*The Cult of Experience: Standing out from the crowd in an era of austerity*

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**Abstract**

Faced with uncertain futures associated with precarious/casualised employment or unemployment, young people are increasingly encouraged to invest in practices of distinction that enable them to stand out from the crowd in the pursuit of employability. These practices include the acquisition of experiences, such as work experience, internships, volunteering, travel and membership of organisations, which are assumed to give young people an edge over their peers in a crowded and increasingly globalised youth labour market. This paper challenges the logic that the acquisition of experience is a solution to tightening youth labour market conditions. I consider how the logic of employability means that young people are increasingly expected to run faster to stand still, and that rather than moving towards the future, they are increasingly fixed by their past. Moreover this fetishizing of experiences limits young people’s subjectivity, as in expecting young people to accumulate more; they may end up achieving, and experiencing, less.

**Key words: Experience, employability, youth, future**

**Introduction**

In 2009 a group of students at the University of California, Santa Cruz who self-styled themselves as the ‘Research and Destroy Collective’ issued a *Communiqué from an absent future* denouncing how university was stifling their futures:

University life finally appears as just what it has always been: a machine for producing compliant producers and consumers.  Even leisure is a form of job training.  The idiot crew of the frat houses drink themselves into a stupor with all the dedication of lawyers working late at the office.  Kids who smoked weed and cut class in high-school now pop Adderall and get to work.  We power the diploma factory on the treadmills in the gym.  We run tirelessly in elliptical circles.

For these students the outcome of running in ceaseless circles was clear, they were already working in the jobs that they would have after graduating in order to pay their way through college. The future was not so much absent but rather depressingly certain and young people’s hopes of ‘making it’ would only be achieved by the few and these lucky winners had already been identified by the advantage of their birth. This communiqué became a rallying call for the occupy movement that saw young people on either side of the Atlantic occupy universities, public buildings and spaces associated with mechanisms of the market in an attempt to reclaim their redundant futures.

This paper responds to one of the protests of the Santa Cruz students, that rather than youth being a time of experimentation, they were required to work ceaselessly in order to have a chance of a future. While the expectation that young people need to take responsibility for their futures has historically been a defining condition of youth (Page Moch 2003), in the current era of austerity the intensification of neoliberalism has exaggerated this belief (Cuzzocrea 2014). In particular, the mantra of the accumulation of experiences, to be distinctive from everyone else in an increasingly crowded labour market, has become the rallying call for young people under the assumed logic of employability. Young people are called upon to make themselves employable through engaging in a range of experiences which may include: volunteering, work experience, paid work, internships, travel, leisure and membership of organisations. This fetishizing of experience is becoming so normalised that it is rarely contested. It appears self-evident that in order to protect themselves against an absent future, young people need to not only complete more education and/or training, but they have to acquire experiences to stand out from the crowd. It is through these achievements that distinctiveness is carved out, doing something different and doing more than everyone else. If young people do not engage with this fetishizing of experiences they not only face uncertainty in the labour market but also risk being excluded from other life course transitions associated with leaving home and forming relationships. This paper offers a critique of the cult of experience through exposing the fallacy of its assumed logic and the reversal of subjectivity that it ostensibly seeks to promote. I argue that the activities that young people engage in are not directed towards their own subjectivity, their own learning or carving out spaces for their own creativity, but towards the promotion of the self in competition with their peers.

In developing this critique of the cult of experience, I focus on how it is shaping university students’ lives in the global north, though it is not my intention to suggest that the fetishizing of experience is exclusive to this group. For example, in the UK the extension of workfare to young job seekers intensifies the assumption that lack of experience is the barrier to employment, rather than the lack of jobs. Moreover, research on the intersections between class, cultural capital and education demonstrate that the importance of experience activities is not as clearly articulated by students from less-advantaged backgrounds (Reay et al. 2009). It is important to recognise that while the message of the need for experience is broadcast to all young people, not all are able to respond to this requirement in the same way, and thus the cult of experience will extend, rather than reduce, social advantage. The differential impact of the cult of experience on young people’s lives is also geographical. Young people from the global north will be able to use the availability of experience activities (including travel to and volunteering in the global south) to reaffirm their position in a globalised youth labour market. References to young people in this paper do not assume that youth are equally positioned to respond to the requirement for experience.

In order to develop this critique of the cult of experience I begin by considering the relationship between the self and experience that is assumed by the fetishizing of experience; I then consider how it relates to theories of individualisation and control and conclude by considering how it reframes young people’s orientation to past, present and future.

*Subjectivity and Experience*

The need to gain experience in addition to formal learning in order to at least have a chance of negotiating the youth labour market has become a truism of contemporary youth transitions, and one that most young people are aware of, if not necessary compliant (Holdsworth and Brewis 2014; Veerman 2012). This raises the question of what and how young people actually gain from these experiences. A working assumption in employability programs is that young people need to learn the skills, understanding and practices that will enable them to be competitive in the labour market (Yorke 2006). These practical skills are assumed to be acquired through relevant experience situations (Cuzzocrea 2014). Yet there remains very little deliberation as to how these experiences enhance learning, other than demonstrating to future employers that young people have done relevant ‘stuff’.

This lack of consideration of what is learnt through experience in current employability discourses contrasts pointedly with the centrality of debates about experience that have shaped western philosophy. As Jay (2005) summarises there have been so many different philosophical interrogations of experience it is impossible to pin it down to any particular concept or explanation. For the purposes of this paper it is useful to make a distinction between those thinkers who uphold experience as the touchstone of human knowledge and understanding of the self against the philosophical tradition that advocates the purity of understanding acquired through rationalist traditions. For the former the celebration of experience is often associated with Dewey’s philosophy of experience. Dewey’s pragmatic theorisation was developed against his depiction of Plato’s hostility to experience as an attachment to custom produced through repetition (Jay 2005, 13). Dewey (1925, 8) followed James in defining experience as a ‘double-barrelled’ word that signifies what people do and how they act, in other words it is both subject and object. This commitment to holistic inquiry and experimental method suggests a very different relationship between experience and time to Dewey’s interpretation of classical Greek thought. For Dewey as experience grows out of experimentation it ‘moves us into the future rather than tying us down to the past’ (Jay 2005, 290). Dewey’s commitment to holistic understanding was also very practical, he was a founder of the progressive movement in American education and popularised the idea of educating the ‘whole child’. Through experimental learning students can commit themselves to a lifelong journey of intellectual and moral development and curiosity about the world (Dewey 1916).

On face value the fetishizing of experience in employability discourse would appear to follow Dewey in identifying the significance of learning through experience. The assumed abstract quality of formal learning has to be counterpoised by the gritty submersion in ‘real’ experiences; young people need to have done real things in real situations to prove their future potential. Yet there are striking differences between the current discourses of experience and Dewey’s account. In employability discourses young people are motivated to acquire experiences by teleological, or ‘in-order-to’, intentions (Reiter 2003). Yet this teleological rationalisation of experience would appear to close down the link between experience and experimentation. The experiences that young people are encouraged to take part in are more akin to Plato’s dismissal of experience as tradition and custom, rather than Dewey’s commitment to experimentation. Rather than engaging in risky activities and edgework that extend the remit of possible experiences (Lyng 2005), acquiring experience to guarantee a future is essentially conventional and passive. Experience is equated with preparedness, rather than curiosity or experimentation, and this sense of preparation to avoid risk is increasingly being carved out as a way of negotiating an unknown future.

There is very little that is creative in the acquisition of experiences for self-promotion. Rather than seeking ‘to bring newness into the world’ (Lippens 2012, 354); young people are torn between hedonistic consumption or commitment to risk-avoidance strategies. Experiences are acquired in order to immunise young people against the vagaries of the market, rather than contributing to their identities and learning. There is very little sense that young people can use experiences as experimentation, work experience for example is about preparing young people for the labour market rather than an opportunity to find out about jobs they might, or might not, want to do. This commodification of experience suppresses the experience of doings; the point is to have done things, to record them and to accumulate these experiences. Rather than being both subject and object as Dewey argues, the commodification of experiences reduces their significance not in the doing, but rather in what they signify about a young person to other people. Even the expression of reflexivity which has emerged as a cornerstone of the post-modern self (Giddens 1991), becomes monotonous and formalised, young people are required to do and reflect on what they have done. Experiences have to be readily articulated and interpreted by others.

Hence rather than enhancing subjectivity, the requirement for young people to acquire experiences can nullify and flatten out both subject and object. As Thrift (2005) describes the endless formation of new commodities and commodity relations is one of the key conditions of contemporary political economy and is exemplified in the packaging of thought and performance in the emerging ‘experience economy’ (Pine and Gilmore 1999). Thus the demands on the consumer are becoming even greater as they:

are expected to make more and more extravagant investments in the act of consumption itself, through collecting, subscribing, experiencing and, in general, participating in all manner of collective acts of sensemaking (Thrift 2005, 7).

This process of commodification is contingent on a dialectical process of creativity and flattening out of creativity that can be both dystopic and invigorating. In Harvey’s (1989) dystopic reading of globalisation, a key condition of post-modernity is the emptying out of both subject and object that occurs through their acceleration in both time and space. All objects, spaces and relationships become flat, homogenised and ultimately disposable. These processes are apposite to young people’s experiences. While the incessant demand on young people to acquire experiences can energise them to engage in activities, it also renders them to a never ending treadmill on which they have to run faster to stand still and accumulate homogenised experiences (Brown 2003). Moreover critiques of credentialism are relevant to this process (Brown 2001). As more young people acquire experiences of distinction, then the value of these ‘unique’ experiences is lost by their wider enfranchisement.

*Individualisation and control*

The cult of experience is about individual advancement and can be interpreted as emblematic of individualisation, it is about young people taking control and responsibility for their own futures. In particular it evokes Bauman’s definition of individualisation:

Individualisation consists of transforming the human ‘identity’ from a ‘given’ into a ‘task’ – and charging the actors with the responsibility for performing that task and for the consequences of their performance (Bauman 2000, 31-32).

It is the charging of individuals with responsibility for their own outcomes that subtly shifts the emphasis from the primacy of self; responsibility is not just for the individual but is socially constituted. Young people are increasingly aware – and in the case of the Santa Cruz students uneasy - of the requirement to acquire experiences and whether they have any choice about how they go about doing this. This is an emerging theme in studies of youth volunteering where the experiences of the ‘voluntold’ are unsettling assumptions about the very nature of volunteering and service (Holdsworth and Brewis 2014). For most young people the emphasis on choice is misguided. If young people are to make choices about their futures: what, where and how long to study; what career to follow, how to make the most of opportunities and what experiences to acquire, then they need to know the outcome of their choices. Yet the flipside of individualisation is that the dismantling of structures to be replaced by individual agency has also brought about a disassembling of the structural certainties that could enable young people to make choices. Woodman (2009) argues that this is an important oversight in mainstream interpretations of individualisation, particularly discussions of ‘choice biography’ in youth research. Woodman’s re-reading of individualisation and choice exposes the fallacy of emphasising choice and argues for a more nuanced reading of individualisation to recognise that as:

‘some of the constraints placed on people are breaking down, the predictability and security that would allow these new options to function as choices to be deliberatively chosen also weaken’ (Ibid: 254).

The point here is that if structures are broken down, if all young people are supposed to benefit from unencumbered freedom, then choice becomes insignificant. Yet the reality for most young people is that they do not have a choice about taking up an internship, acquiring work experience or undertaking volunteering activities, if they do not then their futures are even more uncertain.

The cult of experience signifies the social change associated with a shift from disciplinary to control society and young people’s commitment to the need to acquire experience can be usefully interpreted as a manifestation of control. It is Deleuze’s (1992) interpretation of Foucault’s writings on discipline that sets out the transfer of the locus of power from disciplinary institutions to more fluid and democratic forms that are operated through ‘the brains and bodies of the citizens’ (Hardt and Negri 2000, 23). In disciplinary society discipline operates in more confined spaces and institutions, the shift to control society brings about a dissipation of power in which authority is no longer confined to institutions. Deleuze recognises, though very briefly, how control society renders young people into a perpetual state of becoming and that they ‘strangely boast of being-motivated; they re-request apprenticeships and permanent training’ (1992, 7). Thus instruction and training are no longer the sole domain of institutions but have become projects of the self that are rolled out through the blurring of distinctions between educational practice and everyday life. The perpetuation of training and skills acquisition in control society depends on those engaged in these activities believing that they can be masters of their own fate through their own diligence. Yet in seeking to take responsibility for their own education and employment outcomes, young people are also being co-opted into the cult of experience.

The shift from structural to individual responsibility is not bringing about equality of youth opportunities. As various indicators demonstrate, the extension of inequality in the current era of austerity is disproportionality affecting young people (OECD 2014). Moreover the practices through how these inequalities are produced and maintained are changing. Bauman (2000, 120) argues that the scripting of the social onto the individual brings about new forms of domination that evolve around the capacity ‘to escape, to disengage, to “be elsewhere”’. This seems to apply adeptly to the cult of experience; it is young people who are able to eschew its implications who can make choices about their futures. The distinctions that matter and where new cleavages of domination will be formed for young people in an era of austerity is between those who can master unpredictability and be creative and those who cannot.

*Time*

The cult of experience also engages with theorisation of time in late-modernity. In particular the emphasis on having to do and having to do more represents the speeding up of late-modern societies. As Rosa (2010) describes while this acceleration can be experienced as the unbounded power of exhilaration, there is also a flipside in which the restlessness and relentlessness of modern life is experienced through the shortness of time and the overwhelming sense that there is always something to do. Aubert (2004) suggests we are not just living in a time of post- or late-modernity, but in a time of hyper-modernity which may be characterized as a society of urgency. Young people complain that the demands on them to complete activities as well as formal training are not only excessive, but do not necessarily get them anywhere other than not falling out of the race (Holdsworth and Brewis 2014)*.* It is almost as if it is impossible to begin, the acquisition of experience is driven by the need to promote the self for external consumption in the market for education, employment and other life course experiences.

Through the cult of experience young people’s futures are being increasingly colonised by their past (Reiter 2003). It is not the command of the present that is being achieved; rather the present is subsumed against what one has done and what one will become. Those who can hold on to the present can, as Bauman suggests, ‘be confident of being able to force the future to make their affairs prosper’ (2000, 131). Yet the urgency of the cult of experience, the need to make sure young people have the right credentials before even starting out, makes the grasp of the present increasingly elusive. In his account of the grip of internship culture on the youth labour market, Perlin (2011) exposes the fallacy of this denial of the present. For example to gain a place on the Disney internship scheme, one of most prestigious internship programmes in the US, young people need prior experience, as well as commitment to conform to institutional identity. As the bar for entry into established jobs and careers gets ever higher, the present is becoming too late. This interpretation that it is too late for youth is also applied at a collective level. There is an overwhelming sense that an entire generation of young people have already been scarred by unemployment, inadequate training and education. For these young people the present is too late, they have already being passed over, they have no futures, because of a lack of a past, they have already been dumped on a social scrapheap (Beattie 2013).

The haunting of the present and future by the past is also reinforced through the technologies of experience. As experiences are translated into digital form through social media then they can no longer be deleted (Mayer-Schönberger 2009). The permanency and visibility of digital memories are unforgiving of past misdemeanours, thus limiting young people’s capacity for experimentation and has already caught some young people out. For example the UK’s first youth police and crime commissioner resigned in 2013 after pervious inappropriate tweets about drug use and sex were reported in the national media. As social media spaces become more regulated by both government and network providers, they arguably become less democratic and another space for control.

*Discussion*

The authors of the *Communiqué from an absent future* were protesting not just about how institutions, such as universities, were failing the very people they were meant to support, but how young people were also being co-opted into scripting their own non-futures. Since 2009, the continual global economic crisis has intensified this threat of an absent future, with an estimated 300 million young people aged 15-24 out of work in 2012 (The Economist 2013). The prevailing popular discourse of youth is one of failure against the need to do better. Thus if academic grades increase this is because of grade inflation; if more young people are out of work, this is because they do not have the correct skills; if graduates cannot get jobs this is because they have not acquired the right ‘experiences’. The overall message is quite clear, young people must do better; though in doing more they risk achieving less. This is integrated into policy, for example in the European Commission’s *Youth on the Move* (2010), which outlines its response to chronic levels of youth unemployment in Europe; the solution to this problem is more of the same: more training, more education and more movement. This failure to see beyond the supply side of the labour market is having profound effects on young people’s lives (Peck and Theodore 2000). Not only are young people still faced with the difficulty of finding a job, they are having to do so in direct competition with their peers in a every growing globalised labour supply (Brown et al. 2011). Thus programmes for work experience, placements, volunteering, internships etc. are rolled out in order to compel young people to invest in their own futures. Žižek summarises the implication of reliance on self-promotion:

In a free society…we must behave as capitalists investing in our own lives; if we fail to make the necessary sacrifices, or if we come up short in anyway, we have no one to blame but ourselves (2013, 12).

The cult of experience reinforces this charging of responsibility and passes over other solutions that target the demand side of the youth labour market.

This critique is not particularly novel, the implications of neoliberalism are well laid out in academic debate, yet it would appear that in the current era of austerity the only solutions to absent futures are the very practices that will make youth futures even more uncertain. The mantra of ‘experience’ has certainly gripped geography training from high school through to university, the assumption of the added value of field trips, study abroad, work placement modules, service learning programmes, is rarely contested. Who is going to forgo these activities as long as the promise of a future, or at least employability, is dangled in front of them? Of course we might conclude that it does not matter, surely it is better that young people are exhorted to fill their time doing things? A more populist interpretation of the ‘problem’ of youth is apathy rather than exertion. Is it not better to have more volunteers, more internships, more work placements, more young people doing useful things? As the European Commission argues in *Youth on the Move* the collective benefit to the knowledge economy of improved employability needs to be recognised and endorsed. In response I am not arguing for disengagement, though withdrawal has been an important tactic in youth resistance (Corrigan 1975); but that we need to reconsider the assumptions on which current forms of engagement are based. In particular the problem with the teleological assumption of experience is that it flattens out the present. To return to Dewey one way of countering this is to reassert experience as experimentation rather than affirming individual employment credentials. This suggests a more direct engagement with the process of learning, it is not sufficient to send students on a work-placement and require a reflective diary; they also need to engage in the epistemological challenges of these activities.

One of the benefits of their engagement in the cult of experience is that young people themselves recognise the fallacy and the limitations of its claims for themselves (Holdsworth and Quinn 2012). The educational benefits of doing are not necessarily being stripped out, the endless promotion of the self is being queried by young people and challenged in various ways, as the occupy movement itself testifies. Young people are also alert to how this cult of experience is creating new cleavages of distinction and advantage. It is not sufficient just to focus on individual advantage as this will always have consequences for others. For example as more young people are required to gain relevant work experience, they are also aware that internships and work placements may displace paid employment and create more divisions between those we can take part in these opportunities and those who cannot. The cult of experience is not just relevant for young people’s own individual aspirations but it also shapes their engagement with their peers and communities in which they live and work.

My intention in writing about the cult of experience is not to criticise young people for trying to do as much as possible, but rather to situate these behaviours in a wider political and economic reality. As we roll out more things for young people to do, we widen our co- curricular activities with the promise of employability, as we repeat the mantra that real world experiences matter more than intrinsic learning, we are setting in place a treadmill that is not only hard to get off, but one that will not necessarily take young people where they want to go.

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