam, 1997; Pounder, 1999), we should also consider that the subject's effort could also be to locate an Other that refers to the internal side of the HE domain – HE quality assurance – in search for stable meaning.

Moreover, if we consider the 'value-laden' character of the quality signifier, subjectively associated with what is good and useful to justify an activity irrespective of its meaning, this Other of the internal would appear to reduplicate the gaze of employability and reinforce its command. It is as if quality were functioning as a true metaphor of employability, in a Lacanian sense. It would be accounting for and offering a kind of meta-guarantee for the student-subject; a guarantee for the effectiveness of HE's own guarantee of delivering the graduate employability that is desired. Elaborating on Cremin's (2010) terms, this would be a guarantee of the Big-Educator-Other that refers to the external side of HE –

graduate employability – which would be itself sustained by the Big-Educator-Other that refers to the internal side of HE – quality assurance – and vice versa[2].

We can see that in her relation to both employability and quality in HE the subject is animated more by the form of the promise (the quilting point) than its content (the filling) (Žižek, 1989). Notwithstanding, the form of subjectivity seems to be articulated differently around the above-mentioned signifiers. Beyond the contents of fantasy, what young people expect to become outside HE – 'graduate employability' – constitutes a different experience than the one that happens inside of it – 'quality assurance'. In the next section these modes of articulation will be distinguished, focusing on their effects over the individual and collective imaginaries of identity.

Dis-identifying with graduate employability in higher education

Although the experience of learning in HE institutions is for the most part collective, the achievement of graduate employability has been conceived primarily as a personal, individual challenge for HE students. Among many conceptualizations of this (e.g. Knight and Yorke, 2003; Bridgstock, 2009), the one provided by Holmes (2001) is the most notable. He puts forward a 'graduate identity approach' as an alternative to the emphasis on 'skills' that has dominated debates in this area. This is precisely the reason why such strategy is relevant to our discussion; the dismissal of skills development – a central concern for HE curriculums – is here based on the premise that 'the nature of human behaviour... depends upon there being a set of social practices and a set of identities appropriate to the social situation' (*ibid.*: 111) Essentially, this means that employable self-enhancement cannot be completed by the process of learning on its own. It also requires an incorporated sense of 'social appropriateness' to the core of one's self-becoming in terms of practices and identity; i.e. the discourse of who we are. Do we not perceive the gaze of the

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2   The distinction between the internal and external references of the Other is crucial for the theory and analysis of subjectivity. On the one hand, the gaze of the symbolic Other is capable of validating the reciprocal relationship between the in-side and the out-side of the imaginary depiction of self that the subject constructs. This way the subject can realize where she is in the concrete and what that means. On the other hand, for Lacan the symbolic structure of the Other is radically incomplete and will never be able to fulfil the realization of a stable location or meaning. This proves for the subject that her location in the imaginary is ultimately lacking (an anchor and a reference), that being inside is always also being outside and vice-versa. For an extensive discussion on this aspect of subjectivity (which Lacan sometimes called 'extimacy') see Miller (1994).

'spectral Big Boss' – the Lacanian Other – behind this appraisal of the subject's social suitability?

Indeed, Holmes (2001) clearly advocates the kind of illusory social guarantees that Cremin (2010) has warned us about. It is in this kind of proposition that we can find the specific form of subjectivity that is deployed around the master signifier of employability in the context of HE. Let us consider his detailed account on the relation between employability and identity:

> [G]raduate identity claims... in order to stand a reasonable chance of being successful, must be presented as an appropriate mode of warranting... students would be encouraged to consider what it would be like to be employable and employed in a position, how one conducts oneself, and so on, as the basis for rehearsing their claim upon such an identity. (Holmes, 2001: 117)

Holmes is insightful in contending that a graduate identity can only be deemed employable if it is constantly re-built and rehearsed. This implies a consistent anticipation of what is relevant to the occupational settings the student wishes to enter; 'how one should conduct oneself'; what it would feel like, and so on. Yet what Holmes fails to acknowledge is that this is not a consequence of 'human nature', but, quite the contrary, an effect of a social order – the political economy of enterprise HE – that feeds from the students' desire for a 'liberated' identity and the labour to build it.

With this in mind we can finally grasp the form that subjectivity takes around the master signifier of graduate employability in HE. It is the model of dis-identification, which Cremin (2010) elaborates on in his analysis of workers' employability. The 'dis' prefix does not mean the dissolution of identity; it rather means the possibility of deconstructing the signification of its meaning and of invoking a new master signifier to represent an alternative identity. Following Glynos (2001), it is about ethically transcending or transgressing the mainstream to look for something more sublime, and, therefore, desirable.

It is fair to say that if the students question the appropriateness of who they are, they will probably be able to secure a better job. Yet the meaninglessness that surrounds this fantasy of transcending identity, unfortunately, will eventually result in a mortifying guilt resulting from a lack of knowing how to fully realize it. Inexorably, the question is raised, how and when do we really become employable? Mortification rises precisely because the fantasy of counter-identities does not respond to any 'behavioural mechanisms' but only to dominating ideologies in society – what the Other wants: for us to work and study harder.

Glynos (2001) reminds us that ideology works through fantasy in a specific way: while there is elusiveness or relative emptiness of meaning that produces anxiety (what can we ultimately define as an employable graduate identity?), there is also always a lack of satisfaction (we cannot fully realize an appropriate graduate identity) that only keeps desire going. In this sense, fantasy sustains ideology through a play of void and disavowal, of lack and renewal, which renders identity not only contingent to what is appropriate (as Holmes (2001) proposes) but also always fundamentally reversed. Paraphrasing Glynos, it is the radical failure of identity that comes first, and HE employability merely gives body to this ever-renewed obstacle.

For this reason, the only way to cope with the ideological market-Other outside HE seems to be through warranting the cynicism of a 'graduate identity approach'. In the end, this is the only imaginary in which graduate employability can thrive.

De-throning quality assurance in higher education

We have learned that the student-subject has to constantly deconstruct her graduate identity so that becoming employable outside HE – being one with the master signifier of employability – turns into something possible and bearable. However, what is at stake inside the realm of HE imposes a different form of subjectivity than dis-identification. This form has to represent the quality signifier operating as a metaphor of the employability in the context of HE. In particular, it has to represent 'quality assurance': a method employed to supposedly ensure 'efficiency' and above all 'effectiveness' in HE. Following Lacan, this metaphor is understood as a way of re-negotiating with the Other, of defining yet another (insufficient) guarantee for the (insufficient) guarantees he offers to us.

In this case the guarantee does not seem to be articulated on the individual level, but rather on a collective level. While the promise of graduate employability can only be realized at the expense of others who will be competing for the 'next job', the promise of quality assurance can only be realized if everyone benefits from the same educational excellence. It is a fantasy of a method with no exceptions. This should extend our knowledge about the signifiers of employability and quality supporting each other in the name of the Other, according to HE policies. 'All for one, and one for all'... yet how can we understand the particularities of articulating subjectivity at the collective level in HE? What are the imaginaries that make up this distinct mode of being a student-subject?

Interestingly, there is a concrete case of collective identity in relation to HE quality that can provide some answers to this question. This is not an example of institutional development, however, but an instance of protest against the HE system in demand of a change. It is the case of the Chilean Student movement, which has been active since 2006 in consonance with other student (and academic) mobilizations around the world (e.g. Canada; Spain; UK; see also Bailey and Freedman, 2012).

Following 25 years of extensive neoliberal educational reforms in Chile, including the privatization of institutions and subsequent free-market competition between educators (Vergara, 1997), massive protests broke out. The protestors were demanding a more 'levelled educational playing field' and radical changes in the educational system. Almost a million students marched on the streets and participated in the occupation of schools and universities for months, eventually reaching an agreement with government authorities to work together on a solution, along with a number of experts.

The result, as it can be expected, did not change things radically. It rather promised to balance out previous free-market policies on education by developing major management systems to assure the quality of education and strengthen its institutions. Yet the most interesting part is that the students were somehow aligned with such lukewarm promises of change, based on the possibility of assuring. In the words of Camila Vallejo, their most famous student leader:

> The government keeps seeing education as a commodity and not as a right... we need to turn education into the main tool for the progress of Chilean society as a whole... what we propose is to define education as one of the main concerns of the State, so that it accomplishes international quality levels.... (Vallejo, 2012)

We find here an imaginary of quality assurance that is conceived as something satisfactory for the students' hopes for drastic social transformation. By the time of writing, the Chilean Student Movement is still mobilizing for radical political causes, yet they have kept asking for 'quality education' in their protest banners. It is as if they were working against the system's unfairness, and at the same time, advocating for assuring its present capabilities. We need to discern what form of collective subjectivity is operating here that makes viable such a contradictory connection with the master signifier of quality. We need to deduct how the subject makes amends with this Other of the internal in HE and finally how this relates with the Other of an external employability.

The work of Harvey and Green (1993) can contribute to understand such contrast, as they provide a meta-analytic map of the boundaries of the discourse

on quality that has been used by HE policies and institutions. From this we can understand how the student-subject is taught to speak in the name of the quality signifier. In particular, it gives us the first clue to understand how the elusive meaning of this master signifier enables the student-subject to act against the Other and at the same time fantasize about and demand its presence.

A succinct exercise of discourse analysis is called for here[3]. Harvey and Green (1993) distinguish five stereotypical meanings of the imaginary of quality. Two of them, 'quality as exceptional' and 'quality as value for money', seem to be ascribed by the Chilean students to their antagonist: the current educational system. They mean what is unethical to assure in their society, respectively, 'elitism' and a 'blind search for profit'. Another two meanings, 'quality as perfection' and 'quality as fitness for purpose', seem to be ascribed to the students' own heroic quest: their movement for change. They represent what is ethical and desirable to be assured in their society, respectively, that 'everybody will learn as equals' and that 'learning will be achieved each time by every student'. Finally, the last meaning distinguished by Harvey and Green serves to articulate quality as a metaphor of employability. It is 'quality as transformation', which for the authors means to enhance the learner's capacities and capitalise them professionally.

What we learn from this is that the only way to turn the blurring of meaning into a meaningful promise of assurance or 'professional capitalization' for the student-subject is to cluster the whole five meanings into a desirable yet ambiguous master signifier. This way the ethical can shine against the backdrop of the unethical and the present of HE can overcome the past and also project itself into the future. While some meanings of the master signifier have to be refused, others have to be extolled. There is crucial lesson about subjectivity to be learned from this brief interpretation of discourse on quality, as spoken by the protesters. If the student-subjects want to make sense of the powerful yet obscure message that they are able to decipher from the Other by invoking a master signifier in their discourse – in this case, quality – they have to constantly enthrone and de-throne the master. While university must be overthrown through protest, it should also be assured in its quality, and vice versa.

Lacan was aware of this when he faced student protests personally during his Seminar of 1969. Then his lecture was interrupted by a student who claimed:

> If we think that by listening to Lacan's discourse… we will obtain the means to criticize the ideology that they are making us swallow, we're making a big mistake.

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3   The work of Laclau and Mouffe (2001) on discourse analysis should be considered to further understand the particularities in this subjective arrangement.

> I claim that we have to look outside to find the means to overthrow the university. (Lacan, 2007: 205)

Having listened to him, Lacan replied very bluntly: 'But outside what?... when you leave here you continue to speak, consequently you continue to be inside' – and then he added – 'what you aspire to as revolutionaries is a master. You will get one' (*ibid.*: 205-207).

Lacan talks about speaking from inside, because the student-subject builds up her dreams of liberty within the walls of the university. And just like the 'cynicism of identity' in the case of employability, such 'cynicism of protest' allows the subject to cope with an otherwise unbearable command from the Other – 'assure society (and yourselves) that education will deliver (a future)!'. In this sense, and in relation to quality, we can see that the student-subject seeks for guarantees by using the Hysteric's Discourse in Lacan's terms (2007). This student-hysteric seems to always put her teachers and supervisors to the test – ultimately protesting against the 'spectral Big Educators' – so that she can assure whether or not they have enough quality and potency to rule over her desires and give her what she wants – an undoubtable, employable future. This is how she 'gets a master' to speak her being: by momentarily de-throning the signifier to test its royal rights over the Other, the social order of HE's political economy.

Concluding thoughts

The purpose of this note has been to pinpoint the ideologies and fantasies that sustain the student-subject's relation with the master signifiers of employability and quality. As a mode of concluding the argument, it is elucidative to compare the subject's relation to these ideals with what Lacan (2007) called 'University Discourse'. This is not about the subject (re)producing and sharing new valuable knowledge with the world – learning some quality and employability (skills, lessons, etc) – but really the opposite. In simple terms, making the subject calculate her own value in relation to a method (knowledge) that has been produced and 'skimmed' since long ago – becoming quality and employability, being one with their infallible guidelines.

Two forms of subjectivity have been interpreted here and each one of them can be seen as working to re-produce the University Discourse. In the case of employability, dis-identification: deconstructing identity – one's own value and meaning – to improve the chances of becoming appropriate for the method that ensures employability. In the case of the latter, de-throning (hysterically): resisting some meanings and values regarding HE's workings and extolling others, in hope that the method itself will be depurated and assured. In both

cases, the student-subject proves to be only cynical with the possibility of speaking the discourse of the master (signifier), and thus, to stand as a failure under the gaze of the Other who is supposed to be successful in guaranteeing the master's efficacy. The subject cannot decide between mastering the method and mastering herself, and in that sense, according to Ian Parker (2013), she reveals to be more of a 'little slave' beholden to the recognition of the academic machinery. Or perhaps even worst, to be just a mere residue of the academic (re)production of knowledge.

Certainly this does not constitute a picture of progress. Accordingly, the interpretation of these complex aspects should be followed by the discussion of certain issues, in the hope of their amendment. One, of course, is about 'traversing the fantasies' that subjectively sustain the current shape of HE. For authors like Clarke (2012), this implies that policy and political discourse should be criticized in order to open them up to the contingent and the radical undecidability of the social. Another is about the realization of the students' future. Considering their current subjective conditions, we need to follow them and analyse what will happen after they exit HE to begin their working lives. However, although there is much to improve, we should remain hopeful. At least desire has been kept alive and running throughout these silhouettes of student self-realization. And what better time to explore its unknown consequences than youth, when the young still enjoy a lot of themselves...

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