

## REVIEW

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**Ulrich Bröckling, *The entrepreneurial self. Fabricating a new type of subject*, Sage Publications, London 2016, pp. 256**

Is it possible for a sociologist to devote a book to something that does not exist? It is, and *The entrepreneurial self. Fabricating a new type of subject* falls exactly into that category. Ulrich Bröckling openly announces that the “entrepreneurial self” is a fiction, and for good reason.

*The entrepreneurial self* is the English-language edition of *Das unternehmerische Selbst*, Bröckling’s German habilitation thesis, originally published in 2007. It is a highly interesting book, not only for sociologists, but also for researchers from many other scientific disciplines. In this thematically comprehensive and analytically complex work, Bröckling outlines the intellectual origins of contemporary neo-liberalism and its organizational, cultural and discursive manifestations. Some of the themes covered in the book have been developed by Bröckling on his own, while others borrow significantly from the oeuvre of Michel Foucault and his followers.

Bröckling’s work emerges from the so-called ‘governmentality studies’. This is a complex research perspective focused on modern forms of power over human populations. This approach avoids treating power as a means of control and as pressure from state institutions. Instead, it involves looking for ways in which power is realized through the practice of self-regulation and self-control undertaken by formally free people [Rose 2004; Czyżewski 2009; Bröckling,

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Krasmann, Lemke 2011; Ostrowicka 2012]. The title/theme of “entrepreneurial self” is central to this approach and is derived from what Michel Foucault has called “the entrepreneur of himself” in *The birth of biopolitics* [2008].

Bröckling’s contribution to the development of governmentality studies, and at the same time to the central theme of *The entrepreneurial self*, can be briefly expressed as follows. The “entrepreneurial self” is an interpellation to act, in all spheres of life, like an entrepreneur in business. The concept of interpellation is used here in the specific sense proposed by Louis Althusser [1971]. In simple terms, Bröckling says that representatives of numerous private and public institutions, authorities and consultants within various specialties promote and emphasize the value of the entrepreneurial mind-set as a general model attitude to life. This attitude is supposed to help people understand who they are, who they should be, and therefore how they should change to meet expectations. Contrary to its name, but in accordance with the direction of global social changes, this entrepreneurial self does not apply only in the world of business, although it does encourage cultivating its virtues. At a time when advocates of neo-liberalism succeeded in convincing others that a decent society is one that is organized like a company, modeling one’s own actions to mirror those of an entrepreneur has become the quickest way to attain social recognition. Who is valued in a company if not the entrepreneur himself?

Contrary to appearances, the entrepreneurial self is not a state that can ever be fully achieved. The only thing possible is to maximize entrepreneurial qualities. Therefore, the interpellation discussed by Bröckling means, to put it briefly, admonishing and urging one to act as an entrepreneur. One should be constantly excited and ready for action, for calculating profits and losses, be highly creative, approach others as clients, always be willing to solve problems, make tireless and renewed attempts to achieve success, and remain resilient to adversity.

Bröckling presents a comprehensive outline of the eponymous entrepreneurial self in ten chapters. In the first one, *Genealogy of subjectification*, he refers to one of the key representatives of governmentality studies – Nikolas Rose – in order to exemplify his own research problem. *The entrepreneurial self* is meant to analyze the historical process of the formation, use, and legitimization of control over the behavior of individuals, ranging from institutional methods for leading people, the influence of “engineers of the soul” (personal trainers, counselors, therapists), to people’s ways of defining who and what they are.

In the second chapter, *Tracing the contours of the entrepreneurial self*, Bröckling discusses in detail the entrepreneurial self as interpellation. He outlines

the socio-economic context of the significant dissemination of the discourse of entrepreneurship outside the sphere of economic activity. He also demonstrates discursive and non-discursive conditions that, over the years of erosion of the social-democratic welfare state and as a result of the formation of the so-called ‘new economy’, have been reinforcing the tendency to blur the differences between expectations for businesses, institutions, and individual subjects.

In the third chapter, Bröckling presents the post-Foucauldian view on the idea of neoliberalism. In the first section he explicates Foucault’s interpretation of German ordoliberalism and the American human capital theory. In the latter section of the chapter, Bröckling presents his own discussion of the work of selected representatives of neoliberalism. He focuses on those whose ideas have had the most significant impact on the formation of the “entrepreneurial self”. Thus he omits trends such as monetarism, public choice theory, or anarchocapitalism, even despite the fact that they also imply the need for subordination of society to market principles.

The fourth chapter presents the figure of the entrepreneur in typological terms. The scope of types Bröckling examines – speculator, innovator, risk bearer, and coordinator – partly overlap. This applies both to the source texts by economists (including Joseph Schumpeter, Ludwig von Mises, Israel M. Kirzner and Frank H. Knight), as well as their interpretation by Bröckling. Each of these types is, however, founded on what Bröckling calls a neo-liberal version of Kant’s definition of Enlightenment. The author quotes Jan Masschelein and Maarten Simons, educational scientists inspired by Foucault: “Unproductivity is the inability to make use of one’s own capital without direction from another; this unproductivity is self-incurred when its cause lies not in the lack of human capital but in lack of resolution and courage to use it without direction from another. *‘Have courage to self-mobilise! Have the courage to use your own capital!’* is therefore the motto of entrepreneurship” [Bröckling 2016: 75].

The fifth chapter is a detailed presentation of the principle of contract: from market transactions and educational life, to its philosophical justifications. According to Bröckling, the regime of contract corresponds with interpellation to act like an entrepreneur, if only in the sense that being an entrepreneur is considered as being constantly active and rationally calculating one’s own success in contacts with others.

At the beginning of the sixth chapter, *Creativity*, Bröckling notes that: “Faith in the creative potential of the individual is the secular religion of the entrepreneurial self.” Bröckling derives that religion from sociological and anthropological, as well as – mutually corresponding – psychological and economic concepts of

creativity. Psychology makes it possible to apply the category of creativity to micro- and macroeconomic issues. Economics, on the other hand, teaches about measurable benefits of investing in the so-called creative potential. Bröckling demonstrates how the contemporary market is a system of criteria separating “useful creativity” – that serves business productivity – from “useless creativity” – that goes against the grain of economic requirements.

In the seventh chapter, entitled *Empowerment*, Bröckling traces the origins, political orientation and transformations of the idea of empowerment. Its modern capacity is characterized by a series of paradoxical properties. Firstly, on one hand it is omnipresent; but on the other – it presupposes the existence of a significant deficiency, the need to fill a major gap. Secondly, contrary to the unequivocally positive connotations of the notion, empowerment is a form of directing control over someone else’s behavior. Today, empowering people almost always involves making them follow the rules of productivity and business profitability.

Bröckling opens chapter eight, *Quality*, with the remark that entrepreneurship is primarily so-called ‘quality management’. Quality, of course, in the dual sense of the word: relating to the characteristics of people and things, and at the same time to their specifically understood values. Bröckling focuses on discussing two techniques meant to define quality in such diverse varieties of its existence – as the quality of processes, results, interpersonal relationships, or the appearance of products. The first is the Total Quality Management (TQM); and the second is 360-degree feedback. Bröckling sees 360-degree feedback as a democratic panopticon and thus as a good object for a study on contemporary forms of power. This is because 360-degree feedback focuses on all four aspects of what Foucault called “moral conduct”, a conduct that conforms to cultural codes and expectations, i.e.: (a) which aspects of the person is the object of work on self; (b) in what way people are made to recognize the obligation to conduct themselves in a certain manner; (c) which techniques are used to do so; and (d) what purpose it should serve [Bröckling 2016: 163].

In the ninth chapter, entitled *Projects*, Bröckling presents a comprehensive analysis of the phenomenon of “project.” The contemporary, yet very general meaning of the term, generally evokes an association with work outside the rigors of a typical power hierarchy. “Project” work used to be also understood as attractive in the sense that it weakens the boundary between work and private life. These characteristics of “project” work lead Bröckling towards references to the notion of the “new spirit of capitalism.” To some extent, *The Entrepreneurial Self* is a post-Foucauldian approach to a problem similar to that which Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello covered in *The New Spirit of Capitalism* [2007].

Both these sociological works address, *inter alia*, a new cultural pattern of the expected subject and were conceived as a representation of local (German in one case, French in the other) manifestations of trends disseminated globally. Bröckling emphasizes the profound relationship between the ideal of constant activity, analyzed by Boltanski and Chiapello, and the “entrepreneurial self.” The chapter ends with remarks on “Project Me” self and “Me Inc.,” which are terms meant to characterize people for whom every activity in their lives, from work, rest, health, to contacts with others, has become a “project” to be implemented.

Against the background of the contemporary popularity of governmentality studies, the tenth chapter stands out the most. To a large extent, it is precisely because of this concluding chapter that *The entrepreneurial self* is particularly worthy of special attention. It includes not only a summary of the previous (critical) sections of the book, but also a handful of prospective remarks, rarely formulated by post-Foucauldian scholars. Bröckling considers the possibility of breaking free of the regime of the “entrepreneurial self,” a variant of an escape from its rigors. To this end, he formulates the idea of “the art of being different differently.” Although the German-language original of the book was published nearly ten years ago, this very interesting theoretical proposal has been almost entirely overlooked by representatives of governmentality studies. This omission cannot be explained by the propaedeutic nature of the discussion of Bröckling’s idea. In Bröckling’s view, the specificity of the entrepreneurial self causes actions undertaken to counterbalance this form of power to be possible only temporarily. This, in turn, means that their description can only be very general in nature. To recall the definition of Michel de Certeau, the program of liberating from the entrepreneurial self can only take the form of a tactic, not a strategy.

What makes Bröckling’s book stand out among other works on governmentality studies is the scope of its theoretical ambition. It goes far beyond the more or less effectual demystification of what is generally regarded as an indisputable civilization achievement of Western culture. Bröckling attempts something more: he tries to define a certain attitude, which would be a positive response to the ubiquity of the “entrepreneurial self.” Given the scope of the cultural legitimacy of entrepreneurial attitudes and “project work”, this task is particularly difficult. How is one to become free from neoliberal forms of power which refer to the need to restrict government? Is it possible, while looking for ways to break out of the regime of the “entrepreneurial self” to rely on the same idea of freedom that the regime uses for its own sake? Bröckling posits that in searching for answers to these questions one needs to consider “the art of being different differently.” The whole final chapter of the book is devoted to the consideration of various aspects

and potential opportunities resulting from this attitude, as well as the conditions necessary for its actual adoption.

*The entrepreneurial self* is thought-provoking – it is an extensive and important commentary on the ubiquitous incentives and admonishments to live one's life the way an entrepreneur acts in business. But Bröckling's book also raises critical questions of a meta-methodological nature, and it might be worthwhile to look at them in the context of *The entrepreneurial self*. There are at least two themes that can be addressed.

The first is that the “entrepreneurial self” is treated as an interpellation. Such an interpretation has one major advantage: it allows Bröckling to develop his argument in a way that does not make the subject of his examination a static entity (e.g. the state of things, a form of work organization, social status), lending it instead a historical and processual quality. It is a valuable incentive to tackle the problem of the so-called ‘real fictions’ which, according to Bröckling, should be examined within the framework of the strategy he defines as speculative empiricism. Readers who can overcome the daunting first impression that these seeming oxymorons make will see them in time as a chance to go beyond such dichotomies, organizing typical sociological thinking as structure-process or agency-determinism.

At the same time, however, these supposed advantages entail some problems. Approaching the “entrepreneurial self” as interpellation (in the sense discussed above) indicates that the reader is faced with a dilemma, the solution of which should have been proposed by Bröckling himself. Such a reader will need to choose between two options. The first would require him/her to assume that interpellation belongs to the field of communication acts. Therefore, its properties should be analyzed exclusively in the field of discourse. At the core of the second option is the assumption that the concept of interpellation is a stylistic ellipse. Thus, one would have to conclude that such an ellipse conceals the implicit link of Bröckling's interests in discursive and non-discursive phenomena.

Both options, however, lead to a dead end. Following the first, one would have to treat unfairly both the means of coordinating a collective work, such as Total Quality Management, and the writings of neoliberalism classics as qualitatively equivalent interpellations. Opting for the second variant, one might mistakenly conclude that the overall methodologies of governance and strategies of power associated with the entrepreneurial self can be reduced to an ellipse, defined by Bröckling as “interpellation.”

Another important meta-methodological theme can be called a ‘post-Foucauldian paradox’. Drawing on Foucault's methods of work requires taking into

account the fact that over time he changed his own theoretical ideas, reformulating them and abandoning some subjects for new ones. Except for his conviction that power is (literally) everywhere, that is, the idea that – interestingly – achieved the status of a universally applicable axiom in his historicizing perspective, Foucault was not particularly attached to most of his ideas. In this context, governmentality studies (gaining more and more popularity) stand out in an intriguing contrast to the amount of attention Foucault himself devoted to governmentality. Foucault studied governmentality for two years in his lectures, and later moved on to other issues. His interest in neoliberalism was even more short-lived. At the same time, Foucault did not provide guidance about which subjects should be dropped and when to tackle new ones. Attempts at being a post-Foucauldian scholar should include this issue.

And if so, some crucial questions arise, namely: Does being a post-Foucauldian scholar require dealing with different research problems than Foucault? To what extent can one aspire to become a post-Foucauldian scholar and model oneself on Foucault at one and the same time? To put it bluntly: When trying to follow in the footsteps of Foucault, who studied forms of knowledge and subordination to discourses of authorities, do his followers unexpectedly submit to the irresistible authority of their teacher?

*The entrepreneurial self* provides arguments both for those who would see it as an important study, expanding the scope of interest of sociology, and those who would rather accuse Bröckling of being blinded by Foucault. After all, Bröckling starts his inquiry from the Foucauldian problem of the ‘entrepreneur of himself’ and translates it into the notion of the ‘entrepreneurial self’. Having accomplished an extensive and multi-faceted examination of this problem, he formulates the answer in the form of the so-called “art of being different differently.”

It must be mentioned that Bröckling offers plenty of valuable insights on this occasion. Among them is his comment that the entrepreneurial self is a special peculiarity of our time. On one hand, it is a collection of opposites of clinical depression, while on the other – a short path leading to it. Referring to the French sociologist Alain Ehrenberg [2010], Bröckling indicates that the negative of the entrepreneurial self is to evoke an overwhelming sense of overload, fatigue, helplessness and fear of failure. This prompts the association with a theme Erich Fromm [2011] addressed in the mid-twentieth century. He noted that our civilization is heading in a direction where to be considered “normal” one needs to exhibit psychological traits that are essentially pathological. Fromm would be likely to say that the Janus face of the “entrepreneurial self” is the pathology of normalcy of the turn of the century.

Moreover, Bröckling argues that while depression (in addition to dependency and addictions) is indeed the dark side of the regime of the “entrepreneurial self,” at the same time it is an effective, albeit destructive for the individual, form of weakening it. Another weapon against interpellation is ironic distance. This allows one to reduce the principles of the business world to the absurd, and thus deprive them of their earlier seriousness. The third way to escape the “entrepreneurial self” is passive resistance, as discussed by Bröckling using the example of experimental social practices of the Berlin activist group, The Happy Unemployed.

It is certainly worthwhile to follow Bröckling’s lead and attempt to formulate answers to the social consequences of the entrepreneurial self. Bröckling notes himself, however, that even the three options of resistance he listed do not guarantee success. Depression destroys one mentally, irony does not change the object of derision, and the principle of idleness got commodified over time [Bröckling 2016: 204]. As a result it looks like opponents of the entrepreneurial self cannot count on virtually any promising tactics of resistance. For these reasons, it is worthwhile to take a step back and return to the premises of what Bröckling calls “the art of being different differently.” This leads, of course, to Foucault and the so-called “art of not being governed like that, not by that, in the name of those principles” described by him in *What is critique?* [1997]. From this perspective, we can say that Bröckling starts with Foucauldian premises and, after a long time (about 230 pages of the book), arrives at Foucauldian conclusions. The final result in fact reflects a need for further exploration of ways to critically disobey the entrepreneurial self. Therefore, when compared to Foucault’s general normative guidelines, Bröckling seems to be “different but not that differently.”

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