

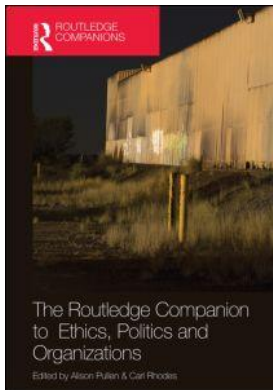
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Work and illness under neoliberal capitalism

How to use your virus as a weapon of refusal

Peter Fleming

I have periods where I feel a little weak, ill, depressed, fuck it, the wheatties aren't going down right. I just go to bed for three days and four nights, pull down all the shades and just go to bed. I get up to shit, piss, drink a beer now and then, and go back to bed. I come out of that completely enlivened for two or three months, I get power from that. I think that someday they will say this psychotic guy knew something. But today we are so obsessed that we have to get up and do something. People are nailed to the processes, up/down, get up and do something, then sleep.

(Charles Bukowski [2012] on Illness)

From the outset I must make a confession. I love being temporarily ill. Nothing serious or life-threatening, of course. But a good flu, with a touch of vomiting and diarrhoea is such a welcome event. If I am lucky, someone might tend to me, which is always wonderful. But it is alright if that does not happen. The reason I relish being ill has nothing to do with masochism. The fact that I feel like shit and am temporarily incapacitated is not motivated by some sick obsession with self-destruction. No, it is the way that my body is repositioned within the work–command matrix that I find such a relief. Out of nowhere, I am released from the complex and never-ending pressures that have reduced my life to work. And yes, it is even better when the boss gets ill. Germs are a good excuse to be left alone.

How should we understand this absurd relationship to illness today? I want to suggest in this chapter that it is a symptom (no pun intended) of how work has changed under neoliberal capitalism. Today, corporate managerialism has transformed our jobs into something we *are* rather than just *do* among other things. Whereas work used to be a space of confinement, containment and demarcation (especially concerning work/non-work, personal/private divisions); organizations now aim to enlist our entire repertoire of bodily affects, cultivating an attitude that sees us permanently on-call (see Fleming, 2014a). What is now called 'human capital' is difficult to separate from the actual persona conducting the work. Its value-creating attributes are lived on an ongoing and permanent basis.

This represents a rupture in the typical power relationships that defined organized work in the past. For example, Marx (1867/1972) and Weber (1946) criticized the industrial labour process because it formally objectified the working subject. The employee becomes an alienated abstraction separated from who they actually are. As a result, the workplace comes to resemble a prison complex that is austere, impersonal and completely regimented. The two poles of freedom and incarceration are unambiguously discernable in this domain. Given the stupefaction that resulted under such conditions which tended to undermine productivity, subsequent managerial techniques attempted to promote more human qualities on the job. The neo-Human Relations movement in the 1960s and corporate culturalism in 1980s, for example, aimed to reconcile our vibrant individuality with the demands of economic rationalization. But even here the alienating rhythms of employment have been noted in influential studies (see Braverman, 1974; Kunda, 1992; Willmott, 1993).

Presently, a number of transformations concerning labour regulation appear to be afoot, in which 'life itself' is put to work and the boundary between work (i.e. the 'prison' of production) and freedom (what we do with the rest of our lives) is increasingly blurred. Following the ground-breaking investigations of Foucault (2008) and Deleuze (1988, 1992), I term this biopower. Take these real-life examples to get a flavour for what this means in the workplace. A real-estate agent prepares for her Monday morning meeting during the kids football game in the weekend. A music store retail assistant is encouraged to wear his own clothes, because it evokes the kind of 'cool' that could never be prescribed by middle management. Mark Zuckerberg's trademark 'hoodie' heralds a new kind of corporate entrepreneur in which hard work, lifestyle, extramural interests and skill blur into singular ethos. An IT start-up realizes most of its workers train themselves on their own time (as a labour of love), and concentrate on tapping these innovative capabilities rather than composing them. A large hotel chain posts its 'employee of the month' in the lobby, detailing his favourite movies, holiday destination and hobbies. An airline attendant trainee is told to act as if the aeroplane cabin is her living room, so that feelings of warmth and goodwill are more easily evoked. Businesses as diverse as call centres and pharmaceutical conglomerates expressly hire 'attitude' and 'personality' knowing that enrolling the 'whole person' is vital for teamwork, problem-solving and customer interaction. A high-tech employee finds himself dreaming up code solutions in his sleep, dubbing it 'sleeping working'. A rich investment banker laments to her half-forgotten husband, 'my job is my life'.

This sea change in management regulation is interesting in that it attempts to break down some of the definitive boundaries that have been fundamental to capitalism from its beginnings. As a growing number of studies demonstrate, many occupations increasingly require workers to bring their entire and unscripted personalities to the job, 'warts and all' (Bains, 2007; Cederström and Fleming, 2012; Gorz, 2010). The rigid 9 to 5 confines of the typical office have been replaced by fluid flexitime, aided by technology and so-called enlightened managers, in which tasks can be achieved in unconventional times and places (Crary, 2013). Using terms like 'liberation management' and 'Results Only Work Environments', some observers have insisted that firms have shed their old 'control mentality' (Semler, 2007), persuading employees to bring their self-fashioned artisanal interests to the job, skills that are often difficult to compose through standard management methods. The demands of work and 'life itself' are increasingly indistinguishable.

This chapter identifies how biopower is a forceful variant of regulation in the workplace and involves shutting down opportunities for freedom rather than widening them. Foucault's (2008) conceptualization of biopower is useful for demonstrating why this is so, especially when taken up and expanded upon in Deleuze's (1988) radical interpretation. However, the real question this chapter seeks to address concerns *resistance*. How do we challenge a modality

of power that infects the very texture of everyday life? How do we resist a form of control that disassembles the long-standing industrial division between 'checked in' and 'checked out'? I will suggest that when our bodily flows of sociality are colonized by biopower, the ways in which we are able to successfully refuse work also changes. Such resistance may take many forms, but this chapter will focus on one; namely, a novel appreciation of *illness* currently emerging among the workforce today. Being too ill to work gathers political import in relation to the type of regulation we experience in (and around) our jobs today.

I intend to explore the following question. Are we able to conceptualize a gloriously debilitating bout of influenza or any other illness as a weapon with which to wage war on the biopolitical flows currently overworking us today? And what are implications of doing so given that neoliberalism both (a) transforms work into a contagious general sickness, and (b) considers specific person-related illnesses (e.g. the flu) a dangerous affront to productivity?

Tagged: the 'open prison' of work today

The onset of your flu begins slowly. First a twinge in the back of the throat. Is it only a head cold or something more serious? Then a temperature change. Is that the start of a fever? Then a nauseating pressure that centres in the stomach and then gradually moves to other regions of the body. Now the bones begin to ache. Perhaps a little vomiting. Finally the real thing arrives and we are bedridden. With a euphoria that is difficult to beat, we can now call in sick. Time to do something fun, like watch a movie, perhaps read a book that we have not had the chance to pick up for months. Joyous rest. Wonderful boredom. Time slowing down. Finally, life has begun again.

This chapter is not so much about illness per se, but the conditions of possibility that have made it a perversely pleasurable experience today. What has changed in the way we work that makes the arrival of the flu feel like a reprieve? The image we typically have of most workplaces is one derived from the industrial period. The capitalist employment nexus is defined by a wage/effort bargain (Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999). In return for a wage that allows us to subsist, we forgo all of those self-determined freedoms that now can be enjoyed only after we have checked out. As Marx (1867/1972) noted long ago, this feature of capitalism is part of the Faustian pact we all must make. When we enter paid employment someone else comes to own a good part of our time. And given the conditions of purchase, we are expected to conduct ourselves as per our employer's wishes, generally in accordance with the demands of economic rationality (Gorz, 1989). The protocols of standardization and rationalization aim to expunge from the world of work the rich individual qualities that make us unique and different. Hence the prominence of alienation as a definitive experience under industrial conditions (Harvey, 2014).

A self denied?

What are these elements of self that are prohibited as soon as we enter the contemporary workplace? According to Weber (1946), formal bureaucracy functions as a cultural ideology as much as a practical concern with efficiency and means–ends rationality (also see Edwards, 1979; Jackall, 1988). In other words, the bureaucratic environment requires a uniform person-type in order to operate correctly. The bureau separates the official function from the vast existential universe that constitutes each individual (with a multitude of life experiences, personality traits and proclivities). Love, hate, spirituality, sexual desire and revenge have no place in the ideal-type bureaucracy because it upsets the 'cog-like' calculus of standardized rationality. Of course,

Weber was very clear about the downside of this remarkable achievement; namely, disenchantment. We find ourselves bereft of any existential expression for a large part of the day and thus become depressed and beset with crippling bouts of ennui.

The same mindset – with different subjective connotations – has been observed in a wide range of studies pertaining to factory employment. According to Marx (1867/1972), factory labour not only physically damages us through long hours of hard labour, but also mentally wreaks havoc on our psychic well-being. We may be alienated from our job task, fellow workers and end-product, but the ultimate expression of this modern curse, according to Marx, is self-alienation. Because they have no choice but to sell their labour power, “the worker only feels himself outside his work, and in his work feels outside himself. He is at home when he is not working, and when he is working is not at home. His labour is therefore not voluntary, but coerced” (Marx, 1988: 74).

Critical sociology has subsequently noted such alienation in an array of employment settings. For example, in the factory he studied, Beynon (1973) even found employees being reprimanded for chatting on the shop floor since this could potentially upset industrial discipline. Leidner (1993) recounted the deep inauthenticity fostered among service sector employees she interviewed, especially evident when customer service roles (e.g. happy and smiling workers) clashed with their true feelings and identities. This type of self-denial has even been observed in relatively high-paid occupations, such as management consultancy, as employees find themselves paradoxically ‘being who they are not’ in order to succeed in the corporate setting (Costas and Fleming, 2009).

The capitalist compromise?

What do alienated workers do best? Weeks’s (2004) study of modern office work answers this question: complain, bitch, gossip, steal, plan various acts of sabotage, avoid work if possible and basically dream of being anywhere but where they unfortunately find themselves. In this respect, managerialism swiftly realized that there was a serious problem to be dealt with. How can the capitalist enterprise have its cake (exploited and regimented workers) and eat it too (enthusiastic, motivated and heartfelt labour power)?

The rise of the Human Relations movement in corporate ideology is often believed to be a pragmatic compromise to tackle the dehumanizing ills of work (Barley and Kunda, 1992). The typical rationale goes like this. Following the depersonalization engendered by the rhythms of strict rationality, managers sought to find ways of injecting life back into the job. Task rotation, fulfilment and a more consensual style of coordination might allow workers, in part at least, to enjoy their jobs (Hollway, 1991). There is some truth in this account of industrial history. But we must place the rise of this corporate perspective in its proper historical context (Fleming, 2014b). The 1920s and 1930s, especially in the USA, were overwhelmed by industrial conflict (also see Gillespie, 1991). Workers were revolting en masse, and for good reason. The Human Relations movement and other types of ‘soft constraint’ entered the fray, concerned that unmitigated class war was imminent.

However, the discourse of Human Relations still basically relied upon the metaphor of the prison when thinking about how work ought to be organized (see Bramel and Friend, 1981). Containment was still a key objective of the management gaze. As Braverman (1974) points out in his excellent critique of Maslow and McGregor, so-called humanized work is conspicuously regimented around space/time analogues indicative of earlier systems of control. We might think of this as Taylorism delivered with an Oprah Winfrey-like munificence. Thoughtful and considerate until you decided work was not really your cup of tea.

The rise of culture management in the 1980s appeared to denote a break from previous corporate ideologies (Willmott, 1993). The attempt to build 'strong cultures' changed the tenor of work from one that was purely contractual to a more emotional and warmer labour/capital interface (Kunda, 1992). The literature on culture management is vast, and a full elaboration of its diffusion and acceptance/resistance among the workforce is beyond the scope of this chapter. However, it is interesting that the original gurus of so-called 'strong cultures' were highly critical of previous management systems. According to Peters and Waterman (1982), rational employment relationships miss out on a key value-driver: employee commitment and loyalty. As such, organizations ought to foster a workforce with strong sentimental attachments to the business, so they see little difference between their own welfare and that of owners and shareholders (Barley and Kunda, 1992).

This is interesting because organizations with strong cultures actually *deepened* the division between work and non-work in a striking manner (Fleming and Sturdy, 2011). Corporate cultures function like clans or cults, which tend to frame outside influences as a dangerous contaminant to their purity and authenticity (O'Reilly and Chatman, 1996). This is how Casey (1995) and Kunda (1992), for example, reveal the dark side of this management trend. The work environment becomes a closed system whereby an Orwellian uniformity prevails, suppressing all other personal and lifestyle signifiers. According to Willmott (1993), the employee socialized in such an environment is no longer an 'individual' with diverse interests outside of work, but a complete 'company man or woman'. Ironically, they must embody the datum of instrumental rationality even more profoundly than their predecessors. The effort to build an emotional connection between the workforce and organization, ironically, leaves employees more depersonalized than ever.

A life enlisted: non-work . . . goes to work

In western organizations, especially in the USA and Northern Europe, a strange mutation has occurred in managerial practice over the last 15 years. Rather than mould the worker into a faithful reflection of the firm, typically by bombarding them with brainwashing media, organizations decided to allow them to 'just be themselves' (Fleming, 2009). As Hanlon (2007) explains, the duty to 'compose' was relaxed in favour of capturing what the employee already was, and the capabilities that they brought to the office on their own steam. In the 1990s we see more *self-sufficient* ideals enter the lexicon of management and human resources management (HRM), including distributive leadership, self-managing teams, flexi-work and the portfolio career. The message is clear. Rather than exhort employees to display love towards the firm, which often resulted in caricatured displays of deference, the corporation instead aims to tap social abilities that already exist (Fleming and Sturdy, 2011). Even the erstwhile guru of strong cultures, Tom Peters, changed his mind about the efficacy of indoctrination and favoured instead 'liberation management' in which the corporation 'unleashes' and 'captures' everything that is personal, self-reliant and socially agile about the worker (Peters, 2003).

I suggest there are a number of important reasons for this shift. Soon after the 'culture craze' became institutionalized, a number of observers noted how the slavish adherence to corporate values often had undesirable outcomes (Foster and Kaplan, 2001). Not innovation, creativity and initiative, but staid conformity might result from cult-like rituals of commitment. Understandably, many workers simply play-acted their way through the day, hoping to appease superiors, even when this undermined organizational productivity. The unintended consequences of extreme indoctrination started to harm the capitalist project (Semler, 2007).

Another reason for this change in labour management pertains to the political economy of neoliberal employment arrangements (Gorz, 2010). Following the crisis of Fordism, the

neoliberal paradigm was activated to salvage the accumulation process. But there was a catch. Extreme neoliberalism – that is to say, private property, commercialization, competition, ultra-individualism – is notoriously impractical for getting things done (see Fleming, 2014b). As any management consultant will confess, organizations rely upon deep flows of sociality, cooperation and informal collaboration to function (e.g. see Bains, 2007), something that the broader neoliberal mission is anathema to. This is exactly why firms began to celebrate the self-managing abilities of employees and blur the boundary between work and non-work. Hence also the increasing importance of ‘human capital’ and ‘human resources’ from the 1990s onwards, augmented by new management attempts to ‘empower’ employees and take on more management responsibilities (whilst, of course, remaining hamstrung by hierarchical relations of authority).

There are a number of important dimensions here. Facets of the employee’s life related to non-work are increasingly evoked on company time. According to Gorz (2010), there is a concerted capitalist motivation behind this reconfiguration. Whereas workers in Taylorized industries

became optimal only after they had been deprived of practical knowledge, skills and habits developed by the culture of everyday life . . . post-Fordist workers have to come to the production process with all the cultural baggage they have acquired through games, team sports, arguments.

(Gorz, 2010: 9–10)

‘Life itself’ now enters the neoliberal machine as its prime resource. This has been facilitated by work techniques that would have looked bizarre in earlier organizational contexts. For example, in their best-selling book *Why Work Sucks and How to Fix It*, Ressler and Thompson (2011) argue that American industry is being transformed by Results Only Work Environments (or ROWE). Here organizations no longer focus on inputs, as conventional management wisdom prescribes, but only on *outputs*. ROWE-oriented firms do not give a shit where, how and when the work is performed, be it in the middle of the night in your unusual underwear. Inputs are left to the discretion of the employee, who hardly ever falters on delivering.

In light of the concept of biopower (to be discussed below), such ‘freedoms’ are, of course, yet another way of extracting more labour time out of the workforce. I call this a *tagging* method of control. Workers under the ROWE and ‘liberation management’ system resemble the fate of criminal offenders in ‘open prisons’. Free but also incarcerated. Mobile but fixed. Citizens but captive. When the boundary between work-time and non-work is ‘relaxed’ in this way, we ironically find ourselves always at work. Kamp (2013) puts it perfectly: “the ‘normal working day’ is gradually being effaced . . . in reality, working hours are no longer defined by actual work time spent but by the nature of the assignment, by solution strategies, and by the level of ambition involved, as well as individual factors and preferences” (Kamp, 2013: 129). In other words, when work bleeds into non-work and vice versa, we move to a situation in which jobs are defined as something we ‘are’ rather than merely do among other things. Work acquires embodied social qualities that we unfortunately cannot discard or walk away from.

I don’t want to spread it sir! Biopower from Foucault to Deleuze

We are now getting closer to conceptualizing why the first signs of influenza might now be welcomed by the worker today. But in order to develop a fuller analysis, let’s more closely scrutinize the capitalist power relations underscoring these trends.

During the latter part of his career, Michel Foucault (2008) made some startling claims about the type of society that neoliberal ideology was about to beget. In his last set of annual lectures at the Collège de France, Foucault argued that ‘biopolitics’ is the guiding motif of neoliberal reason, which he sought to reveal through a close reading of neoclassical economists like Gary Becker. Biopower refers to how governmental and economic influence enlists ‘life itself’ in order to function effectively when markets dominate. Foucault noted that this is why ‘human capital’ is an overarching preoccupation among neoliberal analysts. Whereas Fordism favoured containment in order to render us productive – in which work, consumption and reproduction were clearly delineated for disciplinary purposes – biopower seeks to transcend boundaries and echo work throughout all domains of society. Here the independent vitality of populations enters into a universal relationship with economic requirements. The term ‘life itself’ not only concerns our organic corporeality (that fleshy, leaky and unpredictable organism we call our body), but also our varied ways of living as such (also see Agamben, 2000).

Biopower is a contagious weapon of neoliberalism because it yokes our entire living qualities to the capitalist project, something akin to a virus. Read how Foucault describes biopower in his lectures: it “generalizes the ‘enterprise’ from within the social body or social fabric . . . The individual’s life itself – with his [*sic*] relationships to his private property, with his family, household, insurance and retirement – must make him into a sort of permanent and multiple enterprise” (Foucault, 2008: 241). Economic rationality inserts itself in our bodies like a disease that cannot be shaken. The increasing commercialization of everything from family life, to our value as a marketable person (e.g. permanently updating our employability on our CVs) sees traditional forms of domination, such as disciplinary confinement, lose its usefulness. The body is still central, but in a different way. For sure, Foucault seems to imply that the metaphor of incarceration emphasized in his earlier concept of disciplinary power is being superseded by a new understanding of regulation: one that utilizes openness, cross-boundary fluidity and the permanent instantiation of economic calculation.

Why Deleuze?

Some have suggested – perhaps a little ungenerously – that Foucault’s concept of biopower only really made sense after Deleuze placed it within a wider narrative of capitalist class domination (Hardt and Negri, 1999). Whereas Foucault tended to explain the rise of biopower as a gentler and non-interventionist way of managing modern populations, Deleuze pushed the idea in a more radical direction (Deleuze, 1988, 1992). Neoliberalism is primarily a class project and this is what drew Deleuze to the notion of biopower (Dardot and Laver, 2014). For him, the prison-like apparatus of capitalist work relations has given way to biopolitical flows of ‘control’ in which porous interconnections between institutions means that the space/time delimitations of Fordism have been transformed.

Whereas disciplinary power sought to sequester, regiment and reform the subject into a composite reflection of the panopticon gaze, biopower seeks to accelerate and ‘infect’ the subject of power so that they are always enmeshed within the abstract network (Deleuze, 1992). In other words, the logic of the prison (or factory) has escaped its enclosed space and is now the leading template for all social relations. Unlike the high-security confinement that Foucault discussed, we might call this the ‘open prison’ of employment, which clearly has far more serious implications for the question of resistance.

In his famous essay entitled ‘Post-script on the Societies of Control’ (1992), Deleuze argues that biopolitical regulation is special because of its virtual qualities. Like a bodily virus that can never be completely isolated in any one particular molecular cell, biopower formats an index

that is reverberated through all social relations. Power is no longer quantitative – whereby it starts in the factory and then ends, starts in the family and then ends, sequencing our corporeal time through discrete passages – but is dangerously *qualitative*. When comparing biopower to disciplinary procedures, Deleuze argues:

In the disciplinary societies one was always starting again (from school to the barracks, from the barracks to the factory), while in the societies of control one is never finished with anything – the corporation, the educational system, the armed services being metastable states coexisting in one and the same modulation, like a universal system of deformation.

(Deleuze, 1992: 5)

In this way, biopower sees the productive social body overcoming Fordist boundaries as a matter of course. For us, it is the natural thing to do. The trope of the virus and Deleuze's persistent use of the concept of the 'virtual' or 'gaseous' is important for understanding this form of force. Rather than directly coercing our efforts through manifest blockages and time/space prohibitions, regulation seeks to empower the individual so that s/he may pass from one domain to another, free of approximate conclusions or termini. Let's explore this idea a little more before we employ it to dissect the contemporary workplace and the role of illness therein.

Towards a theory of modulation

As opposed to the disciplinary apparatus that truncates our bodily potentials, biopower prefers to operate by way of indexical modulations, so that we are “never finished with anything” (Deleuze, 1992). The industrial factory of yesteryear gathers its violence through beginnings and ends. We dutifully check in and out of the office, the hospital, the university, the prison and so forth. In this way,

The individual never ceases passing from one closed environment to another, each having its own laws: first the family; then the school ('you are no longer in your family'); then the barracks ('you are no longer at school'); then the factory; from time to time the hospital; possibly the prison, the pre-eminent instance of the enclosed environment.

(Deleuze, 1992: 5)

Biopower functions in an entirely different manner. It is successful when it *modulates* the social body, calibrating or 'indexing' its energies and efforts to an abstract principle (i.e. production, work, obedience, etc.) which can never be isolated in any one particular location. By 'index' I mean a background structure of compatibility between otherwise distinct social groupings. This is never a one-to-one relationship, since biopower cannot function through *direct* compatibilities. For example, life in the post-industrial school does not directly resemble the workplace. Under neoliberalism, however, education is indexed to the needs of production so that schooling continuously resonates the basic requirements of the workplace. Art classes tap into one's employability. As do the dangers of smoking sermons in Personal Social Education class. Mathematics echoes the scientific professions and the 'skills deficit' in many western economies. Physical education presages lower company healthcare premiums. A relaxed and councillor-like teacher imparts the importance of obedience to technocracy. It goes without saying that all of this becomes particularly evident following a Bukowski-inspired four-day stint in a comfy bed. *Standpoint* rather than generalizable data is crucial for analysing biopower.

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Of course, forlorn university educators see this type of ‘indexing’ every day. Compared to the student-body in the pre-neoliberal era (often involving drugs, sex, boozing and the occasional riot that were deeply frowned upon), today’s students approach their education like a fecund bank manager who only sees the future, with little end or alternative. No doubt debt management is a formative influence on this attitude in higher education (see Ross, 2013). But Deleuze is more interested in the capitalist activation of agency along one unending register, whereby any type of enclosure (e.g. a debtor’s prison that would allow us to pay our dues and move on with a clean slate) would somehow defy the neoliberal project. The point, he suggests, is that there can never be any resolution or forfeit. This is what attracts societies of control to biopower, which looks sympathetically upon the achievements of disciplinary power. Indeed, they are in no ways enemies but biopower adds a very different innovation to the way control is achieved:

the *apparent acquittal* of the disciplinary societies (between two incarcerations); and the *limitless postponements* of the societies of control (in continuous variation) are two very different modes of juridical life.

(Deleuze, 1992: 6; emphasis in original)

This analysis opens up some important insights, in my opinion. The indexical command to work in neoliberal societies can no longer be analytically identified in any particular act or instance. That would be like a surgeon attempting to use a scalpel to remove the immune system from the human body – it is everywhere part of the systemic whole and not identifiable in any particular part as such. Perhaps this is what makes the biopolitical modulation of work so powerful, because it cannot be singularly and exclusively identified as a target of rebellion and revolt. ‘The man’ is everywhere and nowhere. In other words, as any good corporate social networker who is constantly glued to their worn-out iPhone will tell us, *I am my job*. The problem they so often relay to us, however, is that amidst it all they do not know exactly who this ‘I’ is anymore (Cremin, 2010).

The joys of illness at work in the biopolitical age

Let’s now return to our opening question. How might biopower at work and its web of modulations be resisted by the growing number of employees – both rich and poor – subjected to it? There has been a growing research interest in this topic, since unlike traditional forms of dissent that focus on the objective structures of capitalist work relations, opposing biopower requires an engagement on a different register, one that is often confused for ‘living’ in the modern world.

Take for example the university as an employment setting. When instructors choose to resist power, they may call a strike, typically a very important form of opposition. So the day-long strike occurs. Union members dutifully cancel lectures, we collectively man the picket line and so forth. But does this kind of resistance disrupt the neoliberal university-machine? Of course not. University instructors who missed their lectures were probably going to stay home on this day anyway. Those who cancelled classes (and had their pay docked by university management) simply made up the material next lecture. No one would want to see the student punished rather than the university. The duty of professionalism and care oblige staff to work around formal rules so that peers, students and less senior administrators do not suffer. As a result, a strike does not disrupt much. This is because biopower in the university enacts its violence across a different index or modulation compared to those employed in a factory where strike action, sabotage and so forth may indeed be effective.

From 'life' to death and sleep

Thus far I have proposed that biopower connects us to work through modular processes. This type of regulation is inserted into life more generally. The biopoliticization of the social body, as discussed by Deleuze above, exerts itself as a persistent pressure to perform, be productive and orient our living energies to the needs of work, whether we are clocked in or not (Kamp, 2013). Strangely, this occurs *regardless* of whether the work is organizationally necessary or not (Fleming, 2014b). Concerning the question of resistance, recent research has focused on three types of resistance which are indicative of how biopower might be challenged or thwarted in relation to work.

The first concerns disconnecting the sociality of workers from the ideology of work that currently rides upon it in parasitical fashion inside the office and beyond. The clearest statement concerning this type of resistance can be found in the writings of 'The Invisible Committee', especially their book *The Coming Insurrection* (2009). They suggest departing the time and space of work, reconfiguring 'non-work' as a return to proper and fulfilling social living. They describe this tactic for undermining biopower in terms of the commune:

The exigency of the commune is to free up the most time for most of the people. And we're not talking about the *number of hours* free from any wage-labour exploitation. Liberated time doesn't mean a vacation. Vacant time, dead time, the time of emptiness and the fear of emptiness – this is the time of work. There will be no more time to *fill*, but a liberation of energy that no "time" contains.

(The Invisible Committee, 2009: 104; emphasis in original)

The Invisible Committee demand collective separatism or what I called elsewhere 'post-recognition' politics (see Fleming, 2013). Rather than calling for more inclusion in the corporate matrix, appealing for better work conditions and pay, they suggest that our living social labour might be detached from the field of exploitation and enjoyed for its own ends. In the chapter entitled 'Life, Love and Health are Precarious – Why Should Work Be an Exception to That Law?', The Invisible Committee (2009) argue that because neoliberal domination is so conspicuously reliant upon our affective autonomy, effective resistance ought to repossess the independence capitalism relies upon for democratic purposes. This they call *demobilization*:

to organize beyond and against work, to collectively desert the regime of mobility, to demonstrate the existence of a vitality and a discipline precisely in demobilization is a crime for which a civilization on its knees is not about to forgive us. In fact, though, it's the only way to survive.

(The Invisible Committee, 2009: 51)

The second way biopower is resisted tends to be a little less positive. In January 2014, Li Junjie, a 33-year-old investment banker in a large US firm jumped to his death from its high-rise tower in Hong Kong. Reports suggested that he had a rather stressful job, but it was news of an impending financial crash that had prompted this awful act. For sure, the wave of banker suicides in 2014 has shocked many of us, with some large firms even banning its employees from using email after hours so they can unwind. But the fact remains. Why would someone take their job so seriously that ending one's life seems reasonable when something goes wrong in the office? How does such a lack of perspective come about?

Drawing on examples like this, Cederström and Fleming (2012) develop their critique of biopower by examining the self-destructive moments of escape that many choose under

neoliberal conditions. Because the command to work has irrevocably infected individual life processes, it is not surprising, they argue, that employees transform the body into a battlefield. In doing so, the overworked subject misrecognizes the living organism as the source of their misery. Indeed, “the post-industrial condition has shattered the boundary between the professional and the person. The logic of work is now intimately enmeshed in who we are, regulating even the most elementary functions of life. We have become our jobs, and therefore an obvious way to end the tyranny of work is to end ourselves (Cederström and Fleming, 2012: 61).

A third and related form of resistance has been explored by Crary (2013) in his book *24/7: Terminal Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*. Because work has colonized almost every aspect of life, especially with the help of mobile technology, even sleep has become a victim of universal productiveness. Crary argues that we need to reclaim the benefits of sleep, approaching it as a modality of resistance in an ever ‘switched-on’ world. It is no surprise that sleep is often compared to death, since it offers oblivion and respite.

The political economy of illness

I now want to posit a fourth approach to resistance, which blends characteristics of each of the above. In 1988 the normally camera-shy Deleuze agreed to give a set of interviews with Claire Parnet. The only condition was that Parnet must move through the alphabet, using each letter as a platform to discuss a topic of interest. For Deleuze, the letter ‘M’ broached the question of ‘Malady’. The reason why is fascinating. He had been afflicted with bronchial tuberculosis at a young age, and this had provided a number of ‘privileges’ that he enjoyed very much. Central among them was a special relationship to work that granted a degree of autonomy and freedom from external obligations and the excessive preoccupation with industrial productiveness typical among academics. As we all know, Deleuze was extremely prolific in his philosophical output. So the counterproductivity he is referring to here is not related to his philosophical ‘work’, but to the demands placed on him from the productive apparatus, which he considered almost always petty, officious and useless in nature. Illness, for Deleuze, confers a particular ethico-political threshold between the body and its injunction to perform.

What is the nature of this threshold and how might it be theorized as a form of resistance in the biopolitical era? The so-called ‘joys’ of illness have been explored in a number of domains concerning modern work. Indeed, if Harvey (2001) is correct to argue that illness under capitalism is defined singularly as the inability to work, then we might begin to formulate an anti-work ethic apropos our dreaded maladies, especially in the present ‘all or nothing’ climate of biopolitics where some even work themselves to death in the name of it (as was the case with the Merrill Lynch intern Moritz Erhardt in 2013). In his wonderful book *How to be Idle* (2004), Hodgkinson makes a persuasive case for being ill in this regard:

that being ill can be a delightful way to recapture lost idling time is a fact well known to all young children. Being ill – nothing serious of course – should be welcome as a pleasure in adult life, too, as a holiday from responsibility and burden. Indeed, it may be one of the few legitimate ways left to be idle.

(Hodgkinson, 2004: 68–69)

The last part of this quote is interesting because it points to the unquestionable legitimacy that illness has obtained in an over-medicalized world. Nobody can defend the idea that the sick ought to work (except for a few rabid right-wing members of the British Tory Party!). Could this mediation point between the unwell body and the biopolitical insistence that we *are* our jobs be fruitfully exploited for emancipatory ends?

To address this question, let us turn to one of the most insightful descriptions of biopower in the workplace. In his autobiographical essay about his role as an IT consultant, Rob Lucas (2010) portrays a life completely overtaken by work. As mentioned earlier, Lucas even found himself working in his dreams when asleep, something he called ‘sleeping working’. The difficulty Lucas had in resisting this form of power is described in relation to some classic modes of worker dissent. And towards the end of this description we find illness entering the picture:

Given the individually allocated and project centered character of the job, absenteeism only amounts to self-punishment, as work that is not done will have to be done later under increased stress. Given the collaborative nature of the work, heel dragging necessarily involves a sense of guilt towards other workers. On the production line, sabotage might be a rational tactic, but when your work resembles that of an artisan, sabotage would only make life harder. . . . It is only when sickness comes and I am involuntarily incapable of work that I really gain extra time for myself. It is a strange thing to rejoice in the onset of a flu.

(Lucas, 2010: 128)

Lucas surmises that if illness is the only recourse that workers have for combating biopower at work, then all is lost. There is little progressive purchase in contracting the flu. He depicts an over-individualized and rather futile moment of escape, one that ends all too soon. However, perhaps he is not approaching the issue in the correct manner. Illness disrupts the modulations that calibrate our bodies to the virus of working. Here the neoliberal indexing process is momentarily scrambled, disgusted and ashamed before the afflicted body. What we might call the ‘boss-function’ is more worried that our flu might infect the entire office than about the enjoyment we may derive from being bedridden with a good book.

How to use illness as a weapon

Echoing the preoccupation Deleuze had with illness as a political force, what came to be known as the Socialist Patients’ Collective (or SPK – German Sozialistisches Patientenkollektiv, 1987) in Germany decided to use our collective maladies as a weapon against capitalism. Like Foucault and Deleuze, they also saw the biopolitical tendencies underpinning a new type of regulation emerging from the ruins of Fordism. Rather than ‘hospitalizing illness’ as a stigmatized deficiency that ought to be quarantined (i.e. the inability to work), the SPK turned the tables on power. They tactically embraced amputations and chronic heart disease as a positive force, developing it into a stealth-like response to the ideology of work. Their catchphrase was basic: use illness as a weapon!

The SPK manifesto begins with a convincing description of the way many illnesses are deeply linked to the contradictions of capitalism. When we work too much, our immune system invariably suffers. For example, a recent report has stated that prolonged stress in the workplace is more adverse to your health than heavy smoking (see *Metro*, 2013). When illness sets in we enter into a medicalized universe. According to the SPK, its true role is to assess the likely damage our affliction will have on the general rate of exploitation. It is this profound anxiety expressed by capitalist reason that might be utilized by the work refusal movement. Illness forms a new modulation that frames paid employment itself as a special type of organic disorder (e.g. stress-induced haemorrhoids). But at the same time, capitalism frames the maladies it has abetted in causing as something obnoxious and menacing. This tension opens a path beyond the doxa of wage exploitation: perhaps even a revolutionary movement:

On the one hand, illness is productive power. On the other hand as identity of production and destruction, illness is a concept of all relations of production. The basic antagonism between productive powers and relations of production is to be thought in this manner, that illness is all around the necessity, which produces its own complement, revolution. Ill patients are a revolutionary class.

(SPK, 1987: 56)

The SPK hoped that the productive incapacity engendered by the capitalist bio-assault on the body might be used against that very system. However, illness must not be practised as an individual pathology, as Lucas appears to do in his description above. This makes it too easy for power to segregate and dismiss. Instead, it ought to be approached as a collective form of life. To unpack these ideas and apply them to the emerging contours of work under neoliberal capitalism, I foresee three ways in which illness may be used as a weapon to block the enlistment of 'life itself' at work.

First, illness can be used to break the spell of the 'all or nothing' approach to work instigated by neoliberal ideology. Biopower attempts to make our jobs seem like *everything*, whereby even our family and (ironically) well-being are sacrificed in the name of. It is the 'nothing' component of this 'all or nothing' approach to work that biopower is particularly effective in modulating. It evokes, of course, death, be it symbolic, social or literal. If we cannot make it to the office, then all is lost. Catastrophe will ensue. I am nothing. However, after being bedridden with the flu for three days, we realize, as did Charles Bukowski, that the world does not end. Life does go on. From under the bed covers, we begin to note that our obsession with work is a rather conceited, manufactured condition with little bearing on functionality or necessity. Illness allows us to regain perspective. We ought to welcome that perspective.

Second, collective or shared illness may break the *temporal* spell that the modern ethos of work has cast upon us today. The seemingly *endless* modulation of productivity that reverberates throughout all other life projects is disrupted by the white static of affliction. This space allows for a new social experience, whereby the ill individual enters a collective political domain. In fact, sociality has always acted like a contagion. It comes from nowhere and leads in unexpected and novel directions. Like the SPK militants, a dreadful malady provides bountiful opportunities for social reassembly. This is the normative element of their manifesto. The life we enjoy when we are no longer obliged to send another useless email can only become a radical force if it foments a biopolitical class consciousness. To paraphrase Deleuze concerning his discussion of 'M' (for Malady), the happiness one practises when laid low by a nasty flu is only the joy of living together more generally. Many ill people educe this communal register of time which lies outside of the alienating rituals of work. Some even take to YouTube to share the good news (see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_h17_0pyIu4). Thus I foresee 'illness soviets' emerging that seek to put biopower back in its place, along with the consumption of lots of coffee, aspirins and a stack of wonderful books to read together. Mental illness might also be theorized in this way, but given that it is not contagious, we probably need another conceptual grid to optimize it. I am sure this can be done.

And third, and more controversially, I suggest that the only thing that is better than being ill (under biopolitical conditions) is when those in authority are unwell and are forced to stay home too. Who can deny secretly rejoicing upon learning that a superior has contracted a foul stomach bug? The elation does not derive from sadistic pleasure in the pain of another (since that would be plain evil), but from the prospect of being left alone for the day. And why shouldn't even the wickedest micro-managing boss participate in the respite and reflection that such an affliction would guarantee them? We cannot be selfish in this matter. For sure, sharing our

illnesses with the commanders of capitalism may create novel cross-class moments of solidarity, disabling the illusion that ‘work is everything’, even among the most tyrannical of employers. If the SPK’s mantra *use illness as a weapon* is to truly hold progressive purchase, then we must insist that our flu be shared, even among the least deserving.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that neoliberal capitalism places a strong focus on the body, especially when it pertains to the way the contemporary workplace organizes us. This is why the concept of biopower, and, in particular, Deleuze’s understanding of biopolitical regulations, is so useful for understanding what work has done to us. We are now only beginning to appreciate how this register of power may be resisted. It is worth reiterating, however, that this form of domination does not replace earlier types of controls. It works in tandem with them, making the traditional strike or collective protest still worthy of analysis.

But given that biopower functions through a universalizing system of modulation, by investing our bodies and affections in a manner that does not follow the 9 to 5 zone of productivity characteristic of Fordism, we are required to conceptualize alternative tactics of refusal. The approach to illness that I have elaborated upon is only half tongue-in-cheek. If the body and the weight of work is one of the first victims of biopower (especially via stress, burnout and so forth) then perhaps it might also be turned to other objectives, objectives that may undermine our fixation on productivity as it seeps into ever more aspects of our lives. Perhaps, then, we can discern a new ethical threshold in relation to the social body itself. If being unwell is the rule (rather than the exception) within the biopolitical era, can the contradictions it raises (between the glorified overproductive body and its inevitable limits) become the fulcrum for a new opposition to neoliberal capitalism?

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