# Instruction and improvisation under neoliberalism

## Ilana Gershon & Chaise LaDousa

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INTRODUCTION

# Instruction and improvisation under neoliberalism

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**ABSTRACT**
Bonnie Urciuoli has become a pioneer for her work on neoliberal discourses in higher education. We introduce this work as well as the articles gathered herein to honour it. The articles engage with Urciuoli's work by considering neoliberal discourse in various institutional contexts. Important in all of the articles is a critique of the control neoliberalism would seem to offer.

The articles in this special issue engage with Bonnie Urciuoli's work on the neoliberal logics through which institutions – like the academic one for which she worked – represent and manage labour and modes of participation. Urciuoli first became interested in studying her home institution after she had published a book, *Exposing Prejudice: Puerto Rican Experiences of Language, Race, and Class* (1996), tracing the shifting resonance of Puerto Ricans' bilingualism in New York City in discourses of race, class and nation in the United States. She began to notice the presence of students with similar backgrounds at the elite liberal arts college where she taught. As Urciuoli puts it in an interview:

> So my project started small with a handful of student interviews in 1995, the original aim being to examine the contrast between what it meant to come from a specific background (Puerto Rican growing up in the Bronx, Dominican in Washington Heights, Cuban in Miami) and to become, over four years at the college, *Latino/a* – how did they experience, live and perform that transition. … I also became obsessed with the neoliberalized thinking and language that framed every institutional decision and move. And with the branding. Eventually the project turned into the study of how 'diversity' is institutionally produced at Hamilton in ways that are strikingly contrastive depending on whether you look at how the institution presents itself to the outside or operates on the inside. … And socially marked students get to do the heavy lifting in the branding department. (Thorkelson 2016)

Urciuoli has devoted extensive attention to the ways in which the voices of her race- and class-marked informants demonstrate that they are aware that the logics and language used to represent them as emblems of diversity are not of their making and not reflective of their experience (1999, 2003, 2009, 2010, 2016). Indeed, it becomes clear that the institution values such students through a neoliberal logic–and appreciates students for their thoroughly depoliticised approximation to a bundle of communicative skills.

Urciuoli's work illustrates that neoliberal logics, like all logics, encounter problems when implemented. To analyse these moments, the contributors to this volume take

instances of instruction as particularly illuminating moments in which vivid conversations emerge about how difficult it is to put neoliberal models into practice. Everyday social life is filled with conversations in which one person or a small group attempts to instruct others about how the world should be. These papers turn to the moments in which people are told that they should consume, labour, organise and innovate according to neo-liberal precepts. Examples include students involved in a diabetes prevention initiative (Lindsay Bell), volunteers hoping to enhance their prospects of employment (Kori Allan), business students grappling with case studies (Andrew Orta), people attending workshops in search of a (better) job (Ilana Gershon), a professor training to mentor a group of students (Chaise LaDousa), and college students navigating the changing curriculum and university (Richard Handler). In response, people express their reservations or reveal through their actions the failures in these models. All of the contributions offer moments of more or less explicit frustration on the part of informants as well as on the part of the authors themselves.

By focusing on moments of telling, we are able to make visible both social actors' local analysis of neoliberal social models for action, and the challenges of implementing these models. This inevitably takes place in contexts where the state plays an integral role in introducing and benefitting from how neoliberal principles are transmitted both in overtly educational sites and through approaches to imagining trainable populations. In these contexts, we compare advice with implementation and rules with improvised prac-tice, using this ethnographic lens on the act of telling to see the fault lines in neoliberal logics.

In the process, we uncover what precisely is neoliberal about these interactions, rather than applicable to capitalism in general. Many of these papers address a familiar Weberian theme – that the spirit of capitalism calls forth a self that functions as a project, one that must be worked upon continuously (Weber 1930). The very act of working upon the self provides a moral authority to the entire process (Weeks 2011). Bell notes, for example, that a diagnosis of pre-diabetes is actually 'somewhat loose', but that the body – specifically its weight – provides a focus for all manner of interventions on the self, with moral overtones. In our ethnographic cases, the self that is a project has developed distinctive neoliberal traits – it is now segmentable, a bundle of skills, experiences, assets, qualities and relation-ships that can be continually enhanced (Gershon 2011). Allan, Gershon and LaDousa find their interlocutors hoping to find a job through projects of self-making and improvement using soft skills, cultural differences, a resume, a handbook, and majors and credit hours. One might call these technological artefacts of a project of neoliberal self-creation and enhancement.

In addition, this self is constantly being tested. It is not enough to claim to be continu-ally enhancing one's self, or to be able to segment one's self – this must be demonstrated time and time again. Testing, both formal and informal, has become the vehicle through which training reveals value, particularly the ephemeral value of the continually enhanced and well-managed self (Greenhouse 2010; Urciuoli 2008). The contributions find interlo-cutors enmeshed in social relationships and institutional locations that require repeated use of technologies of a neoliberal self.

At the same time, the instructions discussed in this collection all reveal a strong empha-sis on predictability – they find a widespread assumption that one can explicitly delineate cause-and-effect such that one can reliably bring about specific outcomes. The ability to

measure such outcomes is essential to the discovery of the efficacy of the technologies of neoliberal self-formation and improvement, by actors enmeshed in them and by analysts of social life alike. Yet, this is a moment in which the work of transforming neoliberal logics into prescriptions for living is at odds with the epistemological underpinnings of neoliberalism as a socioeconomic philosophy. Hayek famously believed that the market was the best form of spontaneous ordering available precisely because humans were too flawed to adequately predict any future for a complex society. It is precisely the market's unpredictability yet overall ability to order that he depended upon as a cornerstone for his philosophy. Yet much of the moral authority that neoliberal instructions claim lies precisely in the ability to proclaim what should work, in being able to trace with putative accuracy the lines between cause and effect. And thus every move is understood as both explicitly strategic, and is made against an easily articulated template of what is desirable. These articles engage with the tension between a market valued precisely for its ability to generate spontaneous order and the demands of navigating such an uncertain and inherently unknowable order. Most informants in the contributions herein give evidence that they have not managed to control outcomes via the use of technologies of neoliberal self-fashioning. Even when they have followed prescriptions they find that the effects of their training are beyond their control.

Neoliberal instructions presume semiotic ideologies that interweave explicitness and predictability, such that the more neoliberal a model gets, the stronger the pressures toward standardisation, towards clearer boundaries and towards outsourced expertise (Urciuoli 2014). Many of the ethnographic cases reviewed herein involve precise measurement, sometimes in units unfamiliar to participants, but more often in units that have become so naturalised as to seem inevitable. Some of the training modules and instructional activities have made an effort to render units and activities their own by the use of names for actions and aspects of their organisation. As models for education or job hunting become more neoliberal, the more labels for constituent parts of the model proliferate – the more acronyms, the more specialised the terms. This proliferation signals a technocrat move towards more and more rigid classification that in practice produces more clearly drawn boundaries. The projects described herein produce specific types of people and specific ways of measuring their activity, progress and achievements. Given the pressures to claim predictable causation, even ambiguity, on the occasions it is acknowledged, must be openly managed. This is also accompanied by outsourced experts whose role is to circulate these models, often in the guise of heavily regimented scripts for conversations. All of the contributors' informants are not only instructed, but those instructions are underpinned by more or less explicitly modelled routines of conversation. Discursive interaction itself can put into play cause and effect dynamics that, in turn, can be pointed to as evidence of achievement.

The moral authority, such as it is, underpinning these forms of instructions hinges upon the presupposition that this model of self and these semiotic ideologies are universal. The authors in this collection all explore the moments when these assumptions are challenged – whether tacitly or openly – by those being instructed. One of the women involved in the diabetes intervention programme in Bell's contribution finds the activities involved to constitute yet another obligation in an already overworked life. In Allan's case of volunteering, some people recognise that organisations need 'cogs in the wheel' – that is, people to perform uninteresting and unsatisfying tasks not likely to enhance anyone's skills of

whatever kind. Gershon's career counsellors blame unsuccessful job seekers for failing to produce the right resume, just as they undercut each other with explanations of how to craft such a document. Both Handler and LaDousa themselves bemoan the fate of professors. Handler highlights parallels between 'gilded ages' when the work of being a student and being a professor seem more tied to employability and profitability than to, in Veblen's language, 'the higher learning'. And LaDousa recounts his own frustration with being told to refrain from being a professor so that he might achieve success mentoring class- and race-marked students. Even Orta finds a sense of unease about neoliberal capitalism to be at the base of business school students' motivations. We explore how these modes of instruction call forth patterned forms of critique and resistance that can shed light on the fissures in neoliberal logics as experienced in the moment.

This volume will be part of a growing body of literature on neoliberalism and the neoliberal self that is contributing to the critique of neoliberalism, not by pointing out the dangers of neoliberalism from the outside, so to speak, but by addressing internal faultlines (Cook 2016; Feher 2009; Freeman 2007; Reich 2016). That is, these scholars are tracing the internal contradictions with neoliberal logics when put into practice, exploring how people on the ground mobilise different aspects of neoliberal logics to critique neoliberal political and economic systems, forms of expertise, and the ways others instantiate neoliberal logics.

Bonnie Urciuoli has been especially observant of changes in the ways her own institution used neoliberal technologies to represent certain subjects for whom she had special empathy. She has provided rich ethnographic and discursive examples of such work, paying careful attention to the ways in which college administrators, faculty and publications generally depicted students through language and images. She also sought out moments to listen to the students represented by the college to foreground those moments when race- and class-marked subjects expressed dissatisfaction with their exemplification of all things diverse. We have sought to honour Urciuoli's pioneering work by seeking out the discontents of neoliberalism and exploring what makes failure possible.

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## Disclosure statement

## Notes on contributors

*Ilana Gershon* is the Ruth N. Hall professor of anthropology at Indiana University. She has published a book on hiring in corporate America, *Down and Out in the New Economy: How People Find (or Don't Find) Work Today* (University of Chicago), and edited a volume on jobs around the world, *A World of Work: Imagined Manuals for Real Jobs* (Cornell University Press).

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