Becoming a neoliberal subject

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Introduction

The neoliberalisation of academia has been well recorded and critiqued (Collini, 2012, 2013; Giroux, 2009, 2014; Hill and Kumar, 2009; McGettigan, 2013). The process is a seemingly global phenomenon, though it is testament to how embedded the narrative of neoliberalism has become in so many facets of education and broader society that no two accounts of it are ever quite alike. The fact that many theorists understand neoliberalism differently is arguably the result of every theorist applying their own conceptual lens to diverse circumstances. This has led some argue that the concept has become overused, to the extent that it has lost any meaning (Venugopal, 2015). However, it may be the very fact that the concept is so multifaceted that makes it worth examining further.

My own research (Houghton, 2017) explores how 'everyday' practices within English higher education organisations influence undergraduate students towards becoming neoliberal subjects. Such practices include the process of applying to university, the constant evaluation or reviewing of both their selves and their organisations that students are encouraged to undertake, and the increasing commodification and privatisation of university campuses. These 'small but constant brushes with neoliberal policies and practices' constitute what Philip Mirowski (2013) terms 'everyday neoliberalism'. This reflects the subjective experiences and lived manifestations of neoliberal narratives that work to pushes agents into *becoming* neoliberal subjects. In this note, I draw on Michel Foucault's work on technologies of the self and Margret Archer's work on reflexivity to explore how university students become neoliberal subjects.

Understanding neoliberalism

Despite the varied applications of the term 'neoliberalism', there are many recurring themes that can highlight its use as a term of critique. These include:

- the fetishisation of competition, and market fundamentalism (Gilbert, 2013; Foucault, 2010; Mirowski, 2013; Standing, 2011);

- a narrative of investment in human capital, both by individuals to increase their own employment prospects, and by the state to drive up national productivity (Foucault, 2010; Hill, 2010; Huber and Solt, 2004; Olssen and Peters, 2007);

- a transition in the Global North from productive capitalism to financialised capitalism (Sayer, 2014);

- a shift from populations made up of people as citizens to people as consumers (Clarke et al., 2007; Tyler, 2013);

- a reliance on debt-fuelled consumption (Cooper, 2008; de La Barra, 2006; Lazzarato, 2011);

- an emphasis on individualised responsibility and the withdrawal of the welfare state (Clarke et al., 2007; Lazzarato, 2009);

- widening inequality, featuring rapid enrichment at the top of the income distribution, presented as the justifiable consequence of entrepreneurial meritocracy (Antonio, 2013; Gilbert, 2013; Littler, 2013; Sayer, 2014); and,

- a prevailing sense of insecurity, both on a global scale and for individuals in their daily lives (Lazzarato, 2009; Standing, 2011, 2014; Wacquant, 2009).

These themes not only co-exist, but also interweave, permeating various areas of life. As David Harvey (2005: 2-3) notes:

> Neoliberalism has, in short, become hegemonic as a mode of discourse. It has pervasive effects on ways of thought to the point where it has become incorporated into the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in and understand the world.

Plenty of attention has been paid to neoliberalism's 'theory of political economic practices' (*ibid.*: 2). However, it is its transformation of 'common-sense' – the way we 'interpret, live in and understand the world' – that reveals how this latest phase of capitalism has embedded itself into the small, everyday actions and

thoughts of people and the organisations in which they operate (Clarke et al., 2007; Giroux, 2009; Harvey, 2005; Hill and Kumar, 2009; Mirowski, 2013). This includes how people conceive of and understand themselves as individuals: how, in short, they develop their identities. The encouragement to frame one's identity as an organisational enterprise stems from *everyday* acts of neoliberalism (Mirowski, 2013). These acts are hinged on the increasing commodification of everyday life, as even 'dissent or resistance [are] expressed through purchases that reinforce the authority of consumer culture' (McCarraher, 2014: n.p.). The extent to which this commodification applies to subjects, not just the goods and services they need, will be explored below.

In attempting to make sense of the varied aspects of the neoliberal project, many theorists have found Foucault's work a useful starting point (Jessop, 2010). Similarly, others exploring identity and subject positions have also adapted his concept of the self (Hall, 1996; McNay, 1992; Rose, 1989). It seems appropriate then that an attempt to understand the subject positions of neoliberalism should start with a reflection on Foucault.

Positioning the self as a subject

In his later work, Foucault made an important theoretical shift, moving his focus from the body and the disciplinary power that binds it, to *the self*. His earlier work focused on the productive nature of power on a grand scale to regulate, discipline, and produce subjects. However, from *The history of sexuality* onwards this conception of subject formation was complemented by a recognition that there must also be a response from the subjects themselves. Crucially, Foucault argues that in order to understand the modern subject:

> [O]ne has to take into account not only technologies of domination, but also techniques of the self. [...] Having studied the field of power relations taking domination techniques as a point of departure, I should like [...] to study power relations [...] starting from techniques of the self. (1985: 367)

With this point of departure, Foucault conceived of subjects as more than simply passive bodies in what Lois McNay describes as 'monolithic and functionalist account[s] of power' (1992: 48-9). Instead, individuals can be understood as active subjects who construct themselves through processes of self-constitution, recognition and reflection – or what Foucault terms *technologies of the self*.

Foucault's technologies equate to the means for defining an individual and governing their conduct (Besley, 2005). While his technologies of power 'determine the conduct of individuals and submit them to certain ends or

domination' (Foucault, 1988a: 18), his technologies of the self are the various 'operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and ways of being' which individuals make in order to reach a 'state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection or immortality' (*ibid.*). It is from these technologies that practices of the self arise. Foucault himself was not explicit about the difference, but it is important to understand how the elements differ. While the technology is the broader mechanism, it is the practice that acts as the 'operation'. As Hardy and Thomas explain, practices emerge 'at the nexus of "doings" and "sayings" as power is embodied in certain ways of thinking, speaking and behaving' (2015: 688). It is in the practices associated with these technologies that Foucault finds the means by which individuals self-regulate, self-fashion, and self-produce. It is through these different practices of the self that the technology is reworked to fit with the dominant narrative of the time. Crucially, these processes are still influenced by dominant narratives. As such, the subjects enacting them will also be influenced by these narratives.

Foucault finds technologies of the self in practices of liberation, rather than in domination (McNay, 1992), but stresses that such freedoms are still conditioned and determined through the socio-cultural context in which they operate (Hall, 1996). These practices rely on the mutual dependency between structure and agency. As Staunæs notes, 'people are actively engaged in their lives – but there are discourses that constrain what can be though, said and done' (2010: 103). In other words, while subjects may exercise a degree of choice in how they conduct themselves, that choice is still shaped by larger social and cultural narratives. This dependency is not one-sided: agency plays as much of a role in subject formation as narrative. Significantly, there is always more than one system imposing narratives and structures on subjects, and these may have conflicting effects. While individuals are influenced by these different systems they have some agency given their current influences, so different individuals may come to embody the same systems differently. This leads to 'diverse and complex version[s] of lived experience[s]' (*ibid.*: 101).

For Staunæs (2010: 103), the concept of subjectivity finds its foundation in the intersection of social and discursive practices and lived experiences, which collate into social categories. These categories can be 'classical' – such as race, gender or sexuality – but they can also imply 'collections of understandings regarding certain groups of people that are based on selected signs' and act as 'tools of inclusion and exclusion' (*ibid.*: 104), as I explore below with the concept of the *ideal neoliberal subject*.

This act of subject positioning works in both verbal and non-verbal ways (*ibid.*). As Davies and Harré (1990: 53) explain, the enactment of these collections of

understanding – that is, discursive practices – are what make subject positions into a 'livid narrative'. They conceptualise this through the practice of conversation, arguing that this interactive practice allows one person to position another within different narratives. Or, a person may position themselves through internal conversation. However, they do caution that such positioning does not always happen intentionally. Here, Margaret Archer's (2007) work on *reflexivity* provides an additional useful stepping-stone from dominant narratives to individual action in the formation of a subject by providing a framework that allows for individual agency to influence a subject's thoughts and actions within the broader discursive narratives to which they are subject.

Reflecting on the self

Archer (2007) acknowledges that there is no common concept of reflexivity across the social sciences, and so positions her own theory as the study of people's 'internal conversations' – their inner dialogues or monologues – and how these are used to reflect on their own concerns and position within their social context. These internal conversations, she says, make us 'active agents' in our own lives, rather than passive agents subject to external forces. The forms these internal conversations take are varied, from short ruminations through to vivid daydreams, and they do not necessarily take the form of a dialogue or conversation. However, they do have to have a central focus for the subject to consider a course of action and then to set about achieving it. These actions are the result of reflexive thought about what we care most about, goals Archer calls 'ultimate concerns' (*ibid.*: 7). 'No one person,' she writes, 'can have an ultimate concern and fail to do something about it' (*ibid.*). Much as Foucault's (1988a: 18) practices of the self are a means of acting upon ourselves in order to reach a 'state of happiness', Archer's reflexive thought can be the means of driving individual action towards achieving a desired project.

Whatever project we set for ourselves, this element of reflexive thought is crucial as it gives us agency to act. Working from the proposition that 'the subjective powers of reflexivity mediate the role that objective structural or cultural powers play in influencing social action', Archer (2007: 5) says that it is only through the study of reflexive thought that we can attempt to understand why people act and how these actions are mediated by social and organisational influences. She theorises the different types of reflexivity that subjects may experience and suggests that different people will be more prone to certain types of reflexive thinking. Like Foucault, Archer recognises that there is a balance to be struck between the self-steering actions of individuals driven by these different modes of reflexivity, and the influences of social and organisational narratives. These

influences work automatically, though they are dependent on human activity in both their origin and exercise. Agency works reflexively, either following these influences or in anticipation of them.

The internal conversations involved in reflexive thinking could be conceptualised as a practice of the self, and while such conversations will take cues from the social world, by their very nature they are internalised and dependent on how a subject chooses to talk to their self. This is important as it allows room for subjects to process their own histories and experiences, and as such it reinforces their agency (*ibid.*). To link back to Davies and Harré's (1990) argument, reflexivity becomes the practice through which subjects can position themselves, though it is not necessarily conducted as an (internal) conversation, but through any form of active reflection. The concept of reflexivity becomes especially useful when addressing issues of personal choice, a key theme of neoliberalism, as it adds an element of agency.

Becoming an ideal neoliberal subject

In accepting that subject positions must be embodied and acted upon in order to enact the discourses they operate within, it becomes imperative that they are studied empirically as well as theoretically. For example, Hardy and Thomas (2014) studied how market discourses within organisations intensified as actors engaged in practices that helped to normalise and diffuse them. Similarly, Bergström and Knights (2006) studied subjectivity during the process of organisational recruitment and how this then affects how applicants position themselves. My own empirical research explores how students at English universities position themselves in relation to the neoliberal discourses directed at them by the higher education sector and wider society.

Universities, like other organisations, operate both as relatively autonomous units, with their own histories and practices, and as cogs in wider 'mechanisms of domination' (Foucault, 2010). One particular cog of the last four decades is the marketisation of higher education and the positioning of students as consumers of education, although reducing changes in higher education to the simple introduction of market forces ends up missing wider neoliberal mechanisms at play. Much has been written on the student-as-consumer (Molesworth et al., 2009, 2011; Williams, 2013), but while the consumer model does lend itself to the narrative of the neoliberalisation of higher education, it does so in a simplistic way. Instead of consumers, universities encourage students to think of themselves as (and reflect on themselves as being) enterprising individuals. This

idealised subject, the product of political, societal, and organisational discourses, is presented as something students should aspire to be.

According to Foucault (2010: 226), the neoliberal identity is that of the 'entrepreneur of [the] self', which manifests as an enterprising subject. Being an entrepreneur of the self means being one's own 'capital… producer… [and] source of earnings' (*ibid.*). He noted that neoliberalism entails *acquiring* human capital, especially through education and training. Neoliberalism, he argued, instrumentalises learning in line with this goal. The ideal subject within the neoliberal narrative will invest in themselves and their futures by acquiring the necessary levels of 'human capital' to succeed. Mirowski, in describing the ideal neoliberal subject paints a picture of an individual who is not simply:

> …an employee or student, but also simultaneously a product to be sold, a walking advertisement, a manager of [their] résumé, a biographer of [their] rationales, and an entrepreneur of [their] possibilities […] provisionally buying the person [they] must soon become. (2013: 108)

For the enterprising subject, almost every act becomes an investable advantage in a competitive world. Competition is increasingly enacted within higher education organisations, and not just between institutions but also students. For example, the student who plays for their university football team may begin doing so simply because they enjoy playing the sport and like the social aspect of being in a team. However, those intrinsic reasons are placed in the background (though they do not disappear) when the student is encouraged to think about how they may 'stand out' in a competitive job market: suddenly playing on the football team becomes an investment in their human capital, an experience of gaining employable skills such as organisational leadership, team work and the ability to cope under pressure. Granted, it does not automatically follow that being enterprising means being neoliberal: one could be enterprising in activities that do not yield economic returns and for reasons other than gaining a competitive edge. However, the current, dominant narrative in higher education tends towards encouraging students to think of themselves in this economically competitive way.

Crucially, implied in this description of the ideal neoliberal subject is the implication of a *neoliberal other*: an 'unideal' subject. The existence of a student other is important; as Hall (1996: 4) notes, identities are constructed 'through, not outside, difference'. Indeed, in later his work, Foucault (1988b) argued that practices of self, based on culture and society, are established as norms to either aspire to or disaffiliate from. In my research, the student other is someone who has not been to university and can be found in the stigmatisation of the *feckless* or *lazy* working class (Jones, 2011; Mirowski, 2013; Tyler, 2013). The stark

dichotomy between these two types of subject offers an interesting insight into why some students – especially those from a lower socio-economic background or other social categories where participation in higher education is still comparatively low – might construct themselves as neoliberal students in order to distance themselves from this *other* subject position. While Archer proposes that in order for a subject to be influenced by social and organisational factors, they must find such an influence to be good, the concept of an unideal neoliberal subject would suggest that some subjects are also influenced by factors that they find to be bad, whether by putting up an active resistance to these influences or by hoping simply to avoid them. Here internal positioning may cause a student to reflect that they are 'not like' other individuals who belong to social categories they associated with (or were associated with by others).

The idealised enterprising subject, the product of political, societal, and organisational discourses, is seen as something individuals aspire to be. Whilst the *ideal* subject may be held up through dominant discourses, no individual will ever fully match the criteria. But that does not mean they will not work on their selves through reflection and their consequent actions in an attempt to match the ideal. Whilst a subject may have a level of choice in how they fashion themselves through reflexive thinking, the practices and judgements through which they embody this will be 'conditioned and overdetermined by the socio-cultural context' (McNay, 1992: 61), though they cannot necessarily be reduced to the direct result of that context. This difference between the actual and the ideal is a point that is at times forgotten in Foucauldian accounts of subjectivity: the extent to which individuals become a certain type of subject is always an empirical question, hence the need for empirical research. So, while we can talk of neoliberal subjects, this is not to say agents will operate exclusively through that frame. As Staunæs (2010: 105) notes, there is no pre-determined hierarchy prioritising which subject positions an individual will enact. However, how an individual experiences these subject positions may be influenced by external factors, encouraging them to position themselves within one predominant classification even if it causes conflict with other subject positions they may embody.

Though not entirely comparable, there are interesting parallels to be drawn at this stage between a neoliberal identity and identities of gender or race. McNay (1992: 71) writes on how technologies of power suggest and impose practices of the self onto individuals through their wider social context, arguing that gender, seen as practices of the self in her work, becomes 'an active and never-completed process of engendering and enculturation' rather than a static model of self-construction. She draws on Simone de Beauvoir's (2014) argument that 'one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman' to suggest that gender is culturally

constructed, but also something an individual constructs for themselves: though a subject does not necessarily choose how to enact gender, they create an identity through the 'gradual acquisition of a skill' based on relations with the world around them. The obvious difference with the neoliberal self is that gender and race (usually) carry with them clear physical attributes that have culturally imposed expectations and identities, but it is useful to entertain the idea of *becoming* and the practices and reflections behind that. No one is born a neoliberal subject, but rather may *become* one.

Conclusion

The ideal neoliberal subject seeks to make an enterprise of their own life, investing in their human capital in order to fuel the consumption that will produce their own satisfaction. The discourse of the neoliberal era of capitalism differs from previous iterations of capitalism because it places the responsibility for securing satisfaction primarily on the individual, making it the consequence of personal choice. In this discourse, enterprising subjects who actively seek to invest in their selves are securing their own futures, while those who do not are left to face the consequences alone. This discourse, based on individual responsibility, has become hegemonic not simply because individuals have been subject to it, but because through their acts they embody it as active subjects, whether consciously or not.

This note has attempted to offer a theoretical lens through which to better understand how and why neoliberalism has become not just a political and economic project, but a social and organisational one as well. By linking the works of Foucault and Archer, the note proposed a framework that explains how the pursuit of desired ends, hopes and the alleviation of concerns, can lead a subject to act in an enterprising way, encouraging them to embody the neoliberal narrative and become neoliberal subjects.

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