



## Roundtable: Free work

Jana Costas, Susanne Ekman, Christian Maravelias and Sverre Spoelstra

### Introduction

This panel discussion took place at the *ephemera* conference on Free Work, in Berlin, May 11, 2011.<sup>1</sup> Three speakers, who each have conducted extensive research on the relation between freedom and work, were invited to briefly present their work and to engage in a discussion about the relation between freedom and contemporary work. The discussion focuses in particular on the alleged freedom of knowledge workers. To what extent is their freedom an imagined freedom? Is their (un)freedom a new phenomenon? What do or can they do to resist new forms of control that present themselves as offering freedom? What is freedom to begin with?

**Sverre Spoelstra:** Before I introduce the speakers on the panel to you, I would like to start with two quotes that, I think, may help us to think about the relation between freedom and work. The first comes from Pessoa's fabulous novel *The Book of Disquiet*, which was written over a long time span in the early twentieth century. In one of the aphorisms of the book, the main character, an assistant bookkeeper, leaves his job two hours earlier than normal for some personal business in town. This doesn't take as long as expected, so he soon finds himself wandering through the streets of Lisbon, overwhelmed with a 'feeling like regret

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1 For this transcription of the discussion, we have asked the participants to refine their answers to the questions and to add references where this may be useful for the reader.

for not knowing what to do with himself' (Pessoa, 2002: 166). To end his suffering, he decides to go back to the office:

I returned to the office, which was still open, and my colleagues were naturally astonished, as I'd already bid farewell for the day. What? You're back? Yes, I'm back. There, alone with those familiar faces who don't exist for me spiritually, I was free from having to feel. It was in a certain sense home – the place, that is, where one doesn't feel. (Pessoa, 2002: 167).

Pessoa's bookkeeper finds a certain freedom in work, but it is a freedom from feelings. I find this passage interesting because it sounds both so familiar and so foreign to contemporary discourse on freedom in work. It sounds familiar because it speaks of a blurring of home and work, well known to any knowledge worker today. But it also sounds foreign: when we think about freedom at work, we tend to think of work/home as a place where we are free to feel, not as a place where we are *freed* from feeling.

This passage also made me think of Hochschild's (1983) classic study of flight attendants. In her book *The Managed Heart*, Hochschild argues that contrary to many traditional professions, flight attendants are forced to manage their feelings in their job. She writes:

Cheerfulness in the line of duty becomes something different from ordinary good cheer. This applies much more to the flight attendant, who must try to be genuinely friendly to a line of strangers, than to the commissary worker, who can feel free to hate packing the three-hundredth jello cup onto a lunch tray. (Hochschild, 1983: 189)

The flight attendant, in contrast to Pessoa's bookkeeper, but also in contrast to the way we normally think about the knowledge worker, is neither freed from feeling nor free to feel. Feelings have a place in their work, but only as an object of self-management.

I wonder to what extent Pessoa's bookkeeper and Hochschild's flight attendant may resemble today's knowledge worker. Could Pessoa's bookkeeper, who is free from feeling, be seen as an image of the ideal knowledge worker? One can get easily get this impression when one reads a self-help book such as *Getting Things Done* (Allen, 2001), where the ideal worker is portrayed as being freed from thinking and feeling (and thereby stress) to make room for a painless flow of productivity. But perhaps today's knowledge worker is closer to Hochschild's flight attendant than we may suspect. Far from experiencing a blissful state of freedom and self-realization in their work, perhaps they are also obliged to tame the freedom that comes with the growing importance of affect in work? Perhaps

the knowledge worker is not so much set free from the management of the heart, but the heart manager par excellence?

Our three panellists may be able to shed light on these and related questions. Each of them has extensively studied knowledge workers in different empirical settings. Susanne Ekman, from Lund University, has studied organizations in the creative sector in Denmark, focusing especially on authenticity and autonomy in their work. Christian Maravelias, from Stockholm University, has studied knowledge workers in various Swedish organizations, looking at potentiality and health in particular. Jana Costas, from Freie Universität Berlin, has studied consultants in the United Kingdom, looking also at authenticity as well as at self-alienation. We have invited them to kick-start a discussion on freedom and work that we will hopefully be able to continue in the days to come. To get us started, I will ask each of the three panellists to briefly tell us something about their research on the theme of freedom and work.

**Susanne Ekman:** For my PhD I studied two creative knowledge work organizations in Denmark. (I think it's important to stress that it is in Denmark because, as someone recently pointed out to me, it is a country with one of the most extensive welfare systems in the world, and in addition it is renowned for its so-called 'flexicurity model'.) My studies were about authenticity and autonomy in this line of work, and I was specifically interested in how this plays out in micro-level interactions between managers and employees. So basically, I studied how people manage people who are supposed to be authentic and autonomous. I was also interested in the theme of freedom, which I studied in a completely different kind of setting in my master thesis, namely in post-communist Romania. What I found was that creative knowledge work was extremely dominated by fantasies of freedom. And if I should try to describe the nature of these fantasies, they concern a form of freedom that is best characterized as 'having your cake and eating it too' or, as Boltanski and Chiapello (2005; see also Ekman, 2013a) have called it, opportunism or never having to choose. Freedom is understood as having no limits: you never have to choose A at the cost of B. Being free means that you can find a way of getting both A and B, even if they are technically mutually exclusive.

I found this fantasy in many different forms, and both managers and employees subscribed to it. Employees wanted their managers to be coaching, caring and personal, not reducing the relationship to rules and asymmetry. But at the same time they wanted their managers to be authoritative, steering and boundary-drawing. Similarly, the managers wanted the creative, limit-breaking and flexible employee, but they also wanted predictable, reliable, traditional, rule-following and obedient employees. And they shifted back and forth depending on what

their purpose was in the specific moment. I encountered this strong fantasy about having your cake and eating too in many places. A classic example was an employee with a highly challenging position. He fantasized about being a famous radio host two weeks a month, a receptionist one week a month ('all I have to do is say "hello" and push the right button'), and then have time off the final week of the month (for self-actualization projects such as travelling, writing books, etc.). His fantasy about being a receptionist was spurred by the anxieties and insecurities of his demanding job as a radio host. But rather than finding a way to moderate his current job, to make it more realistic (yet maybe also less glamorous), he fantasized about a working life which offered the best of self-management and the best of predictability, without including any of their respective costs (see also Ekman, 2013b). Even when his manager suggested concrete measures to implement moderation, the employee declined. The moderate, middle ground was somehow too antithetical to his notion of freedom.

**Christian Maravelias:** I have also studied freedom at work empirically, especially in two fields. First in relation to knowledge intensive companies and the new forms of self-managed work that we tend to associate with such companies; second in relation to occupational health services industry and the so called 'worksites health promotion' programs that this industry increasingly offers companies and their employees.

Let me briefly elaborate on how I approached the issue of freedom at work in the first of these empirical fields, i.e. with regards to knowledge intensive companies. I studied consultancy firms and firms that have adopted principles of teamwork, project based work, etc., that is, principles that we have come to associate with terms such as post-bureaucracy and post-industrialism. Just like many others before me I found that such companies give their employees considerable autonomy in terms opportunities to choose how to work, when to work, with whom to work, etc., and that individuals freely choose to work very hard and long hours even though no one seems to force them to do so. Yet, I also found that the culture of such companies promote employees that were able to act professionally with a very personal touch, as it were. Successful employees were not only freely hard working, they were also – or at least they were able to make it seem as if they were – authentic and personally involved in their work. One of the catalysts of such authentic and personally engaged behaviour seemed to be the unclear and ambiguous roles that the employees were given. One of the companies formulated an explicit policy saying that new employees should not be given a clear professional role. They should be given a chance to stroll around in the organization for a while in order to get to know the people and to gradually develop their own organic role in one or perhaps two of the companies' work teams. Now, employees' attempts to cope with the level of autonomy and

ambiguity that such a policy implies seemed to revolve around trust. Or to be more precise, employees either explicitly or implicitly asked themselves who they can trust, and in that connection, how they should act and who should they be in order to be trusted by others? The general answer that employees found to these questions was that people tend to trust employees that reveal who they really are, i.e. individuals who do not hide, as it were, behind a formal role or façade, but who express their personal standpoints and act spontaneously. So what I found was that employees' freedom at work resulted in an intense focus on trust, or differently put, it resulted in a general feeling that trust was in shortage of supply. This lack of trust, in turn, resulted in employees who were driven, not by their managers, but by themselves and their colleagues to include their whole authentic selves in their work – or to develop a competence of making it seem as if they were very personally and authentically involved in their work.

I published a paper some years ago (Maravelias, 2009), where I elaborated on these empirical findings in relation to Foucault-inspired research focusing on disciplinary power and panopticism. As you all know a basic point that Foucault makes is that discipline is based on that individuals are aware of that they are always potentially observed and thus always potentially caught if they 'misbehave'. In such situations individuals will tend to internalize the discipline and thus become their own masters and slaves – they become subjects in Foucault's sense of the term. The findings from my empirical studies pointed in a different direction. What drove individuals towards disciplining themselves, or to be more precise, towards disciplining a particular identity that were perceived as trustworthy by colleagues and superiors, was not the fear of being 'caught misbehaving', but the fear of being taken no notice of, the fear of not being seen and thus of being left behind. Individuals in these knowledge intensive companies tried to make themselves visible all the time because otherwise they felt that they risked being left in a corner somewhere without friends, colleagues, projects and plans, i.e. with nothing to do and no one to do it with. They did not fear the spotlight, they did not seek to avoid the risk of being seen, they feared the dark, i.e. the risks associated with not being taken any notice of. I think this notion of post-panopticism can be of further use for instance in relation to social media, which as I see it very much revolve around how individuals freely place themselves in a spotlight which then governs them.

**Jana Costas:** My research has been concerned with knowledge work and particularly consultancy firms. I have been especially interested in the kind of knowledge work lifestyles that these companies promote. Both companies I investigated are amongst the biggest management consultancy firms world-wide. They see themselves and are regarded as the elite, and they recruit consultants from the elite universities in the UK, e.g. Oxford and Cambridge. Interestingly,

when you look at the website of any of these companies, they do not provide you with much information about the work they do. What they tell you much more about are the freedoms that you can enjoy working for them: you will read about the freedom to move around, namely how you can travel around the world, how you can work flexible hours and, more generally, how you can be free to express yourself at work, for instance in one of their sport initiatives, corporate responsibility and diversity projects and so forth. It is this kind of image of knowledge work that constitutes a certain ideal of work today. What interests me is to look at the ways in which this ideal is lived in everyday work life and, specifically, what happens when this ideal collapses, namely when knowledge workers enjoying this lifestyle start experiencing a sense of emptiness and self-alienation (see Costas and Fleming, 2009).

In order to investigate this ideal and related experiences of self-alienation, I have studied three kinds of freedoms around work that constitute its building blocks (in this sense, my focus differs from Susanne's as she looks at freedom *within* work). First, freedom in relation to the ways in which the corporate culture promotes discourses and practices of authenticity. The idea is that you can be yourself at work by engaging in all sorts of non-work activities within corporate life. This is exemplified in the corporate culture emphasis on fun, play and leisure, such as drinking and sport. Second, freedom in relation to discourses and practices of mobility (see also Costas, forthcoming). The idea is here that in being mobile knowledge workers – that is individuals of the so-called kinetic elite – are no longer spatially constrained. This ideal is typically constructed against the idea of a boring bureaucratic lifestyle where one is stuck to a certain place and cannot freely move around. Third, and closely related, freedom in knowledge work in terms of temporal flexibility, namely the idea that individuals can choose to work anytime – again this is constructed against the image of a boring nine-to-five job.

Now I asked myself where does this ideal collapse for those knowledge workers enjoying these freedoms around work. Of course, I should stress that it does not collapse for everyone; many consultants love this kind of lifestyle. But some realized, at least in the moments when I interviewed them, a certain emptiness and meaninglessness of this lifestyle: the authenticity schemes were then experienced as inauthentic (e.g. sitting with your boss and drinking and trying to be funny, can seem quite fake). These knowledge workers expressed uncertainty, instability and even a certain feeling of deracination given the constant need to move around. The temporal 'freedom' to work anytime turned into a life where people worked all the time. More generally, these freedoms around work mean that people's lives outside of work seem to vanish. As a result, knowledge workers express the sense of living an empty and meaningless life. Such an

experience, which makes it difficult for them to simply dis-identify from corporate life (as the latter defines more and more their lives) may be seen as a form of self-alienation.

**Sverre Spoelstra:** One of the things that seem to be central to the work of all three of you is the notion of authenticity. I wonder if you could say a bit more about this. For example, how do the people that you have been studying negotiate the demand for authenticity?

**Susanne Ekman:** Well, first of all, it is not only a demand from their work place; it is also a demand that they bring to work. At least in my case study, they are only willing to work to the extent that they can be 'authentic'. In the mind of the creative knowledge worker, meaningful work should never be boring, banal or tedious. They consider access to stimulating assignments as their prerogative. It is their *right* to be authentic, so to speak. And obviously, then it suddenly backfires when they are faced with the invasive and all-consuming demands about authentic all-in commitment. It is a mutually constitutive pattern between work places and workers. Hence all parties jump back and forth: neither managers nor employees want the shadow side of authenticity. Once they encounter the costs of authenticity, they seek resort in more bureaucratic ideas of the workplace.

**Jana Costas:** I agree with Susanne – the demand for authenticity is placed upon the knowledge worker, yet is also one that they bring to work. What is interesting here is the ways in which this emphasis on authenticity collapses in corporate life, as the ways in which companies address it become too managerialistic and hence inauthentic. For instance, this takes place when individuals experience the social events the companies organize, such drinking sessions with the bosses, as too staged. Despite the emphasis on fun, informality and leisure, actors feel the need to act in certain ways (e.g. be always friendly and funny) and, indeed, to attend such events in the first place. This clearly reminds of Hochschild's management of the heart, which Sverre mentioned. Consultants also noted that through the emphasis on authenticity their life and self outside the corporate world was vanishing. Thus, there can be not only a sense of inauthenticity but also of loss (e.g. the giving up of social activities outside of work) resulting from the emphasis on authenticity.

I have seen two main ways in which organizational members respond to this. First, they engage in distancing, that is dis-identification. They express that the corporate authenticity schemes are fake and inauthentic. They cope with this and, indeed, still engage in these schemes, as they feel able to be themselves outside of work, e.g. on the weekend when they meet their friends. A more

troubling response is that of the self-alienated knowledge worker. They realize that this weekend-self, i.e. what they regard as the more authentic or real self, doesn't exist anymore (e.g. when they find the time to actually live it out). So these people feel stuck and experience a sense of meaninglessness and emptiness – something that leads to a search for meaning and can make them in fact turn back to corporate life.

**Christian Maravelias:** I like the idea of seeing authenticity as a fantasy or unreachable ideal. I think the interest in authenticity is part of a cult, which has formed around everything that is perceived as Pure, Real, and True – just because nothing is in fact perceived as or believed to be Pure, Real and True. Is that not what Baudrillard means by 'hyper reality' or Debord means by 'the spectacular society'? In general I think we focus on those values that we lack. The reason everyone seems so interested in authenticity today is not because people are authentic or because organizations promote authenticity, it is because organizations promote people who are able to make it seem as if they are authentic and true, when actually they are just cynically playing along.

**Sverre Spoelstra:** It is clear from what you are saying that this prospect, or fantasy, of authenticity at work holds a promise of freedom: when you manage to be yourself, you have also managed to transcend some of the constraints of social life. Perhaps I can ask you to elaborate on the concept of freedom in this context a bit further? Christian, you published an article in *ephemera* (Maravelias, 2007), in which you distinguish two different concepts of freedom: freedom as autonomy and freedom as potential. Perhaps you can say something about this distinction?

**Christian Maravelias:** One reason why I wrote this paper was that I had read quite a number of critical management studies that made the case that post-bureaucratic management merely seems to provide employees with more freedom, when in actuality it takes away people's freedom. The enemy in most these works is of course North-American pop-management literature, which is seen to promise freedom while luring employees into almost totalitarian subordination.

The problem that I saw with these studies was that they discuss new forms of exercising power against a taken for granted notion of freedom. So I wanted to explore whether it was possible that these new post-bureaucratic ways of exercising power also configured new forms of freedom. When exploring this idea I came across something which I found quite interesting, namely that in comparison with European languages the notion of self-consciousness is understood and evaluated very differently in American English. In Europe there

is a long tradition in seeing self-consciousness as intimately related to freedom in the sense of autonomy from power. The self-conscious individual is able to step aside and look upon him- or herself and the situations he or she is part of with an autonomous distance. That is, in Europe self-consciousness is seen to imply the ability to step aside, to locate oneself elsewhere, which in turn is seen as the precondition of the very idea of freedom. So this close tie between freedom and self-consciousness implies that freedom is understood primarily as autonomy, autonomy from power. Yet, if you look up the word 'self-conscious' in an American English dictionary you typically get the meaning 'uncomfortable about yourself and worried about disapproval from other people'. That is, self-consciousness tends to mean awkward, fake and inauthentic. Maintaining a critical distance (autonomy) towards oneself and others is thus associated with something not very positive. What is instead valued is the idea of being free to take a hold of opportunities, seizing the moment and being able to move through it smoothly, instinctively and authentically, like a fish moving through water.

When exploring this idea I found that one reason why critical management studies, which is primarily a European affair, is on a collision course with popular management literature, which is primarily an American or Americanized affair, is that they look for and treasure very different forms of freedom; freedom as autonomy as opposed to freedom as potential.

So, this distinction was not just a recapitulation of Berlin's distinction between positive and negative freedom, it was also meant to capture two different ways of relating to the world: where freedom as autonomy would imply the ability to step aside from power through our self-conscious distance, and where freedom as potential would imply the freedom to seize opportunities, to get things done, to be provided with opportunities. That is, it would imply a 'just do it' mentality, a more instinctive way of getting about things. What I then did in this paper was to analyze bureaucracy and post-bureaucracy against the background of these two forms and ideals of freedom.

**Sverre Spoelstra:** Does this distinction between freedom as autonomy and freedom as potential also speak to your work, Susanne?

**Susanne Ekman:** Yes. You know what – I find that those two approaches to freedom have something in common, namely the reluctance to accept disappointment. The freedom of potential promises that the expansion and intensification and amelioration of the individual can always reach new heights. Possibilities are endless. The freedom of autonomy is driven by the same fantasy, I would argue. Only, it approaches it from a defensive position: nothing or no one should be allowed to limit me. So both freedom fantasies are based on a

notion of the individual as unlimited somehow. Both have as their constitutive outside 'limits' or 'disappointment'. Now, if we look at the knowledge workers that I studied, they relate to freedom as the antithesis of disappointment. To them, freedom means a way of life which is devoid of disappointment; if you encounter disappointment, you haven't lived your freedom in the right way. An interesting line of research in this context is Ian Craib's work on disappointment (1994). He is a psychoanalyst and sociologist drawing on both Freud and Giddens. He quotes Freud for arguing that disappointment is what makes us human. That's where we face the reality principle and that's where we enter the world and commit to it – precisely through the maturation and tolerance for ambiguity that disappointments engender. Furthermore he says, in line with Giddens, that in our times it has become extremely dangerous to be disappointed because you are expected to have endless potential. As the functional differentiation in society increases, we must be able to operate in so many and diverse fields that it requires a certain degree of megalomania to take it on. Consequently, the humbling lessons of disappointment would endanger our ability to function in this excessive society. On top of that, we increasingly outsource all experiences of powerlessness to welfare institutions such as healthcare, childcare, etc. We can pass on the most encompassing sources of disappointment and helplessness in life to professionals. Craib even says that his own line of business, namely psychoanalysis, has happily contributed to this trend by offering years of therapy to promote self-realization, all the while shunning lessons of 'authentic powerlessness'. So, yes, I can certainly see the parallel. But my point is that mainstream popular management and critical management studies have more in common than they would like to think. They both draw upon a romantic notion of freedom, namely as the opposite of limitations and disappointment.

**Jana Costas:** Rather than starting with a philosophical conception of freedom (and thus thinking of freedom as potential or autonomy), I have been primarily interested in the question of how freedom is discursively constructed in contemporary corporate and social life. I have looked at the particular ways in which freedom is constructed as an ideal today (e.g. in terms of authenticity, mobility and flexibility) and the kinds of performative effects this gives rise to. Following poststructuralist insights and Lacanian psychoanalysis, I would argue that there is no freedom without power: the free self, like the idea of the authentic self, remains an unrealizable fantasy. This is a fantasy that people invest in as it provides them with a sense of unity and fulfilment, but which is also bound to fail. Perhaps a first step towards freedom is therefore accepting its very impossibility, namely that striving for a free self is an illusion that in fact can have controlling effects.

**Sverre Spoelstra:** I like Christian's reminder that notions of freedom have a strong cultural component, which may be reflected in differences between North-American and European management thinking and research. I understand from Susanne that these two different notions of freedom also have something in common: a denial of disappointment. The next question is how these notions (or fantasies) of freedom play out on a more empirical level, as they clearly do not only haunt management researchers. Jana's suggestion to accept the impossibility of freedom without power already takes us into this direction. So how do people resist the tempting discourse of finding freedom in work in practice? And did you encounter coping strategies that you thought were interesting?

**Jana Costas:** In my empirical studies I observed Hirschman's response of 'exit', i.e. of leaving the firm, as the most prevalent form of resistance. Other than that, I believe that one interesting way to resist the seemingly irresistible knowledge work lifestyle could be in engaging in some kind of refusal. It may be interesting to look at individuals who refuse to enter these kinds of corporations and live this knowledge work lifestyle in the first place. Thus, resistance through refusal and not entering the corporation may constitute an interesting strategy. This also links to the idea that individuals refrain from constantly expressing themselves, that is being visible to others and providing information to corporations (just think of Facebook and so forth). In other words, the reintroduction of boundaries, refusal and invisibility might constitute important strategies.

**Sverre Spoelstra:** Have you come across people who are leaving their organizations, or refusing to take a particular job?

**Jana Costas:** Yes, in the companies I have looked at there were consultants who had plans to leave the firm and go to what they call a nine-to-five job. Here it is important to note, however, that this nine-to-five job is an illusion too. As I mentioned, it is part of the construction of the knowledge work lifestyle to set itself against so-called nine-to-five work lives, namely by depicting the former as exciting, creative and free and the latter as boring, dull and constraining. But who works nine-to-five today? That is, especially in the UK where the working hours are the highest within the European Union, I wonder who actually has these nine-to-five jobs.

**Susanne Ekman:** Yes, fantasies about security and predictability are very common. Again, it becomes the extreme anti-thesis to self-management and high involvement, rather than a moderation of it. In that sense, I would claim that the people, who have made the most interesting move away from this tendency, are those who dare strive for moderation and a humble middle ground.

There is something about this logic that keeps us in the extremes, either as intensely authentic or intensely bureaucratic with nine-to-five, strictly rule-based jobs. In my opinion, the truly challenging and difficult form of resistance (if that is what we should call it – I am critical of that concept) would be to reduce intensity. That's a really difficult thing. It is about moderation and moving into the middle ground as the place where you accept ambiguity. There is so much polarization, so I would find it very impressive if a worker makes that humble move out of the intensities, and into temperance. If she says: 'Yes, I have knowledge work that requires a certain amount of personal investment. But I will turn down the intensity a little, and turn other things in my life up, so my work is doable on a day-to-day basis'. That's a very moderate thing, but maybe moderation is the toughest thing to do. We are so afraid of missing opportunities that we would rather be imprisoned by our hunt for them.

**Christian Maravelias:** I agree, this is very difficult to achieve in practice, and it reminds me of a study I recently conducted at Scania, the large producer of busses and trucks. Scania began a profound transformation of its once Tayloristic factories along the lines of Lean production about 15 years ago. The change to Lean production at Scania meant that each individual worker and each production team of workers received a lot more autonomy than before. In that respect, Lean production was viewed positively not only by Scania's management, but by workers and union representatives as well. Yet, Lean production was still highly problematic to implement, because it proved to require a new type of worker. A worker that was communicative, cooperatively minded, active and energetic and thereby able to switch between on the one hand, doing the work according to set routines, and on the other hand, reflecting upon that work, trying to improve it. In very short terms, Scania responded to this problem by investing heavily in facilities and expertise dedicated to help employees improve their lifestyles in the direction of more activity, self-discipline and health. Through health coaches, therapists, fitness trainers, and so on, Scania basically thought to help employees develop themselves to better employees and better individuals. Even though this implied that employees were helped to instrumentalize even their lifestyles to fit with the criteria of Lean production, it happened without arousing much resistance or conflict. One reason for this lack of resistance, I think, is that the whole transformation concerned things that are generally seen to be positive – more autonomy, better health, more activity, more opportunities, and so on. How and why should you say no to that? When Scania decided to break with its Tayloristic heritage and somewhat later began to invest in resources dedicated to improve employees' health and wellbeing, this was in many ways what the union had been fighting for, for decades.

**Sverre Spoelstra:** The appeal of freedom, as an unrealizable fantasy or not, is also very much present within academia. Nick Butler and I recently interviewed a number of critical management professors about the desire and temptation to be 'excellent' according to managerial criteria. Many of them spoke of 'buying yourself freedom', by means of pleasing the system through top tier journal publications. Academic freedom is here no longer seen as the condition for academic success, but as the reward. But for most academics this freedom never arrives: we think we play the game to own benefit but end up being played by the game (Butler and Spoelstra, 2012). I wonder to what extent your observations about knowledge workers also apply to academics: do you recognize parts of yourself, as an academic, in the knowledge workers that you have interviewed and observed?

**Jana Costas:** Yes, in some ways I can see similarities. First, there is also the idea that we are free to express our interests and ideas in our work. Second, there is the idea that academics are mobile and global (indeed, some people constantly travel from one conference, presentation to another). Third, the academic lifestyle is also celebrated as one where individuals can choose when and where to work. In terms of self-alienation, I believe that those moments of emptiness and meaninglessness do arise, e.g. when you feel that the publishing/journal process is random and contingent or you realize that the majority of publications are not read and have little, if any, impact (within academia and outside). It is then that you wonder whether what you do is worthwhile, that is meaningful for you and others.

**Christian Maravelias:** I can also recognize myself in all this. But that is not particularly surprising because in many ways I think academia is idealized in contemporary working life. From an employer branding point of view Google is perhaps the company that is the most famous and attractive employer among younger people. And what is Google famous for? Well they have established some kind of campus environment where employees are 'free' to be themselves, to develop themselves, work in cafes and so on. The model for that environment is to a large extent at least academia. So in that sense it is no surprise that we can recognize ourselves in studies of knowledge intensive companies and so called freedom at work.

**Sverre Spoelstra:** But perhaps it also works the other way around? There is more and more pressure on university departments to look like knowledge intensive firms.

**Susanne Ekman:** Yes, I would say there is a strong similarity in the sense that in academia it is a constant struggle for all of us not just to succumb to an

opportunistic attitude. I mean there is so much in the structure that calls for opportunism. One of the interesting things about this discourse of freedom in work is that it is so closely linked to opportunism, and that's probably also why it's so closely linked to a feeling of emptiness: there's something about this celebration of freedom that doesn't fit with commitment beyond sheer personal satisfaction. And in academia, this kind of opportunistic freedom is enhanced structurally.

**Christian Maravelias:** This makes me think of Shoshanna Zuboff's book *In the age of the smart machine* (1988) where she distinguishes between blue-collar workers that use their bodies to act upon materials and the white collar workers that use their bodies to act with; presenting themselves is a large part of their work. That is, whereas blue-collar workers use their bodies as tools in the process of producing things, white-collar workers use their bodies both as means and ends. At this point, maybe we resemble the blue-collar worker more than the white-collar worker? As long as the work that we produce is good, it does not really matter what we look like, if we are social or not, do sports or not, etc. It is what we write.

**Sverre Spoelstra:** The disturbing part, of course, is that the 'goodness' of academic work is increasingly defined by journal rankings. One may even say that the management scholar is even free to produce bad work, as long as the 'quality' outlet ensures that it counts as good. This is perhaps a good time to open up to the floor, but let me ask one final question first: what is in your view especially important to discuss over the next few days?

**Susanne Ekman:** I think it is important to discuss the question of opportunism, and also whether we might miss important issues if we get stuck in the classical distinction between managers *versus* employees. I think there are some very important distinctions to be made within these two groups. So maybe we miss something if we're only interested in what happens between managers and employees. Maybe important stuff happens inside those categories: vulnerabilities and new distributions of power.

**Christian Maravelias:** I think much of what we have discussed so far is related to the concept of self-management, and that raises the question about the management of self-management. And the authorities that are supposed to manage people to manage themselves: what kind of authority is that? This issue relates to the blurring of the boundaries between work and life in a general sense. We often hear that management tries to use more of our potential by exploiting our full and private selves. Yet, I think this idea implies that management is in a state of crisis: because when reaching beyond the

professional sphere it reaches beyond the sphere in which it has authority, and that raises questions about other sources of authority. Who are the managers of self-managing employees?

**Jana Costas:** There are three things that I can think of. First, I believe it would be interesting to see how far the issues we talked about apply to individuals outside of knowledge work. Ross (2009) has made an interesting point, namely that after the financial crisis, on an experiential level, a lot of these uncertainties that elite knowledge workers expressed, to some extent, resembled those of individuals working at the lower end. This is something that I also observed in relation to consultants' experiences of mobility – in many ways, these were similar to those Christina Garsten (2008) refers to in her study of temporary workers. Of course, one has to be very careful in making such connections (there are massive socio-economic differences), but I think it is interesting to point to such bridges between different kinds of groups of individuals. Indeed, it is only in this way that forms of solidarity can arise (see also Costas, forthcoming). The other point, which I have already mentioned, is the idea of resistance as not entering the corporation in the first place. Lastly, I think it is important to think about ways in which we as researchers and academics can have an impact on students and their construction of the knowledge work ideal. When I ask my students where they would like to work, a great number of them typically responds that they want to become consultants or at least start as consultants. In other words, all these people with great minds, full of ideas, want to work for these companies (this shows how effective these companies are in constructing an idealized image of what it means to work for them). So I think we play a huge role in educating people and showing them what the ideal of the knowledge work lifestyle can entail.

**[Question from the floor] Armin Beverungen:** Thanks for the interesting presentations and discussion. I was curious about something in all of your presentations. There is this thing that people get thrown into a situation, and figure out how to be free, right? It's a very individualized moment I find in what you describe in their experiences. Now if we take a step back it is clearly a case of them being thrown in the labour market, being separated from the conditions of their own production, and a consequence of an extremely individualizing force of neoliberalism. And given a certain way of thinking about themselves and their own freedom, they seem to struggle with this. But one thing that I think might happen is to challenge the way we are told to be free, the kinds of freedom we have or are given. But what seems to be missing, and maybe you have more to say about this, is there any kind of collective response? Part of dealing with the individualizing response is to call to do something collectively. I mean for me the only way we could ever be free in any kind of way would be collectively; all things

I do in my life are collective things and not me self-reflecting whether I am authentic or not, whether I can have my cake and eat it. So I'm wondering if these people also have responses that aren't embracing this individualizing power or this discourse?

**Susanne Ekman:** In my study I found quite powerful discourses about collectivity existing alongside the discourses about authenticity, freedom and self-realization. Several employees told me that they had previously stayed in relatively boring workplaces because they were so happy with their colleagues. And vice versa, many employees also told me that they would leave prestigious workplaces if they did not get along with the colleagues. So the social element of work is certainly important and can effectively challenge the norms about self-actualization and individualism. There was also an idea about craft, doing your work properly, not in order to promote yourself, but in order to do something for somebody. In these cases, the Self gives way for external and collective concerns, and work becomes a vehicle for serving something Other rather than developing one's personal potential.

**Jana Costas:** This does not apply to the knowledge workers who I have studied. They tend to have a very strong individualist outlook – something that is fostered by the companies' cultural configurations. I suppose one example that comes to my mind concerns the ways in which one of the firms I investigated fostered a friendship culture (Costas, 2012). Here management wanted to instil an atmosphere of equality, playfulness and openness. Whilst this friendship culture very much emphasized informal relations between management and employees, some analysts became very close friends amongst themselves. Through this friendship they undermined some of the company's rules, such as that consultants were not supposed to share their bonuses. In this sense, there was a little bit of a collective moment. However, there was still a lot of competition (some consultants even reported how this was particularly prevalent with respect to their work friends). But I agree with Armin's point: there needs to be some kind of solidarity.

**Susanne Ekman:** I'd just like to add that some of the researchers on youth in Denmark have noticed how young people, in universities or high schools, find it increasingly difficult to work in groups, because they have this ideal that everybody should be free to have their own extremely unique opinion, and that it is oppressive when you try to create a collective movement. You become oppressive because everybody should be free to be themselves. So the very notion of some kind of consensus becomes problematic and I think that's maybe also what we're up against here: that everybody should be so free to be themselves that it is viewed as a form of violence to create a consensus. And so we are back

at the romantic notion of freedom which popular management research and critical management studies have in common. Now, who will be able to resist that?

**[Question from the floor] Steffen Böhm:** I am interested in the historical ruptures or continuities that we're talking about here. So, for me, the question is: is the phenomenon you're talking about really so different from what's been going on before, because you seem to be saying that there is something new here. In the call for papers there is a reference to Marx, because we wanted to point to the concept of 'freedom' in Marx, which, for him, has a double meaning. On the one hand, the peasant is freed from the landowner (feudalism), and hence he or she can freely sell their labour power in the marketplace – that's Marx's free worker. On the other hand, this very freedom is also a non-freedom, as the worker has no option but to sell their labour power to the capitalist if they want to eat and feed their family. So, for Marx, there is a non-freedom in freedom. Also, Jana mentioned Lacan: Taking a Lacanian line, one could even say that this dialectic – between non-freedom and freedom – is the very stuff of how the subject is created, whether we talk about capitalism or not. For Lacan, the freedom of *jouissance* has to be supplemented by the non-freedom of the symbolic, and vice versa. So, what I'm trying to ask is: what's so really new about this?

**Jana Costas:** In terms of self-alienation I think there is something new. I totally agree with you that this tension between freedom and unfreedom has always been there, but if you look at Marx's critique of previous forms of work, and particularly early industrialization, it is concerned with unfreedom. Specifically, alienation is related to the ways in which labourers cannot be themselves at work, cannot find themselves in the products they produce, and lose the connection to the production process and also to fellow men and women. In today's 'new spirit of capitalism' (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005) we see a certain shift; the ideal I have been referring to celebrates those very freedoms that Marx to some extent called for (of course in an individualistic manner). For instance, knowledge workers are depicted as completely identifying themselves with their work and what they 'produce' as they have autonomy, can be creative and so forth. The same applies to the ways in which people are seen to be able to be themselves at work today (thus they are no longer dehumanized robots). Whilst alienation, for Marx, related to a *lack* of being able to be oneself, express oneself in one's products, etc., today's idealized knowledge work lifestyle celebrates the fact that people can be themselves at work, express themselves and so forth. In this sense, the kind of self-alienation I am interested in derives from a reverse logic, namely the very emphasis or *excess* of having to live out those 'freedoms' of authenticity, mobility and flexibility.

**Christian Maravelias:** It is obviously a very relevant question, but also a very difficult one. With regards to Marx I think there are a lot of things that we could discuss. For instance how his analysis of capitalism points in the direction that capitalist production and capitalist development results both in a steady increase and intensification of the exploitation of workers and thus in less and less freedom and in a progressive development of capitalist production, which presses for a more developed and social worker whose freedom is not so obviously shrinking. Particularly in the famous ‘fragment on machinery’ (Marx, 1993: 690-712) Marx develops the idea that as modern industry develops what will eventually be the source of surplus value is not labour in a traditional sense, but the sociality of (particular) individuals. Maybe that is where we are today.

But let me try to give another answer to this question, which relates to how Foucault’s work has been used within organization studies. A lot of studies have been conducted, which make use of Foucault’s notions of disciplinary power and pastoral power, especially in relation to ideas about self-management, coaching, etc. The idea that I developed in my paper in *ephemera*, that new forms of post-bureaucratic work are managed not by distributing obligations which open for certain degrees of autonomy but by distributing opportunities (potential) based on judgments of employees’ abilities of using these opportunities, indicates something which goes beyond disciplinary and pastoral power. Because even pastoral power is still a matter of providing individuals with self-knowledge, a certain form of self-conscious distance (autonomy) to oneself and to ones work and colleagues. What I think we see more and more often is not pastoral power but more of a reprogramming of individuals. I am thinking, for example of the sports trainer: in sports, thinking about what you do while you do it is bad because you break movements apart that need to be whole and you lose the ability to react instinctively. Yet, at the same time you have to know what you are doing in order to improve yourself. In sports the role of the trainer is to set things out in such a way that you as an athlete don’t have to think. The trainer is someone that tries to reprogram you, so that you do not think, but ‘just do it’ and act instinctively. I think this relates to work as well. The manager of self-managing individuals, whoever that may be, does not simply provide some knowledge about yourself, but tries to help you to become instinctive in relation to your work or the world in which you live. So the manager of self-managing individuals as someone who does not provide individuals with an ability to self-consciously (autonomously) step aside, but as someone that reprograms individuals.

**[Question from the floor] Martyna Sliwa:** This is a question for Susanne: how do the people that you have studied make distinctions between authenticity and intensity, and how does this relate to freedom?

**Susanne Ekman:** I think that they pretty much conflate these two concepts. Authenticity equals intensity which in turn equals freedom. So non-intensity is taboo in this discourse. Moderation and the unspectacular routine of daily work are associated with a sense of loss, namely the loss of potential. To most of my research participants, routine was synonymous with an unsuccessful working life. This was because the Self practising the routine became relatively inconspicuous, whereas the concrete assignments took centre stage. My research participants expected it to be the other way around: concrete work assignments should serve the purpose of enhancing the spectacular Self and its continuous realization of potential. This was their notion of freedom. Consequently, the most difficult thing to accept was banality. But maybe some degree of reconciliation with our own banality is one of the highest forms of freedom we can achieve?

**[Question from the floor] Stephen Shukaitis:** This makes me wonder, perhaps this is an even more fundamental question: why do we have this assumption that 'being yourself' has something to do with work? Or to put it another way, why do we assume that there is, or should be, some necessary connection between work and authenticity? Why does authenticity have anything to do with working, as opposed to any other sphere of activity or form of interaction? That's why it's important to remember that the 'refusal of work' does not just refer to particular forms of refusal, but also of displacing this ubiquitous assumption and association of almost any positive value with working.

**Susanne Ekman:** I think that one of the pitfalls in critical management research is the notion that work per se is alienating. This is a perfect illustration of the symbiosis between critical research and mainstream research: they each take their polarized stance and thus become two more sets of intensity promoting the same romantic ideal about freedom and having a hard time moving into the moderate middle.

**Sverre Spoelstra:** This strikes me as an important point, and perhaps a good one to end this discussion with. I am sure that the coming days will provide a great opportunity to overcome the fallacy of thinking the relation between freedom and work as either good or bad, as either a humanization of work or as a new mode of controlling employees. I think the discussion has showed that there is much more going on, which calls for both conceptual and empirical carefulness. Please join me in thanking our three speakers for a great start of this conference.

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