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# **Cold winds and warm attachments: Interrogating the personal attachment to neoliberal work and economy**

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## **Abstract**

The question of personal attachment to work in neoliberalism is subject to debate. Some scholars postulate that personal attachment to work based on durability, collectivity and predictability is weakening because of changes in its organisation; work ceases to provide the basis of subjectivity and identity. Conversely, others claim work, and neoliberal economic logic generally, pervades ever deeper into our lives, shapes our subjectivity, and incites personal and individualised attachments. This article describes four ways social scientists have understood personal attachments: entrepreneurship discourse; biocracy; approaches emphasising desire, lack and affect; and approaches highlighting the normative justifications and ethics of the self. It interrogates their theoretical underpinnings, empirical focus and points of confluence and difference.

## **Keywords**

affect, emotions, entrepreneurship, ethics, identity, individualisation, neoliberalism, organisation, subjectivity

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## Introduction

Since the 1970s (Beynon, 2016) work in advanced economies has been transformed with the decline of standard contracts (Aerden et al., 2013), increased self-employment and entrepreneurship (Parker, 2001), increasing precarity (Prosser, 2016) and intensification (Thompson, 2003). In this context, personal relation to work has been debated in this journal and beyond (Beech et al., 2016; Doherty, 2009; Foster, 2012; Strangleman, 2012). The issue of personal attachment to work is pertinent to negotiations of financial reward and productivity, as well as wider politics of workplace control and resistance (Cassar and Meier, 2018; Knights and Willmott, 1989).

Some suggest that personal attachment to work has weakened and work has lost its role as a source of identity formation (Bauman, 2004; Beck, 2000; Sennett, 2007). Changes brought through neoliberalism make it difficult for workers to develop subjective attachments to work or meaningful personal narratives around their working lives. While old sources of attachment are eroded, new versions of the self, based on consumption, are seen as short-term and shallow (Bauman and Raud, 2015: 59–74). In this perspective, changes associated with the neoliberal economy work as cold winds, harmful to human feelings and desires.

Conversely, others argue that work remains an important source of identity (Doherty, 2009; Foster, 2012; Strangleman, 2012) or even that the logic of economic productivity permeates personal lives more deeply (Fleming, 2014; Hancock and Tyler, 2004). Where old identities are eroded, new forms of personal relations to work and economy take their place. Though most agree with critical accounts of neoliberal changes, scholars nonetheless argue that some workers continue to build intense personal attachments to work (Konings, 2015).

This article outlines the theoretical underpinnings of attempts to understand individuals' relations to work in the neoliberal economy. It connects often isolated strands of theorising,

making their similarities and differences explicit. It argues there are four ways personal attachment to work and economy has been dealt with by social scientists, primarily based on divergent understandings of the driving forces behind this attachment: (i) entrepreneurship discourse, (ii) biocracy, (iii) approaches emphasising desire, lack and affect, and (iv) approaches emphasising normative justifications and personal ethics. The paper outlines these four approaches, interrogates their theoretical underpinnings, empirical foci and makes explicit their differences to facilitate discussion across these theoretical streams.

### **Personal attachments to work and neoliberal economy**

Changes in individuals' forms of attachment to work are understood as part of wider shifts in the organisation of production frequently discussed under the term neoliberalism (Crowley and Hodson, 2004). While acknowledging Venugopal's (2015) argument that the concept of neoliberalism has multiple and contradictory meanings, this article takes neoliberalism as a form of governmentality which is 'the conduct of conduct: a form of activity aiming to shape, guide or affect the conduct of some person or persons' (Gordon, 1991: 2), emphasising individuals as enterprising subjects seeking to maximise potential, value and satisfaction. The market is seen as an ideal arena where this pursuit takes place, allowing free and independent maximisation of utility. In relation to work, neoliberal ideas in management engage individual motivations and psychology, while downplaying wider social and organisational factors (e.g. joint decision making and conflict) in labour relations (Keenoy, 2009).

Using such broad concepts, however, risks overstating the differences between contemporary processes and those of by-gone periods as well as misapprehending general problems inherent to capitalist societies. Meštrović (1991) argues that contemporary economic deregulation and its impact on other spheres of life is strikingly similar to the situation in the late nineteenth century described by Durkheim. Inasmuch, stressing the 'newness' of current workers' attachments to work runs a risk of overlooking continuities in the politics of work under

capitalism; work in capitalism always needed a justificatory ideology and ways to manage and control workers (Anthony, 1977). However, there *are* traceable changes in the ideology and technologies for governing workplaces. Differences in the emphasis and content, scale of deployment of certain techniques and ideologies, and reliance on new ways of controlling the workforce can be discerned (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2007; Rose, 1999).

This article focuses on how personal attachment to work is produced in these new neoliberal conditions. Forms of attachment can change and new ones can emerge alongside changing politics and organisation of economies and workplaces. As Strangleman (2012) reports in his study of the railway industry, younger workers may base their attachment to work on a sense of individual achievement rather than collectivity and solidarity. Similarly, Foster (2012) argues that contemporary work identity can be expressed using ‘individualistic language of personality and introspection’ (Foster, 2012: 948) and responsibility to oneself rather than a company or colleagues. Rather than a demise of personal attachment to work, its transformation in the neoliberal climate is characterised by increasing individualisation of concerns with work despite its changing organisation and nature (Crowley and Hodson, 2014; McCabe, 2007).

New personal commitments to work can be justified by values such as freedom, creativity and personal employability (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2007). Companies seek to incorporate workers’ personalities into the workplace, be it through spatial and temporal arrangements (Fleming and Spicer, 2004) or cultures emphasising self-realisation and authenticity (Rose, 1999). In some cases, the negative changes brought by shifts in the economy and work organisation (e.g. uncertainty, long working hours) can be a source of intense personal attachment through anxiety or imbalance (Bloom, 2015; Cockayne, 2016). In other words, difficulties and struggles can reinforce rather than weaken personal attachment to work (Beech et al., 2016). Additionally, rather than centring personal narratives around life-long careers in one organisation, individuals can base them on the notion of careers as a life-project managed

individually and outside of workplaces (Hancock and Tyler, 2004). Such an individual interpretation is bolstered by discourses of individual responsibility related to increases in self-employment and entrepreneurship (MacDonald, 1996; Mallett and Wapshott, 2015; Parker, 2001).

The following section outlines four different ways scholars make sense of personal attachments to work and economy in the newly emerging conditions. It is intended as a heuristic device for mapping out distinct theoretical themes and highlighting the points of difference which can facilitate discussion and serve as guidance for further empirical research. Given this, no preference is expressed for any particular perspective.

### **Discourses, organisational strategies, affects and ethics: Four conceptualisations of personal attachment to work in the neoliberal economy**

#### **Entrepreneurship discourse and enterprising selves**

Originating in the ideology of the New Right and neoliberal economic theory the enterprise discourse established itself in policy as a cure-all for unemployment and economic stagnation despite limited delivery on its promises (MacDonald, 1996; Parker, 2001). The enterprise discourse translates into organisational cultures and strategies (Du Gay, 1996; Rose, 1999) and self-conceptions of individuals (Fenwick, 2002; Mallett and Wapshott, 2015). Personal attachments to work, from this perspective, is formed through discourses and policies which create a particular subject position for individuals to occupy. The central model of subjectivity that neoliberal discourses promote is an entrepreneur of the self (Foucault, 2010) - an individual who ostensibly applies economic cost-benefits analysis to all spheres of life aiming to maximise human capital in expectation of future profits.

Through policies citizens should be 'activated' to accept responsibility for individual welfare and use 'private initiative' to navigate their economic lives (Lesenich, 2010). Employees are

increasingly seen as entrepreneurial subjects finding self-actualisation in work and working towards increasing their employability (Rose, 1999). Du Gay (1996) illustrates how dominant discourses of work increasingly resemble the sphere of consumption where workers are encouraged to search for individual self-realisation while concerns with work organisation and conditions are translated into individualising language of autonomy and self-management. As Harvey and colleagues illustrate (2017), the promise of benefits from becoming an entrepreneur leads to the acceptance of highly disadvantageous working conditions in the so-called gig economy. The enterprising subjectivity is promoted through a wide range of areas, including activities like time management and personal productivity, and reaches beyond the workplace. These discourses circulate through popular media and are at points adopted collectively outside of organisational settings (Fridman, 2014). Application of this entrepreneurship discourse is not limited to economically-active populations but reaches groups such as students (Berglund, 2013) or the unemployed (Boland, 2016).

### **Biocracy: Trapping life in work**

Rather than focusing on a discourse, others highlight the shifting boundary between working and personal life emerging from management strategies to increase productivity and commitment. The major force creating personal attachments to work, in this perspective, is the organisational strategy to incorporate life into the workplace. This tendency is succinctly captured by Fleming's concept of 'biocracy', the 'instrumentalization of all personal life attributes that were previously considered exogeneous, irrelevant or detrimental to formal organizational productivity' (2014: 885). In other words, a managerial strategy to displace the boundary between work and personal life, making workers personally invested in their job. For example, in their study of call-centre management, Fleming and Spicer (2004) argue that workplaces increasingly incorporate aspects of life previously deemed unacceptable; workers were encouraged to express emotions, share personal stories and simply 'be themselves' in the

workplace. Moreover, bosses offered advice on private matters and understood themselves as quasi-counsellors. Relatedly, the workplace is understood as a place where workers can display their ‘authentic’ personal and social traits (e.g. subcultural symbols) (Fleming and Spicer, 2008).

### **Lack, desire, and affect**

Scholars have emphasised the role of desire, affect and subconscious in fostering personal attachments to work. Though their works draw on different theoretical sources, the common thread addresses how discourses and strategies of control are effective. Inasmuch, rather than focusing on how and why the discourse is produced, the locus of attention moves to how and why they are accepted by workers. Additionally, these authors share an appreciation of ambivalence about our relation to work; experiences of dissatisfaction, hardship or lack can paradoxically reinforce subjective attachment to work.

Jones and Spicer (2005) argue that the discourse of entrepreneurship is effective precisely given its vagueness and ambivalence. As, from a Lacanian point of view, the impossibility of full and permanent identification is at the core of the logic of subject formation (Lacan, 2001), the emptiness of the entrepreneurship discourse is precisely what makes it attractive. This vague and ambivalent image of entrepreneurs allows the subject to engage in ceaseless work of self-identification. Bloom explores ‘affective identification’ (2015: 2) focusing on the discourse of work-life balance where the individual is maintained as a particular subject of an organisation through the impossibility of finding a balance and finally finding a joy ‘from being “imbalanced”’ (ibid.). Konings (2015: 94) similarly argues that personal attachment to the economy operates through a logic of ‘wounded attachments’. Driven by a fantasy of an anxiety-free state, the subject attaches itself ever more closely to the very things producing its anxiety (see Cockayne 2016 for a discussion of this in the digital media sector).



Affect and emotions are an increasingly prominent theme in managerial literature and have implications for how workers are managed and relate to themselves. Hughes (2005) reports how employees are expected to produce specific kinds of emotional display and how these influence ideas of personal success. Employees are expected to develop a character that is ‘attuned to the transient and indefinite flux of a flexible workplace’ (Hughes, 2005: 619), managing emotions in line with organisational demands. Affects works intersubjectively as it circulates between individuals and intensifies through sharing and exchange (Ahmed, 2004). This is well captured by Richard and Rudnyckyj (2009) who explore the role of affect in the justification of organisational change in an Indonesian steel plant. Managers and employees underwent complex training involving expression of affects such as shame, grief, joy or fear, sometimes accompanied by ritual crying. Strong affective reactions were seen as essential for deep subjective transformation of individuals into ‘a disciplined but entrepreneurial worker who will work hard and avoid corruption’ (2009: 71). Experience and genuine expression of affects was seen – by managers and employees – as necessary for undergoing deep subjective transformations demanded by success in the changing economic conditions.

### **Normative justifications and ethics of the self: Reflexivity and self-fashioning of the working subject**

The final analytical thread concerns the normative dimension of personal attachment to work and capitalism. Works taking this approach focus on individuals’ ethically-informed judgements in their relation to working life. Similarly to the perspective of moral economy (Bolton and Laaser, 2013), they shed light on the ways new work practices and employment arrangements operate within wider social norms and values.

For Boltanski and Chiapello (2007) ‘the new spirit of capitalism’ offers a justification of work in capitalism in the face of changing work arrangements. They stress the importance of investigating how new management discourses address long-standing normative concerns like

autonomy, security, and fairness. They show how the new ideological formation emerged in the 1980s to legitimise and justify changes in company and welfare state arrangements. The new flexible work arrangements are legitimised by ideals of freedom from authoritarian control, self-management, and creativity and employability. Whereas Boltanski and Chiapello draw on elements of Weber, others take inspiration from late Foucault to describe individuals' incorporation of diverse ethical ideals into their self-shaping efforts vis-a-vis work and economic productivity. These include autonomy, freedom and independence in the case of self-help manuals and coaching (Fridman, 2014), principles of 'organic' life (Skinner, 2012) or even notions of Islamic piety (Rudnyckyj, 2009). Together, these works illustrate how economic practice is often saturated with ethical concerns and normative justifications, both at organisational and individual levels.

## **Discussion**

Scholars have focused on the new ways workers form personal attachments to work. However, the extent to which these modes of attachment effectively create and maintain durable attachments to work remains unclear. To unpack this, the following discussion focuses on three questions. Firstly, what is the reach of these new ways of producing attachment; to what workers, to what workplaces and to what social groups do they apply? Secondly, to what extent do these approaches take account of conflicting values and complex politics of the workplace? Finally, how far do these approaches make space for workers' agency and potential for resistance?

Most studies discussed above focus on work/workplaces where these trends of personal attachment might be developed most profoundly. Mostly, discussions centre on paid work, predominantly in the global north, and especially in Anglo-Saxon countries. Most of the reviewed research focuses on either office jobs (e.g. retail management, call-centre) or independent and entrepreneurial jobs (e.g. media start-ups, organic farmers). Yet research on

work orientations shows workers' expectations and satisfaction vary considerably among occupations and depend on factors like type of contract, gender and level of education (Rose, 2003; Gallie et al., 2012). As McDowell (2001: 455) argues, 'construction of individualized workplace identity' might be associated with elite workers more than, for example, the growing sector of low-paid service jobs (which is increasingly feminised). New ways of controlling or 'motivating' the workforce based on cultural, normative and emotional management may be less necessary to manage low-skilled and more precarious workers where economic necessity and threats of unemployment/underemployment play a primary role (Warren, 2015). In the context of punitive workfare policies and re-commodification of labour (Greer, 2016) the commitment of workers resulting from punitive labour market discipline (rather than normative and cultural controls) should not be underestimated.

The second question concerns how much space these four approaches allow for alternative discourses, values and influences in their understanding of power and mechanisms forming personal attachments to work. All four approaches focus on how a certain discourse, ideology or orientation to work is imposed on and/or adopted by workers. Most studies stress the ways workers are asked to adopt an entrepreneurial, economic look on their work and lives. However, as moral philosophers point out, there are limits to the incursion of market principles into all spheres of social and individual life (Sandel, 2012; Satz, 2010). From a different angle, Skeggs (2014) criticises the assumption that the logic of financial value permeates every aspect of life and is automatically internalised by individuals. Countervailing logics and values (e.g. value of care) cannot easily be captured by the capitalist (re)valuation and continue to play a role in everyday negotiations. The question is to what extent do the approaches emphasising new ways of creating attachment to work make space for more complex combinations of influences, values and conflicts in contemporary working life.

Studies of the enterprise discourse and biocracy, with a degree of simplification, focus on the production of discourses, policies, and organisational practices more than the exploration of workers' experiences. The major contribution of research in this area is that it situates the issue of attachment to work within wider societal and political discourses. Additionally, it reveals how certain discursive logics work on the individual both inside and outwith workplaces through various channels of communication. Similarly, biocracy studies explore the workings of organisational strategies aiming to build personal attachments to work by shifting the boundary between 'work' and 'life' to achieve a 'more committed and dedicated workforce' (Fleming and Spicer, 2004: 79).

These two approaches are predominantly concerned with discursively and organisationally-prescribed selves. However, this focus on discourse or organisational strategy can leave personal level and everyday negotiations underexplored and can downplay the issue of how far the enterprise discourse or integration of life into the workplace is accepted by the subject. The pervasiveness of enterprise discourses can be exaggerated and portrayed in an over-deterministic manner (Armstrong, 2001) ignoring the role of countervailing values and discourses (e.g. professions or family) (Fournier and Grey, 1999). For example, within the gig economy, workers' complicity is ensured not only by discourse, but also by close monitoring of time, activity and output suggesting that the entrepreneurship discourse is not in itself enough to ensure worker complicity. This perspective's understanding of the subjective attachment might therefore be too straightforward, obscuring the complex ways power works and the necessary ambivalence of lived experiences of capitalism (Konings, 2015). Similarly, within biocracy studies, the focus is chiefly on management strategies which may underplay the importance of workers' agency in resisting and/or co-producing workplace dynamics (Ackroyd and Thompson, 2016). Though this strand of theorising is inspired by Foucault, the emphasis is mostly on strategies of control and domination (Burrell, 2006), thus side-lining

later concerns with self-formation of the subject (Skinner, 2012). In general, the emphasis on management strategies can overshadow the ways individuals relate to their work and personal attachments function from the perspective of the ‘receiving’ subject.

On the other hand, the approaches stressing desire and affect and studies emphasising ethics explore more closely the reception of discourses by the subject. The focus on desire and affect highlights the role of emotions in workers’ lives which is a welcome correction to portrayals of the neoliberal subject as purely rational and utilitarian. The studies focusing on the role of ethics and normative judgments shed light on the ways ethics and values shape subjects’ relation to work, economy and productivity. Both, albeit based on different theoretical traditions, complement a picture of larger power structures with a focus on the subjective micro-level.

However, although these perspectives focus more on subjective perceptions and judgements, the problem with the complexity of influences, values, and negotiations remains. Further exploration is needed to understand how affective and ethical dimensions of personal judgement relate to more instrumental and material aspects of work and job situations. Ethical statements and convictions do not exist separately from more material concerns with work and are often targeted towards others for performative and political purposes (Lempert, 2014; Fassin, 2014). To take this one step further, professions of ethical beliefs can be part of instrumental self-presentation of individuals and organisations and used to achieve instrumental goals, rather than an expression of purely normative concerns. As Ekman (2013) points out, normative ideals such as ‘authenticity’, however desired for their intrinsic value, can be mobilised in struggles over work control and content by both workers and managers.

The final issue concerns the four approaches’ limited scope for workers’ reflexivity, agency and resistance. Some studies offer valuable insights into the changing cultural meanings of

work and changes in organisational practices based on discursive and textual research. This is a valuable contribution, especially in cases exploring historical discursive change (notably Rose, 1999; Boltanski & Chiapello, 2007). However, even interview and ethnographic studies often do not explore the issues of workers' reflexivity, agency and potential resistance, instead emphasising the effects of new ways of forming and maintaining personal attachment to work. Across the four approaches, the issue of distance and resistance to new ideologies and technologies remains underexplored. Labour process scholars have criticised the tendency of post-structuralist accounts to assume that the new attempts at cultural control of the workers' subjectivity are effective and uncontested (Thompson and Ackroyd, 1995; Thompson, 2016) and suggested that more attention should be paid to dissent and oppositional practices. Of the authors discussed above, Fleming and Spicer (2003, 2008) offer critical discussions of the reception of the new trends in producing personal investment in work. As they show, attempts to manage employees' selves frequently lead to dis-identification with the organisational discourses. Cynical and instrumental performance of commitment, rather than sincere personal attachment to work and organisation, is a possible outcome.

While the recognition of failures to foster employee identity is important, the discussion of personal attachment to work should go beyond the dualism of work having no personal significance or workers being fully invested in the new ideologies of work without limits and space for negotiation. The literature stressing new ways of fostering workers' attachment provides important evidence that individuals continue to invest personally and shape their personalities around work. However, future research should explore in more detail how new ways of attachment connect with more complex politics of workplaces and working life, including material factors, forms of control, and workplace conflict and negotiation.

### Concluding remarks

This article has outlined the current debate about personal attachment to work and brings together various strands of literature exploring the new ways in which attachment to work is formed. Future discussions of personal attachments to work would benefit from (i) taking into consideration the diversity of contemporary work situations, (ii) a more complex understanding of power mechanisms and presence of countervailing values, and (iii) allowing more space for reflexivity, conflict and potential for resistance in contemporary work politics.

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