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Employing the CEO of Me, Inc.:

US corporate hiring in a neoliberal age

ABSTRACT

Social practices and contingencies always exceed the neoliberal models by which people currently try to contain the inherent unpredictability of accomplishing social tasks with others, such as getting a job. Contradictions in neoliberal logics emerge when people try to live according to neoliberal precepts, engaging with other social entities as though all are corporate persons and all alliances are, metaphorically speaking, business-to-business alliances. Moments in US corporate hiring challenge scholarly critiques of neoliberal logics that have made neoliberalism seem too reductive and too prescriptive. At such moments, Americans find that one neoliberal principle is incompatible in practice with a different neoliberal principle—as when, for example, being a flexible worker is antithetical to being a legible job candidate. [*neoliberalism, employment, hiring, job advice, neoliberal subjectivity, United States*]

In 1978, Michel Foucault (2004) first proposed that there existed a neoliberal intellectual movement and that its members had a shared vision of how people should best function in a market-ordered world: as entrepreneurial selves. At the time he had no ethnography or historical records of daily neoliberal practices as evidence. Forty years later, there is now a considerable ethnographic literature showing how people consciously engage with models of a neoliberal self (Allan and McElhinny 2017; Ganti 2014). For ethnographers influenced by Foucault, studying neoliberalism is akin to studying how Communist countries interpret Marx. This is because, unlike other discursive formations Foucault analyzes, neoliberalism is very much the brainchild of specific thinkers—Friedrich Hayek, Milton Friedman, and others in the Mont Pèlerin circle—who deliberately spread their ideas through universities and think tanks (Hayek 1984; Mirowski and Plehwe 2009). In paying careful ethnographic attention to how and when people try to behave as an entrepreneurial self, one begins to see the problems they face in doing so. Foucault himself saw the origins of social change in such moments of difficulty, when living the precepts of a discursive formation generates destabilizing contradictions. These contradictions require social fixes that are subtly transformative and, according to Foucault, gradually lead to new formations, although he died too early to record what such formations might be under neoliberalism (Foucault 1991).

Hoping to find an ethnographic site where I could learn about the moments when people have problems implementing the neoliberal model of the self, problems that can potentially destabilize neoliberal social orders, I conducted fieldwork on hiring in corporate America in Northern California's Bay Area in 2013–14. I attended many free workshops for job seekers to watch people advise others on how to perfect their neoliberal representations of an employable self, and through interviews and observation, I learned how this advice was adopted, ignored, and rejected.¹ These were moments when neoliberalism may have been changing from within as people used some elements of a neoliberal model to dispute other elements. Analyzing the hiring ritual helps me answer the question,

How and when do debates internal to a neoliberal logic emerge in daily life as people navigate the complicated social tasks of finding workplaces to join or, on the hiring side, finding people to join their workplaces?

My fieldwork interlocutors tended to willingly embrace neoliberal strategies for presenting themselves as employable. In the workshops I was attending, I watched as anxious, frustrated job seekers were told that, to get a job, they needed to forget all they thought they knew about finding a job. Instead, they were supposed to craft a familiar repertoire of genres—business card, LinkedIn profile, cover letter, interview answers composed ahead of time, and so on—but now re-designed to represent themselves as a desirable employee, which nowadays involves bringing measurable market-derived value to a company. This was a vulnerable time for job seekers to be told to be neoliberal, and they were not in a mood to argue. They simply wanted to learn effective strategies for becoming employed, adopting a stance that was much more pragmatic than critical.² Their willingness to accept neoliberal advice was brought home vividly for me when I returned to an organization to present my research for the first time. I explained my understanding of how the self job seekers were expected to model was a neoliberal one by describing the contradictions of striving to be the CEO of Me, Inc. In the questions that followed, one man leapt up and said, “You say that we now are all expected to be the CEO of Me—so how do I become the best CEO of Me?” When my face fell, another middle-aged man, also dressed in office worker garb, reassured him that this would be the topic of the motivational speech he was giving in that venue two weeks hence.

When white-collar job seekers expressed an unwillingness to wholeheartedly adopt job advice, it was largely because specific circumstances made the advice too challenging to follow. By contrast, the blue-collar and other workers I interviewed viewed the hiring ritual described in these workshops as alien to their own labor market conditions (see also Sharone 2013), and with good reason. Yet advice specific to white-collar hiring practices is the only type that formally circulates. When my white-collar interlocutors voiced their frustrations, they were responding to tensions within neoliberal logics. One principle underlying being neoliberal would often appear to contradict another neoliberal principle when put into practice. In analyzing hiring, I found three main tensions: (1) between being flexible and being legible in a standardized form, (2) between being maximally responsible for one’s own risks and being in a business alliance in which risk and responsibility are ideally distributed equitably, and (3) between valuing skills and valuing alliances.

My fieldwork was limited in part by the very logics underpinning the dynamics I wanted to study. I found it impossible to observe hiring from within a company while conducting fieldwork in Northern California—companies

were too concerned about the legal risk of allowing me this access, or they feared that I might learn important trade secrets about talent acquisition. As a result, my initial entry point was through free workshops around the Bay Area that taught how to craft a LinkedIn profile or create a personal brand. But my research was not confined to these workshops, as I interviewed people in all the structural roles of the hiring process. I made a point of seeking out recruiters and HR managers for caregivers and construction workers to get a less class-specific glimpse into hiring. In total, I attended 53 workshops and interviewed 154 people about hiring—job seekers, jobholders, recruiters, hiring managers, and HR specialists—84 men and 70 women. I also conducted focus groups at community-based organizations designed to help professionals find jobs.

As a result, I do not have the data to answer one of the most commonly asked questions about hiring these days: What are the mechanisms by which discrimination based on race, gender, sexuality, religion, or age takes place in hiring? I saw the traces of long-standing patterns of discrimination, especially age discrimination, among workshop participants. I heard statements from hiring managers, recruiters, and HR specialists that revealed their own prejudices or the fact that they often overlooked others’ prejudice in the hiring process. But my vantage point does not give me material to say anything insightful about how different identity markers are being interpreted and selected against during hiring. I can only restate the frequently made observation that patterned forms of discrimination were clearly affecting job seekers (Bertrand and Mullainathan 2004; Ghayad 2014; Neumark, Burn, and Button, forthcoming; Rivera 2015).

Contradictions of the neoliberal self

For many critics of liberal or Enlightenment models of the self, it is a familiar move to explore how people make visible such models’ many internal contradictions. To mention but a few of them, there are the contradictions between liberalism’s belief in progress and its commitment to human equality, contradictions that lead liberals to become some of “imperialism’s most prominent defenders and its sharpest critics” (Pitts 2005, 4; see also Mehta 1999). Moreover, the Enlightenment’s project to create universal truths was based on strategic uses of “generalization, abstraction, and decontextualization” and could putatively be acontextual, but this process simultaneously produced the opposite—“hybrids that place every individual or community in hierarchical schemes” (Bauman and Briggs 2003, 68). In addition, disorderly differences, such as Mormon polygamy or female genital cutting, readily reveal a clash between liberal principles of individual choice and tolerance circumscribed by the demands of a larger social order (Sarat and Berkowitz 1998, 87). While scholars have

been analyzing how classical liberalism engenders clashes of principles when they are put into practice for decades, examining the contradictions internal to a logic is a form of analysis that scholars are only starting to deploy when interrogating neoliberal practices.

Critics are beginning to explore how people on the ground mobilize different aspects of neoliberal logics to critique or transform neoliberal political and economic systems, forms of expertise, and how others instantiate neoliberal logics. These contradictions often manifest themselves as lived dilemmas, which are a general feature of social orders (Dreier 2007; Lave 2015). People regularly encounter conundrums in their daily lives that they must consciously choose how to respond to. These are dilemmas precisely because there are a set of possible and socially acceptable responses, and each response evinces a principle or imperative that is mutually exclusive yet equally valid. And these are lived dilemmas because people will face them repeatedly as they tackle social tasks, and each time they choose anew.

To give an example, one perhaps familiar to academic readers: I, as a faculty member at a university, am torn every week between the obligation to labor on behalf of my department or discipline and the obligation to do my own research. These obligations very infrequently coincide. As a result, I am repeatedly choosing between these obligations and am inconsistent in how I choose. Sometimes I err on the side of my department or discipline; at other times, I err on behalf of my own research. Choosing consistently to do only one—say, privileging my own research—is not uniformly valued or helpful to the institution or my colleagues.

Describing a lived dilemma on the page might suggest erroneously that this is a problem that can be solved rather than a dilemma that is ever present for a given subject position in a given social organization. Moment after moment, people will continue to wrestle with these dilemmas anew, choosing to go in one direction in one instance and in another, perhaps contradictory direction, in the next instance. Job seekers in the United States encounter specific kinds of lived dilemmas when they attempt to represent themselves as a neoliberal self and thus, presumably, as a desirable potential employee.³

The lived dilemmas of following neoliberal logics emerge in many different contexts. For example, a neoliberal valorization of choice leads mothers opposed to vaccination to reject the advice of experts (Reich 2016). These mothers face cultural norms that hold them uniquely responsible for whether the children thrive physically and academically. At the same time, they are also enmeshed in a neoliberal logic that values institutionally sanctioned forms of expertise (Rose 1990), such as that of doctors who advocate vaccination. When deciding whether to vaccinate, the mothers bring together neoliberal understandings of choice, risk, and responsibility to refuse to cooperate with

expertise. Yet this version of medical expertise is also a sanctioned component of neoliberal logics; in neoliberal markets expertise has proliferated to respond to daily dilemmas that have not previously been understood to require expert attention (Hochschild 2012; McGee 2005). Indeed, at other moments, the mothers do accede to medical expertise—this is a lived dilemma for them in which they are continually evaluating and reevaluating how to respond to these incompatible imperatives. Similarly, consumers of music often face the conundrum of either paying for a product protected by intellectual property rights or, as a sensible market actors, paying the best price for a product that may be pirated—intellectual property versus price. Two different imperatives underlie how consumers should treat music in the marketplace (Dent 2012, 30–31). Analyzing hiring, in turn, sheds light on a moment when the employment contract is reimagined as an alliance between two businesses, a creation of equivalence between business and self that, in practice, encapsulates the contradictions of being a neoliberal self.

Scholars inspired by Foucault all view the neoliberal self as an entrepreneurial self (Boltanski and Chiapello 2006; Cruikshank 1999; Lane 2011; Rose 1990), which for my purposes is accurate but too imprecise to explain how certain lived dilemmas can emerge. I have in mind a more elaborate model, which I have addressed in greater detail elsewhere (Gershon 2011).⁴ In my fieldwork, and in Carrie Lane's (2011) as well, career counselors openly recommended that job seekers view themselves as a business (and many did), and the résumé, cover letter, and LinkedIn profile as marketing documents. Being an entrepreneurial self involves seeing oneself as a bundle of skills, assets, qualities, experiences, and relationships, a bundle that must be consciously managed and constantly enhanced. This is what I mean by appropriating the emic term "the CEO of Me."

This concept of agency requires a reflexive stance in which people are subjects for themselves—a collection of ever-transforming processes to be managed. How one manages these processes speaks to the one putatively stable component of the neoliberal self—one's qualities are supposedly constant across contexts. They are the source of an authenticity that, in the United States, is championed as that which makes someone an efficacious actor (Gershon 2016). Even so, one is never fully authentic without calculation; there is always already a presumed distance to oneself as an actor. One is always faced with one's self as a project that must be consciously steered through various possible obstacles and alliances. These alliances that one might enter into should be continually assessed according to how risk and responsibility are distributed, with the underlying and rarely realized expectation that risk and responsibility should be equitably distributed among all involved in the alliance. What is equitable is, of course, contextually specific and always open for debate.

Examining neoliberal logics in terms of lived dilemmas presents the possibility that, in practice, aspects of neoliberal logics that scholarly critics of neoliberalism generally view as taken-for-granted features are not axiomatic. Scholars following Foucault and Rose argued that the neoliberal self should be ever flexible. For example,

far from being attached to an occupation or clinging to a qualification, the great man proves *adaptable* and *flexible*, able to switch from one situation to a very different one, and adjust to it; and *versatile*, capable of changing activity or tools, depending on the nature of the relationship entered into with others or with objects. It is precisely this *adaptability* and *versatility* that makes him employable. (Boltanski and Chiapello 2006, 112; emphasis in original)

This describes an ideal type that emerges in management literature, as well as in the broader critical literature on neoliberalism. Another idea commonly taken a hallmark of neoliberalism is that responsibility always devolves to the individual actor, in part because constituting a neoliberal subject means constituting a responsible subject who can enter into contracts. “Contemporary neoliberal governance operates through isolating and entrepreneurializing responsible units and individuals, through devolving authority, decision making, and the implementation of policies and norms of conduct” (Brown 2015, 129). My fieldwork on the hiring ritual suggests that this process of devolving responsibility away from corporations and toward individuals is in fact contentious. These are moments when Americans face contradictions when implementing neoliberal logics, and they thus might be open to finding different ways of being social beings.

Flexibility versus legibility

While flexibility might seem to be an ideal attribute of workers in the abstract, it was not always so ideal in practice. My interlocutors did not experience all lived dilemmas as frustrating, but this one invariably was. When job seekers present themselves as a business metaphorically through the genre repertoire that hiring requires applicants produce—that is, the CV, cover letter, LinkedIn profile, business cards, and so on—sometimes the goal is indeed to seem as flexible as possible. Sometimes, however, job seekers want to be legible by having an easily interpreted work history and a specific, coherent, and predictable skill set, one that has emerged out of neoliberal techniques of evaluation and standardization (Urciuoli 2008). Similarly, job seekers hoped that their work history checked all the boxes on any checklist that employers might have in mind. Both legibility and specificity could be at loggerheads with a neoliberal ideal of flexibility when job candidates were being evaluated. A job applicant’s flexibility, after all, is

represented through a combination of standardized genres geared toward making it as easy as possible to compare multiple people’s complex work histories at a glance.⁵ These genres’ reductive standardization, however, limits how applicants can signal flexibility. When they are looking for flexibility, evaluators of résumés look for signs that a worker is committed to enhancing his or her skill set. The ideal neoliberal self, after all, is the one that can adapt quickly to changing circumstances, anticipate future market demands, and transform skills and capabilities accordingly. People interpreted switching jobs as a strong signal that the applicant refused to stagnate and to grow complacent with his or her lot in work.

Thus, in hiring contexts, the ideal way to demonstrate flexibility was to regularly move to a new company. To do so was to prove that one had a broad-enough range of skills and the versatility to readily move to different companies—this is a flexibility often associated with certain managerial roles. Recruiters would often tell me that the ideal career trajectory for people working in the Bay Area was to have a new job every two or three years at a well-regarded company. One recruiter in her late 40s, who fortunately for me had taken anthropology courses as an undergraduate, was enthusiastic about explaining to me her experiences helping others find jobs:

People will stay at HP [Hewlett-Packard] for 10 years, and then they come to me and ask me to help them find something new. And the only way that could possibly happen is if they had really shown some clear growth, progression in the company, doing a multitude of different things, and grown into good management positions. Then you could see it. But if somebody’s staying at kind of the same level for a long time, it’s old. [. . .] That’s why I recommend not staying too long.

After I asked her if it was possible to stay for too short a period of time, she responded, “Well . . . two years. That’s kind of on the border of not staying long enough. Because I have clients that’ll say, ‘Why does this person move so much?’ Actually, I don’t have clients that say that very often because I don’t present people like that. Unless I think they’ve got some kind of great skill that is so hard to find.” Everyone I interviewed, job seekers and employers, viewed this widespread expectation that people regularly change jobs to be a general marked change in hiring expectations, but I view it as a neoliberal change (see also Boltanski and Chiapello 2006).

Applicants should, by switching jobs regularly, show that they are flexible but not too flexible, or they risk being seen as job-hopping. Flexibility, in short, was an ideal with limits, and these limits were region specific. In the Midwest, seven to 10 years at a single company was typical, while on the East Coast five to seven years was acceptable. One mid-career job seeker whom I met for coffee in San Francisco

explained that he had almost been hired at a company in Chicago. His application was rejected, however, because his potential coworkers became concerned that he moved jobs too frequently, that he was a job-hopper. They had all been at the same company for a number of years. “Of course,” he said, “first thing, they’re on my résumé: Why did you leave here? Why did you leave here? Why did you leave here? So, and I got into that trap of [explaining] why I left versus [...] why I joined [the next company].” Conversely, recruiters reported to me that they had trouble placing applicants from the Midwest in Bay Area jobs because employers were suspicious that workers were too set in their ways if they stayed at a company more than five years. In short, there was clearly a regionally specific standard that one was supposed to adhere to, and regional specificity occasionally caused problems for people wishing to move to new geographic locations.

Not all workers switched companies so regularly, but the fact that the applicant had not changed jobs then had to be addressed in the résumé as well. Recruiters and job seekers were clear with me that the second-best strategy would be to indicate on the résumé that the applicant had switched types of jobs while staying at the same company every two or three years to demonstrate they were constantly developing and not stagnating. Unlike their predecessors, neoliberal employers now saw staying too long at a company as a failing that could be justified if the applicant could portray the labor he or she performed at a company as though it were segmented in ways that could parallel the transitions other more desirable candidates made by switching companies. What recruiters said resonated well with what scholars of neoliberalism frequently claim—that the ideal neoliberal self, in this case the ideal job candidate, is a flexible one.

At the same time, in an alternative and equally widespread set of conversations, people debated whether too much flexibility undermined a job applicant’s chances. These conversations focused on the interpretations of hiring managers, the people tasked with coordinating the hiring and sometimes, after collecting others’ input, making the final decision about who to hire. Recruiters tended to deal with only the hiring manager and so focused on those interactions in narrating hiring practices. Recruiters would often tell me that hiring managers were looking for a candidate with much too specific qualifications and skills. Recruiters, and occasionally job seekers, commonly complained that before the CEO of Me, Inc., became an ideal type, hiring managers used to understand that a skilled worker could learn on the job, that they were hiring flexible employees who would pick up what they needed to know after a few months. Ironically, people repeatedly told me that there was more tolerance for the trainable (and thus flexible) employee under an earlier form of capitalism. But nowadays, as recruiters kept telling me with a bit of

exasperation, employers are looking for an increasingly specific list of skills. One recruiter, who had been working for over 25 years in the Bay Area, was very aware that much had changed during his lifetime, and with the exception of how much easier it was to find and contact people through the internet, most changes were making his work life harder:

In the old days, you know, if I was looking for somebody that had A, B, and C, and they’re smart, and they could pick up E and F, they’d get hired. Over the last 10 years, five years, it’s gotten much, much more . . . they better have A, B, C, D, E, and by the way, F and G would be nice too. So it’s a lot harder specs to get people hired. [...] A lot of them have an idea of, I only want people with good pedigree. I only want people who have done a certain type of technology. I only want people from A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, I, J companies. I only want people who’ve worked at a start-up before. I only want people who—and it’s highly illegal but—who are youthful.

Recruiters were frustrated that the hiring managers they were trying to satisfy were developing narrower set of requirements. Indeed, hiring managers might ask for a person with five to seven years of experience doing a particular task, something unlikely to be possible if one is truly the ideal flexible self in the Bay Area, switching jobs every two or three years. Hiring managers wanted a legible applicant, one whose skills clearly fit into their understanding of the job role they were filling. Employers were increasingly hoping to find people who “could hit the ground running,” as I was told by many recruiters, career counselors, and job seekers. One consequence is that people who decide to change careers often find it quite challenging to do so.

This tension haunted job seekers at almost every résumé workshop I attended. The frustrations around this dilemma emerged when people discussed the minutiae one should include or omit on a résumé. Should one show the breadth of work one has tackled, or show only the jobs that relate most specifically to the position in question? What if the job description indicates that the employer wants someone as flexible as possible, but then lists interest in a relatively narrow skill set? How does one deal with too long a job history when the job most relevant to the job opening was held 15 years ago? I attended one such workshop at the Jewish Vocational Services in Palo Alto, where Moira, a career counselor who often used humor and a very matter-of-fact style to engage with her clients’ growing frustration with applying, taught a group of middle-aged women, most of whom were entering the job market again after taking time out to raise their children.⁶ Moira had just explained to the audience that after the 2008 recession, résumés had changed.⁷ Today, she said, under the heading for each job held, one should list bulleted statements that answer questions like, How did you help the company meet its goals?

and How did you help the company save money or make money?

MOIRA. You must show the skills that were relevant in that most recent job.

VARDA. And what isn't relevant, then I just erase it?

MOIRA. Sadly, I know it's hard, but sadly gone.

LESSIE JO. Is there ever a time when you don't want to list a job?

MOIRA. Is there ever a time when you don't want to list a job? Yes! You didn't hold it for very long, like over three months, or you are pretty sure you are going to get a really bad reference.

[Lots of laughter from group.]

JUDY. Then how do you explain the gap?

MOIRA. I would have to say we have to handle that on an individual basis.

BETH. What about, I have more than 25 years' worth of experience. Some of my experience way in the past has the 15-year mark and can be relevant to certain jobs like procurement. What I have done was put "prior experience" in my résumé. Is that still OK?

MOIRA. You can do prior experience and just list the companies and the dates.

BETH. But I just put bullet points of what I've done.

MOIRA. All right, you can do that too, or you can do "prior experience" and just list two or three companies. I think what I want you to be aware of is that for a lot of companies, even though you think it is relevant, when it is over 15 years, they stop thinking it's relevant.

In her answers, Moira tries to explain what to include of one's work history in such a short document, but she is torn between recommending showing the entire range of what one can do and making sure it is relevant to the specific job ad. Even in such a short interchange, she advises listing all jobs, except those that might reflect badly on the applicant, and then she is quickly enmeshed in a conversation about being far more selective. The conundrum over what to include in a one- or two-page résumé has been around since résumés became a standard part of the US job applicants' genre repertoire in the 1940s. What is new, according to those I interviewed, is that the pressure to tailor the résumé to be a marketing document forces applicants to constantly choose between revealing their flexibility as workers and their specific detailed fit for the job.

Thus, in applying for a job, applicants are always choosing between seeming adaptable and seeming like they have a predictable and intelligible skill set. People do not always choose flexibility over intelligibility. Instead, each time they have to make the choice, they will decide in whatever way seems appropriate in that moment. In short, while a maximally flexible self may be described as an ideal in MBA programs and popular business literature, in practice being too flexible could mean that a job seeker may have done so many different jobs that a hiring manager or a recruiter will find the résumé difficult to classify. And if the résumé is difficult to classify, it is difficult to interpret. While the metaphor of self-as-business suggests that flexibility will always be valued, in practice this is debatable.

Responsibility as a hot potato

Also debatable is the question of how responsibility is going to be allocated for enhancing the various aspects of one's self. As I mentioned earlier, from a neoliberal perspective, the challenge of properly managing relationships involves ensuring an appropriate, agreed-on balance between responsibility and risk. People often disagree about what the proper balance of risk and responsibility actually is, turning the issue of balance into a potential source of conflict. As academic critics of contemporary capitalism frequently point out, corporations and governments often avoid responsibility and expect individuals affected by their practices to bear full responsibility for any consequences (Cruikshank 1999). In the United States, for example, residents near polluting companies or polluted sites are told that the correct response is to move elsewhere, not that the place should not have been polluted in the first place—a typical distribution of responsibility under contemporary capitalism (Ottinger 2013). This take on how best to allocate responsibility and risk through market mechanisms has its origins in neoliberal economist Ron Coase's (1960) now famous article "The Problem of Social Cost," in which he focused on market efficiency as the solution for similar property disputes. Coase's framing has become so widespread that critics of neoliberalism often understand a consequence of this view—that responsibility seems to devolve to the most vulnerable—as a hallmark of how people nowadays in the United States determine responsibility.

Yet the principle that the individual is maximally responsible for any personal success or failure was occasionally contradicted in my fieldwork by people's commitments to the promise inherent in a neoliberal contract. That is, when people were explicitly seen as participating in a contractual relationship with others, responsibility did not always devolve to the individual. People will often have more complex ways of allocating responsibility that engage with the belief that risks and responsibilities should be equitably distributed among participants. Thus, who is

seen as responsible can change rapidly in any conversation. Because I had read so many earlier accounts of how responsibility is allocated under neoliberalism, I expected the job seekers I interviewed to claim maximal responsibility for the fact that they were laid off and unable to find another job. I certainly came across this. But I also came across job seekers who brought a range of arguments to explain why they were not being hired. These arguments included a recognition of how immigration policies affected their job opportunities or the realization of the pitfalls inherent in the hiring process—be it problems with applicant-tracking systems, recruiters, or dysfunctional workplaces.

In part, this ambiguity around responsibility results from a clash of two US neoliberal principles. The notion that one is maximally responsible for one's own future—both the rewards and failures—clashes with the notion that the business-to-business/employment contract is one in which risk and responsibility is allocated equitably among participants. When people understood themselves as enmeshed in alliances requiring such balancing, they were willing to argue for a more equitable contract. I found that people were willing to argue for equity especially whenever questions arose about who or what was responsible for enhancing a person's skills.⁸ Much to my surprise, I also found companies that were willing to institute policies that reimagined company obligations to employees when it came to enhancing employees' skills.

There were definitely moments when individuals were taken to be wholly responsible for their own mastery of skills. In workshops and among career counselors, job seekers were often advised to develop new skills while they were working. For example, people were encouraged to spend a few evenings a month, when they were not working at their job, attending local talks about new directions in work. Data analysts were expected to learn about new advances in big data, and HR professionals might be learning about new work platforms that help companies hire freelancers. Job seekers were told that, once they were employed again, they should continue to use their spare time to anticipate where business needs might exist in the future and develop their own skills to become more hireable once that industry took off. Here people were told to see themselves in terms that resonate with neoliberal economist Gary Becker's (1962, 38) vision of workers as both human capital and as administrators of that capital who should therefore strategically invest in themselves (see also Feher 2009).

Treating the self as a business also involves seeing the skills one develops as a risk. I met several computer programmers who were working for a salary at one job while also working at a start-up to learn new skills in exchange for "sweat equity" (i.e., receiving company stocks instead of a salary). They did this not necessarily because they strongly believed that the company would later be successful, but because they could learn a new set of skills and obtain

company-sanctioned work experience in this particular labor market. They believed they could not be hired without already having demonstrated mastery. One programmer in his early 50s was especially conscious that he needed official credentials; he felt that his lack of a college degree was a long-standing problem whenever he looked for a new job. He kept trying to figure out strategies to compensate for a lack of credentials in a variety of ways. In our conversation, he began to discuss how he was going to respond to a company that had recently rejected him because it wanted a more official signal from him that he had the relevant skills, which he had been learning informally. "I told them I want to migrate directly into Linux. [...] And they said that's gonna be really hard because it's not on your résumé . . . I actually considered going back to them and say, 'Remember, you interviewed me. You can have my skills for a dollar an hour.'" This programmer was willing to devalue his labor as a strategy for providing the appropriate line on his résumé for the future. With similar strategies, programmers were trying to anticipate what the market would require in the future and make themselves desirable when this new direction became a reality. This was a risky investment—they could be guessing wrongly, and then their time would be wasted.

Yet this was not the only way that people described enhancing skills. Often it was unclear who precisely was being considered responsible for enhancing a worker's skills. The worker is certainly expected to spend some time outside work trying to predict what future jobs might require. Yet I also found that people sometimes felt it was only fair that government agencies provided job training for specific professions—the government was seen as having an obligation to help citizens improve their job skills. Presumably, this judgment was still founded in a neoliberal logic in which government helps the market function well by regulating it and those participating in it. The government-sponsored education would allow everyone to enter markets on as equal a footing as possible so that markets could create forms of spontaneous social order and determine value, as they are ideally supposed to do.

My interlocutors did not believe that only workers and the government were responsible for developing workers' skills. They would also hold employers responsible. Benjamin, who was in his late 20s and about to quit his job, explained how he got his first decent job in San Francisco by answering a job interview question especially well. In the third round of interviews, he was being interviewed by the general manager. The interviewer, he said,

asked me one really interesting question. I was applying for like a sales role. I was applying for anything, just get me into the store and I will figure it out, you know what I mean? And he asked me a really interesting question, which was "I have two salespeople on my

floor. One is overall in the company the number one salesperson in the company, and I have the number 100. But if you met both of them, you wouldn't even know. They work really hard, they work well together on the team. Where do you fit in that? Are you gonna be the number 100 sales person? And again, you know, we are results driven." That's obviously what he's getting towards. "Are you gonna be closer to the number 1, or are you gonna be *the* number 1?" [. . .]

I said, "You know what, I can guarantee 100 percent I would be in your top 10. Now, the difference between me being the number 10 and the number 1 is up to *you* because I need you to teach *me* the skill sets to be number 1 [. . .] and so if you can do that for me, then we can talk about which number I'm gonna be."

In describing what he considered an excellent answer to a job interview question, Benjamin was explaining the verbal contract he was articulating for his soon-to-be boss: that he would excel, but only if his boss provided him with the knowledge and training to do so. Benjamin sketches a contract in which responsibility for enhancing a worker's skills is equitably distributed between the boss and the worker. In fact, versions of this contract are becoming part of some companies' policies.

Companies have long understood that workers need to be trained, that part of hiring someone involves training them to work at that particular company. Under earlier forms of capitalism, internal company training served two interests—the company's immediate needs and the company's potential need for a supply of properly trained workers over the life of the company (Doeringer and Piore 1985). Under neoliberal restructuring, most businesses are less interested in investing in employees whom they do not anticipate will stay at companies, which is a position that Becker (1962) argues for in his initial discussions of human capital. Training a transient employee becomes a bad investment from a company's perspective (Cappelli 2012). This reluctance to train has contributed to the frustrations that I mentioned recruiters expressed earlier, that there is pressure to hire people who require as little training as possible.

Yet there are indications that companies are also transforming their understandings of why one might train an employee in the first place. Following a perhaps unexpected turn in neoliberal logic, companies are not always focused on training their employees for future work with them. Some companies are beginning to offer support for workers to train for any job the worker might want. Here is a revision of an older liberal understanding of the employment contract that led companies to provide pensions and social insurance. As David Graeber (2001) explains in discussing Mauss, "In wage labor the worker does give of the totality of himself, he 'gives his life and labor,' but the cash he receives in return has nothing of the same total quality about

it. If one gives one's life, one's life should at least be guaranteed" (162; see also Mauss 1925, 65). Under a liberal employment contract, there was a general understanding that workers are giving a portion of their lives to the company and should thus be compensated accordingly. Under a neoliberal employment contract, workers are dedicating to the company the time during which they could be enhancing their skills for other purposes, and in turn, some companies compensate them by helping them train for jobs elsewhere. For example, Amazon began in 2012 to provide training for employees who potentially want radically different jobs. Jeff Bezos explains in his 2013 letter to shareholders, "We pre-pay 95% of tuition for employees to take courses for in-demand fields, such as airplane mechanic or nursing, regardless of whether the skills are relevant to a career at Amazon. The idea was simple: enable choice" (Amazon 2013). Amazon's decision is intelligible from a neoliberal perspective in which people are businesses but are also following their passions in temporary alliances with companies and might develop passions for other types of jobs that working at a company inhibits. According to this neoliberal take on employment contracts, companies should provide this form of compensation in an effort to help enhance employees' value overall for potential careers elsewhere and mitigate the risk that employees have taken on by accepting their employment contract.

The suggestion that bosses and companies were also responsible for enhancing workers' skills would sometimes be articulated by my interlocutors as an explicit recognition that the work contract between employee and employer was very much a temporary one in other ways. When people discussed what good managers did for their team, it was increasingly understood that good managers were responsible for helping those working under them to develop the skills that would enable them to find a job elsewhere. In the basement of a large hotel, I attended a workshop designed to teach newly promoted managers how to handle their new role. At the end of a long day, a panel of managers reflected on their own practices and suggested practices that worked well for them. One speaker said she supported her team by making a point of taking any new member out to lunch in the first week. "So I always say things like 'You don't work for me, I work for you.' [. . .] My job is to make sure you can do your job well. And one day, you are going to leave this job, right, our careers are long, and we will have many jobs along the way. When you want to leave this job, I hope to be here to help you move on to this next job." This speaker described her lunch meeting as a moment to explain the employment contract from her perspective, in which she states her own obligation to help new hires enhance their skills in anticipation of a future job search. In short, it was not always clear who was responsible for enhancing a worker's skills—the worker, the government, the manager, or the company—and responsibility might shift depending on the

circumstances. In addition, enhancing skills was not always in the employer's best interest, yet it was still seen as part of the contractual obligation the company or manager had to their employees.⁹

Individual responsibility was not always the taken-for-granted and uncontested understanding of how responsibility should be allocated, even in a context in which people were constantly being told that success depends on being as disciplined a neoliberal self as possible. When people operated outside an employment contract, they were often taken to be primarily responsible for enhancing their own skills, although there was also a neoliberal case to be made that government too bears some responsibility. After all, government's role in a neoliberal perspective is to regulate markets, which can include helping citizens participate in the labor market through education. Once people were employed, then the claim that individuals are maximally responsible for their own enhancement could potentially be countered by the claim that companies should share the burdens of a given alliance. Thus training, and even training for jobs outside the purview of one's current employment, could be seen from a neoliberal perspective as something that a company legitimately owed an employee. Readers might note that losing pensions and gaining in their place financial support to train to be a pilot seems like a poor trade indeed. No doubt, but the larger point is that even under neoliberalism there is a space, albeit a fairly limited one, for workers to advocate for their own interests. There is an understanding that a contract should include a measure of reciprocity, and this opens the door for workers to make certain bounded claims on employers.¹⁰

When the self as a bundle is an uneven bundle indeed

I have been describing lived dilemmas that emerge from enacting the more broadly defined entrepreneurial self that, as I mentioned, many scholars have ascribed to neoliberal subjectivity in general, starting with Foucault's (2004) insights in his 1978–79 lectures published as *The Birth of Biopolitics*. For this next part of my argument, it is more relevant that the neoliberal self be seen as a collection of segmentable and measurable components (Urciuoli 2008). If the self is a bundle of skills, experiences, assets, qualities, and relationships, these aspects of the bundle in practice will be valued differently by different people in different contexts. Some will value skills over qualities or relationships, others will value relationships over skills. This in itself can be a moment when one neoliberal principle (valuing personal qualities) is pitted against another neoliberal principle (valuing skills). Different valuations are a frequent source of disagreements among those selecting likely job candidates together. These disagreements are often the

moments when those in a workplace will experience hiring as a lived dilemma, when all components of an applicant are weighed, and weighed unpredictably. The employed people I interviewed reported that, in practice, valuing one element too much over all the others will cause tension. For example, they were upset when hiring managers repeatedly valued hiring someone who is a known quantity in their professional networks over evidence that the person has the skills required. Intriguingly enough, this turned out to be a complaint I heard from jobholders, not job seekers. The people who were bothered by this form of valuation were frustrated that their work lives were filled with colleagues whom they felt were not good enough at their jobs but knew the right people. One game designer explained that his workplace was filled with people who had been hired because they knew all the right people but might never had any substantive interaction with video games in general:

You get to a point at which you are constantly walking through such senior people, none of whom have any domain-specific experience with what you are doing and all of whom feel that they contribute to the decision. People who have never made a game, played a game—well, maybe now that this is a hot thing, they have bought a console and played a couple of games with their kids, and they *really* have an opinion. [...] You want to make your game and make it really cool. Their goal would be to increase their control and power of influence. And you can't have a good discussion that way. You use the same words to describe two completely different things.

The people who were frustrated by these hiring decisions saw networking as undercutting efforts to create the best workplace in two ways. First, valuing networks above all else meant overlooking skills or experience. From their perspective, networking populated their work interactions with people who were effective at transforming social relationships into instrumental relationships. This might mean that the person was not necessarily good at their job, although not always. After all, some jobs depend entirely on being able to turn one's friends and acquaintances into business opportunities.

Second, people often have to make calculated decisions about whether they are going to enhance their networks or enhance their skills. One has only a limited amount of time during the day and must sometimes choose between meeting people or learning and practicing a skill. Yet many people believe that it is only through networking that one can repeatedly find jobs every two or three years.¹¹ The people who chose repeatedly to enhance their networks might survive the transitional moments between jobs, but surviving those moments can come at the cost of enhancing their skill sets. These choices create a

distinction between skills and relationships that in other forms of capitalism, with less continual turnover between jobs, might not be as relevant. This is a moment when what makes someone good at *getting* a job is different from what makes someone good *at* the job. It is in the act of experiencing these choices as a dilemma that people make skills and relationships distinct and come to understand valuing one over another as a potential conflict. In the hiring process, because this bundle that makes up the self is in fact a complex and often uneven bundle, valuing one aspect—be it skills, experiences, qualities, or relationships—over all else can put the selection process for job applicants and the actual workplace practices at odds with each other.

Conclusion: The seeds of change?

Neoliberalism began as a theoretical model, a socio-economic philosophy conceived by a thought collective to delineate how the contemporary world should be—a world structured by a market that is as international as possible, one in which governments' primary role is maintaining competitiveness (Mirowski and Plehwe 2009). Once implemented, neoliberal logics often reconfigure how capitalist relationships are understood and practiced. For example, in *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, Luc Boltanski and Eva Chiapello (2006) argue that this new approach to capitalism encourages people to value property ownership less than under previous capitalist regimes. Renting in particular has become a more valued relationship—people now appreciate total but temporary access to various forms of property in new ways. According to Boltanski and Chiapello, this new appreciation for renting results from two factors. First, they argue, neoliberal managerial discourses claim that social connections or networks are integral to how power is constituted. When networks are central to power, the ability to traverse networks in pursuit of one's own interests becomes highly valued. Immobility or forced mobility become the markers of disempowerment. Owning, in this context, becomes less preferable precisely because the permanence of ownership can so easily contribute to immobility.

Second, renting is one way to deal with the uncertainty of the market: "In fact, given the comparatively unpredictable character of fruitful projects, it is difficult anticipate the kinds of assets one might need" (Boltanski and Chiapello 2006, 153). Under these conditions, it is far more preferable to choose temporary access. That is to say, while previous forms of capitalism might have encouraged people to accumulate as many assets as possible but to view relationships with some reservations, under a neoliberal logic the reverse is true. Now the more relationships the better, and at the same time, one might want more carefully managed and more lightly held assets. As

such shifts occur, people experience different types of lived dilemmas, which indicate how neoliberal logics have altered how people understand being strategic as well as being appropriate.

These lived dilemmas emerge in practice in a number of different ways. Bundles of skills, assets, experiences, qualities, and alliances are unevenly constituted bundles, and this unevenness can generate quandaries. Or in other moments, what is an equitable alliance can be contentious, especially when entities of different sizes are entering into a contract as though scale did not matter. How equitable can the balance of risk and responsibility ever be between a single human being and a multinational corporation? Or, yet another quandary, these contracts presume that the entities involved should be stable in some way or another, but the ideal neoliberal self is one that is ever enhancing and ever adapting to circumstances—how stable is a constantly improving self? These and other issues can become vibrant problems when one tries to craft an appealing résumé or evaluate a potential candidate's LinkedIn profile.

While all the dilemmas I detailed are examples of how neoliberal principles become contradictory or incompatible when put into practice, they were not easily or often transformed into moral conundrums. This is one way that focusing on lived dilemmas leads to a set of questions about how reform or internal shifts, not radical change, might occur. Put another way, this is not a clash of moral economies that lends itself easily to widespread protest. Yet the lived dilemmas can also reveal changes in how people are evaluating their social relations along lines that can consistently lead to moral quandaries, which might compel workers and companies to change their practices. After all, when one understands the nature of the self and sociality in new ways within already established infrastructures and social organization, one begins to revisit what should be presupposed and entailed in particular social relationships, since older frameworks can offer substantively different answers to how one should be with others. Here I want to suggest three ways in which the employment contract is being informally reformed in the United States based on the theoretical openings that studying the lived dilemmas of neoliberalism provides.

First, people are now encouraged to view themselves as a business, which by analogy implies that the employment contract is now a business-to-business contract. While US employment law has not yet incorporated this take on the employment contract, some people during my fieldwork said job seekers should think about the companies they were considering joining in the same way they would treat any other business investment, that is, in terms of the financial and career risk of being allied with this company. Second, some of what companies are supposed to do under this version of neoliberalism is to become good places

to leave—to allow people to cycle in and out of their tenure at the workplace, supposedly improving the business while they are there, and in turn having the business improve them. Third, given the temporary nature of much employment these days, a job has become a short-term investment of time and labor. Thus jobs should be evaluated according to whether they provide new skills, new networks, or a new way of framing one's work experiences to make one seem desirable to future employers—that is, people now initiate employment contracts always anticipating quitting.

This take on a job as an investment was quite explicit when people were expected to work for sweat equity, and it led to new arguments. Tom, an independent contractor, explained how his seeing a job as an investment clashed with his potential employer's perspective. When he arrived at the interview, the hiring manager explained that he was offering a sweat equity job. "OK," Tom replied, "so what is your business model?" His interviewer was surprised and discomforted, and he refused to answer; from his perspective, the details of the company's business model were relevant only to venture capitalists, not potential employees. Tom thought his refusal was unacceptable. After all, he was being asked to be an investor in the company—admittedly with his labor instead of with money—and he should be given the same financial details that any other investor in a company would expect before signing on. Tom's interviewer was caught between two models: wanting the possible labor arrangements now available but unwilling to view employees as investors. The interviewer did not want to follow through on the implications of this new model of employment, and as a result, Tom was unwilling to take the job. In this interaction, a neoliberal logic reconfigured what counts as exploitation.

Lived dilemmas may become the reasons why people might begin to reject neoliberal logics or transform them into something else entirely. I hold out some hope that neoliberal logics encouraged some of the people I interviewed who most enthusiastically embraced this perspective to ask anew a question Marx posed in his analysis of capitalism—why would anyone willingly agree to have a boss, to give up their autonomy and accept a workplace hierarchy?¹² The previous answer used to be this: because workers need security and a salary, needs created in part through the destruction of the commons. As neoliberal working conditions increasingly undercut security, and as people are encouraged over and over again to imagine themselves as the CEO of Me, Inc., they are also being encouraged to ask, Why work for another? While many still do not have the option to refuse, perhaps the promise of autonomy inherent in the vision of a firm composed of hundreds and thousands of individual CEOs will begin to offer people a dream of work that allows for more say in how they are governed in the workplace.

Notes

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1. I was motivated by a desire to develop an ethnographically rigorous understanding of neoliberalism as a historically specific version of capitalism. Hiring rituals were an especially fortuitous ethnographic site for querying historical specificity because US job advice often presumes that hiring has dramatically changed since the 2000s, thus encouraging my fieldwork interlocutors to compare capitalisms, however tacitly (Gershon 2017).

2. Unemployment was not an option for financial reasons as well as others. In the United States, one's work has become a central basis for identity, especially for white-collar workers, making the search for a job also the search for an identity, a condition of contemporary work that Kathi Weeks (2011) critiques.

3. The people hiring experienced a different set of lived dilemmas, ones that in my interviews seemed to emerge not from neoliberal logics but from the structural conditions of hiring (Gershon 2017, ch. 6).

4. That article was not based on fieldwork. This article is an ethnographically grounded revision of my earlier argument.

5. When discussing how they reviewed résumés, most employers reported devoting between 10 and 45 seconds to it (see also Rivera 2015, 84).

6. I use pseudonyms for everyone.

7. In fact, my survey of job search advice dates this shift to the early 2000s.

8. These questions arise in a context in which people may acknowledge being inept at finding a job, but they never described applying and failing to be hired because they were unqualified to accomplish a given job. I did find, albeit rarely, the reverse phenomenon, in which employees explained to me how talented they were at interviewing, and thus kept getting positions that they weren't qualified for (and were holding at the time of the interview). In general, counselors and applicants acted as though everyone was an equally plausible job candidate.

9. This has changed the nature of work in some companies, as employees try to enhance skills that will make them attractive for that nebulous next company, and avoid tasks that seem too specific to the company they currently work for. Not all tasks are created equal when workers are constantly anticipating having to market their skills to other companies. Some tasks are too contextually specific, too bound up with a company's intellectual property, or too linked to the idiosyncrasies of that company's products. Thus the company's interests and the workers' interests do not always align when managers have to distribute some kinds of technical work, which can cause tensions in the workplace (for fuller account, see Gershon 2017).

10. This need not be limited to white-collar workers. For example, service workers who face just-in-time scheduling could potentially argue effectively that such varied weekly schedules prevent them from taking classes or otherwise improving their skills.

11. Turning to one's personal connections to find a job is a time-honored technique and a staple suggestion in US job advice manuals. While many components of US job search techniques have stayed the same since the early 20th century, how these components are weighted changes over time (for fuller account, see Gershon 2017, forthcoming). In the 1920s some authors recommended that the job seeker avoid relying too much on personal connections. This would be unimaginable today, both because of a changing media ecology and changes in capitalism.

12. There are other potentially persuasive framings through which to think about the workplace as a site of unequal power, as Elizabeth Anderson (2017) illustrates when she asks how most citizens of a democracy would respond if they had to live in a country governed in the same way that a US corporation is governed.

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