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To cite this article: Peter Kelly (2017) Growing up after the GFC: responsibilisation and mortgaged futures, *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 38:1, 57-69, DOI: [10.1080/01596306.2015.1104852](https://doi.org/10.1080/01596306.2015.1104852)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01596306.2015.1104852>



Published online: 11 Nov 2015.



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Growing up after the GFC: responsibilisation and mortgaged futures

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I argue that in the aftermath of the Global Financial Crisis of 2008–2009 young people, certain populations of young people in particular, are being made to bear a heavy burden, carry significant responsibilities for re-imagining their lives as a enterprise – an enterprise in which an *investment* in education and training and work increasingly looks like a *mortgaging* of an uncertain future. In mortgaging their future, many young people are confounded by the possibility of repaying this debt, or of leveraging it into a life that was promised them if only they stayed in education and training, if only they got a job, if only they studied and worked hard, and had an eye to the future. The paper will explore some of the characteristics of the self as enterprise, the challenges and opportunities that shape the fields of possibilities from which this self emerges, and which require us to practise our freedom in particular, always limited, ways and to carry responsibilities for more and more aspects of our lives, in circumstances that mostly escape our differing, individual abilities and capacities to shape these circumstances.

KEYWORDS

Global Financial Crisis; self as enterprise; individualisation; responsibilisation; labour markets of the twenty-first century; mortgaged futures

Introduction

In a number of spaces, over a number of years, I have argued that the self as enterprise is a *figure*, a ‘material-semiotic node or knot’ (Haraway, 2008), that points to the sort of person that we should become if we want to be, and remain, employable in the globalised, precarious labour markets of the twenty-first century, flexible capitalism. The self as enterprise, and the ‘ethically slanted maxims for the conduct of a life’ (Weber, 2002/1930), the ‘technologies of the self’ (Foucault, 2000), that promise to give shape to this form of personhood, assume that we are, or should become, rational, autonomous, choice making, risk aware, prudential, responsible and enterprising in the conduct of ourselves, our lives (see e.g. Kelly, 2013, 2007).

However, the self as enterprise is not imagined as the raw material, the essence of what it is to be a person. Rather, the self as enterprise has to be ‘made up’ (Rose & Miller, 1992) – in families, in schools, in relationships, in labour markets, in training programmes – and continuously worked on (*for the term of our natural life*). Technologies of the self as enterprise imagine that we, as individuals, are responsible for the always in-process, always

provisional, always precarious state of our Do It Yourself (DIY) project of the self (Beck, 1992). These processes of individualisation and responsabilisation have a particular character in the lives of young people as they are made the subjects of a diverse array of governmental programs – in families, schools, workplaces – that promise to equip them to secure some sort of parlous redemption in the globalised, increasingly precarious labour markets of twenty-first-century capitalism (Kelly & Harrison, 2009).

In the aftermath of the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) of 2008–2009 young people, certain populations of young people in particular, are being made to bear a heavy burden, carry significant responsibilities for re-imagining their lives as an enterprise. This is an enterprise in which an *investment* in education and training and work increasingly looks like a *mortgaging* of an uncertain future. In mortgaging their future many young people are confounded by the possibility of repaying this debt, or of leveraging it into a life that was promised them if only they stayed in education and training, if only they got a job, if only they studied and worked hard and had an eye to the future. Drawing on the work of Bauman, Foucault, Law and Haraway (among others) this paper will explore some of the characteristics of the self as enterprise. The challenges and opportunities that shape the fields of possibilities from which this self emerges, and which require us to practise our freedom in particular, always limited, ways, and, in the end, to carry responsibilities for more and more aspects of our lives, in circumstances that mostly escape our differing, individual abilities and capacities to shape these circumstances.

The GFC and generations

In many of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) economies, young people appear to be carrying a particularly heavy burden for many of the downstream effects of the 2008–2009 GFC. These downstream effects have compounded the educational and labour market effects and consequences of 30 or 40 years of heightened globalisation, the emergence of a more flexible capitalism, and the ways in which 1980s Thatcherism and Reaganism have morphed into the globalised triumphalism of neo-Liberalism (Hall, Massey, & Rustin, 2013).

The unfolding effects of what some are calling the Great Recession in Europe and the USA, and the emergence of sovereign debt crises and significant austerity programs in many European Union (EU)/OECD economies represent a largely successful framing of responses to the downstream effects of the GFC as being principally about State debt levels. In this discourse those that depend most on State provided services, payments and programmes will be the ones to carry the greatest burden of government austerity measures. In an appearance before the UK's House of Commons Treasury Committee in early 2011, the then Governor of the Bank of England Mervyn King claimed that those made unemployed or who had their benefits cut as a consequence of the GFC, recession and austerity 'had every reason to be resentful and voice their protest'. In his submission to the Committee he suggested:

that the billions spent bailing out the banks and the need for public spending cuts were the fault of the financial services sector: *The price of this financial crisis is being borne by people who absolutely did not cause it*. (cited in Inman, 2011)

One example from the North East of England illustrates some of my concerns here. In an article in *The Guardian* on 4 February 2013, John Harris discussed some of the debates and

possible consequences related to Newcastle City Council's (UK) published budget plans. According to reports on these plans the Council was to cut a third of its budget, or £100m spread over three years to 2016, and shed 1300 jobs as it struggled to deal with budget cuts imposed by the Tory/Liberal Democrat coalition government in the name of a sovereign debt crisis, fiscal responsibility, austerity and the need to show the UK's *strivers* that the coalition was serious about dealing with a 'culture of entitlement' among the nation's *skivers*. In the week prior to the publication of Harris' article, the UK's National Audit Office (NAO) had issued a report titled *Financial sustainability of local authorities*. This report, referenced by Harris (2013), suggested that not all Councils in the UK were in the same position as a consequence of Tory/Liberal Democrat austerity measures. According to the NAO: 'councils in the most deprived areas have seen substantially greater reductions in government funding as a share of revenue expenditure than councils in less deprived areas'. In other words, claimed Harris (2013), the likes of 'Hackney ... Liverpool, Manchester and Newcastle take a big hit, but Elmsbridge, Winchester and Richmond-upon-Thames have got off very lightly indeed.' He goes on to suggest that this 'kind of imbalance' is also reflected in the ways in which these sorts of cuts are reported:

In the London-based media, Newcastle is currently a byword for the 100% drop in the council's arts budget ... Unfortunately, there [seems to be no one] who will speak up for the youth services set to be killed by a 100% cut in their budget, the Sure Start provision soon to be restricted to 'those who need it most', the respite services for parents of disabled children that will shut, the city's remaining educational psychologists or the imperilled swimming pools. (Harris, 2013)

Harris (2013) suggested that in this sort of environment 'you get a keen sense of bright, shining hypocrisies that extend into the distance'. Tory and Liberal Democrat ministers 'still parrot the political class's habitual platitudes about "aspiration" and "opportunity", while in places such as this they are self-evidently meaningless'. The idea of *intergenerational theft* becomes, in this sense, less about passing on public debt to future generations, and more about changing the 'life chances of millions of young people'. What is at play here, Harris argued, is some sort of fantasy in which the 'barren expanses' being created 'will sprout new centres of entrepreneurial zeal'. In such fantasies those young people that are 'refused extra educational help or denied a local library', well, they become 'tomorrow's genius digital tycoons, or something ...'.

It is in this sense that I want to suggest that today's young people and young adults, and the generations who will follow and grow up in the unfolding aftermath of the GFC, will carry a particularly heavy burden in terms of changed education and employment circumstances and opportunities; consequences for physical and mental health and well-being; consumption, housing, relationship and parenting aspirations; and a sense of self in relation to the possibilities for participation in the liberal democracies.

In the EU, for example, youth unemployment and long-term unemployment rates in many Member countries have reached record levels; and the numbers of young people not in employment, education or training have also risen. At the start of 2013 the youth unemployment rate (for 15–24-year-olds) ranged from 7.7% (Germany) to 59.1% (Greece). In the EU these percentages translate to more than 5.7 million unemployed young people (European Commission, 2013). As many have suggested, these sorts of

aggregate figures do not reveal the ways in which different groups and communities and different localities are differently impacted, how different labour markets offer more or less opportunities for particular populations of young people, or what combinations of social class, gender, ethnicity and geography shape the exclusion and marginalisation of young people from education, from work, from housing, from consumption, from the possibilities of family relationships. For example, a recent Australian study suggested that data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics indicated that in early 2014 the youth unemployment rate (for 15–24-year-olds) was 12.2%. Importantly, this rate was much higher in certain towns/cities/regions: 21% in West and North West Tasmania, including Burnie and Devonport; 20.5% in Cairns (Queensland); 19.7% in northern Adelaide, including Elizabeth and Gawler (SA); 17.5% in Hume (Victoria), including Goulburn Valley, Wodonga and Wangaratta; 17.3% in Mandurah (WA) and 16.8% in Parramatta (NSW) (Brotherhood of St Laurence, 2014). These *gross* and regionally segmented unemployment figures also do not tell us much about the types of work, the sorts of jobs that are available to many people, young and old.

In addition, in many OECD and EU economies governments have, for the last few decades, been shifting the burden for the cost of higher education to students. In the UK, in 2010, the newly elected Tory/Liberal Democrat government partially deregulated the structure of University undergraduate tuition fees to increase competition between providers (in the process breaking a key pledge in the Liberal Democrat election manifesto not to increase tuition fees). As a result there was a race to the top of the government imposed £9000/year cap on tuition fees as nearly all providers priced their degrees the same (even though there must be a self-evident difference in what students are ‘buying’ for that price). Students, who take out loans to pay these fees, and to provide a small annual allowance, are likely to graduate with debts of £40,000. Millions of young people in the OECD economies can now look to start their ‘working lives’ (if they can find a job) with large debts that are to be repaid through an array of student loan schemes (McQuillan, 2014).

Young people: a future mortgaged?

At this time I want to briefly examine some of the ways in which young people in different parts of the globe have taken up some of the challenges of growing up after the GFC. During the last five years or so, we witnessed how many young people around the world had both begun to experience what some of these consequences might be and to give voice to much of their anxiety, uncertainty and anger about their experience of these consequences. Space does not permit me to spend any time analysing young people’s involvement in groups and movements such as the Spanish *Indignados* or the global Occupy movement, or in the various and different revolutions in the Arab Spring, or in the riots in many cities in the UK during August 2011. But I do want to suggest that high levels of youth unemployment and precarious employment, student debt accompanying increased costs for higher education, housing costs that lock many out of home ownership, and the challenges for young people’s physical and mental health and well-being are re-shaping young people’s sense of self and of their chances for meaningful participation in relationships and settings that traditionally identified someone as an adult, as a citizen.

These concerns are well captured by the many hundreds, even thousands of contributions from young people to a Tumblr page called *We Are the 99%*.¹ Those who posted to this page were asked to upload an image, and to contribute some text about the image and why they imagined themselves as being part of the 99%. I want to present just a small number of these posts. In the first one a forlorn looking young woman, wearing headphones and looking into her computer's camera, holds up a notebook where she has written:

I CAN'T FIND MY FUTURE.
 I looked in college.
 I found debt.
 I looked to my parents.
 I found debt and heartbreak.
 I looked at my friends.
 I found grief and sorrow.
 I looked at the land.
 I found MY COMMONS DESTROYED, MY LAKES AND RIVERS AND SOIL AND TREES AND BEES AND WORMS DESTROYED.
 I looked at my fellow humans.
 I found disease, debt, sorrow, dissonance, hate, greed, misery, AND NO ONE CARES ANYMORE.
 well. I CARE. an awful lot.
 I'M TAKING MY FUTURE BACK.
 (IT'S MINE)
 I AM THE 99%

Another post shows an image of white board with words that appear to have been written with much passion, emotion, anger, anxiety:

I am 20
 I earned a culinary degree
 I had to move back w/my parents
 I have \$\$\$\$ in student loans
 I make and have never made more than \$9.50/hr
 I vow never to have children, for I fear for their future like I fear for my own
 I feel this life is almost not worth living ...
 I live 4 change
 I AM THE 99%
 #OCCUPYWS

In the final post, the following text accompanies an image of a digital clock showing 0:01 (orange figures against a black background):

I'm on an internship for school. I'm not getting paid for it. I'm in a strange city. I don't know anyone here. I have applied at almost every fast-food restaurant, retail store, gas station, and whatever else I can think of, but have heard nothing back. My bank account is almost completely empty. I'm writing this on the laptop I can't sell because I need it for school, and while I write, I eat the last of my groceries. My car is almost out of gas. I don't even have enough money to pay rent on the first of the month. I don't have a lot of personal possessions that I can sell, and the ones that I can, I probably won't get much for. I don't have health insurance, and I dread getting sick or having an accident that leaves me in the hospital. If I give up now and go home, I won't graduate. I'm already several thousand dollars in student loan debt, I hope to at least have something to show for it. But how long can I last at my

internship when I have to choose between putting gas in my car and doing laundry? My life is a ticking time-bomb, and the last few seconds are counting down before my eyes. I am the 99 percent. And I am out of ideas.

We can see in these and the thousands of similar posts, and in a variety of other spaces, a powerful questioning of many of the markers of adulthood that have framed young people's identity, their sense of self, both in *being*, and in *becoming*: *becoming* an adult, *becoming* a citizen, *becoming* independent, *becoming* autonomous, *becoming* mature, *becoming* responsible. These markers frame accounts of what it is to be an aspirational, enterprising young person who has a prudential eye to the future: to *their* future as adults with some sort of investment in an education, a career, relationships, consumption, housing, possibly parenting (Kelly, 2007, 2012). For many young people it now appears that what is needed to realise these aspirations is less an investment in *becoming*, and more a mortgaging of these possibilities with few, if any, means to meet the obligations that these debts demand. And in seeing these aspirations and hopes mortgaged many young people see little chance for their concerns to be heard and met through the traditional institutions of the liberal democracies.

We are the 99% represents, in this sense, an attempt to re-imagine what it means to be a person who is connected to others in various spheres of life. Of course not everyone who might qualify will imagine themselves as being a member of the 99%. But it can be argued that the material concerns of those who imagine themselves as being part of the 99% are able to be reframed via the networking that is promised by social media. That is, I can imagine myself as being part of this thing called the 99% because social media enables me to imagine that such a thing exists, or exists as imagined by those who come to identify themselves in this way. These 'experiments' in new 'cultures of democracy' (Taylor, 2007) are uncertain and open-ended. In many instances they have been transformed, or have 'failed', or been suppressed and dispersed by the powerful forces at the disposal of governments and globalised corporations. The nature and consequences of these experiments are of interest, but are not my primary concern in this paper. Instead, I want to situate the burdens and responsibilities that will be carried by the generations who will grow up after the GFC in processes that have made individuals in the neo-liberal democracies increasingly responsible for managing their lives as an enterprise. And for the experience of the ambivalence that inevitably accompanies the obligation to make choices, to exercise an always limited freedom, and to carry the responsibilities for the ways in which we exercise our freedom.

Precarious work and twenty-first-century capitalism

A number of influential sociologies of work have claimed that at the start of the twenty-first century the nature and meaning of work has changed. In many respects workers in the OECD economies remain as participants in a classic capitalist exchange relation in which they sell their labour (physical, mental, creative) in variously regulated labour markets. Those individuals and organisations that purchase labour then have some claims – often negotiated, contested, arbitrated – over what individuals are expected to do in terms of work processes and practices; when and where they are expected to do work; and the manner in which they should think, act and feel in relation to these paid work tasks and duties. Not much has changed then since the likes of Marx and Engels, and

later Weber, were formulating frameworks for understanding capitalism and work. Yet, in many other ways work, work opportunities, work identities, the meaning of work, the place of work in our lives, the times and spaces and places in which work occurs have been, and continue to be, transformed (Bauman, 2005; Beck, 2000).

Long-term trend data (1982–2005) shows that at a fundamental level paid work in many of the OECD economies is no longer primarily a male pursuit (although, of course, to suggest that at one time it was is to think of paid work from a middle-class perspective: large numbers of women from the working classes had to participate in the paid labour market to secure household livelihoods). In many of these economies women now make up at least 40% of the labour force, and in many economies at least 60% of women of working age (15–64 years) are active participants in the labour force (OECD, 2006). At another level paid work requires fewer and fewer of the workforce to manufacture a physical object; fewer and fewer to plant, sow, harvest or otherwise engage in the production of foodstuffs or agricultural products; fewer and fewer to dig or mine minerals, ores and fuels above or below ground. The percentage of the labour force engaged in mining and primary production in most OECD economies declined significantly from 1982 to 2005, as did the numbers involved in the manufacturing industries; while greater numbers of those who participate in labour markets are engaged in the provision of a vast variety of services (OECD, 2006).

In this context there has been discussion about the emergence of core and peripheral labour markets in which the core workforce trades excessively long hours of work for a measure of security and access to a range of non-salary benefits. The so-called peripheral workforce has been characterised as low/minimum wage, casualised and part-time, denied access to employment conditions such as sick leave, pension and health care entitlements, and a general lack of security in an employment context. In many of the OECD economies, the labour force has become characterised by increased levels of casualised and part-time work, and the over-representation of particular populations – females and young people – in part-time and casual employment (also Hochschild, 2001, 2003; OECD, 2006; Thrift, 2005). Standing (2011a) has recently canvassed many of these concerns in his book *The precariat*. Elsewhere he summarises a number of his key ideas in arguing that the precariat:

... consists of a multitude of insecure people, living bits-and-pieces lives, in and out of short-term jobs, without a narrative of occupational development, including millions of frustrated educated youth who do not like what they see before them, millions of women abused in oppressive labour, growing numbers of criminalised tagged for life, millions being categorised as 'disabled' and migrants in their hundreds of millions around the world. They are denizens; they have a more restricted range of social, cultural, political and economic rights than citizens around them. (Standing, 2011b)

Sennett (2006) identifies three key, unfolding, processes shaping the emergence of what he calls *flexible capitalism* – a form of capitalism that energises and is energised by precariousness. The changes Sennett describes are complex; they unfold unevenly and with a variety of consequences (intended and unintended); they may look different and impact differently in different configurations of time/space/place – such as in different organisations (large/small, startup/established), or in different towns, cities, regions, nations, free trade communities. Sennett's framework enables a discussion of changes

in twenty-first-century work regimes that foregrounds the powerful demands for flexibility, both at the level of the organisation, and at the level of the self.

The first of the processes, Sennett (2006, pp. 37–47) identifies is the ‘shift from managerial to shareholder power’ in many, mostly larger, organisations. Sennett locates the energising moment for this shift in the 1970 breakdown of the Bretton Woods agreement, and the subsequent freeing of vast amounts of capital to find optimal returns anywhere around the globe. Takeovers, mergers, acquisitions and buyouts became the playthings of increasingly mobile capital. All enabled by the frenzied activity of wealth holders seeking wealth creation; and facilitated by the demands for the interests of mobile, digitised capital to be accorded more currency/value than those of more *territorially fixed players* such as nation states and *flesh and blood* workers (Beck, 2000).

This globalised circulation/flow of often predatory capital ushered in the second process that Sennett identifies as energising the flexibilisation of capitalism. Sennett (2006, pp. 39–40) argues that ‘empowered investors’ in greatly enhanced, globalised circuits of capital demanded short term rather than long-term results: ‘whereas in 1965 American pension funds held stocks on an average for 46 months, by 2000 much in the portfolio’s of these institutional investors turned over on an average of 3.8 months’. As Sennett (2006, pp. 40–41) indicates, there is little new in money chasing money. However, organisations have had to transform their institutional processes, practices and structures to satisfy the fetishisation of the short term by impatient, globalised, digitised capital: ‘Enormous pressure was put on companies to look beautiful in the eyes of the passing voyeur.’ In Sennett’s understanding of flexible capitalism this is a profound change, and a continuing driver of change: the re-engineering, re-working, re-invention of the organisation – and I would add, of the self – that accompanies the myriad, complex demands for flexibility, nimbleness and innovation signals a highly consequential break from the *steel hard shell/iron cage* of the Weberian bureaucracy.

The third driver of this post-bureaucratic, flexible capitalism is, for Sennett, the information, communication and transportation revolutions of the last four decades that have transformed the nature of all productive activities. Under the sometimes uneven influence of the global development and deployment of these technologies twenty-first-century work looks different, is imagined and regulated in different ways. It can be undertaken by micro-processor governed machines and hardware that displace humans on a massive scale. It can be organised within organisational architecture that, ideally, looks less like a *pyramid*, is *flatter* with less layers, and which constantly strives for *real time* rather than *lag time* in processes of command and control, but also of innovation and development. These forces are not just felt at the organisational level, at the level of being an attractive object of mobile, digital, impatient capital. They are highly consequential for the individual, the self, that constantly encounters these *norms* of economic activity, and must make choices, fashion a self, practice his/her freedom in the spaces structured by these demands and expectations (Kelly, 2013).

These, and other claims, have figured prominently in a broad literature concerned with the sociology of so-called *new work orders* that has emerged in the last few decades. This literature highlights the emergence of widespread anxieties and uncertainties as individuals work away at constructing a coherent and continuing narrative of self, of identity, in an adult world of work that is increasingly precarious, uncertain, flexible (Bauman, 2001,

2005; Beck, 2000). These understandings should not be seen as determining the forms of selfhood that we are encouraged and/or compelled to practise in the labour markets of twenty-first century, flexible capitalism. But if twenty-first century, flexible capitalism structures the fields of possibility in which we practise our freedom, then these fields, following Foucault, should be understood as not being entirely open, and as not being wholly constrained. There is always the possibility of acting otherwise, but in acting otherwise there are always consequences for a self.

The self as enterprise and the ambivalence of freedom

In this final section I want to situate this discussion in a brief account of why it is productive to think about the self as an enterprise, and the ways in which neo-Liberalism, as an art of government (Foucault, 1991), seeks to make the individual responsible for the choices, outcomes and consequences of managing this enterprise. In *The Protestant ethic and the 'spirit' of capitalism*, Weber (2002/1930) explored the particular virtues that should be seen as attaching to work, and the particular influence that certain Protestant sects had on articulating these virtues. Weber's concern was with investigating the relationship between a Puritan/Calvinist view that hard work, done well, was its own reward, and a so-called *spirit of capitalism*. Weber (2002/1930) provides a 'provisional illustration of what is meant here by the "spirit" of capitalism' via a 'document of that "spirit" which encapsulates the essence of the matter in almost classical purity'. What follows in *The Protestant ethic* are extended passages from the 18th century pamphleteer Benjamin Franklin, including:

Remember, *that time is money* ... The most trifling actions that affect a man's credit are to be regarded. The sound of your hammer at five in the morning, or eight at night, heard by a creditor, makes him easy six months longer ... It shows, besides, that you are mindful of what you owe; it makes you appear a careful as well as an *honest* man, and that still increases your *credit*. (pp. 9–11, original emphases)

Weber (2002/1930, p. 11, original emphasis) makes no claims for the representativeness, even truthfulness of Franklin's incitements and advice. Yet, for Weber there is little doubt that what he calls 'this little sermon' is the 'characteristic voice of the "spirit of capitalism", although clearly it does not contain everything that may be understood by the term'. Moreover, the 'essence of this "philosophy of avarice" is the idea of the *duty* of the individual to work toward the increase of his wealth, which is assumed to be an end in itself'. This *spirit* has, for Franklin, 'the character of an *ethically* slanted maxim for the conduct of life [*Lebensführung*]. *This is the specific sense in which we propose to use the concept of the "spirit of capitalism"*'.

Weber saw in the Protestant Ethic only one of the motive forces for the emergence of rationalised capitalism. A Protestant ethic promised heavenly salvation, and an earth-bound redemption as the outcome of the pursuit of the individual's calling. Twenty-first century, flexible capitalism is energised by a spirit that sees in the cultivation of the self – as an ongoing, never ending enterprise – an *ethically slanted maxim for the conduct of a life*. This spirit is made explicit in the ways in which American management consultant Peters (2005), for example, imagines the type of person one must be, the forms of personhood that one must cultivate, in order to succeed in the *monstrous cosmos* of twenty-first-

century flexible capitalism. In his *100 ways to help you succeed/make money*, Peters (2005, pp. 41–42) claims that:

100 WAYS TO SUCCEED #23:

DESIGN MEANS YOU!

Sure, 'design' means DHL spending Gazillion\$\$\$\$ on ... YELLOW. IT'S THE NEW BROWN.

But that's not all.

Design means ... me ... at age 61 and somewhat successful ... going through more than 25 drafts of a mere update of my Official Bio ... that will be circulated to Clients for the next several months.

Design means ... that every action I take is Consciously Mediated by my implicit-explicit 'design filter': That is ... HOW DOES THIS COME ACROSS? COULD IT BE CLEARER? CRISPER?

MORE EXCITING?

I 'am' design!

It works for me.

I invite you aboard!

It's a daunting journey ... and an exciting one.

It's near the Heart of the Matter in a BrandYou World.

(Hint: We live in a BrandYou World ... like it or not.)

You = Desire to Survive = BrandYou = Branding Fanatic = LoveMark Fanatic (thanks, Kevin Roberts) = Design Fanatic.

Q.E.D.

Michel Foucault's later work on the care of the self; the central part played by an analysis of the relationships between knowledge/power/subjects in this work; the focus on the ways in which forms of management and regulation, and practices of the self interact to shape the ways in which we practise our freedom in neo-Liberal spaces; and a refusal to ground this analytic in a theory of the Subject provides a powerful framework for thinking about the self as enterprise and the processes of individualisation and responsibilisation at play in the conduct of this enterprise (Foucault, 1985, 1986, 1991). Foucault's work throws into relief questions about the ways in which we practise our freedom, and are managed and regulated as Subjects who are free to choose, and who must carry the consequences of the choices we make (Rose, 1999). An extensive literature that draws on Foucault's work argues that neo-Liberal governmentalities produce understandings of the self as an autonomous, self governing enterprise that should, ideally, be capable of identifying, navigating and managing the opportunities and risks of twenty-first century, flexible capitalism (Barry, Osborne, & Rose, 1996; Burchell, Gordon, & Miller, 1991; Gordon, 1991). The idea of the self as enterprise opens up for analysis our *willing* participation in globalised, precarious labour markets (Bunting, 2004). To practise one's freedom is to develop certain dispositions, behaviours, capacities and commitments – in settings and systems of interaction in which others seek to manage or encourage particular (appropriate) behaviours and dispositions. It is in the compulsion to choose, to make appropriate choices from a range of culturally and historically specific options that we, not only, *practise* our freedom, but also carry the responsibilities and obligations, or reap the rewards that flow from practising our freedom in these ways (Kelly, 2013).

Where the meanings of life are transformed into meanings which are structured by the market form, then the subjects of neo-Liberal rationalities of government emerge, argues Burchell (1996, pp. 22–23), as 'free', 'entrepreneurial', competitive and economically

rational individuals. However, within these governmentalities this form of selfhood is not so much a 'given of human nature as a consciously contrived style of conduct'. That is, this subject has to be *made up* – encouraged, incited, directed, educated, trained – via the mobilisation of diverse techniques, as the active, autonomous, responsible entrepreneur of her or his own DIY project of the self. Rose (1996) argues that the self, in this sense, is conceived as an active, self-creating individual seeking to *enterprise* themselves. Individual biographical projects are the result, within this rationality, of the *maximisation* of the chances for a *good life* through *acts of choice* – through the practice of freedom. Life is accorded 'meaning and value to the extent that it can be rationalized as the outcome of choices made or choices to be made' (p. 57).

In this sense an ethic of enterprise is a fluid, shifting, generalised, and at the same time contingent and contextual body of thoughts, ideas, recipes, forms of advice, injunctions and suggestions for how it is that we should know and act on ourselves. This ethic emerges from and gives shape to an array of always limited fields of possibility in which we are encouraged to imagine ourselves, our choices, our aspirations in particular ways if we want to participate in precarious labour markets. Participation that will provide, it is hoped, the forms of salvation – even purpose and meaning – that paid work promises (Kelly, 2013). In the work of Tom Peters, for example, we see the moral imperatives to conduct one's self as an enterprise writ large. Indeed, the work one must do on oneself, the labour required to know oneself in terms of being the producer and promoter of one's own biography, and the diverse aspects of this biography that position the self in a favourable light in the precarious labour markets of twenty-first-century capitalism, are presented as imperatives. Success, on the terms demanded by this *monstrous cosmos* (Weber, 2002/1930), is dependent on being able to manage the self as a successful enterprise:

Task one: Work on ourselves. Relentlessly!

HE/SHE WHO HAS THE BEST STORY WINS! SO ... WORK ON YOUR STORY!

You = Desire to Survive = BrandYou = Branding Fanatic = LoveMark Fanatic = Design Fanatic.

(Peters, 2005)

Conclusion

Whether we have the capacity, the desire, the skills necessary to know or to recognise ourselves as an enterprise cannot be determined in advance. Despite the ambitions of neo-Liberal governmentalities the self as enterprise cannot be willed into existence. The regulation of the conduct of oneself and others is, always, an incomplete project. The responsibilities for managing the consequences of this enterprise, and the capacities to identify and manage the risks and opportunities that confront this enterprise are, in neo-Liberal mentalities of rule, imagined as residing in and with the individual. As individuals we are imagined as being responsible for the choices we make, for the outcomes of choices made (and not), for managing the material ambiguities (Bauman, 2001) and emotional costs of globalised, precarious labour markets (Elliott & Lemert, 2006). In the North East of England, in regional Australia, in Greek and Spanish cities, on Tumblr, the material ambiguities and emotional costs of globalised precarity are experienced in diverse ways by diverse groups of young people. And the possibility of thinking or acting otherwise in twenty-first-century capitalism is indeed limited. As Weber (2002/1930) argued in *The Protestant ethic*:

Today's capitalist economic order is a monstrous cosmos, into which the individual is born and which in practice is for him, at least as an individual, simply a given, an immutable shell ... , in which he is obliged to live. It forces on the individual, to the extent that he is caught up in the relationships of the 'market', the norms of its economic activity. The manufacturer who consistently defies these norms will just as surely be forced out of business as the worker who cannot or will not conform will be thrown out of work. (p. 13, original emphasis)

In the aftermath of the GFC, as a consequence of largely successful neo-Liberal attempts to re-configure this aftermath as being principally about sovereign debt crises, the need for austerity, and an end to the 'age of entitlement', we may be condemning generations of young people to a life-long burden of precariousness and debt. In this sense, a self as enterprise that grows up after the GFC is being made responsible for resolving the contradictions, the paradoxes, the limits and possibilities of fashioning a life in twenty-first-century capitalism. That is a burden of responsibility beyond the capacities of many us, and a burden that is that much harder to bear when you have mortgaged your future on the promise that education and training will secure an always parlous salvation in the globalised and precarious labour markets of twenty-first-century capitalism.

Note

1. Tumblr is a social networking/micro-blogging site. The *We Are the 99%* page can be found at www.wearethe99percent.tumblr.com. A methodological examination of research in these spaces is beyond the limits and intentions of this paper. See Campbell and Kelly (2013) for a more detailed discussion.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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