Agile bodies: a new imperative in neoliberal governance
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Abstract
Modern business discourse suggests that a key bulwark against market fluctuation and the threat of failure is for organizations to become ‘agile’, a more dynamic and proactive position than that previously afforded by mere ‘flexibility’. The same idea is also directed at the personal level, it being argued that the ‘agile’ individual is better placed to secure employment and to maintain their economic worth within globalized, rapidly-changing markets. Educational discourse, particularly relating to the tertiary sector, is also beginning to appropriate such concepts and in this paper the discourse is probed from the perspective of Foucault’s notion of governmentality. The paper argues that agility can be seen to be aligned both with the neoliberal concept of the entrepreneurial self and also with the ‘governance turn’, whereby policy aims are achieved through the apparently autonomous actions of agents, but actions which are heavily steered by various control mechanisms. The paper suggests, however, that the ‘agile’ self is but one, albeit powerful, response to the current crisis of capitalism and that counter-conduct is possible by focusing on alternative ethical and political stances.

Background
The terms ‘agile’ and ‘agility’ are increasingly encountered in modern policy discourse. Their use seems to have become particularly marked since the global economic downturn originating in 2008. Being ‘agile’ is presented as a way of resisting recession, a means by which corporations and employees can survive and, indeed, succeed. While these words are most commonly found in the manufacturing and business sectors, they are also now permeating the public sector and so the world of education.

In this paper, this concept of ‘agility’ will be examined, initially through some preliminary discourse analysis, and then in more detail from a Foucauldian theoretical perspective, with the aims of rendering it more intelligible (Foucault 2007a, 64), suggesting reasons for its current prevalence, and exploring its wider discursive links and ideological importance.

Meaning and metaphor
-concrete usage
Agility is almost always a word with positive connotations. In its original physiological sense the word refers to the capacity of a body to move itself in quick, light, and well-co-ordinated ways. In zoological contexts, it is used in a positive sense to describe the movement and manner of any animal which displays nimbleness, speed, fluidity, and suppleness - typical amongst such being the big cats. In human affairs, it is notably associated with gymnastic contexts, describing a person with particular skills in shaping the body in ways that demonstrate liveness, even liquidity. While athletes may also be called ‘agile’, it is more often used in instances where the body needs to move in many different ways and with several limbs simultaneously. For example, long-distance runners would not be expected to demonstrate ‘agility’ although they may well possess it, whereas an acrobat would. The runner does not require to move the body in sufficiently varied ways for agility to be manifested, whereas the gymnast does: all parts of the body require to be moving in complementary ways for success to be gained. In team sports such as soccer, an outfield player would not necessarily be expected to possess agility, whereas the goalkeeper would. Indeed, ‘agility’ is probably a key criterion in goal-keeping evaluations and terms such as ‘cat-like’ or nicknames of that sort are not uncommon for goalkeepers, who require to throw themselves around in innumerable ways but with sufficient delicacy and dexterity that the ball can be caught and secured at the same time. The simple capacity to move rapidly or indeed to project one’s body in malleable ways is probably insufficient to be deemed ‘agile’: this sense of
purpose, control, and lightness of touch is also required. The ballet dancer must be agile; the hammer-thrower need not.

In summing up ‘agile’ as an epithet, therefore, the defining features would include such concepts as movement, speed, fluidity, and lightness. It should be noted, however, that there is no verbal form of the word: it is instead descriptive of action in the form of movement or potential movement, of the physical capacity or capability for certain types of action.

It is important in studies of this sort to beware of the etymological fallacy, of tying meaning irrevocably to word-roots and derivations. Language use changes and meaning cannot be prescribed. Nevertheless, some exploration of denotation and connotation is essential in seeking to probe developments in language and discourse. Of interest in this paper, of course, is the metaphorical use of ‘agility’ and ‘agile’, the ways in which the word has come to be used and valued in settings far beyond physiological, zoological, biological, athletic or sporting discourses. ‘Agile’ is commonly encountered in the language of business, finance, management, in both the private and the public sector, and within education itself.

Given what has been unpicked about the concrete use of the term, it is not too difficult to explore the aspects of meaning which have led to its metaphorical or figurative usage. This paper is particularly focused on probing its use in policy terms, first within business discourse, and then with educational discourse. In one of his last publications, Bourdieu (2003, 20) argued that this is a critical priority: to ‘submit dominant discourse to a merciless logical critique aimed not only at its lexicon . . . but also at its mode of reasoning and in particular at the use of metaphors (e.g. the anthropomorphization of the market)’.

- business metaphor
In its metaphorical usages, agility is applied at both group and individual levels. It can thus be a collective or personal description. At the collective level, it typically refers to a company, or a discrete part of a company, in respect of its mode of operation. In its earliest manifestation – around the beginning of the 1990s - it seems to have been solely linked to manufacturing or production processes (Yusuf et al. 1999), although some suggest that this itself drew on the notion of flexibility in economic discourse (Seethamraju 2006). Since then, the concept has been applied to information systems, ‘knowledge management’, to software design where it has become a brand name (Highsmith, 2001), and to human resource contexts. In recent years it has become a highly prevalent concept in corporate discourse, and ever more so in relation to the current recession. Much of this discourse is hortatory or even prescriptive in tone: in times of economic difficulty and a rapidly-changing globalized market, only the ‘agile’ business can hope to survive, far less succeed (Cheese et al., 2009).

There is limited empirical evidence produced within these texts of an ‘agile’ business. Much of it is predictive or speculative in tone, suggesting that agility is what will be required, or what ought to be in place. Some early analysts did detect corporate evidence of this transition to agility (Kantor 1992; Martin 1994) but much of the literature lacks exemplification. Even within the manufacturing sector, the earliest to adopt the metaphor, there is no fixed understanding of what ‘agility’ is or how it manifests itself.

Nevertheless, a number of studies have sought to outline the key features of an agile company (Dyer and Shafer 2003; Amin and Horowitz, 2007; Sherihiy et al. 2007; Holsapple and Li 2008; Bernardes and Hanna 2009; Ganguly et al. 2009; Ribeiro and Fernandes 2010). In manufacturing contexts, the distinctive features of an agile company are said to be that it can respond effectively, and speedily, to changing circumstances by adapting existing products or developing new ones to meet changing market demands. This also has to be conducted in a ‘lean’ manner so that changes are achieved efficiently, eliminating waste. In general corporate usage, a company can be seen to be agile to the extent that it can respond to environmental change in due time, can exploit and take advantage of such changes as opportunities, can effect innovative reactions, and can thrive in unpredictable environments. These environments include the political, the legal, and the social and not just those of the market per se. The agile corporation will anticipate and plan for any such changes which may affect its practice in terms of regulation, for example.
Agility seems to be distinguished from flexibility in relation to this idea of unpredictability. While flexibility is a prerequisite for agility, the agile company is one that has the capacity not simply to cope with known factors but is one that can thrive in an environment of continuous and unanticipated change. Given the recent economic downturn and the march of globalization, one can see how such a concept as ‘agility’ can become more prized than mere flexibility. Bernardes and Hanna (2009, 42) suggest that while flexible organizations may adapt responsively ‘within current configurations’, the agile company has the capacity for fundamental reconfiguration in the light of contextual change. This applies to all aspects of the business: agility ‘presupposes that...human, organisational, and technical components can be changed in a timely and cost-effective manner’ (Amin and Horowitz, 2007, p.13). A second distinguishing feature is that agility is seen to be more proactive than reactive: while a flexible organization can react well to change, the agile organization uses market intelligence to foresee and predict change and so positions itself even more nimbly to cope with, and exploit, changing circumstances. Hierarchical, bureaucratic organizations, or those bound by regulations (such as those relating to workers’ rights), are unlikely to demonstrate agility: flatter systems with more horizontal structures are said to be better suited. The agile company is robust, resilient, responsive, flexible, innovative, and adaptable, this being most starkly demonstrated by ‘edge’ organizations, ones where power for informed decision-making and competent action is not retained at the centre but pushed to the very ‘edges’, the points where they interact with their environment and their market (Alberts and Hayes 2003; Holsapple and Li 2008).

Current corporate literature is replete with the concept, fed by a rich diet of management consultant rhetoric, all with the energy and alarmism of the crisis narrative (Doz and Kosonen 2007). Survival depends on agility: unless your firm is agile you risk failure and ruin. Cheese et al. (2009) reintroduce the athletic metaphor, arguing that the company must ‘imitate the multi-skilled triathlete’ so that it is agile in all its facets. The agile company demonstrates internal agility, for example, in its capacity for ‘nimble workforce redeployment through rapid re-skilling’ while decisions to make redundancies and effect job losses can be given an agile makeover in the following terms: ‘a comprehensive planning process [producing]...a blueprint for a phased right-sizing of staff according to performance and strategic fit’ (p.4). The agile company must have ‘a mindset of continuous renewal’ (p.11), enabling it to ‘change ahead of the curve’ (p.3). If it is of a multinational nature, then help is at hand: the World Bank and others have developed a ‘predictive model’ which enables corporations to detect likely employee attitudes to ‘change acceptance’ in different national contexts. In this way, agile companies can align themselves with agile workforces worldwide and, by the same token, avoid cultures seen to lack sufficient enthusiasm for ‘change acceptance’ (p.10).

The agile worker, like the agile company, is one ‘fit’ for a modern, unpredictable market: proactive, alert to change, can respond quickly and efficiently to any such change, exploits rather than adapts to change, can initiate and improvise (Dyer and Shafer, 2003). While the agile company is configured in a particular way, it is the agility of its workforce which determines the success or not of this potential.

‘agile’ in educational discourse

Much of the educational usage of the term ‘agility’, although as yet quite limited, is to be found in reference to the university sector (Teitelbaum 2005; Stamp 2006, 2008, 2009; Duderstadt 2008; Newby et al. 2009; Gallagher et al. 2009). This should be of little surprise as the university sector is the one part of the education system which is most aligned to the business model. Indeed, well over a decade ago, Readings (1996) was arguing that the university was no longer simply aping the corporate sector but now was a corporation in its own right. Encouraged and, indeed, compelled by government to reduce its reliance on public funding, the university has more and more been developing as a private body. In England, for example, it is interesting that the university now comes under the remit of the Department of Business, Innovation, and Skills but across the European Union a much closer alignment between the university sector and the world of business and commerce is also emerging, particularly since the Lisbon Agreement.

This can be attributed to two main sources. One of these is the concept of the ‘knowledge economy’ which is posited on the notion of economic survival and growth through intellectual prowess rather than the physical brawn of the old industrialized model. As ‘knowledge producers’, the universities are key elements in this recalibration of the economy: their graduates are the foremost of the new ‘knowledge workers’ on whom
economic prosperity is said to depend. The university thus becomes an essential element of the economic strategy: as Tony Blair claimed, 'education is the best economic policy we have' (DfEE 1998, 1). This economic rationalism positions the university sector as instrumental to the economy both for providing the workforce but also as the source of the innovation, creativity, and imagination which can drive and optimise economic success. In this sense, graduates are not simply of value in terms of the uses to which their intellectual abilities can be put, but of value for the content, the products of that intellect. Graduates are not expected merely to operate with others' ideas but to produce and generate these economically profitable ideas themselves. This 'knowledge worker' is not merely adaptable and capable but creative and proactive. Ideas that can be exploited economically are new ways of generating surplus labour value (Cole 2009).

Of course, much of this is questionable. Just as the 'agile' company may be more of an ideal than a fact, so the 'knowledge economy' may also be somewhat difficult to substantiate from current trends. Ball (2008, 24) points out that the service sector, and the hospitality sector in particular, may well be a greater employer than the so-called 'knowledge economy' but few would suggest tailoring tertiary education to that end. The knowledge economy may be seen as more of a goal or policy imperative rather than empirical fact. Edwards (2008, 21f.) argues that it needs to be read as part of 'discursive struggles to inscribe certain meanings rather than others' in social practices. The discourse of agility can be viewed in the same light: it serves as one way of fabricating and representing, of constructing, that which it wishes to see realized (Edwards et al. 1999, 626; Sennett 2006, 10).

As well as being instrumental to this economic objective, the university sector is also re-shaping itself in commercial terms. Thus there is increased emphasis on knowledge exchange which sees university activity in market terms, the most advanced, and profitable, version of which is the 'spin-out' company. In addition, the increased emphasis on 'impact' in relation to research and scholarship carries with it an expectation of not just human benefit but economic benefit also. A university sector, backed by less government money, needs to maximise its income, and achieving impact without profit makes little corporate sense (Boxall 2010, 26).

There is a second influence which has served to align the university sector with the world of business and commerce and that is the emergence of lifelong learning. The concept of lifelong learning can be seen as very much in tune with recent changes in western economies. It is said that developments in globalisation such as technological innovation and high-speed communications have decreased significantly the life expectancy of certain jobs: the idea of labouring at the same job for 40 years is now predicted to become a rarity. As employees will expect to change job several, perhaps numerous, times in a working life so 'lifelong learning' becomes an imperative. The capacity to find new jobs in an ever-changing economy will depend on the worker's capacity to learn new skills regularly. Fast capitalism or hot capitalism present a considerable challenge to the worker: flexibility, lifelong learning, become the key (Sennett 1998).

This demand for lifelong learning had a particular resonance for the university sector because if everyone can be expected to engage in learning at any stage of their lives, then the university is required to change its profile to meet this new environment. It is not the traditional population of school-leavers with little or no work experience who can be expected to engage with universities but anyone at any time. It is this new understanding of lifelong learning which has 'forced' the university sector to become 'flexible': new approaches and new configurations of courses and qualifications are required to suit this new population (Edwards et al. 2000, 2)

However, with decreasing public money on offer, universities are now being encouraged to develop this flexibility into 'agility' (Leadership Foundation for Higher Education 2010, 2). Management consultants such as PA Consulting Group (2009) argue that the university must become 'agile' if it is to survive. Cut adrift from public money, the university needs to operate as a private company, in competition with other universities for 'market share', with the likely risk that some universities will 'fail' (PA Consulting Group 2008). If flexibility can be seen as the capacity to adapt, the new imperative for 'agility' develops this much further in the sense of being proactive, of anticipating changes in the business environment, of honing the organisation to its optimum efficiency, of being 'lean', responsive and alert. The big blocks to agility are seen to be tradition, bureaucracy, and regulation. The modern 'agile' university is now no different from the agile corporation: in
the battle for economic survival, agility is seen to be critical and any blocks to its realisation must be addressed and, preferably, removed.

It should, of course, be recognized that ‘agility’ has always been an educational goal in the particular sense of mental agility, especially in relation to mathematical computation. The agile mind has been much prized within education, and beyond. However, this modern usage of agility, now becoming detectable in university management discourse, is quite different. It is not about cognitive processes but about ethos and culture, about a whole way of being at both personal and institutional levels. The agile university involves the capacity for total reconfiguration, for complete reformulation to meet and anticipate external demands and trends. It means, essentially, the elevation of the economic above any sense of moral purpose and academic principle: what matters is corporate survival and feasibility, in whatever form that may take (Thomas, 2010).

**from ‘flexible’ to ‘agile’**

One of the most interesting facets of the figurative concept of agility, is the way in which the term has displaced its lexical neighbour ‘flexibility’. The notion of flexibility has been recognised as a key one in neoliberal discourse. A rapidly changing market, the desire for minimum labour costs, lead capital to demand more from each employee. The presumed necessity for individuals, at all levels, to be flexible has, paradoxically, become an inflexible requirement (Swan and Fox 2009, 149). Each must have a range of skills, be capable of learning and absorbing new ones, and be easily redeployed as corporate need demands. Flexibility is manifested both as employee capacity and in worker deployment: employees must posses the inner flexibility to cope with learning new skills and work demands, but must also be able to be moved flexibly from task to task by management, as and when required. It is this malleability and relative passivity that led Bourdieu (1998) to coin the term ‘flexploitation’: flexibility under duress, for others’ benefit.

The ‘agile’ worker can be seen as a further mutation of the concept of flexibility, and one that is deemed to hold more positive connotations. The pejorative overtones which Bourdieu identifies are transformed in a number of ways. The first of these is that the ‘agile’ worker is given an active role. Flexibility had the suggestion of being manipulated by others, of willing passivity, even docility. Agility suggests agency. The new ‘agile’ worker will be active as well as flexible. The ‘agile’ worker will not just be able to respond to change but will anticipate change and seek out opportunities to exploit changing circumstances (Glasgow City Council 2010). The ‘agile’ worker will mirror the agile company, therefore. In a changing and threatening market, the agile worker will be proactive and responsive (Lemke 2001, 203).

The second development is in relation to responsibility. Just as neoliberal governance shifts much more from society and community to the individual, so ‘agile’ workers become much more responsible for their own fates. If only ‘agile’ companies can survive in the new ‘fast’ market, then only ‘agile’ workers can hope to survive too. They can no longer rely on merely being flexible in relation to company changes, they need to seek out these changes themselves, be alive to context, and alert to its developing nature (Simons and Masschelein, 2006a, 296).

Thus, while agility can be presented as empowering the worker, it also brings its burdens. The ‘agile’ worker takes on some corporate, and all personal, responsibility. Moynihan (2006, 79) outlines the bargain: ‘flexibility and operational authority are increased in return for results-based accountability’. Success in the market is down to the agility of each worker: the company depends on worker agility and, as the worker depends on the company for employment, the worker takes on responsibility, therefore, for her or his own economic fate. Insecurity is embodied and any sense of stable employment relies paradoxically on change and the capacity for rapid change.

While this neoliberal angle must be addressed, it should be acknowledged that aspects of flexibility have been of benefit to some workers too, particularly in relation to flexible shift patterns which have suited some with childcare responsibilities, for example, and in relation to homeworking. Yet, as Sennet (1998) argues, there are costs to this way of working. Similarly, ‘agility’ may offer some specious reward in terms of agency and autonomy for the worker but this too comes with considerable cost, as noted above.
Despite its apotheosis in modern business literature, ‘agility’ could be viewed as, at least, implicated in the recent banking crisis. The demands of ‘fast’ capitalism have led to extremely short-term investment practices (Sennet, 2006), where immediate returns are demanded with little sense of long-term effects and with little regard for fundamental economic principles. This could be viewed as very much typifying ‘agile’ investment and yet, while it seems clear that some form of regulation will be instituted to counter any similar recklessness in the future, the overall status of ‘agility’ within the business and corporate sector seems to have emerged undiminished.

**agility, governmentality, and ‘care of the self’**

The work of Foucault is particularly well-suited to probing this discourse of agility. First of all, his concept of governmentality sees the notion of government as a continuum which involves both self and others. Government as the ‘conduct of conduct’ (Foucault, 1982) can be exercised on the self, the individual’s rational control of their own conduct, and can also be exercised on the conduct of others. Governmentality, therefore, as a concept can be brought to bear on both the ways in which the individual is encouraged to be ‘agile’, interpellated as such by those in power, and on the way in which individuals come to act on their own selves to become ‘agile’.

Indeed, given the focus of Foucault’s later work (1998, 139), it is worth noting the ways in which the ‘body’ is used so widely here as a metaphor. Already acknowledged has been the physiological roots of the ‘agile’ metaphor, but it should also be recognised how the business world is already replete with such imagery. Groups of people in a single enterprise are already referred to as a ‘body’ and business conglomerates are also referred to as ‘corporations’, drawing from the Latin word ‘corpus’ – the body. Thinkers such as Plato and Hobbes made significant use of the image of the human body in their conceptualizations of ‘the body politic’. Indeed, Plato’s fundamental concept of the state is as a human body with all parts functioning as appropriate to purpose. The call to agility can, therefore, be seen as very much in keeping with this dominant physiological metaphor within social action.

Foucault’s main concern with the ways in which the subject is constituted is also highly relevant to agile discourse. Foucault argued that the central, unifying interest in his studies was ‘the different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects’ (1982, 208; 2000a, 224). This concept of agility can usefully be examined in this light also: what are the effects on the subject of this call to agility? Finally, Foucault’s focus on ‘the care of the self’ is also highly relevant. The ways in which agility is to be exercised by the subject can be viewed from this perspective: what action of the self on the self is expected in this re-constitution of the subject as an ‘agile body’? In his lecture series of 1981-82, Foucault addressed no fewer that 24 lectures to this concept of the ‘care of the self’, seeing it as fundamental to the constitution of the subject and the ways in which the modern human is to be understood (Foucault 2005).

Some writers such as Fraser (2003) suggest that Foucault’s work has less relevance in modern post-Fordist economic structures. It is true that Foucault’s examination of discipline (1977) is particularly suited to industrial Taylorism, but his later work, seen now in the wake of the recent publications of his lecture series, is very much relevant to modern neoliberal governance (Binkley and Capetillo, 2009). While ‘docile bodies’ was the industrial default subjectivation, we can trace in Foucault an understanding of modern ‘agility’ in relation to his work on governmentality and on neoliberalism in particular. He himself recognised that the focus on (Fordist) techniques of domination needed to be supplemented by an equal attention to ‘techniques of the self’ and this is what his latter work does (Foucault 2000a, 225; 2000b, 177).

Agility, first of all, can be linked to the neoliberal concept of the person as an enterprise. The entrepreneurial self is a neoliberal concept of the deployment of the self as an infinitely flexible product reshaped to meet market demands (Simons and Masschelein 2008, 54). Agility is a more active call than flexibility: it is a call to agency in a particular way and as a thoroughly marketized self so that ‘life is to become a continuous economic capitalization of the self’ (Rose 1990, 226; 1999, 161). The agile self reconfigures itself in anticipation of market changes, the value of this identification judged in so far as it secures economic survival and success. As Adkins and Lury (1996, 219) suggest: this call to flexibility actually suggests a market in self-identity. The
self selects the identity which suits the market: so the agile self anticipates the market and reshapes itself accordingly (Peters 2001, 60; Bauman 2005, 8).

The agile company, encouraging individual selves to be agile, might be seen to be adopting a high risk strategy. The company cannot guarantee that employees as empowered agents will exercise their powers in such a way as to meet its desires as well as their own. This is where a Foucauldian perspective can be helpful: the strategy is for the agile self to embody corporate desires also, to become one with it, to be captured by the discourse. This need not follow in some juridical way, it is not contracted to do so, as it were: instead, the agile self appropriates, as its own, corporate desires, its very agility allowing for this to be repeated endlessly in any context. It marks the neoliberal dream: the worker as physical and mental embodiment of the enterprise (Foucault, 2008, 242; Lemke 2000, 12). As Edwards (2002, 358) suggests: by fashioning and shaping people’s values and norms in line with corporate principles, the prospects for successful organizational transformation are hugely increased. Modern governmentality works ‘through infiltrating regulation into the very interior of the experience of subjects’ (Edwards 2008, 26), creating ‘a speculative, creative or innovative attitude to see opportunities in a competitive environment’ (Simons and Masschelein 2008, 53).

This can also be interpreted as a development in neoliberal governance (Kooiman 2003, 117ff; Ball 2009, 537). Instead of ‘docile bodies’, subjected to surveillance and discipline, this form of direct government gives way to a more subtle, insidious, form of governance where ends can still be aimed at merely through shaping actors’ own choices (Lemke 2009; Miller and Rose 2008, 42). Governance achieves its goals through what Ozga terms the ‘disciplined self-management’ of the individual or group (2009, 152). This phrase neatly encapsulates this fused governmentality where the subjectificies itself in the image of the state or the institution (Simons and Masschelein 2006b, 419). Thus, actors’ agency ‘does not entail an escape from power but a specific exercise of it’ (Nicoll 2008, 167). The ‘insidiousness’ lies in the illusion of personal freedom and control (Wain 2004, 286; Miller and Rose 2008, 39). And, as Martin (1994, 247) notes, after the experience of the Foucauldian disciplinary society, ‘it is no wonder that moving gracefully as an agile, dancing flexible worker/person/body feels like a liberation, even if one is moving on a tightrope’.

In Foucault’s lengthy and detailed examination of the concept of ‘care of the self’ can be traced the various ways in which the subject is called upon to exercise this self-government (Foucault, 2005). The agile self is one fitted to survive and thrive in the modern market. That becomes the measure – a ‘permanent economic tribunal’ (Foucault 2008, 247; Simons and Masschelein 2008, 54). This economic evaluation also allows for dividing practices to be introduced which identify the successful individual and the failure, the good and the bad, the right and the wrong, the ‘affiliated’ and the ‘marginalized’ (Miller and Rose, 2008, 98). In the neoliberal world where market forces are universalized, it is the agile, marketable self which is treasured and valorized. In the old Christian economy it was ‘man in the image of God’ that was sought: now it is the human as the image of the market, the economized, entrepreneurial self (Foucault 2008, 241). The sustainability of this neoliberal paradigm is that any enterprise may, and does, fail but the resilient, entrepreneurial self can always renew itself in new contexts. Market failure besets, but thus need not defeat, the agile self.

Foucault’s analysis of ‘care of the self’ recognises its relation to the aleatory (2007b, 29). The aim in the Hellenistic era was to afford the self the equipment to withstand life’s unpredictability and its threats. Foucault explores at length how askesis, the exercise of self on self, could develop paraskeue, equipment, with which to withstand life’s vicissitudes (Foucault 2005, 320ff). In the ancient world it was a word or a verbal formula, learned through the parrhesia of the guide, to which the self could have recourse when troubles arose. It was a means of maintaining self in the face of trial (Foucault 2005, 366). By contrast, the stultus, the foolish person, becomes prey to the external, unable to resist environmental pressures (Foucault 2005, 131). This paradigm is not so far removed from modern agility. The capacity to be agile is the way in which we can withstand market unpredictability and change. The infinitely entrepreneurial self develops the agility to cope with whatever the market demands. In the neoliberal world, everything is a market and so this agility is a permanent and all-embracing weapon. In both cases, it is the desire for security that underlies the governmentality at play. Agility is rationalised as a means of establishing security in the face of unpredictable threats, nullifying the risk (Foucault 2007b, 47; Olssen 2009a, 85).

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Problematizing agility

It is important when employing a Foucauldian perspective not to be tempted to utilise Foucault as a way of judging the rightness or wrongness of some practice (Foucault 2002b, 456; Biesta 2008). Foucault himself was very clear that his approach to critique is not of that form but rather a means of probing, and challenging, what is presented as self-evident, essential, necessary (Foucault 1984a, 50). Thus, in critiquing the discourse of agility, this paper is not attempting to make judgements other than to suggest the ways in which such a discourse may have emerged and some of the philosophical and ideological factors which may have contributed to its formation. Foucault did suggest, however, that his approach to critique can be used as resistance, as part of a reaction which refuses to be subjectivized in such a way, which resists the neoliberal self: ‘critique. . . should be an instrument for those who fight, those who resist and refuse what is’ (Foucault 2002a, 236).

Problematization is a central concept in Foucault’s genealogical studies. On the one hand, it relates to the emergence of problems within a discourse – ‘problematics’ - which render a consequent course of action as rational (2000e, 256). Thus, within neoliberal discourse, it can be argued that the concept of agility is a means of addressing the problem of rapid changes within globalized markets which have led to numerous business failures, financial losses, and unemployment. The notion of agility is thus presented as a solution to such a problem. However, problematization can also be used in a more active sense and this involves utilising Foucauldian critique to raise problems about the discourse of agility (Foucault 2000c, 114). Foucault is notoriously accused of contenting himself with criticism and not formulating substantive alternative models. In a sense, this sort of criticism fails to recognise the nature of the Foucauldan project (Foucault 2000c, 118; Sawicki 1996; Butler, 2002; Biesta 2008). To accuse him, as some do, of failing to present a totalizing alternative displays a lack of understanding of Foucauldian thought, of his theoretical stance which problematizes the very nature of the totalizing accounts that some paradoxically demand of him. Nevertheless, Foucauldian critique can open up spaces for resistance and, indeed, for counter-conduct (Foucault 2007b, 196). And one way this can be done is through problematizing (Miller and Rose 2008, 15).

The first way has already been suggested which is that the discourse of agility is fundamentally rooted in neoliberal thinking. Thus, if one wishes to resist such a view of humanity and society, then one ought also to resist the call to agility. The imperative to be agile is founded on a view of existence as a market, on the individual as a marketizable self, and life as a means of reaping profit from investment in oneself.

A second way of problematizing agility is in reference to its ēthos, the way of being that it involves. The image of humanity it promotes is of an ever-changing, nimble self, reinventing itself in anticipation of market changes, permanently alert to opportunities to exploit and to profit from. Now there is a sense, in which this is what marks the animale from the inanimate – the capacity and will to use the environment to survive (Dewey 1916, 1). Yet, at least one way which distinguishes agility from Deweyan survival is that the social core at the heart of the Deweyan world is entirely missing. The neoliberal self is individual, not social; and, secondly, its agility is for continued survival as an economic entity and not for any sense of community, or the more abundant life. It is this absence of an ethical substance, this apparently unscrupulous expediency, that leaves the concept of agility with a significant problem (Ardagh 2000, 3). Over history, the moral vacuum at the heart of this sort of protean opportunism, is one that has been readily disparaged. In England there is the notorious Vicar of Bray, in Scotland the figure of Bobbing John, each adjusting himself effortlessly to suit diametrically opposed political or religious ideologies, and thus exposing himself to public contempt and ridicule. This sort of unprincipled character is known, and abhorred, in every culture: the turncoat, the time-server, the quisling. But all of these disreputable figures could be said to have demonstrated remarkable agility, indeed their lives were founded on it.

Thus, the agile person, the agile organisation cannot be afforded unconditional endorsement. Human experience suggests that it needs to be tempered, that it needs to be constrained in certain ways, for it to be judged favourably. To take the case of the university: is its goal to be simply of survival at all costs, endless agile repositionings but to have no core, no fundamental rationale, with which to guide and anchor its activities? The same can be said of the students and young people called to agility: is it to be a life of agility at all costs, or, if not, on what grounds and for what reasons ought one to resist this interpellation? For the
university sector, then, and for academic staff, a key challenge is to determine – if agility is to become a dominant operating principle – which elements of the university and which aspects of the academic’s work have sufficient value that they cannot be refigured, which parts represent the backbone, the inflexible.

In simple lifestyle terms, the work of Sennett (1998, 2006) gives ample evidence of the costs of endless flexibility. As Martin (1994, 249) argues, there is also the human interest in stability, in being rather than in endless becoming. ‘In the face of incitement to be nimble and in constant motion, we need to remember the common human need for stability, security, and stasis’. In problematizing agility, therefore, one can legitimately point to its lack of meaningful telos, and its lack of apparent sympathy with common human goals (Lemke 2000, 6).

In terms of counter-conduct, while Foucault may not offer a template for action, there is surely a work to be done to establish that ethical core, that moral spine. Simply preparing young people for lives as agile economic agents is a travesty of the state education system. In a postmodern world we may lack the conviction to promote one set of values, one moral code, but that does not mean that we should not promote the need to develop such if life is to be in any sense human and rational. Preparing learners for life in a democratic society must mean more than merely preparing them for agile self-survival. Secondly, the empirical evidence of the human effects of flexibility cannot be ignored. The evidence is that agility of this sort is self-defeating on its own terms. The lives which can be led in such a paradigm do not seem to be attractive to the people who lead them: indeed, they would appear to be profoundly unsatisfactory (Sennett 2006).

Foucault, aesthetics, and agility

There is a perverse sense in which the discourse of agility could be seen by some to resonate with Foucauldian theory. Analysis of this odd phenomenon is worth pursuing if only to clarify some of the issues that may lead one to see in Foucault’s position something akin to sympathy with agility. There are those who see in Foucault a dilettante aesthetics which might be seen to valorize a perpetual reshaping (Hadot, cited by Olssen 2006, 172f.). Indeed, such a charge has been laid at postmodern and post-structuralist positions generally: that they flirt with a sort of value-less relativism which may give succour to this sort of rootless agility (Callan 1998, 153; Ericsson 2003).

In dealing with this, it should be noted that although Foucault, notoriously, avoids the normative, there are some ways in which his work can be read as promoting certain values. The first of these is in terms of freedom: it seems clear that much Foucauldian critique can be read as relating to a refusal to be as others wish us to be and this must be founded on a belief that personal freedom is at least preferable to external control or direction (Biesta 2008, 204). Foucault’s work can be seen to have as one of its themes that of domination and resistance to such. However, his refusal to set out any broader sense of the good life, or what is to be done, could lead one to see his position as one that endorses a form of agility. His position of permanent critique involves one apparently adopting no solid principles other than that of refusal to be constrained in this way, or to form oneself as a subject in that way. Personal freedom to live as one sees fit might appear to be the only principle.

However, this view can be countered by the fact that Foucault does promote certain elements as central to ethical life. He expressly rejects the sort of discontinuous drift which a life of endless agility might entail. Dismissing the philosophy of the Cyrenaic school which valorized flux, for example, he writes: ‘not only are they doomed to discontinuity and flux, they are also doomed to dispossession and emptiness. They are no longer anything. They exist in nothingness’ (Foucault 2005, 467). One element which Foucault clearly presents as central relates to domination and a desire not to subject others to it: ‘one must be against nonconsensuality’ (Foucault 1984b, 379). The second follows from the earlier commitment to freedom which is that if one adopts the position of reserving the right to construct oneself and one’s life in one’s own way, then such a freedom must extend to all (Olssen 2009b, 47). These two principles, therefore, do provide some kind of core to any sense of agility that might be seen to reside within Foucauldian philosophy. He wrote of his own approach in this regard: ‘I do know. . .what I have committed myself to. . .: to having a brain as supple as possible and a spinal column that’s as straight as necessary’ (Foucault 2002c, 473). Those who see in Foucault endless suppleness are clearly missing this central core.
However, there is a second sense in which the entrepreneurial self might be seen to resonate with Foucauldian ideas. The sense that one makes a ‘business’ of oneself, that one develops and produces profit from one’s life which can be seen as symptomatic of neoliberal, human capital approaches (Miller and Rose 2008, 97), could be construed by some as having echoes in Foucault’s work. One of the oddly normative, but never full developed, elements of Foucauldian thought is this concept of transforming oneself (Foucault 2000d, 130f.; 1992, 10-11). Foucault seems to think of it as something to be endorsed, indeed as an implicit purpose to life. Given his reluctance to set out any normative code it does seem odd that this lies so openly within his work. Indeed, the same observation can be made about his related point about the possibilities of life becoming an art form. While he may not explicitly present this as a good, an end to be desired, he does raise it in the sense that it is floated as a possibility: ‘But couldn’t everyone’s life become a work of art? . . . From the idea that the self is not given to us, I think that there is only one practical consequence: we have to create ourselves as a work of art’ (Foucault 2000e, 261-62). However, this is quite a different sense from that proposed under the neoliberal agenda: Foucault’s lecture series on the birth of biopolitics (Foucault 2008) offers an extensive critique of the neoliberal project that turns the individual into an ‘entrepreneur of himself’ (226) and his life into ‘a sort of permanent and multiple enterprise’ (241). Foucault’s transformation is about éthos, an art of living, the relationship of self with self, a wholly different concept altogether.

Now, if Foucault concedes that being other than one was, transforming oneself, is a good, then it does not seem to be beyond the Foucauldian pale to suggest that designing oneself as a marketable entity is perfectly legitimate. The point here, however, is that while Foucault may not take a position on this being ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ in some sense, he would certainly critique any such construction which was forced on others, or which was established as a norm, or indeed which depended on its fulfilment on the exploitation or dominance of others. As has been noted, Foucault’s task was not to establish some kind of discipline by which good, bad, right, and wrong could be employed. His position was the very opposite and if, by one process of interpretation, the entrepreneurial, agile self can be seen to be ‘permissible’ within Foucauldian thought one must be very cautious about the lengths to which such a view can be taken. A very short length would appear to be the answer: it certainly was never Foucault’s purpose that his work be used in such a way.

Foucauldian critique was never designed as a means by which we should come to the light of truth (Foucault 2002a, 236). His work does offer the possibility of counter-practice: his critique illuminates the contingency of social practice, shows that there is no necessity for it to be as it is, and leaves open the possibility of alternative approaches – ‘the undefined work of freedom’ (Foucault 1984a, 46; Biesta 2008, 201). Thus, being ‘agile’ is but one way of proceeding: there are many other, innumerable, ways of being and what Foucauldian analysis allows is for this to be exposed.

Conclusion

The discourse of agility is firmly rooted in neoliberal ideology and is recognizable as a form of governance, a contemporary governmentality which promises ‘to shape the conduct of diverse actors without shattering their formally autonomous character’ (Miller and Rose 2008, 39). Yet, some caveats need to be acknowledged in such an analysis. First of all, it seems clear that the call to agility is a form of discursive action, it is hortatory, more an imperative injunction than indicative description. At most, agility is one element which may be detectable in current social practice. It is not universal, not all-consuming, and nor is it inevitable. In that sense, probing governmental discourse does not equate with probing empirical fact (McKee 2008). Nevertheless, Foucault’s concept of governmentality can serve to make the diachronic emergence of agility intelligible, and can serve to illuminate its synchronic links, and may even be an exercise in ‘teaching people what they don’t know about their own situation, their working conditions, and their exploitation’ (Foucault 2000f, 296). It highlights one current way in which humans are called upon to construct themselves as subjects and by problematizing such constructions alerts us to the potential for alternative forms: ‘situations can always give rise to strategies. I don’t believe we are locked into a history’ (Foucault 2002d, 397). Thus, while alive to dangers – and they are real for those for whom discursive capture, workplace pressures, economic status, and personal circumstances provide powerful constraints on agency - Foucault’s position ‘leads not to apathy but to a hyper- and pessimistic activism’ (2000a, 256), to the critical task of working on ‘our limits, that is, a patient labour giving form to our impatience for liberty’ (1984a, 50).

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References


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