Enjoy Your Work! The Fantasy of the Neoliberal Workplace and Its Consequences for the Entrepreneurial Subject

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This article critically examines the ways in which organizational performance and audit practices intersect with the dynamics of contemporary capitalism, managerialism, and individualism to shape the experience of the entrepreneurial, "postneurotic" subject at work. Drawing from Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, the article argues that the conditions for the contemporary subject are characterized by the declining efficacy of the Symbolic order, which induces the production of people whose identities are fragile and unstable. Paradoxically, this instability emerges at a historical moment at which individuals are commanded to "self-actualize" and to not be limited by authority or tradition. Neoliberalism makes "Work" assume particular importance in this project. The article argues that the decline of the Symbolic, in turn, places a heavy weight on interpersonal relationships in the Imaginary, or among alter-egos, to produce any semblance of a stable identity. Workplace performance measures and audit practices offer seductive points of identification and "quantifiable" stability for the subject in search of her "authentic" self at work in particular. Yet, at the same time, these measures painfully ensnare the subject in external identifications and managerial validation in new, constraining ways.

Before the dawning of the age networks and governance, there was an extensive literature and discourse in public administration and allied fields about the disturbing effects that bureaucratic organization and management had on the well-being of people and social relationships in modern organizations (Baum, 1983; Denhardt, 1981; Ferguson, 1985; Hummel, 2008/1977; Merton, 1997/1940, 1981; Thayer, 1979/1973; White, 1969). Today, an array of troubling consequences of new managerial and organization practices associated with the new public management and neoliberalism have been documented for democracy (Box, Marshall, Reed, & Reed, 2001); administrative professionalism (Radin, 2006; Terry, 1998); policy implementation (Brodkin, 2011; Diefenbach, 2009; Fox & Miller, 1995); and organizational transaction costs (Frederickson & Frederickson, 2006). While other fields have

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theorized and documented these consequences for individual subjectivity (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005/1999; Costas & Taheri, 2012; Ekman, 2013; Fleming, 2014; Hardt & Negri, 2000; Hoedemaekers, 2007; Karreman & Alvesson, 2004; Moore & Robinson, 2015; Styhre, 2008; Vanheule, Lievrouw, & Verhaeghe, 2003), with rare exceptions (Kouzmin & Vickers, 2001; Vickers, 2010, 2011) scholars in public administration have yet to confront the effects of contemporary managerial regimes and emerging discourses of work for human experience and subjectivity in workplace organizations. In this article, we begin to address this important absence in the literature by drawing from the resources of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, related social and political theory, and critical management studies.

Broadly speaking, Lacanian political and cultural theory has argued that contemporary society is marked by the decline of conventional forms of paternal authority and shift from a society of prohibition to one of enjoyment (Catlaw, 2007, 2009; McGowan, 2004; Verhaeghe, 2000). This is reflected, empirically, in the decline in trust and faith in societal institutions (Inglehart, 1997) and the emergence of a discourse of hyper-individualism that emphasizes self-optimization and the overcoming of institutional, personal, and even bio-logical limits (Catlaw & Treisman, 2014; Rose, 2007) in pursuit of one's "authentic" poten-tial and well-being. This argument is paralleled in the sociological literature, which emphasizes the importance of personal identity and individualization as the influence of social traditions as guides for living wanes (Bauman, 2005; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2001; Castells, 1997). For Lacanian theory, these changes have been understood in terms of the col-lapse of the Symbolic order and the emergence of an unstable subject that is narcissistic and fragile (Zizek, 2000). Philosopher Dufour (2003/2008) has insightfully advanced various strands of this Lacanian argument by elaborating the effects of these changes to the human subject in the wake of the theorized disintegration of the Symbolic order within the context of the dynamics of the contemporary capitalist political economy. Dufour argues that a new postmodern, *postneurotic subject* is being produced through a process of *desymbolization* in which historical representations of the Symbolic order have lost their credibility as regulators of human relationship.

By and large, however, the Lacanian line of thought in political and social theory has not considered how these transformations in subject formation impact the experience of *work* in particular or how neoliberal workplace practices may shape new dynamics of subjectivity. Relatedly, in this context we must grapple with the fact that "work" is a critical term in the neoliberal political economy and workplace is a privileged terrain in which this "authentic" self is to be realized (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005/1999; Dardot & Laval, 2013; Ekman, 2013; Harding, 2013). Work also figures centrally in contemporary policy and political dis-course; for instance, in terms of the shift from welfare to "workfare" in government programs (Peck, 2001). For its part, the rich and growing Lacanian inspired management literature largely has not explored the problem of Symbolic decline for making sense of experience of the subject in the neoliberal workplace (Arnaud, 2002; Arnaud & Vanheule, 2007, 2013; Cederstrom & Hoedemaekers, 2010; Contu, 2008; Costas & Taheri, 2012; McSwite, 1997; Roberts, 2005; Styhre, 2008; Vidaillet, 2007).

In this article, we address both the problematic absence in public administration of dis-course about the subjective effects of contemporary organizational practices and these open matters in the extensions and application of Lacanian theory by examining the ways in which

performance and audit practices intersect with the dynamics of contemporary capitalism, managerialism, and individualism in the workplace to shape the experience of the postneurotic subject at work. While work is often lauded as a location for self-actualization, autonomy, and fulfillment, we seek to show how and why workplace practices today could be contributing to increased experiences of precariousness, inadequacy, depression, and physical and mental exhaustion (Ehrenberg, 1998/2010; Knights & Clarke, 2014; Layton, 2009, 2012), while at the same time offering a seductive, gratifying point of identification and "quantifiable" stability for the contemporary subject.

In sum, we seek to elaborate what Glynos (2011) instructively calls "the ideological and political significance of fantasy at work" (see also Ekman, 2013). We consider not only the role of performance measures in contemporary fantasies *at work* but also the ways in which *"Work"* itself has become privileged terrain for staging fantasy. This allows us to connect the governmentality literature on neoliberalism and the Lacanian analysis of Symbolic disintegration in order to understand the entrepreneurial self as *postneurotic* in its constitution.

THE LACANIAN SUBJECT: A PRIMER

One of the more provocative and interesting theses in the sociopolitical application of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory is Zizek's (2000) contention that the human subject today confronts a world in which the Symbolic order has collapsed (see also McGowan, 2004). To make sense of this claim and assess its plausibility, we first outline Lacan's theory of the human subject (see also Chiesa, 2007; Dor, 1997; Fink, 1995; Stavrakakis, 1999).

For Lacan, human beings exist in three dynamically intertwined registers—the Symbolic, the Imaginary, and the Real. The *subject* of the unconscious (as distinct from the ego, discussed below) is inaugurated by being *subjected* to the *Symbolic* order. This is, as Leupin (2004) puts it, "the space where everything begins" (p. 6). For Lacan the Symbolic is, fundamentally, the domain of language, defined in Structural linguistic terms as signifiers operating as a system of differences. In more approachable terms, the Symbolic names the dense cultural, social, and linguistic worlds that predate our birth and are the condition for our emergence as subjects. In a literal sense, then, we are *subjected* to the Symbolic; we have no choice in the matter. Nonetheless, the upshot of this subjection is that we enter into a world of language, symbols, and human relationships.

The subject is the subject of the *unconscious* insofar as we are subjected to the Symbolic in ways that we are not aware of and which are largely inaccessible to us. What is unconscious is essentially the Symbolic source, locus, or mediator for our seemingly very personal identities, wishes, and thoughts. For example, Darien Leader recounts the surprise of Bertrand Russell who "was thunderstruck one day to come across one of his father's diaries in a desk drawer which revealed details of his parents' courtship" which were identical to his courtship with his own wife (Leader & Groves, 1995, p. 45). The implication, of course, is that the story of Russell's parents had been internalized unbeknown to him and, in turn, become the implicit guide for Russell's own romantic engagements. For psychoanalysis, this anecdote is illustrative of the general state of human affairs and conscious "choices." In this sense, the Symbolic is not merely the kinds of cultural rituals or practices we consciously

participate in but the unconscious manner in which we learn to live and be in the world. We may have better sense, too, as to why Lacan also will call the Symbolic "the (big) Other." The Symbolic is a domain radically other to the subject and, as we will discuss below, transcends the domain of relationship to "little others" in the Imaginary. This big Other is also the register toward which our existential questions are addressed: Why am I here? What is my purpose in life? What does the Other want from me?

Finally, while the Symbolic Other is a powerful, often determinative force for the subject's being, it is an imperfect, flawed one. In Lacanian terms, the Symbolic *lacks*. We will discuss this in another way below when we consider the Real, but two observations are worth making here. First, when we are subjected to the Symbolic, it is an incomplete process. We are never fully subjected or determined. The concrete expression of this incomplete subjection is what we experience as *desire*. We could think of desire as the longing for that missing thing that we fantasize will make us completely fulfilled and satisfied. As McSwite (1997) puts it, "All desire is configured in reference to something that has been lost" (p. 52). Second, because the Symbolic lacks there are no final, definitive answers in language or symbolic systems. Not everything can be expressed; glitches, paradoxes, and so on appear in the lacking Symbolic. For the subject, the big Other has no definitive answer to her existential questions.

However, on this issue of Symbolic lack, authority and institutions play an important, practical role. They act as materializations of the big Other and as such, the Symbolic big Other traditionally is represented by or materialized in institutions or figures of authority that finesse or address limits of the Symbolic. For example, courts—and government more generally—are one institution in which potentially interminable interpretation, argumentation, and debate comes to an end. Technical or professional expertise can serve a similar function.

Next, the *Imaginary* is the domain of everyday social life and "reality." It is the world of relationships among *egos* and alter egos, or, Lacanian parlance, *little others*. The Imaginary operates based on a logic of the image and relations of resemblance in which the driving question is: Is the other like me? Through recognitions and identifications, we relate to the others in terms of affection (like me) or aggressiveness (not-like-me). The surface quality of the Imaginary is seductive in that it suggests wholeness, and a tidy and comforting dualistic order of things. But it is an order that is continuously destabilized by the potentially threatening presence of others, or alter egos, who threaten to disturb our image.

While the *subject* of the Symbolic and the Imaginary *ego* are distinct, they are related. To grapple with Symbolic lack, the ego seeks Imaginary identifications and objects to cork this lack and so, as Chiesa (2007) writes, "the ego is nothing but a *necessary* imaginary function of the subject" (p. 13). Further, Imaginary identifications happen unconsciously; they come from *outside* us since how we identify and the objects we chose largely are structured by the Symbolic. For example, in advanced capitalist societies, a prevailing way in which we desire is through the consumption of consumer products, and, increasingly, brands, lifestyles, and communities of identity (Salecl, 2004). Against this common backdrop, we develop strong individual senses of "the kind of people we are" based upon manifestly meaningless things like what kind of car we drive or brand of shoes we wear, and are encouraged to enjoy and create our own authentic selves, in part through consumption. During the course of our lives, Imaginary images and identifications—though interests, relationships, social roles, jobs, and

the like—become sedimented in the ego. But none can fully sate desire or cork Symbolic lack.

The Symbolic, however, does offer the subject something beyond these Imaginary identifications. Lacan calls this the *ego-ideal.* This does not connote ideal in a normative sense or imply a perfect ego. Rather the ego-ideal names a position in the Symbolic order from which we judge and assess ourselves. It is a point of *Symbolic* rather than Imaginary identification. So, whereas the register of the Imaginary affords us models or ideals for the ego to strive toward (or be threatened by), the Symbolic ego-ideal is the position from which we measure our distance from that model and judge the value of that pursuit. Zizek (2006/2007) writes, "the Ego-Ideal is the agency whose gaze I try to impress with my ego image, the big Other who watches over me and propels me to give my best, the ideal I try to follow and actualize; and the superego is this same agency in its revengeful, sadistic, punishing, aspect" (p. 80). This Symbolic identification offers the subject a stable anchor that the competitive domain of the Imaginary does not.

Finally, we have a relationship to the Real, an admittedly elusive concept even for the notoriously opaque Lacan. For starters, the Real is *not* everyday reality, which is the Lacanian Imaginary. As Chiesa (2007) explains, the Real names Lacan's view that "there is no self-contained Symbolic *and* there is no purely external, whole Real which surrounds it" (p. 123). As we have said, the Symbolic lacks. It is not a self-contained, complete structure. However, there is not a higher order term that resolves or addresses Symbolic lack; no God above the Symbolic that acts as a failsafe system for lack. The lack is *real* ontologically. On the other side, there is no material object or foundation *external* to the Symbolic and which envelops the Symbolic. That is, there is no a priori wholeness or fullness from which we are alienated when we are subjected to the Symbolic. Nevertheless, the nature of the desiring subject is such that we fantasize and long for a return to that wholeness.

SYMBOLIC COLLAPSE AND THE END OF THE KANTIAN-FREUDIAN SUBJECT

In light of this overview of the Lacanian subject, what does it mean to say that the Symbolic has collapsed? What are the implications?

Given that the Symbolic is the "space where it all begins," its collapse implies the disintegration of the ground of the subject's being and identity. Further, it suggests the waning of the Symbolic point of identification—the ego ideal (Dufour, 2003/2008, pp. 82–83)—and thus the weakening of that point from which we are able to reflect on and judge our ego; a decline of conscience, as it were. We would expect to observe an insecure, vulnerable subject; preoccupied with the dualistic domain of the Imaginary; concerned more with ego recognition and the question, "Is the other like me?" than with the Symbolic question, "What does the Other want from me?" We will pick up some of these issues later in the article.

Zizek and others intimate (Beck, 1992; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2001) broader social implications. First, there is the general decline of faith in social and political institutions of all kinds, which delegitimizes authority and the efficacy of the big Other's representatives. This makes it harder for the inevitable limits of the Symbolic to be finessed and for ordinary social life to be enacted. Second, as the efficacy of institutions declines, so does faith in the

prescriptions of the past, or traditions, as appropriate guides for living in the present. The individual life becomes a "project," the various dimensions of which must be freely chosen and constructed in order that individuals may realize their authentic self and realize their potential. Yet, at the same time, the individual lacks any traditional authoritative—that is, Symbolic—basis for undertaking this project in light of the weakening of the position of the ego-ideal and representatives of the big Other.

Whither the Lacanian Subject?

Notwithstanding the force of this thesis and its implications, its significance for the application of Lacanian theory itself is unclear. If the Symbolic register truly has collapsed one could interpret this as the collapse of the Lacanian subject as such. In other words, if Lacan's theory of the subject hinges upon the efficacy of the Symbolic order, or the big Other, and that has failed, then the Lacanian subject, too, is done for. An alternative approach would be to qualify the thesis about the "collapse" of the Symbolic order and, rather, theorize the Symbolic's particular manifestation and functionality in these times; that is, to radically historicize the Symbolic and consider the nature and subject being generated today. Though we do not agree with the whole of his argument, this, in large part, is what philosopher Dany-Robert Dufour (2003/2008) aims to do.

Dufour argues that the modern subject was composed of two seemingly contradictory elements: a Kantian, critical subject and a Freudian, neurotic one. The presence of these two created the characteristic tension of modernity. The Kantian subject was founded in "a new critical metaphysics, established within the limits of mere reason, freed from the dogmatism of transcendence yet making no concessions to empiricist skepticism" (p. 7). Kantianism aims to resolve the antinomies of reason by enjoining humans to deploy their critical faculties and to forge an ethic of justice around that use. At the same time, modernity brought the subject into relationship with religions and cultures, past and present, from across the globe and asked her to submit to "several subjects: to spirits and gods, to one God in a variety of monotheistic guises (Judaism, Catholicism, the various Protestantisms, Islam), to the King, the Republic, the People, the Proletariat, the Race . . ." (p. 38). Thus, many expressions of the big Other come to compete and coexist with one another.

However, Dufour notes, the modern subject is "*ipso facto* subject to *neurosis*" since "no normally constituted individual can obey all the action-oriented maxims the transcendental subject is required to obey . . ." (p. 38). Nevertheless, the neurotic subject becomes marked by growing levels *guilt* for the symbolic debt owed to the big Others, "who appears in different guises, and hence takes many forms" (p. 40). For a time, however, the critic and the neurotic, he argues, are "sibling rivals who eventually find they can get along fairly well together" (p. 42). The hysterical neurotic makes for a persistent critic of the master and the neurotic demands that "world [be] interpreted in terms of his symptom, in terms of what is insistent in his discourse" (p. 42). Indeed, the proliferation of big Others proceeds in tandem with the growth of criticism.

For Dufour, it is this matrix of modernity's critical-neurotic subject that has come undone because "*no* figure of the Other . . . has any real validity in our postmodernity" (p. 42, emphasis added). Critical-neurotic modernity gets hoisted on its own petard and undermines

Symbolic forms of the big Other and institutional efficacy. He writes, "In that sense, we could say either that postmodernity is a regime without Others or that postmodernity is full of semblances of Others that immediately reveal themselves for what they are: humbug" (p. 43). Whereas the modern subject was constituted via the Symbolic Other, the subject today is produced through *auto-referentiality,* self-creation.

So far, Dufour's argument is more or less consistent with the thesis concerning the collapse of the Symbolic and its aftermath offered by Zizek, and also with the sociological account of individualization and life project. However, what Dufour pursues in greater depth is this new dynamic of the auto-referential or self-constituting subject, *desymbolizing,* in the fact of difficult contemporary paradox: We are expected to be our "true" selves at a time when we lack the Symbolic ground to do so.[1] As Dufour sees it, the consequence is a borderline neurotic-psychotic state in which the individual facilitates between the seemingly unlimited power of self-creation ("I can be and do anything!) and inhibition (Ekman, 2013; McGowan, 2004) and the impossibility of creating that self; plagued by doubts of adopting "false selves"; and haunted by the ever-present, fatiguing shame of failure, inadequacy, and not making the most of one's potential and using one's life in the most productive way. As a result, depression and anxiety become more commonplace (Ehrenberg, 1998/2010; Rustin, 2014; Verhaeghe, 2012/2014). Dufour poignantly writes of this basic impasse for the post-neurotic subject:

> Once we enter a period in which there are no more presentable Others, other problems begin to arise. Why? Because it is of course at the point when the subject is enjoined to be herself that it is most difficult, if not impossible, to be a self. . . . [T]he act either fails by always getting deferred, or is accomplished but puts the subject in the situation of seeing herself perform an act she cannot believe in. The subject, then, always feels herself to be an impostor. (Dufour, 2003/2008, pp. 69–71)

Postneurotics in the Neoliberal University

Where can we see evidence of what Dufour is getting at? In order to communicate a clearer sense of experience of postneurotic subjectivity, we turn to a fascinating study by Knights and Clarke (2014), who interviewed 52 academics at eight different business schools in the United Kingdom. The aim of Knights and Clarke was to explore the impact of "the proliferation of managerialist controls of audit, accountability, monitoring, and performativity" within these academic realms (p. 335) and the theme of insecurity and identity in the contemporary workplace. While we will return to the role of audit and performance in later sections, for now, our purpose is to use this study in order to illustrate these affective conditions of vulnerability and insecurity—here within corporatizing universities and "academic capitalism" (Marshall, 2016)—in order to lend some empirical credence to Dufour's thesis. Exploring this in the context of academia is particularly interesting given that university faculty ostensibly has a greater range of autonomy and scope to enact the work of auto-referentiality. But it is still not so easy.

Knights and Clarke find three emergent types of fragile or insecure identities in the academic workplace: impostors, aspirants, and existentialists. *Impostors* are plagued by the

feeling that they are getting away with something. Their position is a result of luck or hard work rather than ability, and they are perpetually on the verge of being "found out." They fall short of the ideal academic almost to the point of wanting to distance themselves from academic work itself. Impostors feel a strong sense of guilt for not measuring up in light of the many and varied audiences that constantly evaluate and judge them. *Aspirants* strive to be the idealized, proper, fully realized academic. Journal ranking and other markers of academic prestige are held to be legitimate and valid signals of success. So, while fear and disappointment haunt aspirants, obtaining access to those journals or other academic capital provides real validation. This validation, however, is fleeting since they must continue to meet the target in order to feel affirmed on an ongoing basis. *Existentials* experience the contemporary workplace as being threatening to "the worth and significance of being an academic and what is valued and meaningful" (p. 345). Existentials experience tension between fulfilling career goals and doing meaningful work. The virtues of the academic life are eroded by the escalating demands for performance and entrepreneurial practices of the corporatized university.

Other psychoanalytically informed work draws allied conclusions about the conditions faced today, putting particular emphasis on the "relational" damage done in neoliberalizing practices, intensification of forms of narcissism, and attendant defenses against anxiety that develop. Layton (2014), for example, argues that neoliberalism denies dependency needs and indeed codes them as shameful. This leads to two general classes of reaction: withdrawal from public life and abandonment of care-taking functions (especially among the relatively privileged) or retaliation against (little others) marginalized or minority groups (see also Verhaeghe, 2012/2014, p. 29). Rustin (2014) sees neoliberalism as a general assault against social bonds and human beings' relational needs. The result is increased anxiety and "unconscious defenses against" it (p. 152). This is expressed as "social avoidance and self-segregation" (p. 154).

Desymbolization and the Imaginary

In Knights and Clarke's case material, we see evidence of the experience of inadequacy, depression, and anxiety of contemporary subjects and of the role of neoliberalizing management practices in cultivating these feelings. Working from a Lacanian psychoanalytic perspective, our interest is not merely to see workers as victims of neoliberal managerial control (though this often is the case), but also to probe, to follow Ekman's (2013) suggestion how workers and management may unwittingly be "deeply attached to their own domination" (p. 1,176). Our contention is that, in the face of the command to be-your-true-self and a disintegrating Symbolic order, the *Imaginary* assumes a particularly important role for the subject. In this setting, performance management and data are seductive resources for self-positing, while at the same time helping to reproduce feelings of inadequacy and depression. From a Lacanian vantage, the Imaginary and imaginary identification of course are always central to understanding subjectivity (Roberts, 2005). In our current context, relating to others and rendering oneself visible to (little) others becomes a more vital and, arguably, more treacherous undertaking.

Imaginary identifications are more vital for the postneurotic subject in that absent a stabilizing Symbolic anchoring ego-ideal, one's relationships with Imaginary others and images may be paradoxically ever more important to forging a coherent semblance of self. Circulating images of success and fulfillment try to do the work that Symbolic identification did. Dufour (2003/2008, pp. 94–106) echoes this conclusion in his comments about the power of the image (e.g., television, social media) in supplanting linguistic communication and the parental transmission of the Symbolic function. We leave "the relationship of meaning" (p. 113) behind.

It is treacherous because there is an inherent instability and fragility to the context of Imaginary identification. Though Dufour does not explore it directly, we can illustrate this issue via the dynamics of social media and the presentation of self in online venues like Facebook or Twitter. Social media sites serve as a kind of desymbolized "virtual immanentization" of the big Other that offers some element of *external* Imaginary confirmation of one's existence and forms of recognition and affirmation. However, given its location in the Imaginary, this recognition is capricious and temporary, and requires continual, ongoing maintenance, "liking" and affirmation by one's social network "friends"— akin to the feeling of the aspirant academics described above of needing to constantly and actively maintain their standing. There is no lasting Symbolic recognition. As we discuss below, being "liked" (that is, affirmed and recognized) in the workplace by your supervisor takes the form of both "objective" performance assessments as well as subjective assessments of being an entrepreneurial worker.

A final destabilizing aspect of the power of the Imaginary relation today is this: The binary in-out, Us-Them, logic of the Imaginary may have stabilizing in-group effects. We may gain a sense of "Us" because we know we are different and better than Them. However, neoliberal managerialism—described next in terms of entrepreneurialism—deploys and amplifies the competitive ego/alter-ego dynamic *within* social groups themselves. Thus, many contemporary organizations pull in opposite directions, trying to both create a kind of *esprit de corps* or "brand identification" among employees while at the same time injecting their organizations with practices that incentivize individual competition and cultivate antisocial behavior (Bowles, 2016).

THE POSTNEUROTIC SUBJECT AT WORK: AUTHORITY AND ENJOYMENT-IN-WORK

In this section, we elaborate three dimensions of the contemporary workplace that are germane to the discussion of the dynamics of the postneurotic subject: entrepreneurialism, the ideology of enjoyment-in-work, and the performance and audit revolution.

For three decades, governmentality studies have documented transformations in general practices of government (defined, generally, as the "conduct of 'conduct'") and the relocation of risk management with the advent of neoliberalism (Catlaw & Sandberg, 2014; Dardot & Laval, 2013; Dean, 2010; O'Malley, 1996; Peck & Tickell, 2006). In neoliberal governmentality, the basic premise of "the market" shifts away from naming a particular, bounded domain (in contrast to state and civil society) or even general process for allocating resources

efficiently and maximizing social welfare. Rather, the market names the practically and normatively preferred model for human relationships in general and for generating certain kinds of behavior. To this end, market-type relations must be *constructed* where they do not exist and individuals must make themselves ready for participation in market relations. Thus, there are two directives in play: the disciplinary power of market forces and the *self-disciplinary* action taken by individuals. The aim is the creation of a certain kind of self who is *entrepreneurial* (Bröckling, 2016; see also du Guy, 1991, 1995, 2004; Jones & Spicer, 2005; Sandberg, 2016). This self must be capable of independently gathering necessary information in order to identify and manage one's personal and professional risk, and to adapt to constantly changing "market" (that is, social) conditions; responsibility for much of which was previously assumed by government. An obvious corollary is the imperative to ready *oneself*—to learn to govern and discipline oneself (see also Lakoff, 2002)—for the labor market; to continually learn and adapt, and to acquire the necessary human, cultural, and social capital required to compete and succeed in an unpredictable and volatile world. One must become an *entrepreneur of oneself* (Bröckling, 2016).

In this connection, as Dardot and Laval (2013) note, entrepreneurialism "takes precedence over the calculating, maximizing capacity of standard economic theory" (p. 111). The neoliberal presumption is that every human being "has something entrepreneurial about them" and market (self-)discipline can unleash this limitless personal capacity. Thus, neoliberal government is distinct from the workings of the traditional market in that human beings are not seen as *naturally* driven to advance their self-interest or to truck and barter (Smith, 1776/1976). Rather, the entrepreneurial spirit must be cultivated and developed through mutually reinforcing and enabling governing practices. The self must be worked on and disciplined; and enabling social conditions must be *designed* (Triantafillou, 2017). However, at the same time, there is the implicit promise that hard work on the self will not only help to realize economic gains in the market, but also help to unleash a singular aspect of each individual. But, akin to the neoclassical economic assumption that individuals freely select their preferred basket of labor and leisure (Wolff & Resnick, 2012), the *choice* to engage in this activity is assumed to be freely ours, though both work and play are undergirded by the imperative and promise of self-realization through entrepreneurial activity.

It is at this juncture that the discourse of neoliberal governmentality joins, first, with the older discourse of organizational humanism and its promise of finding fulfillment via work (see Denhardt & Catlaw, 2014); and, second, with the post-1960s concern with self-realization (Lasch, 1979/1991), rise of post-material values (Inglehart, 1997), and rejection of various forms of authority (Diggins & Kann, 1981; Kittrie, 1995; Nisbet, 1975; Rosenau, 1992; Sennett, 1980). These disparate discourses converge to generate the underlying, orienting social coordinates for the subject outlined by Dufour and allow "Work" to serve as the primary venue for staging fantasy and for the "entrepreneur" to be posited as the primary image for Imaginary identification.

Thus, in our view, the figure of the entrepreneur outlined and critiqued in governmentality and critical management studies is not only an ideological artifact of contemporary neoliberalizing capital being imposed on us—though it is. In Lacanian terms, we also see the entrepreneur as the prevailing Imaginary representation of success, well-being, and desire that narrowly orients the work of auto-referentiality in contemporary organizations. That is,

we can see why the entrepreneur could be a certain kind of purchase for contemporary subjects given the task of auto-referentiality and the disintegration of the Symbolic. Problematically, though, the entrepreneur stages itself narrowly within the fantasy of *Work* (i.e., wage labor) as the privileged domain for self-positing and enjoyment and to the ends of organizational instrumentality. As discussed above, neoliberal policies and practices also may amplify and exacerbate the vulnerability of the subject and frustrate efforts to ameliorate deleterious consequences.

Organizational Authority

These discourses also shape how *authority* in the workplace is imagined and practiced. Recall that organizational humanists like Douglas McGregor contended that the old carrot-stick management practices were outdated. People need to be valued and, in turn, find meaning in their work. There need not be an inherent antagonism between labor and management. In the process, not only would people be happier, the organization would be more productive. Dardot and Laval (2013) lucidly show how this attitude of enjoyment-in-work is now a central component in the contemporary enterprise culture (for related reviews, see Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005/1999; Ekman, 2013; Fleming, 2014; Jones & Spicer, 2005; Roberts, 2005). From the employee side, becoming an enterprise oneself within the privileged domain of *Work*, we are promised self-realization and fulfillment. That is, in neoliberalizing organizations, the notion that individual lives are projects to be self-designed is accepted, but work and market-activity is the hegemonic way for this to happen. The entrepreneur is the only Imaginary (in the Lacanian sense) identification that is sanctioned.

From the management side, the task, then, is not merely to value employees and to make work meaningful. Rather, management's task becomes, in part, to make it possible for *Work* to become the vehicle through which an individual's authentic self and personal growth trajectory are realized and to see that process of self-realization as an essential *instrument* for advancing organizational and managerial objectives. In this way, the employee's entire person—body, intellect, affects, and interests—becomes mobilized or instrumentalized to meet organizational ends, a state of affairs Fleming (2014) provocatively labels *biocracy*. Since "career success is conflated with success in life" (Dardot & Laval, 2013, p. 268), organizational and work-related practices necessarily take on a new valence for the postneurotic, self-referential subject.

As Ekman's (2013) excellent work demonstrates, managers do not stand apart from this. They also desire through the image of the entrepreneur. She writes, managers "also wished to be challenged, to accomplish something extraordinary, and to receive recognition for this, not the least from their employees" (p. 1,168). Managers in her study of two creative knowledge work organizations did not want to hire ordinary workers but ones that were exceptional, who saw work as a platform for "extraordinary pursuits and individual uniqueness" (p. 1,169). Entrepreneurial workers, in turn, become representations of their own extraordinary work as managers. In short, both supervisors and supervisees are ensnared by the image of the entrepreneur and the promise of Work.

THE SEDUCTION OF PERFORMANCE

It is in this political-economic and workplace context that we should understand the seductive allure of techniques of audit and performance management, central elements of neoliberal government and entrepreneurialism. Our aim in this section is two-fold. First, we sketch some of the key aspects of audit and performance technologies, or "rituals of verification" (Power, 1997), in contemporary workplaces. In this connection, we rehearse aspects of the documented, negative consequences of these practices on organizational processes and individuals. Second, and in the next section, we integrate the strains of the argument thus far in order to elaborate what we think is an underconsidered and important dimension of audit and performance for the contemporary subject; namely, how performance targets promise stable images of reference and objective expressions of entrepreneurial development.

Performance and the Audit Revolution

In this now-classic work, Power (1997) described the "explosion" of the use of myriad techniques of audit in large organizations. He noted that this was a normative program with technical elements deployed within a context of demands for greater managerial accountability and control. At the core of the generalized practice of audit is the expectation of proof and documentation in lieu of expert or managerial judgment or testimony. The production of audit data would factually demonstrate compliance with rules, policies, and regulations and concomitant meeting of performance expectations as well as break through the enclaves of professionals and experts. Managers, thereby, could be held *accountable* via the audit for results and supervisors could gain greater control over line managers and workers by rendering their work more visible and subject to evaluation. In the public sector, performance and audit promised that a (presumptively) inefficient government would make better decisions and use of resources and, thus, could be held accountable by relevant publics and constituencies (Moynihan, 2008).

The audit or performance revolution entails a restructuring in organizations in order to become auditable and to generate performance information (Power, 1997). In our discussion of Knights and Clarke above, we considered some of practical manifestations and adverse subjective effects of these audit technologies in corporatizing universities. The public administration literature has inventoried a litany of other unintended consequences (Diefenbach, 2009) that undermine the purported promises of enhanced organizational performance: managing performance targets and manipulating performance information to meet targets (Brodkin, 2011; Diefenbach, 2009; Fox & Miller, 1995); increasing transaction costs (Frederickson & Frederickson, 2006); and enforcing the demoralizing denigration and devaluation of professional judgment as more "objective" forms of accountability (Radin, 2006).

These practices have also been shown to have real human consequences. A visible and tragic example of this "performance ethic" is the exposure of the dysfunctional, and perhaps lethal, practices at the Veteran's Health Administration Medical Center (VHAMC) in Phoenix, Arizona. In this case, an inspector general's report (Veterans Affairs Office of Inspector General, 2014) concluded that the Center's "emphasis on goals," in particular those

outlined in the director's performance contract, "resulted in a misleading portrayal of veterans' access to patient care" (p. 63). Similar issues have been documented in the United Kingdom's National Health Service (Francis, 2010). Soss, Fording, and Schram (2011) document the harm incurred by recipients of public services in "reformed," neoliberalizing social welfare systems. Not only are benefit recipients worse off economically under welfare reform, but they are more tightly and punitively managed, surrender their rights as both workers and citizens, are often subjected to myriad forms of surveillance and audit, and learn to be docile and compliant before case managers.

The Work of Performance for the Entrepreneurial Postneurotic

In advancing the argument thus far, we have attempted, if only implicitly, to complicate some of the familiar assessments of neoliberalism and its impact on organizational and subjective life. That is, we theorize the actual practice of entrepreneurialism as the effect of a complex intersection of various discourses—some capitalist, some humanist, some managerialist, some modernist—that all reflect the decline of Symbolic efficacy and the growing import of relations in the Imaginary in the workplace.

Why, given the nature of the postneurotic subject, is entrepreneurialism compelling and seductive to workers despite the suffering it may exact? Part of the answer to this is, again, that the figure of the entrepreneur presents a figure of Imaginary identification that offers a route for the subject to pursue the work of auto-referentiality on the stage of Work. But how do performance and performance management practices in particular fit into the puzzle?

In a compelling article, Roberts (2005) describes the dynamics of identification and the Lacanian Imaginary in an effort to explore a related question. He observes that, invariably, "disciplinary power [and its accounting technologies] 'individualizes' by creating a narcissistic preoccupation with how the self and its activities will be seen and judged in its terms; whether defensively or assertively, to be individualized involves becoming preoccupied with myself" (p. 621). Performance, he suggests, creates a kind of "mirror" that reflects back to the subject a substantial and unified self, and gives the worker a way to measure the progress of a self that needs to be "continuously improving." In this way, while audit and performance technologies are instruments of control, Roberts suggests that they also serve as content for workers' *demands* for recognition and affirmation by management that they are more than cogs in the organizational machine (pp. 634–636). This endows management with the power to address the demand for confirmation of our existence and puts the worker in a position of constantly testing out the similarity or difference of others in the workplace.

Roberts' subtle analysis helps to illuminate the attraction that performance and audit in particular may have for the subject. But his work does not speculate on the unique dynamics of the subject today, which we will add here. Absent an anchoring Symbolic affirmation and the importance of Imaginary identifications, we suggest that performance assessments and quantitative measures promise points of stability or reference for the destabilized subject. They help us to tell not only "how we're doing" (as the ubiquitous corporate demand puts it), but also tell us "who we are." Moreover, the dynamics of *quantification* provide a comforting (if misleadingly objective) way to assess our advance toward the entrepreneurial ideal (See Catlaw & Sandberg, 2018). Quantitative data seem to tell us if we're doing better or

worse, enhancing or diminishing ourselves; more profoundly, they tell us if we getting better or worse as people. These data also enable the subject to rank order and distribute herself in relationship to others and so give subjects the ability to locate themselves within an ethical hierarchy embedded in social space. So, not only does the data tell us whether we are better or worse, individually. Numbers appear to offer reassurance that we are better or worse than little others and give us little others to compete against and overcome. Thus, while perhaps invented as an accountability measure and whatever their often-fraudulent quality, audit and performance technologies are alluring as resources to do stabilizing work for postneurotic subjects today. Performance data is a way to objectify and assess one's advancement toward the organizationally sanctioned, the entrepreneurial ideal.

But how well does this work for the subject? Does identification with organizational ideals provide the stability promised? It is a precarious state of affairs. As evidenced in Clarke and Knights' study, even for high performing aspirants, official recognition "does not appear to provide long-term security, but rather the opposite" (p. 344) since "good professors" simply must continue to seek affirmation. This is because—like Facebook likes—performance data and measures only provide temporary, limitless Imaginary affirmation that must be continually replenished. The consequences seem even more damaging for the impostors and existentials. Moreover, neoliberal ideology pushes the deployment of competition and productivity, which degrades potentially stabilizing effects of in-group identification and renders uncertain McSwite's (2005) modest hope that microsymbolic groups could offer shelter from the storm.

CONCLUSION: THE SOCIAL BOND AND THE FANTASY OF WORK

A new, fragile social bond is being articulated today that is founded on the dynamics of *desymbolization, auto-referentiality*, and the centrality of unstable, Symbolically-unhinged Imaginary relations. This renders postneurotic subjects dependent on ongoing recognition and affirmation from (little) others while, at the same time, confronting the command to be fully one's self. Neoliberal ideology frames this project in the image of the entrepreneur. For the postneurotic enterprising subject, *Work* takes on central importance and promise in light of the neoliberal emphasis on (paid) work as the primary location and means for achieving the self-discipline and focus to actualize that true self. Quantitative performance measures serve as "objective" representations of recognition and assessments of one's advancement toward that Imaginary image of self-realization. Where the big Other fails, we might quip, "big Data" fills in. In sum, this is the ever-displaced ground for the experience of inadequacy, fatigue, and depression (see Vanheule et al., 2003) in the contemporary workplace. There is a particular doubling-down on employees in the public and nonprofit sectors insofar as the discourse of Work becomes entwined with discourses of service, vocation, and "doing more with less," adding an additional layer of command to the injunction to "Enjoy your work!"

What counterlogic or practices are possible here? This is not an easy question to answer and indeed any answer depends upon the ends toward which this question is oriented. On this question, though, Dufour is grimly pessimistic. He sees not simply authoritative societal

institutions, but our "very *being*" as in danger. While conceding that the contemporary era affords "an unexpected opportunity" to "rebuild everything," the only real "option is to try and protect the [critical-neurotic subject] like an endangered species, in the hope that better days will come . . ." (p. 168).

While Dufour's assessment is bleak, it is worth taking seriously. As the stage of the neo-liberal fantasy, Work makes it difficult to dis-identify with work (as paid labor): to say "No!" to work. This is so not only because of potentially punitive consequences, but also because, for the subject, saying No-to-work represents foregoing promises of fulfillment and the potential Imaginary qualitative and quantitative diminishment of the ego. The context also makes it seem unlikely to expect political or institutional mitigation. The message seems to be: If you have a problem with any of this, if you are burned out, if you are depressed, the fantasy has a ready-made answer: That's *your* problem. *You* need to figure it out. *You* need to get your values and priorities straight. *You* self-govern yourself better and find balance. Thus, while we may find exceptions to the rule, counterlogics and practices must grapple with the fact that broad collective solutions are not readily forthcoming and dis-identification with work is easier said than done.

The development of counterpractice needs to be approached from the dilemmas of self-positing or *auto-referentiality*, the fundamental project for the postneurotic subject in the context of entrepreneurialism. What about materializing "what one wants" through entrepreneurial initiatives, like new business start-ups and nonprofit organizations? These could be theorized as one venue for the work of self-positing is pursued in contemporary society. That is, might people self-posit by creating new organizations more tightly aligned with their desire? The paradox, of course, is that this impulse to create rests upon the singularity of the subject and is not itself responsive to the general dilemmas we have discussed here. That is, there is no reason to think that a new nonprofit initiated in such a way will not simply replicate the problems of organization from which one fled; replacing one fantasy with another. Indeed, research on nonprofit organizations evidences the problem of the "cult of the founder" and the organizational pathologies such singularized commitment qua path to fulfillment may spur (Block & Rosenberg, 2002). So, this may not be a productive route.

Alternatively, counterpractices could seek, in Ekman's (2013) terms, positions in an "ethical struggle" against Work in light of the task of auto-referentiality of the postneurotic subject (for a potential illustration see Catlaw & Sandberg, 2018). These can assume the form of what we could call discursive moves that might unsettle or to call into question the fantasy of Work and the seduction of performance measures.

The first could be to pull back on the language of "passion" in connection to work. One need not adopt psychoanalytic jargon to do this. For instance, in their excellent popular book *Designing Your Life: How to Build a Well-Lived Joyful Life*, Bill Burnett and Dave Evans (Burnett & Evans, 2016) from Stanford's Design Lab write that "anti-passion is their passion" (p. xxvii). They adopt contemporary "design-speak" to argue, "Many people operate under the dysfunctional belief that they just need to find out what they are passionate about. Once they know their passion, everything else will somehow magically fall into place. We hate this idea for one very good reason: most people don't know their passion" (pp. xxxvii–xxiv). Burnett and Evans go on to describe an experimental "prototyping" process by which we "build in" rather than are "born into" our passions. The authors have used this

with undergraduates working in internships, and the students have often commented that they are relieved to hear that it's okay not to be crystal clear about their "passion," to stumble along for a while, and to learn that not having enjoyment-in-work isn't a personal failing. This also offers an accessible frame within which to consider work and fulfillment over a longer time horizon that displaces the urgency to be one's true self at work.

Second, managers and workers could attempt to shift or supplement conversations about performance, tasks, and passion to ones about "interests." Not in the economic sense, but rather in the sense of asking, "What is it about that task, project, or problem that interests you? (Catlaw, 2008) What about that other thing does not interest you?" The move here aims to encourage workers to shift attention away from performance images and even dissatisfaction into a more personal discourse about what sustains their interest, energy, and enthusiasm. Conversations could evolve into ones about trying to "job craft" (Vuori, San, & Kira, 2012) positions such that they engage in reflective work about concrete tasks in which they *do* find fulfillment and away from external forms of validation. Conversations could also be had here about how to manage workload responsibilities. This is broadly consistent with Ekman's (2013) concern with pivoting away from validating relational dynamics of recognition and toward concrete work tasks.

Third, managers could experiment with being open and ironic with regard to performance evaluations and assessment. For example, a colleague's spouse works for a Fortune 50 company in a high level position. This company, historically, has gone so far as to rank order each and every one of its tens of thousands of employees—from 1 to 80,000. Walking back from these cliffs of insanity, the company now has performance tiers but, as many organizations do, it places restrictions on how many employees can achieve the highest ranking, regardless of actual performance. Since future salary increases, bonuses, internal awards, and promotions are tied to these performance appraisals, admittedly false evaluations have real material consequences. In this case, the manager, though, was typically very transparent about the dilemma and, in one-on-one meetings with her group, talked about the problem of having many high performing group members and the reality that someone will get a lower official evaluation, regardless of actual performance. As part of her discussion, the manager makes it clear, however, to workers about *her own* assessment of his work. By communicating about evaluation in different ways and challenging the official veneer of the official system, the manager helps to mitigate some of the personal and impersonal upset that these mis-evaluations cause.

Fourth and finally, we might all begin to appreciate shifting social dynamics in which people feel vulnerable, in need of ongoing recognition and affirmation, and demand passion and meaning in Work as symptomatic of the disintegration of the Symbolic order and the decline of the efficacy of the big Other. We could approach people in organizations not as self-serving caricatures like "entitled Millennials" or "crybaby snowflakes" but as simply subjects trying to make lives for themselves.

NOTE

1. Rather than seeing Lacanian theory as eclipsed by this event, Dufour sees Lacan as centrally concerned from the very beginning of his work with the problem of the self-referentially constituted subject (pp. 68–69) and as

recognizing that "a subject who is defined self-referentially is also a subject riddled with holes because she has no definition" (p. 69).

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