

Original Article

The fantasy of control: behaviourist transgressions of neoliberal subjectivity

Abstract

Neoliberal governance of individuals has largely been based on a specific notion of self and society, emphasising human capital, authenticity and essentialism. I argue that this comprises an essentially humanist view of the self. However, within contemporary society, remnants of the mechanistic conception of man continue to surface in politics and workplace management. By examining strands of humanism and behaviourism within political and economic modes of governance, I trace how images outside of neoliberal discourse can take on a transgressive ideological function. I propose that, rather than challenging neoliberalism, such apparent transgression strengthens it.

Keywords: neoliberalism; subjectivity; humanism; behaviourism; transgression

Introduction

In recent years, the Anglo-Saxon political establishment has been rocked by two distinct waves of populism, in the form of a small but decisive majority vote for Brexit in the EU referendum in the UK, and the unexpected election of Donald Trump to the US presidency. Such right-wing populist upsets have swept many other developed countries in the past two decades, among them many continental European countries. However, the self-professed identification within the Anglo-Saxon political economy with individual freedom and centrist democracy has been brought into question by these examples of electoral backlash against the status quo. Because of how closely related this is to societal pillars of individualism and citizenship rights, it can be argued that these electoral results represent a clash in notions of selfhood within the discursive articulation of political, economic and social norms. It has also been noted how such populism can be interpreted as a rejection of neoliberalist politics by the traditional working class (Hoggett, 2017).

On the one hand, we witness the continuing dominance of neoliberal consensus, in which individuals are imagined in terms of enterprise discourse, imbued with personal responsibility for social and economic status, equipped with individual freedom of choice and engaged in self-investment of their human capital. It has been noted that neoliberalism as a mode of governance relies strongly on individualism, market rationality as a central directing mechanism, and surveillance (Hoggett, 2017; Rustin, 2014). Given the primacy of notions of individual freedom and consumer choice to its discourse, we can infer that processes of identification are crucial to its operation. It is also clear that these identifications will emphasise individualism and customer sovereignty at the expense of notions of collectivism and social justice.

On the other hand, we have witnessed the recent reappearance of a more paternalistic notion of the subject, in which more overtly authoritarian government is evoked to provide redress of current socio-economic inequality. Populism in the West has often relied on the channelling of anti-immigrant sentiments. Such movements have questioned the primacy and rationality of markets, and have instead emphasised structural conditions within society as determinative of people's lives. These populist projects tend to restate citizenship along nationalist narratives, critique austerity politics as a key outcome of neo-monetarist neoliberalism and problematise the role of free trade and key neoliberalist institutions. As such, in such rhetoric a very different image of the individual appears, more in line with materialist determinism than classic liberalism. However, this does not appear to have destabilised the political-economic order significantly. Following Glynos and Howarth (2007), we may view ideology as subject to competing logics and libidinal investment, evident within transgressive acting out and projective identification of images onto empty central structuring signifiers. This paper explores this constitutive contradiction within public political discourse and suggests that it concerns the central worker-subject position embodied within neoliberalism.

Neoliberalism casts governance and policy within the language of management and strategy, and as such it makes sense to examine managerial discourse in order to understand this central contradiction. I will argue in this paper that, within the management of work and organisation, two notions of the subject can be recognised, and these have analogies within wider neoliberalism. These subject positions are couched within the language of humanism and behaviourism respectively. On this basis, we can read recent populist eruptions within Western neoliberal economies as

inviting identification with a behaviourist subject position, shaped powerfully by its conditions rather than a free agent of human capital. However, I will suggest that this identification is momentary and fleeting, and best read as a transgressive gesture against the dominant neoliberalist subject position, which is broadly humanist.

Behaviourist psychology can be seen as an important part of historical developments in primarily American social scientific thought, and has been variously described as a key instance of pragmatist philosophy (Mills, 1998), as representative of the 'traditionalist' paradigm that reflects a commitment to adapting the individual to institutional contexts (Bjork, 1997), and of 20th century attempts to apply social science to social engineering: psychiatry, defence and education (Smith and Woodward, 1997). Given this pragmatic and instrumental undercurrent, there has been a strong implicit convergence between behaviourist notions of the individual and the workplace management approaches of the mid-20th century. In particular, it can be argued that the predominance of a 'mechanistic' notion of the individual as we find it in mainstream management owes much to behaviourism (Rose, 1974). The behaviourist notion of the subject is considered in terms of schedules of reinforcement, conditioned by environmental factors, unimpeded by 'introspective' notions of agency or affect, or indeed free will (Skinner, 1974). In parallel to this, much mainstream management thinking of the mid-20th century stresses the design of organisational structures, systems, arrangements and work, to the end of finding a fit with exogenous external factors. There is also some evidence that key classic management theorists were aware of and interested in behaviourist psychology, with the work of Parker Follett (1926) being a particular example.

As such, behaviourism forms part of a wider set of discourses that has shaped the governance of economic activity. In recent years, however, the broad governance of neoliberalism has largely been premised on a far more agential notion of self and society, providing a notion of governance based on deregulation, marketisation and privatisation, and based on a subject position of human capital, authenticity and essentialism. This subject position is a fundamentally humanist one.

Examining these coexistent notions of selfhood through the lens of organisation and management studies allows us to understand the ways in which the neoliberalist notion of subjectivity has reproduced itself, and how managerial technologies have developed to engender self-management and self-disciplining. The transgressive reappearance of behaviourism in contemporary politics can be seen as a direct reaction against the internalisation of a neoliberalist ego ideal on which such modes of governance rely. Some studies in management have demonstrated how transgressive logics such as cynicism can reproduce themselves in organisations (Fleming and Spicer, 2003) and work to function as part of control strategies in the workplace. In this sense, it is possible to read the reappearance of behaviourism through the concept of ideological fantasy (Žižek, 1989; Glynos and Howarth, 2007; Glynos, 2014). Fantasy here allows implicit ideological narratives to underpin and give consistency to the contextualised self-interpretations of social actors. In this way, unconscious attachments can influence subjectivity on the level of meaning and normativity, and help shape social relations and institutional contexts (Glynos, 2014). Below, I will examine behaviourist psychology, and how it has re-emerged within recent social and political discourses.

Behaviourism at work

Once a central research paradigm within Anglo-Saxon psychology, behaviourism emerged in the 1910s by the hand of a group of psychologists who were inspired by logical positivism and behavioural approaches in other social sciences (the Progressive reform movement) and philosophy (New Realists). This led to a movement which was instrumental in its orientation towards the social and technological application of its ideas, and openly hostile to philosophical speculation (Mills, 1998).

The most prominent of the early behaviourists was John B. Watson, commonly acknowledged as behaviourism's founder by virtue of his 1913 text 'Psychology as the Behaviorist Views It', in which he set out the principles by which psychology could free itself from its speculative and philosophical conundrums by focusing strictly on behaviour as an object of study. Watson (1913) made the point that animal psychology does not need to refer to the concept of consciousness or thought for its explanations and, driven by a desire to discover fundamental natural laws, argued that 'organisms, man and animal alike, do adjust themselves to their environment by means of hereditary and habit equipments [*sic*]' (pp. 19–20). To elide the differences between humans and non-human animals, behaviourism rejects 'introspection', the idea that mental states should be the object of psychological research (also referred to as 'mentalism'), in which context Watson claimed that 'I believe we can write psychology [...] and never use the terms consciousness, mental states, mind, content, introspectively verifiable, imagery, and the like. [...] It can be done in terms of stimulus and response, in terms of habit formation, habit integrations and the like' (p. 19).

As such, behaviourism does away with the 'inside' of the mind as a viable object of research or even as a theoretical construct. Watson (p. 28) even speculates that thought can be reduced to behaviour, in the form of muscle movement in the larynx, a claim

from which later behaviourists distanced themselves (Mills, 1998). Behaviourism argues that behaviour alone matters, since it reflects the mind of the species. Relying on a subjectivist notion of the mind would hamper the objectivist aspirations of psychology as a discipline. Instead, it aims to be fully materialist in its explanation of human individuality.

Skinner later extended the notion of conditioning in a way that revitalised the experimental research of behavioural psychology (most of which was done using non-human animals). In seeking to exclude notions of physiology and thought from his conceptual framework, he argued that the most important conditioning takes place through environmental mechanisms of reward and punishment. Skinner's (1974) central concept in this is 'reinforcement', which means that behaviour is strengthened by its consequences (pp. 55–61). According to Skinner, behaviour that leads to positive outcomes will be more likely to be repeated, and the same is true for behaviour that alleviates negative outcomes. Similarly, behaviours that lead to adverse outcomes will be negatively reinforced. The consequences that make it more likely that a behaviour is repeated are called *reinforcers* (p. 44). It is important to imagine this within the context of behaviourist research, in which a rat placed in a maze learns to press a lever that gives it food, or that avoids it being given an electric shock. The careful control of experimental settings makes only a few behaviours possible, thereby allowing for mechanistic theorisation, wide extrapolation, and ambitious and universalist claims. This reductionism is aggravated by the theoretical simplicity of the conceptual apparatus.

Behaviourism, then, represents a formal rejection of introspection as a way of studying and understanding the human mind, thereby dismissing insights from, for example, social and cognitive psychology, as well as psychoanalysis and philosophy. In the radical behaviourism of Skinner, human agency comes to be regarded as a by-product of everyday life, rather than a key driver of it. In seeking scientific objectivism, the behaviourist notion of subjectivity holds that behaviour is itself directly linked to environmental conditions. Rather than via any notion of perception, anticipation or reaction, it views conditioning as the process by which behaviour is formed and reproduced. Such conditioning is first viewed as primarily located in habit, and later in operant conditioning as mainly reproduced through dynamics of reward and punishment. Here is a view of the human subject that regards human nature in the most mechanistic of terms.

Whilst it is tempting to write off behaviourism as a defunct academic curiosity, this overlooks the wider cultural resonance that it has had as an approach. To a large extent, this influence is built on the way in which behaviourism was instantly able to connect with societal development, technological advances and social policy. As Mills (1998) has argued, 'the essence of behaviourism is the equating of theory with application, understanding with prediction, and the working of the mind with social technology' (p. 2). From its very inception, behaviourism has been prominent in public debates and has shaped the public imagination of the psychological make-up of the individual, institutions and government.

This is evident within our daily lives through the ways in which behaviourist assumptions pervade policy and institutions. In the field of organisation and management, behaviourist ways of thinking represent an important lasting influence.

As Rose (1974) points out, the psychology of management existed for a long time within the implicit assumptions that were made about subjectivity: these started with a strongly instrumental, materialist notion of the self, and later evolved to include social and psychological motivations. From the work of Frederick Taylor (1911) onward, management thinking revolved around the design of systems that were to encourage productive behaviour and discourage shirking, resistance, or indeed solidarity and labour organisation. To this end, management researchers have used notions of habit (Parker Follett, 1926) and the use of incentives (such as performance-related pay) and a host of disciplinary measures to shape behaviour. Not only is this based in a mechanist view of the subject (Rose, 1974) that disavows its 'passions' (Hirschmann, 1977), it is entirely consistent with behaviourist notions of what reinforces behaviour, namely respondent and operative conditioning (Mills, 1998).

Despite rhetoric that proclaims the end of hierarchical bureaucracy, modern management still shows a strong predilection for organisational design of structure, systems and jobs, peppered with incentives and disincentives. Within HRM, there is still strong emphasis on the notion of strategic fit, in which performance-related rewards are still rife and more popular than ever at the higher levels of organisations, despite evidence that they are ineffectual at best and highly disruptive at worst (Legge, 1995). Such practices persist, even though the dominant discourse of managerial practice has moved on beyond a behaviourist view of the self, to include notions of sociality, emotion and commitment that extend managerial discipline to subjective interiority by instrumentalising the discourse of emotionality (Illouz, 2007).

Behaviourism has carried certain muscular connotations in terms of its scientific claims to objective truth, its pragmatism and entrepreneurship surrounding the practical application of its ideas, and its predilection for authoritarian and paternalist modes of politics (Skinner, 1971). What is at stake here is that, while as a scientific paradigm behaviourism is now assigned to the historical scrapheap, it lives on within the collective consciousness through its vocabulary, its logic, its assumptions and its commitment to 'impact' on social engineering. Behaviourism now operates primarily on an ideological level, through its link to the social imaginary. Given that behaviourism is vacated of agency, it can represent an appealing flight from the essentialist individualism and self-worth central to neoliberalism. I will explore this further within the next section.

Neoliberal subjectivity and humanism

Harvey (2010, p. 10) defines neoliberalism as a set of draconian policies designed to consolidate capitalist class power, masked by heavy rhetoric on the virtues of individual freedom, liberty, personal responsibility, free markets, privatisation and internationalised trade. Neoliberalism relies on strong processes of identification in which some of its more contradictory mechanisms are hidden from plain view, such as strong state intervention in financial markets and military state spending that occurs alongside its avowed commitment to privatisation, dismantling of the welfare state and austerity. The identifications that obscure this revolve around personal responsibility and market behaviour.

Foucault (2008) argues that neoliberalism reproduces itself through the self-disciplinary articulation of discourse by and through the subject, which he calls *governmentality*. Neoliberalism represents a series of tropes taken directly from the

economic discourse of the market, such as investment, returns, opportunity cost, yield and so on. These together form an ethos of self-investment, through which the subject comes to view itself in an entrepreneurial manner (see also Du Gay, 1996).

As a key site of such governmentality, we can see these dynamics reflected within managerial technologies in the workplace, through an increased shift towards self-disciplining, performance auditing and individualised surveillance. Here, the developmental discourse of HRM relies on tropes of self-growth and development, and links this to managerial practices that invite self-reflection and the articulation of identities beneficial to organisational ends (Townley, 1994). In this respect, managerial practices variously aim to channel the subject's identification with idealised images of career and performance (Hoedemaekers and Keegan, 2010), or aim to give way to anxiety in the work place to intensify labour. The effect of this is that the subject's interiority becomes the object to be managed—impelling one to ask “what am I to the organisation?”. Here, the subtext is that we ourselves become an object to be directed, optimised, maximised. The neoliberal subject can therefore be understood as a version of what the behaviourists criticised as “introspective” (Watson, 1913), enriched by the wider discourse of optimisation, investment and market valuation. This commitment to viewing the subject as imbued fundamentally with interiority, and also as a site of potential and investment, coattails with a humanist view of subjectivity.

With the emergence of neoliberal thought and the fading of Fordism, we also see counter-arguments emerging that provide distinct criticisms of behaviourism's mechanist notion of subjectivity. Sennett (1971) argues that Skinner's work in moral and social philosophy represents Victorian nostalgia wrapped in a crude, under-theorised application of the behaviourist doxa. He laments how the behaviourist steps

over notions of individuality and humanity to achieve seeming scientific rigour and over-inflated truth claims. In organisation and management studies, such a move away from mechanist assumptions is most clearly reflected in the standard canon of motivation theory in organisational behaviour textbooks, as reflected in theories by Maslow, McGregor, Herzberg and others. These exemplify an explicit commitment to humanist principles of the transcendental subject, imbued with innate potential, and nurtured through experimentation, freedom and sociality.

This Human Relations movement has proved instrumental in extending the reach of management beyond the merely behavioural, into the realm of 'introspective' aspects of employee engagement. Illouz (2011) convincingly shows how researchers such as Mayo adopted the strategies and methods of psychotherapy and psychoanalysis in order to make accessible the thoughts and feelings of employees to managerialist intervention. In the wake of such research, therapeutic discourse becomes a part of the evaluatory matrix of managerial competence (Illouz, 2011). To further explore how individuals become invested ideologically into specific ideational images and discourses, and how these affect processes of identification and transgression, I will now discuss the notion of ideological fantasy.

Ideological fantasy: desire and transgression

The notion of ideological fantasy emerged from the intersection of the work of Laclau and Mouffe (1985) and Žižek (1989). This approach has succeeded in partly revitalising ideology critique and embedding psychoanalytical analysis within discourse theory (Glynos and Howarth, 2007). The analytical concept of fantasy has been productive for understanding how highly contested sites of representation can work to maintain the

order of social arrangements. Fantasy logics operate as part of discourse, and concern how a subject is 'gripped' by ideology (p. 145) through libidinal investments. The malleability and incomplete nature of social relations is disguised and explained away through utopian or dystopian visions of one's situated self-interpretation within a constellation of logics.

Where identification broadly describes the modelling of the ego after an ego ideal, fantasy can be understood as a sustained relationship that channels the subject's desire onto an ego ideal, introjected from the wider discursive context. Lacan (2005) argues that the subject's desire is caught in a metonymical cycle of displacement, where the object of the desire must be seen as structural, as a signifier that overcodes some real-life object. The point here is that, once obtained, desire displaces itself to another surface, and the previously desired object has not quenched the fundamental longing within the subject. The fantasy can therefore be understood to cover over a constitutive lack within subjectivity itself. Neoliberal selfhood emphasises the worth the individual derives from their social and economic attainment, and the signifiers of the market, exchange and self-interest feature heavily in this. Therefore, in order to understand how contemporary neoliberal governance occurs in the everyday, we should include a reflection on working life, and how subjectivity relates to fantasy within this context. The notion of ideological fantasy has had some traction in the field of management and organisation studies. Management researchers have shown how seeming displays of resistance can instead be seen as an accommodation rather than a contestation of authority (Cederström and Grassman, 2008; Fleming and Spicer, 2003). Other analyses have focused on the way in which organisational practices channel the desire of organisational subjects by actively shaping identification with career targets and

competency profiles, or by encouraging the development of enterprising selves in response to organisational shortcomings (Ekman, 2013; Hoedemaekers and Keegan, 2010). In such a way, the ideological fantasy operates by maintaining a passionate attachment to an idealised self-at-work, an unattainable position that can be used to explain and frame everyday workplace experience. This same surface can be understood as an empty signifier, onto which libidinally invested self-images are projected. Such sites are prone to being overcoded with affectively invested projections, manifesting themselves as contradictory images. In studies such as this, the notion of ideological fantasy reflects the vacillation between the utopian and the dystopian (Žižek, 1998).

In this nexus of the subject's desire, the transgressive impulse consists in unwitting attempts to create a counter-fantasy, which functions as an ideological complement to the structurally incomplete nature of the dominant fantasy. As quintessential sites of neoliberal production, organisational contexts are rife with authority, but the modes by which control is exerted upon the efforts of employees have widened and evolved over the course of the modern era (Delbridge and Ezzamel, 2005). A crucial development in the neoliberal era has been the shift in control strategies to normative and non-normative forms (Fleming and Sturdy, 2011). These can be linked with the prominence of neoliberal forms of governance, in which the vocabulary, reasoning and mechanisms of market logic come to dominate political and social contexts, and exclude other perspectives.

Transgression, subjectivity and artistic critique

Neoliberalism transforms the governance of public life by bringing it under the authority of market mechanisms and the direct management of the private sector. As such, it has fetishised 'private sector management' and brought its techniques to bear on a variety of public institutions. On the one hand, there are systematic practices that seek to codify behaviour and monitor and direct efforts, and these can be broadly seen as representative of a behaviourist, mechanist notion of the subject: they are aimed at monitoring and accounting for work efforts, ranking these and linking them to specific performance targets. An infrastructure of monitoring and control is designed and applied, bolstered with incentives and disciplinary sanctions. Speaking more broadly, we can recognise such management in wider neoliberal governance. As Hoggett (2017, p. 366) points out, neoliberal governance seeks to engender performativity, which he argues includes:

- Process controls: specification of how work is to be done in precise detail;
- Output controls: specification of targets, indicators and comparators for individuals, units and organisations;
- Appraisal systems: individual performance evaluation (incl. 360-degree appraisal), audit and inspection;
- All of these linked to a system of sanctions and incentives.

Therefore, on a structural level, neoliberal governance relies on deeply behaviourist management techniques, but also strongly relies on the subjectification of employees through a deeply humanist ethos. To this end, different workplace management technologies have developed, aimed mainly at engendering self-disciplining, couched

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within developmental and therapeutic discourses. These are more readily associated with post-Human Relations management.

Boltanski and Chiapello (2008) have argued that this line of thinking sits in the tradition of artistic critique within capitalism, which they define as directed at ‘the everyday oppression and sterilization of each person’s unique, creative powers produced by industrial, bourgeois society’ (p. 199). Such critique initially pushed back against dominant collectivist structures, standardisation and formalisation in organisations as part of the 1968 student protests and subsequent social movements. However, Boltanski and Chiapello’s key argument is that such critique has gradually become incorporated within capitalist modes of production and governance. This is crucially visible in the primacy of place given to notions of individual choice and free markets within neoliberalism. This critique has also impacted on the way that work is organised, and people are managed:

The traditional Taylorization of work undoubtedly consisted in treating human beings like machines. But it did not make it possible to place the most specific qualities of human beings – their emotions, their moral sense, their honour, and so on – directly in the service of the pursuit of profit. Contrariwise, the new enterprise mechanisms [job enrichment, improvement in working conditions], which demand greater engagement and are based on more sophisticated ergonomics, incorporating the contributions of post-behaviourist psychology and the cognitive sciences, precisely because they are more human in a way, also penetrate more profoundly into people’s interior being. The latter are expected to “give themselves”, as one says, to their work, and the mechanisms

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permit an instrumentalization and commodification of what is most specifically human about human beings. (pp. 465–66)

Through this, Boltanski and Chiapello demonstrate how contestation of capitalist modes of governance can become co-opted and assimilated by hegemonic capitalist discourse. Here, the encompassing spirit of capitalism shifts to incorporate elements of artistic critique, emphasising autonomy and individuality. However, the authors refute that this is social or economic reform. The base of capitalism stays intact, ~~founded on~~ expropriation of public property, maximisation of surplus value and labour intensification. On a macro level, Boltanski and Chiapello's argument demonstrates how countervailing discourses can prop up the dominant discourse and neutralise political critique through its co-optation and incorporation.

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There is a parallel to this argument on the level of the subject. Psychoanalytic theory shows us how transgression of inculcated dominant social norms can have an important role in strengthening the 'normality' of the subject. We can see this reflected in the way that Freud's (1905/1960) theory of humour, based on his analysis of genres of jokes, proposes that humour provides pleasure and relief from internalised authority relations and socio-cultural norms. At the same time, it creates an intersubjective space in which the joke is shared ~~and such relations are mutually acknowledged. As such, a minor~~ transgression of dominant norms in the form of 'risky' humour can work to affirm the status of the subject as 'normal' and well-adjusted, rather than exhibiting deviance. This has been further taken up by Žižek (1989) in his analysis of cynicism, and subsequently adopted by others in the analysis of organisational control and resistance (Fleming and Spicer, 2003). Here, we see how cynicism, despite its sheen of defiance, allows the

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subject to disavow the internalisation of corporate cultural rhetoric in their own discourse. Such cynicism allows for a subjective split between an 'authentic' internal discourse, and an outward surface that goes along with 'business as usual'. The critical point made here is that this very split is ideology at its most effective: the subject performs exactly as instructed, and cynicism acts as a safety valve to relieve the sense of grievance and alienation. Through narcissistic acting out, the libidinal investment within a neoliberalist ego-ideal remains unperturbed. Glynos (2014) refers to this as self-transgression: the act by which a subject acts out against its ostensible subject positions within a set of social practices, propelled by a drive for enjoyment. Such enjoyment is derived from pushing back against the symbolic Law, the normative demands against which the consistency of subjectivity are shored up. This extra-symbolic enjoyment does not feature at the level of meaning and social reality, but rather makes an appeal on the unconscious level, through repressed affects such as envy, aggression and anxiety.

It is in this sense that we can understand the transgressive appeal of behaviourism. As a scientific project, behaviourism was aimed at eradicating any notion of the introspective subject, thereby formalising the study of the mind according to the observation of strictly material conditions. On the other hand, the humanist subject, as it emerged in the world of work organisations, was a direct counter-reaction against this mechanical notion of man that preceded it (Rose, 1974). Boltanski and Chiapello (2008) argue that this artistic critique must be seen as part of a wider wave of reactions against the disenchantment and the uniformity created by contemporary capitalist production, reflected in Fordism. Therefore, this contestation provides a complex picture. While

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behaviourism is now largely defunct (if partially revived through cognitive and neuropsychology), it is deeply embedded in the public consciousness.

Behaviourism reappears not as a fundamental underpinning force of management in the contemporary workplace, but rather as a trace of the archaic, of forgotten and redundant modes of the organisation of work. As Shotter (1975) reminds us, the language and logic of behaviourism is drawn from anywhere except our intuitive self-interpretation (p. 42). But in this uncanniness, it has a desirous appeal that is based on the fact that behaviourism cancels out the very basis on which self-understanding is now premised: its interiority that **emphasises entrepreneurialism and self-management**. In contrast, the behaviourist subject is evacuated of its agency, of its affect, and reduced to its bare schedules of reinforcement. This subject is only meaningful in relation to its environment, and this environment must be pre-designed to generate the behaviour that it bestows upon the individual.

A vision of a behaviourist subject therefore transgresses a humanist consensus. Through the neoliberal co-optation of humanism, subjectivity is posited as characterised by irreducible individuality, innate potential, free choice and the responsibility for self-optimisation. To imagine oneself through the prism of behaviourism is to empty out the content of one's selfhood, to imagine oneself as invariably led by circumstance. **A behaviourist view** leads one to imagine politics and management as top-down, centrally designed and controlled rather than enacted through 'hearts and minds'. This momentary re-imagining of the self then also allows another figure to emerge, namely that of the authoritarian leader. Here, we are invited to imagine an Other who is able to

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control the circumstances through which human activity is conditioned, and to remove those circumstances that would lead to aberrant behaviours.

Discussion: traversing the neoliberalist subject in populist discourse

Through self-transgression, behaviourism provides a vision of the self that forgoes the intense normative pressures of everyday life within the strictures of neoliberalism. Neoliberalist governmentality is built on internalised notions of enterprise and self-development, and the self is here viewed as strongly individual and agential. As Layton (2014) points out, neoliberalist subjectivity nurtures a specific form of narcissism that discourages intersubjective forms of relating, and encourages a forced individuality aimed at goal-maximisation. Faced with such pressure, the prospect of release exerts a desirous pull. In the cracks of dominant discourse, images appear of an archaic understanding of subjectivity that is non-agential, but wholly structurally determined: a version of ourselves no longer burdened with the weight of 'choice' (Salecl, 2011).

Psychoanalysis allows us to understand this and conceptualise the role that enjoyment plays in this appeal of a radically transgressive vision of the self, and how it might link back to the socio-political landscape. Glynos' (2014) concept of self-transgression grapples with how subjects push at the boundaries of internalised norms within dominant social logics that govern daily life. Such self-transgression is aimed at enjoyment, which Glynos understands in its Lacanian sense: here, enjoyment is at once thrilling and illicit, but also includes elements of self-effacement and discomfort due to its transgressive, extra-symbolic character.

Glynos (2014) puts this concept into epistemological context by linking it to two distinct but related theses. Firstly, the orthogonality thesis holds that enjoyment takes place on a different epistemological plane from normativity and meaning, and that these planes are governed by different logics. To the former we might ascribe the status of ideology, and to the latter the status of reality (produced through discursive means). Secondly, the overdetermination thesis holds that the plane of reality and the plane of ideology are crucially interlinked via the notion of the fantasmatic. Here, subjects' desire is structurally bound within a fantasmatic relationship that is strongly tied to anxiety and encounters contradictions within the social. In this way, the realm of social reality can have a direct bearing on the plane of desire and fantasmatic attachment, and vice versa, in overdetermined ways.

These two theses in relation to enjoyment allow us to examine specific manifestations of the behaviourist self-transgression of the humanist subject position within neoliberalism. The fantasmatic appeal of humanism relies on a disavowal of systematic exclusions and structural disadvantages for specific social groups:

Neoliberal governance propounds a particular vision of human nature: the individual is conceived of as an entrepreneur whose "nature" is competitive and based in self-care and self-interest [...] The neoliberal reconceptualization of the individual rationalizes the radical split between those who have a chance of making it in the system and those who do not and cannot: awareness of mutual interdependence is disavowed as social divisions become understood as "failures of individual choice and responsibility". (Layton, 2014, p. 163)

Such a disavowal of social structure breeds anxiety over whether we have tried our best, and whether we have what it takes to be good neoliberal subjects. This provides the momentary behaviourist escape with their enjoyment—the temporary disappearance of the relentless normative pressure of being responsible, enterprising and successful. Indeed, behaviourism offers a vision of neutralising the question of agency entirely. The transgressive attraction of this absolution from neoliberal subjectivity exists on the fantasmatic plane for the subject, but it also manifests itself in the social and political space given to renewed incursions of authoritarian leadership and populism.

Within management and organisations there has arguably been a return of ‘hard leadership’ tropes and anti-unionism in broad terms. An example of this has been the distinct swing towards more directive and centralised management in higher education, which has increasingly liberated itself from existing practices of institutional democracy, joint decision-making and stakeholder influence (McGettigan, 2013). Existing alongside a discourse of institutional competition, self-management and individualised performance management (which relies on self-disciplining and the inward gaze of surveillance), these forms of management rely on more naked displays of centralised power, radical organisational restructuring and a tightening of budgetary controls. On an individual level, increased reminders of job insecurity are used to keep staff on their toes. These measures are difficult to justify in the logic of Human Relations, which pursues ‘efficiency and social harmony in the corporation’ (Illouz, 2007) and aims to use people management as a way of inspiring higher performance through the creation of high levels of commitment.

But in the political sphere, we can see how self-transgression can pierce the orthogonality of the plane of ideology and its appeal to unconscious desire, and can have lasting effects on the social plane through electoral politics and public institutions. This has been evident in the election of Donald Trump to the US presidency. The transgressive character of Trump is visceral and apparent, as he represents an archetype of populist politics in his accusations of political corruption, electoral fraud, closed establishment circuits of power and politically correct pussyfooting. Such charges are aimed at ‘metropolitan elites’ and the neoliberal order in which they are deemed to be culturally, politically and economically dominant. What Trumpism places in opposition to this is a vision of society and citizenship that breaks with the normative demands of neoliberalism upon the self. Here, we see a decisive rejection of the humanist subject, the entrepreneur of social capital, striving for authenticity, engaged in freedom of choice and rational exchange. In Trump’s discourse, we see how a behaviourist notion of human nature is implied within the extraordinary importance afforded to external, material conditions as key in shaping policy and consequently society. We see this evidenced in the promulgation of a Mexican ‘wall’ as a means of managing cross-border migration, and the proposal of the Muslim visa ban as a way of managing both refugee immigration and domestic terrorism. We see this in Trump’s rejection of nuclear disarmament, and the aggressive mobilisation of the nuclear deterrent in foreign disputes. Besides reflecting paranoia over ‘alien’ invaders, these measures represent highly material interventions into behaviour—akin to a behaviourist designing a maze, incentives and sanctions in order to control experimental conditions. At the same time, political disagreement and public debate are framed as deliberate misinformation (‘fake news’). It appears that debate, knowledge and understanding here fade from view in the implicit conception of human action, and are conceived of as responsive only to

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physical consequences, incentives and sanctions, rather than to strategy, reasoned debate or diplomacy.

Trumpism, then, seems to flirt with a complete externalisation of agency, in which human beings are conceived of as acting on deterrents and incentives rather than reasoning or emotion. In such a view, agency amounts to the design of a set of conditions that reproduce certain behavioural responses. At the same time, Trumpism offers up a violent rejection of what Boltanski and Chiapello conceptualise as ‘artistic critique’: the demand for individual freedom, authenticity and diversity unfettered by state or capitalist institutions. We see this reflected within the ways in which Trumpism embodies a deep ridiculing of the discourse of humanism, by directly attacking identity politics, sexual and racial anti-discrimination law, and demonising civil disobedience and legitimate protest. Pushback against this is aggressively maligned, using terms such as ‘snowflake’, ‘SJW’ and ‘triggering’.

This transgressive appeal to a distinctly non-humanist notion of the self is also evident in Theresa May’s 2016 Conservative Conference speech, which typifies a clear rupture with the language and logic of neoliberal identification. In it, she problematises the place of markets within the governance of society, by calling into question the rationality and fairness of market outcomes. She also pushes back against the free movement of EU labour, a legal principle that reflects the neoliberalist primacy of markets. She suspends the centrality of human capital, by implying that EU citizens are unfairly taking employment away from British nationals, thereby privileging domestic status over being hired on the basis of one’s skills and suitability for the job. Finally, she counters the rhetoric of individual choice by pointing to the deep shaping influences

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Commented [CH7R6]: Sorry, not at the moment. I don’t have the volume handy – am currently in Canada, and the book is in my office in the UK. But artistic critique is an absolutely central concept in Boltanski and Chiapello so I don’t think this is needed for the sake of clarity. Any page reference would be arbitrary.

of locality and community. In deriding cross-border migration as **rootless**, she critiques the legitimacy of self-determination and enterprise that EU freedom of movement bestows upon its population.

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In this excerpt, May (2016) coins the phrase 'citizen of nowhere', a hugely evocative term that is aimed at undermining a sense of pan-national identity, **opting instead** for a more closed nationalist version.

Commented [SS8]: If you see what I mean, I think it would have more impact to just use this specific phrase in this 2nd para. – and perhaps allude more generally to the concept above. Could you review this quickly now?

Commented [SS9]: You mean to say she is opting for this 'more closed' version, yes?

Commented [CH10R9]: Yes – not sure how to phrase this more clearly, but open to suggestions.

But we also value something else: the spirit of citizenship. That spirit that means you respect the bonds and obligations that make our society work. That means a commitment to the men and women who live around you, who work for you, who buy the goods and services you sell. That spirit that means recognising the social contract that says you train up local young people before you take on cheap labour from overseas. That spirit that means you do as others do, and pay your fair share of tax. But today, too many people in positions of power behave as though they have more in common with international elites than with the people down the road, the people they employ, the people they pass in the street. But if you believe you're a citizen of the world, you're a citizen of nowhere. You don't understand what the very word "citizenship" means.

This shows how May's rhetoric clashes with a neoliberalist notion of the subject. In the neoliberal rhetoric of markets and individuality, the subject is cast as a site of human capital, propelled by aspirations and individual choice. May here evokes something else, linking subjective authenticity to collectivity: she evokes a social contract, and the 'spirit' that emanates from it. She links these to a specific local space, 'down the road',

where we might pass ‘people in the street’. While the nationalist parochialism of this is evident, the significance extends further. Within her whole speech, May evokes a notion of selfhood that coattails with a behaviourist view in at least three ways. Firstly, by using signifiers such as ‘citizenship’ and ‘spirit’, attention is drawn to a dimension of commonality within subjectivity and how this is linked to national boundaries and history. Secondly, selfhood is cast as linked to local conditions. This represents a privileging of materialist determinism. Here, signifiers such as ‘bonds’, ‘obligations’ and ‘social contract’ are used to denote a habit-forming shaping of selfhood through material conditions. This is further linked to locality by means of words such as ‘street’, ‘people down the road’ and ‘how the country works’. Thirdly, the rhetoric in this speech works to de-emphasise any notion of individualised interiority. Instead, it emphasises collectivity on a national level, and makes an argument for how local conditions shape our very selfhood. This is powerfully evoked in the statement ‘citizen of the world [...] citizen of nowhere’, which not only validates the EU referendum’s backlash of English nationalism and petty racism, but also seeks to marginalise the voices of those who have proven themselves geographically and socio-culturally mobile. As such, within May’s take-up of the national mood post-referendum, we see a desire to appeal to a notion of identity that sits uneasily alongside a more general neoliberal notion of self and society. Here, government becomes more centralised and interventionist, nationalism takes a greater significance and self-identity is seen as highly tied to local and national circumstances and surroundings. Far less attention is given to choice, individual freedom, enterprise, or markets as morally neutral.

These are powerful illustrations of the ways in which norms and practices associated with a dominant ideology (or what Glynos and Howarth (2007) refer to as a ‘social

logics') may be temporarily negated by an archaic doctrine, echoing older political discourses of 'land and blood'. This is a transgression of the spirit and rhetoric of neoliberalism, which rests on radical free market ideology and an assumed self-interested subject of human capital. Suffused with the vocabulary of humanism through notions of self-actualisation, enterprise and individualist essentialism, such neoliberalism puts forward a powerful ego-ideal that provides a fecund surface for identification. Neoliberalism trades on the imagery of freedom and choice, and as such works as an appellation of the subject to 'become' neoliberal (Cremin, 2011). The momentary overstepping of such powerful normativity of the self works to create an illicit *jouissance*, a pleasure riven with the guilt of transgression.

Rather than counter the powerful hold of neoliberalism on public life and on the lived everyday of individuals, this transgression assures ideological consistency by providing a respite from and a negation of legitimate critique. Here, the 'invading' imagery of behaviourism and authoritarianism becomes a container for our misgivings about the world. The figure of the citizen of nowhere becomes a scapegoat, upon which the specific flaws of a socio-political totality can be blamed. At the same time, its position outside the political mainstream means that we cannot come to view ourselves as representative of it, and it retains a plausible deniability as a result. It therefore acts as a perfect safety valve for the continued functioning of hard neoliberalism itself, rather than countering it. With respect to the illustrations discussed above, for Brexit politics as for Trumpian conservatism, the machinations of neoliberalist socio-political production are not only undisturbed, they are bolstered. While masquerading as a political rupture, both populist upsets have allowed the rollback of the welfare state to be accelerated and have manufactured a narrative of crisis which has allowed for further

centralisation of power, deregulation of market controls and labour law, as well as privatisation and marketisation of public institutions and services.

Such transgressive hegemony operates on the level of large-scale political discourse, but equally functions on the micro-level of the subject. Politicians do not tire of praising the value of 'hard work', masking a social-Darwinist ethic with the language of meritocracy. But in the workplace, too, we find contradictions within the images offered up for identification to the subject. Through carefully designed organisational structures, strategies and mechanisms of control, the spirit of behaviourism is historically present in the governance of everyday organisational life. A carefully designed environment seeks to replicate desired behaviours, in a 'one-size-fits-all' manner. However, its influence is discursively marginalised due to its uneasy relationship with the neoliberal rhetoric of human capital and enterprise. Couched within a language of 'developmental humanism' (Legge, 1995), more psychologically refined management practices encourage individuals to articulate themselves through the lens of the malleability and individuality of the self. In such a way, one is invited to become an entrepreneur of one's own human capital, aimed at employability, development and self-maximisation. Prevaricating between adherence to the strict monitoring of compliance to performance targets and pursuit of the largely unrewarded discretionary effort denoted by commitment, the subject thereby contains its own contradictions. This allows it to function within work contexts that are increasingly fraught with insecurity, precariousness, labour intensification and surveillance.

Conclusion

In contemporary neoliberalism, there exists a potential for self-transgression of key tenets of neoliberalism, particularly the notions of the subject of human capital, the indiscriminacy and rationality of markets, and the beneficial nature enterprise. At the same time, manifestations of such self-transgression cannot strictly be seen as a rejection—there is also a distinct indulgence in the attractiveness of those sensibilities and speech acts that fall outside of the perimeter of ‘the establishment’. Through populism within the realm of politics and a return to authoritarianism within organisations, there is a lure of leadership that treads on a notion of liberal consensus. The dangerous appeal of authoritarian paternalism is reflected in the social philosophy of Skinner (1971), who argued that society must move beyond notions of free will towards rationalisation, social engineering and design.

In the analysis above, I have asked questions in relation to images of selfhood within neoliberalism. These are intended to problematise how normative influences on subjectivity structure everyday life and experience. With this, I have explicitly traced the ways in which those images that fall outside of the established norms can take on a counter-intuitive ideological function through an unconscious act of transgression. Given the unanticipated nature of recent political events, it is important to explore how remnants of the mechanistic conception of man continue to surface in contemporary public debate and wider socio-cultural rhetoric. I have proposed that one way to read such moments is to see them as a momentary transgression of the dominant normativity of the neoliberal subject position of human capital. Here, the relentless, internalised pressure to maximise one’s innate potential through self-investment and enterprise is suspended by continual flight into utopian visions of a subjectivity bereft of its

interiority, reduced to bare behavioural impulses reinforced by environmental conditions.

Please insert an 'About the Author' para. [here](#).

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