The business of truth: Authenticity, capitalism and the crisis of everyday life

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> The poet does not participate in the game. He stays in the corner, no happier than those who are playing. He too has been cheated out of his experience – a modern man. (Benjamin, 1940: 332)

In the early twentieth century Walter Benjamin lamented what he observed as the waning of meaningful, long-term human experience and the upsurge in its stead of short, isolated moments of existence. Building on the observation of Baudelaire that the metropolis represented a case of modernity in which movement obliterates social memory, Benjamin saw the 'naked man of the contemporary world who lies screaming like a newborn babe in the dirty diapers of the present' (Benjamin, 1933: 733). While Baudelaire was ambivalent about this aspect of modernity (since it also afforded the explorer of crowds the freedom to disappear in the present) Benjamin was even less impassioned. He linked it to the further regressive truncation of the modern subject and flattening effect of the commodity-form. The exploited worker was not only caught within the vertiginous forces of class oppression but also became a kind of half-living universal equivalent that cannot radically constitute itself via a historical reference. Indeed, the man without qualities exchanges the rich and painful political texture of a living past (and all of the intimations of a democratic future that it holds) for the fetish of pure phenomenological presence. In this sense, we are not only separated from what we are – a living inventory of a bygone multitude whose defeats and victories might be detected in a glance, a smile or gait – but also from what we might be in an as yet unmapped future. A prisoner of a perpetual present.

With this political inscription of the insular modern subject the question of authenticity, its loss and achievement, also becomes prominent. In the context of radical thought the notion of authenticity has a troubled past. Is it something that can be retrieved out of the wreckage of modern capitalism? Is it an ideological cipher that never existed but serves a certain function in the marketplace of bourgeois ideas, or can it be rethought through a notion of an inoperative community? The concept of social or personal authenticity as a co-ordinate for radical change undoubtedly waned during the heyday of post-structuralist thought, but it has seen a recent revival in some most unlikely places, such as that of the capitalist firm, popular culture and contemporary political campaigns. While revolutionary politics has often tried to rebuild experience from the rubble of the commodity-form, not even Benjamin could have foreseen what would come to pass in

the ideological permutations of 21st century capitalism. The concept of authenticity appears to have shifted from a problem of the humanist revolutionary left to one that is now at home in glossy corporate training manuals, team-building exercises of investment firms and advertising agencies.

One of the more bizarre aspects of the development of contemporary capitalism has been to prescribe to workers existential palliatives for problems that the regime of work itself has created. Business firms today are in the vanguard of attempting to re-establish the lost connection between self and experience so colourfully depicted by Benjamin, through a peculiar evocation of authenticity. From new-age spiritualism in the call-centre, tokenistic difference and diversity employment policies in consultancy firms, authentic commodities and marketing tactics, leftish eco-enterprises, chic counter-cultural rhetoric in IT start ups and so on, capitalism has claimed authenticity as one of its leading concerns. This recent evocation consists of an admixture of sources including spiritualism, airport lounge philosophy, the self-help movement, work-life balance programmes and a rally of techniques designed to help workers express the truth of themselves. It can also be found in a turn back towards an imagined past, one that seemed to make more sense than the fragmented reality we currently inhabit. What we have observed is that what was once an emancipatory response to commodification, rationalization and social and economic oppression has now itself been put to work as a perverse combination of commodity, business ideology and marketing stunt (Fleming, 2009; Murtola, 2011).

While it is important to note that not all firms in the global economy are engaged in the quest for authenticity, and straightforward coercion still remains the norm in contemporary capitalism, there is an interesting shift to be observed in how the capital-labour divide is being managed in western economies. An important element of this business version of authenticity is the way in which it is structured by a fundamental absence. The call for workers to express their unique identities found in recent business discourse, for example, turns on the assumption that all is presently not authentic and that something is missing and needs to be addressed. The same is discernible in the endless range of authentic commodities available on the market, ready to respond to consumers' cravings for an authentic experience. In other words, authenticity is more of a symptom of an abiding absence – the cause of which is seen to reside in us rather than the structural preconditions that make 'us' possible in the first place. What exactly is missing in the sphere of work and everyday life that might prompt this response on the part of capital?

We suggest that the way we address such questions has significant consequences for how we understand the politics of work and of everyday life more generally. As it enters the phraseology of corporate discourse the idea that we can now express our authentic selves in an environment renowned for its hierarchical and anti-democratic tendencies might appear to be a liberating gesture. Ironically, many of the attempts to 'humanize' such structures (commitment, empowerment, job enrichment programmes, etc.) often themselves create feelings of alienation as employees easily see through them. This unsurprising response among the workforce might result from a pre-emptive expectation regarding the brutal 'right-sizing' that frequently follows such initiatives. But workers also chide these maladroit attempts to soften the crunch of capitalist

employment because they ironically seem *unreal* and *counterfeit*. Like so much other dross proffered by consultants and pop-management pundits, the discursive facade of work is manipulated without going to the heart of the problem. What is the lack that appears to motivate authenticity programmes and schedules? Why does authenticity gain such prominence in the sphere of political recruitment and other marketing campaigns?

When it comes to the workplace, we argue that the answer lies in a fundamental lack of life at work, and this is perhaps an inescapable part of the capital labour process since life and work hardly ever go together. In this sense, the celebration of personal authenticity involving expressions of difference and diverse identities is both a continuation of past attempts to inject a modicum of life into work and an official response to earlier failures. Moreover, in the words of Adorno (1973), it trades in a 'cult of inwardness' so that the social logic of a broken system is reseated in the perpetually failing individual as an ethic, anxiety and even a 'spiritual' project in the case of the self-help industry. So this, then, is why we speak of the rise of authenticity as involving a particular response to the current capitalist crisis of everyday life.

If the ideology of authenticity is a suspicious corporate response to a structural crisis of experience precipitated by capitalism itself, then this special issue aims to register a kind of counter-response. We certainly are not advocating the wholesale abandonment of the concept, even though we are deeply distrustful of its current usage in particular in recent business rhetoric. This special issue presents papers that explore the discourse of authenticity in the context of everyday social and economic life, with particular emphasis on its analysis as a symptom pertaining to a crooked reality. While they are certainly not adverse to strictly philosophical meditations on authenticity, they do tend towards critically investigating particularly the emergent political economy of authenticity, in the context of contemporary work and organizations.

In the first paper, Ince studies the place of authenticity in the context of the spatial politics of the British National Party and shows how the party mobilises tropes of authenticity (and its 'other') for its purposes. He draws attention in particular to the community rhetoric in use and the contestations over ideas of community that take place between fascist politics and responses to it. Thus he points to the malleability of authenticity and the danger of an unquestioning embrace of it as a universally positive force, and discusses the implications for the possibility of a meaningful anti-fascist response. We think this paper is also useful for pointing to the broader tendencies in conservative political thinking in the United Kingdom (and beyond) that uses a bogus notion of an 'authentic citizenry' in order to maintain a racist polity and economic apparatus.

In the second paper, we move from authenticity as a way of policing the body politic to one that connects it with the body proper through the discourse of health. Cederström analyses the relationship between health and authenticity as currently discernible in managerial attempts to streamline employee interests with corporate aims. He shows how the imperative for employees to 'be themselves' at work is now also linked to a command to lead a healthy life, a goal perceived to be beneficial for both employee and corporation and visible in the use of various health promotion programmes. Thus

Cederström points to how authenticity at work pertains less to employees being asked to 'come as they are' and more to employees being encouraged to become their ideal selves – sublime, imagined beings of perfection – a goal perfectly compatible with the never-ending project of self-creation so prominent in capitalism more broadly today.

Echoing these 'bio-moral' themes, Spicer goes on to explore the relationship between the contemporary search for authenticity and guilt. Drawing on Basterra's work, he argues that this search for authenticity is tragic in form and can produce feelings of guilt, which are then sought to be alleviated through the use of various 'authenticity rituals'. These activities, he argues, involve an excessive focus inward, which in turn leads to the individualisation of collective, political struggles. Therefore, instead of liberation, the obsession with a search for authenticity leads to yet another form of oppression.

In the final paper of the issue Pedersen analyses the role authenticity plays in the context of a specific corporate recruitment campaign. He uses Deleuze and Guattari's concept of a social machine in order to explain the place and function of authenticity in contemporary economic life. In doing so he also points to the focus put on the need for employees to *become* themselves rather than to merely *be* themselves and discusses the role that this plays in relation to the corporate colonisation of employees' lives.

To conclude the issue, Moore presents in her note a stinging critique of the cooptation of authenticity by capital. She underlines the ambiguity that lies at the heart of authenticity today and the perversions that follow from the split between authenticity as perceived in terms of 'originality' on the one hand, and in terms of a copy that is 'close enough' to an original to be considered authentic, on the other. She shows how authenticity has been put to work in the marketing industry in a search for ever increasing customer loyalty and profits. Moore also points to how the current obsession with authenticity is perfectly aligned with the individualism at the heart of contemporary capitalism. She demonstrates the important role that media, and social media in particular, play in the contemporary processes of authentication at a time when we all have the chance to democratically participate in opinion-based journalism on the Internet.

The papers are, therefore, very sceptical about the nature of authenticity and its many articulations in and around the world of work. It is seen as a kind of Trojan horse for rendering the subject more susceptible to the broader socio-economic vicissitudes of a system that appears to be out of control. Techniques of authentication – which appear to have an inbuilt proclivity for failure – therefore contain strong ideological elements that bind us even firmer to the very things we wish to escape – our unhappiness, restlessness and deep suspicion that all is not well.

But does this mean that there is nothing salvageable here pertaining to the political uses of authenticity? While the following contributions certainly forward strident criticisms of the concept, we see two possible ways in which it might be redeemed. The first pertains to a more socialized understanding of what the 'truth of oneself' might mean. An open (or inoperative) and multitudinous community that both makes and is made by the individual might rearticulate us to a more radical notion of authenticity. This is

because, as a number of the following contributions reveal, including Cederström, Spicer and Pedersen, the pro-business version of authenticity evokes a kind of 'false individual' that is more about an oppressive sociality tethering us to our own domination through the sign of the subject. A disciplined and unavowable collective, on the other hand, would not hijack the truth of us for instrumental ends, but the opposite. Following Baudelaire's observation that it is in the overflowing and anonymous crowd where we really discover ourselves, perhaps this is what Žižek meant when he suggested that 'the dissolution of "critical individuality" in the disciplined collective leads not to some Dionysian uniformity, but rather clears the slate and opens up the field for authentic idiosyncrasies' (Žižek, 2010: 373). Perhaps.

This raises another interesting point in relation to the contributions in the special issue: running underneath the variety of discourses of authenticity explored here is a pre-occupation with *inauthenticity*. That which is not pure, not healthy, not guilt-free and not fun. The authentic ideal maintains a symbiotic relationship with its horrible 'other' in an almost mesmerised fashion. Perhaps the remaining purchase of authenticity in any progressive political project might be found in its defetishised form. That is to say, where the source of this inauthenticity is not found in the 'false individual' (and their way of coping with the circumstances they find themselves in) but in the flows of social domination that keep us excluded from a transformative politics. In nominally transforming these sources of inauthenticity would we not also render the very idea of authenticity obsolete once and for all?

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