
GENDERING THE ENTERPRISING SELF

Subjectification Programs and Gender Differences in Guides to Success

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How-to-books about personality coaching and self-improvement design a comprehensive model of the neoliberal subject: the enterprising self. Significantly, manuals for successfully marketing “Me Inc.” often rely on feminist and leftist arguments. Drawing on Michel Foucault’s work on modern governmentality and Louis Althusser’s concept of interpellation the first part of the article traces the contours of this figure. The second part studies women’s guides to success and outlines in which ways the female entrepreneur of her self differs from her male counterpart.

Keywords: governmentality; neoliberal subject; self-help literature; self-improvement.

The Place of Negation

In the fall of 1987, two years before the collapse of state socialism, a watchword of social upheaval was conspicuous on many billboards throughout the old Federal Republic of Germany. “Every revolution starts with a crowd” was written in big letters. Yet a glance at the photo under the caption quickly made it clear that this was not at all a call for the subversive occupation of public space. The photo showed a plate with a pre-cooked meal and the logo of the Pfanni company. This dumpling manufacturer – who would be better qualified to declare the revolution in Germany! – was announcing an expansion of its range of products: in addition to the company’s potato dumplings, ever popular, but certainly more evocative of bourgeois portliness than revolutionary energy, a new line of potato casserole was now also available. The crowd in the slogan was, in fact, a casserole: the German word “Auflauf”, literally “a running together” means both. The revolution was “Pfanni frozen foods”. Gone are the days when victorious revolutions devoured their children; now every child can eat their revolution and risk nothing more than good taste. Freeing women into the bargain, Pfanni relieved them of tedious repetitive work at the stove.

The ironic *détournement*, the appropriation and reinterpretation of an affectively charged term, is as much a popular and proven advertising technique as playing with the double meanings of words. On the one hand revolution emphatically invokes the Marxian “categoric imperative to overthrow all relations in which man is a debased, enslaved, abandoned, despicable essence” (Marx 1974: 385); on the other, it represents the universal cypher for transformations of any kind – be it even the transition from the Sunday pot-roast side-dish for the Fordist nuclear family to the pre-cooked frozen dish for the post-Fordist single household. Yet where is the place of this negati-

on, if subversive desire has long since become a motor of product innovation? And what is so radically new about conservation (in the freezer!) of the old (potatoes!)? Do we really want to welcome a revolution that starts with a potato casserole? And if not, are we even able to imagine a different one?

Anita Roddick, the founder of *The Body Shop* is: The cosmetics chain incorporates its social and ecological convictions into its image and sells the illusion of global responsibility with every body lotion. In 1997 it started a campaign against tyrannical ideals of thinness, proclaiming a new “concept of beauty, one that embraces the mind-blowing diversity of cultures and societies that make up our planet”. In the accompanying brochure Roddick explained:

We're going to do some awareness-raising on behalf of self-esteem and self-authority. We will be challenging the cultural concepts of femininity as portrayed in the 'beauty' industry. We will be working hard to promote self-esteem, cultural and physical diversity. We will encourage the celebration of the unique qualities that make each of us what we are. Self-esteem is truly the route to revolution. (The Body Shop 1997)

Roddick's revolution of female self-esteem leads directly to the contemporary guides for self-management and coaching, especially those addressed to women, whose subjectification programs and gender codes will be explicated in the following. This highly popular medium – the genre is consistently represented at the top of the best-seller lists – draws abundantly from feminist and leftist movements, promising the reconciliation of emancipation and fungibility, of self-realization and self-capitalization. These instruction booklets for successful self-marketing now make use of what was only recently brought forward as the *point de résistance* against alienation, exploitation, sexual oppression and gender hierarchies, as a resource to be socio-technologically developed. They postulate autonomy instead of regimentation, empowerment instead of control, and translate the parole of the right to difference as the obligatory distinction of “Brand Yourself!” (Peters 1997). The boundaries between criticism and affirmation blur when every objection is integrated as cybernetic feedback signalling a need for adaptation and enabling flexible endowment. Since management gurus have started propagating “creative chaos” and “liberation management” beyond hierarchies (Peters 1987; 1992), the subversion of order is part of their optimization. And what helps businesses keep up with the ever changing relationships of supply and demand, opening and closing markets, should also enable the individual, as the entrepreneur of his or her own life, to find success in the various markets for work, relationships and attention.

If the familiar system of coordinates no longer applies, it could make sense to first conduct a new survey of the terrain, rather than doggedly defending old positions or hectically taking new ones. With regard to the contemporary forms of subjectification, this means dispensing with the humanist gesture of saving the subject as with the anti-humanist pose of dismissing the subject. Instead, it is a matter of investigating how the subject is becoming a problem in the current transformations of the organization of work and life, and seeing which solutions are proposed for this problem. What needs to be analyzed, in other words, are the ensembles composed of cognition forms, discipline strategies and self-practices, which turn human beings into subjects and with which they turn themselves into subjects.

The first part of the paper traces the contours of this contemporary mode of subjectification; in the second part, I will outline, on the basis of success guides for women, whether the female entrepreneur of her self differs from her male counterpart and in which ways.

Contours of the Enterprising Self

Both *The Body Shop's* advertising campaign and the self-help literature work within the same Catch-22: On the one hand, they appeal to their audience as an authority who knows what is good for them. On the other hand, they cultivate mistrust in any external definition and preach nothing but "Be yourself!" The performative contradiction reflects a fundamental paradox of all subjectification: That self, which should recognize and value itself, acting in its own unique interests, derives its ability to act from those same authorities from which it must become autonomous (Butler 1997). It is neither solely an independent opponent, nor is it a compliant pawn for intervention by external powers, but also the result of that intervention. Its creation coincides with its subjection.

Louis Althusser (1971: 163) has characterized the societal constitution of the subject as an invocation. In his famous scene, a police officer calls out to a passer-by in the street with the words, "Hey, you there!" The passer-by turns around and in this physical turning becomes a subject, recognizing that the interpellation was meant precisely for him. Remove the example of state authorities and substitute the authoritative voice of the police officer with other instances, and the self-management books based on this model are understood. Whoever turns to them for advice is convinced that they have something to say to him or her. Just like advertisements that compel no one to buy a particular product, no one is forced to follow the formulas of the guidebooks, but their popularity rests upon the fact that their readers, in a very literal sense, feel addressed. Just as the address of the police officer evokes a spontaneous feeling of guilt, the recognition of which and the becoming a subject are one and the same process, the guidebooks formulate a simultaneous promise and threat. Their message, "If you follow, you will find yourself, and you will reap success and satisfaction. If you reject our advice, you will lose yourself and fail; at least, you will not achieve what you could achieve". The interpellation here is a call to work. Even in this call to work itself there is of course an accusation of guilt that is constantly present: Because there can never be an "enough" – of competence, motivation, self-esteem, and so forth – the striving of the individual, no matter how much he or she genuinely works toward that goal, remains insufficient. In every incentive to do "more" the verdict of "not enough" is hiding.

Like Althusser, Michel Foucault also grasps subjectification as a formation process in which societal organization and self-constitution bleed into one another. While Althusser characterizes this process according to a model of linguistic signification, Foucault's attention focuses more steadily upon the mechanism of external or self-guidance; upon those ensembles from forms of understanding, strategies of organization, and technologies of the self that turn humans into subjects, and with which they turn themselves into subjects. According to Foucault, the nature of a subject can be recognized based on the historical semantics and complexes of knowledge, and the

self- and social technologies that have been and are invoked for its theoretical determination and practical formation. Such a “genealogy of subjectification” (Rose 1996: 23) does not ask what the subject *is*, but rather which knowledge has been mobilized in answering this question, and which techniques have been readied in order to appropriately model it. In other words, the “genealogy of subjectification” investigates the disparate constitutions of the self within the programs of governing and self-governing.

In his lectures on the history of governmentality (2004), Foucault has shown how a new form of governmental rationality emerged in the writings of the German *Ordoliberalen* and the Chicago (economic) School after 1945, and with it a new figure of subjectification, which has distanced itself equally from the governmental rationality and the self-concepts of classical liberalism, from Keynesianism as well as from every national-socialist and Soviet totalitarianism. While the *Ordoliberalen* have striven to compose a layered economic order out of basic enterprising units; and their political program ought to produce the institutional presuppositions that promote this order, the theoreticians of human capital of the Chicago School have drawn out the logic of competition even further, and have radicalized it to a general model of characterizing human action. These works especially, and Foucault’s interpretation of them, are of importance here. The theory of human capital is less interested in the societal institutions than in individual behavior. Its main characteristic is the “economical imperialism” (cf. Radnitzky/Bernholz 1987), the expansion of economic explanations into areas of life that traditionally have not been assigned to the sphere of economics.

This expansion of the area of economic explanations corresponds to another type of discourse: in contrast to the predecessors of the social market economy who expressly argued based on norms, the theoreticians of human capital insist on the descriptive character of their investigations. They do not ask how humans *should* economically conduct their individual actions and societal cohabitation, but rather they presume that humans have always done this. Bound to this, therefore, is a greater distance to daily political business compared to West German post-war liberalism. American neoliberalism

does not describe itself solely and so much as a political alternative [...], but rather, so to speak, as a form of global, polymorphic, ambiguous postulation with a mooring in the left and the right. It is a form of a utopian center that is newly activated again and again. (Foucault 2004: 304)

The theory of human capital does not show itself to be an answer to a specific historical situation, but rather it appears with the claim of universal validity. Its explanation should not only be able to describe the actions of every human, but also human action in its entirety.

Not least, it is this gesture of removing the constraints, or the orientation upon a science of behavior that goes far beyond a mere methodological individualism that motivates Foucault’s interest in *The Economic Approach to Human Behavior* (Becker 1976). From the writings of especially Gary S. Becker he deciphers the rationality of neoliberal governmentality in its clearest, i.e. most radical, form, and dissects from it the “entrepreneur himself” as its nucleus, “who is his own capital, his own producer, his own source of property” (Foucault 2004: 314).

The individual appears here as an economic institution whose existence, similar to a business venture, is dependent upon a plurality of choices of action. Whatever one does, one could also leave it undone or choose to do something else. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that one will choose the option that one assumes corresponds best to one's preferences. The *enterprising self* is above all a being who unceasingly makes decisions, a *Homo oeconomicus*, who is occupied in every expression of life with the allocation of scarce means to the quest toward competing goals.

This schema of rationality may be a highly inadequate description of the actual behavior of the individual; however, it possesses eminent political implications. If one is constantly seeking to maximize one's benefit, one's actions can be steered by decreasing or increasing the costs, thus changing the overall calculations. *Homo oeconomicus* is therefore also someone "who is governable in an eminent way" (Foucault 2004: 372). If there is no behavior that cannot be described in a cost-benefit-calculation, then humans have no other option in any of their actions but to make decisions of selecting. The economical approach always identifies humans as benefit-maximizing subjects of the market, into which they first are made, and into which they should make themselves.

As entrepreneurs of themselves, they are "competence machines" (Foucault 2004: 312–3), who produce a flow of income; these machines want to be cautiously developed, carefully guarded, and continually adjusted to the demands of the market. Even the will to know is an economical function in this perspective; and neoliberal governmentality is an art of governing that is based upon scientific expertise, systematic management of information, professional advice, and especially upon the activation of the potential for self-help. To be an *enterprising self* is also an educational program. This self must especially learn to continually inspect its investments, and if necessary, to revise. To act enterprisingly does not only mean to utilize one's own resources in a cost-benefit way, but to utilize them again and again as a reaction to innovation.

How does the discussion on the enterprising self relate to other theories of contemporary subjectification? What is the status of this form of speaking? First of all: The enterprising self has neither a name nor an address. You will not find an exemplar of this species in the offices of start-up companies or anywhere else. Nor is it what empirical social research calls a modal personality, the statistical construct of a Joe Average subject, uniting the most common personality traits in a society into one personality. Nor is this the latest type of socialization, as it might be distilled from interview studies, for instance, or psychoanalytical case studies, neither a character mask in the sense of Marxist ideology critique, nor a script in the sense of interactionist sociology. The enterprising self does not designate any empirically identifiable entity at all, but rather marks a direction for the way in which individuals are to change and be changed. It exists only in the gerund as something being produced and optimized. One is not an enterprising self, but is rather becoming one. Speaking of this self is never a description, but rather an interpellation. This appellative, if not prescriptive character, which indeed first constitutes the subject in the appeal and the prescription, also distinguishes it from an ideal type in Max Weber's sense. According to Weber's theory of scientific knowledge in terms of a certain query intention, the ideal type is to be formed by deriving particularly characteristic elements from the material of a historical social constellation:

An ideal type is formed by the one-sided accentuation of one or more points of view and by the synthesis of a great many diffuse, discrete, more or less present and occasionally absent concrete individual phenomena, which are arranged according to those one-sidedly emphasized viewpoints into a unified analytical construct. (Weber 1988: 191)

An ideal type of today is embodied, for instance, in the “manpower entrepreneur”, in which the German sociologists G. Günter Voß and Hans J. Pongratz (1998) identify a “new basic form of the commodity manpower”, which supersedes the “vocationalized mass employee of Fordism”. In contrast, the enterprising self does not represent a heuristic category that could show the way to a social structure analysis, but rather it names the micropolitical ratio, towards which the contemporary technologies of self-management and managing others are headed.

As ill-suited as the topos of the enterprising self is as an explanatory model for the actual behavior of human beings, it is just as ill-suited for reduction to a normative code. It not only bundles a canon of “do’s and don’t’s”, but also defines forms of knowledge in which individuals may recognize the truth about themselves, the mechanisms of power that they are subjected to, and the practices with which they may shape themselves. In other words, the enterprising self forms the vanishing point for the lines of force that take effect in – among others – institutional arrangements and administrative regulations, in labor and insurance contracts, in training programs and therapy concepts, in media productions and everyday performances. These lines relate to one another in complex interactions, and that which is generally called the subject, including both subjugation and the relative freedom of action, is at once the arena and the effect of these intersecting, mutually reinforcing, inhibiting or bending forces.

According to Foucault (2004: 342), the neoliberal type of governmentality is characterized in that the market functions as “a kind of permanent economic tribunal”, to which every form of governing and self-governing is held accountable. Above all, the market teaches that the best conditions to learn are where the rules of the market govern – a tautology that from a practical perspective, however, gives actions direction. Here lies the essence of the neoliberal leadership of humans. In a formulation by Mitchell Dean (1999: 160), “If the market teaches the manner in which we should guide our own conduct, then the way in which we gain access to guidance regarding our conduct will be through the construction of markets.”

Construction Manuals for Me Inc.

What Foucault demonstrates in his lectures with the theoretical works of the Chicago School finds a practical counterpart in the behavior manuals of popular guides to success. They not only convey techniques for efficient career planning, work organization or stress management in a condensed form, but as contemporary theories of prudence, they propose a comprehensive model for the relationship to oneself and provide practical exercises for modeling oneself accordingly. The fact that there is always a huge gap between ambition and reality in this does not document the ineffectiveness of the manuals, but is rather the constitutive moment of their functionality. Always lagging behind the promises of success generates a pull that is intended to move the individual never to give up economizing himself.

The omnipresence of the market, according to the suggestive message of the guides, only allows for the alternative of either competing unreservedly or being left behind in a dead-end job. The market is a space of contingency par excellence, a highly fluid maze of gaps and niches, which open up as quickly as they disappear again or are closed by the competition. Any attempt to halt the dynamic is doomed to failure. Only those who mimetically adapt to the dynamic or even seek to surpass it are successful; in other words, those who are flexible enough to grab their chance before someone else does. Becoming an entrepreneur of the self thus requires the same procedure as the founding of any existence: “Getting yourself a clearly defined product and doing some effective market research,” it says in one of the relevant guides. “To do that, you must see yourself as self-contained economic entity, not as a component part looking for a whole within which you can function” (Bridges 1994: 104). To the extent that a person creates himself as an unmistakable “Brand You”, he sets himself apart from the masses and is able to beat the competition – of course only if the personal label simultaneously guarantees quality and meets customer demands, whether the customer is a potential employer or a relationship partner. Nonconformism is to be cultivated because, economically seen, it produces a unique selling point: “Commodify Your Dissent!” (Frank/Weiland 1997). Everyone is only the same in that they are all under the constraint to differentiate themselves from the others. The alternative runs: “distinct ... or extinct” (Peters 2004: 95); it is an imperative that is second to none to the paradox of the legendary “Be spontaneous”, and functions precisely because of its irreplevisability as a generator for individualization.

The parallelization of individual and enterprise goes even further; the enterprising self is not only boss and subordinate, but also supplier and customer in one person. Just as companies are supposed to best increase their profitability by organizing their internal procedures to be market-compatible, transforming themselves into a multitude of “companies within the company” and ultimately promoting every employee to a subcontractor, the individual is supposed to be able to fully develop his entrepreneurial virtues only by applying the principle of intrapreneurship to himself and splitting himself up accordingly: as “customer of himself”, he is his own king, a being with needs that are to be recognized and satisfied by the “supplier of himself”. If the latter ignores the demands of his internal business partner, this partner will chasten him with lethargy, exhaustion or other forms of energy deprivation. If the exchange works well, however, both profit from it. For this reason, it is just as important to explore one’s own wishes as one’s own strengths and weaknesses. Like skilful personnel management, successful self-management is not based on confrontation and subjugation, but rather on clever bargaining and the ability of all the participants – employees there, personality stakeholders here – to commit to a common goal. What is required is not an authoritarian regime of the “head” over the “heart”, but rather participatory decision-making and partnership-based cooperation. Since the self, unlike a “real” business, can neither choose its staff members nor fire them for unsatisfactory performance, the self has no other choice but to reconcile the heterogeneous elements. Moralizing is counterproductive here: there are no good and bad personality stakeholders, there is only a team that either cooperates well or poorly. To overcome “success blocks”, due for instance to a disagreement between the “career stakeholder” and the “joy of living stakeholder”, one guide entitled “Coach Yourself” recommends calling an internal conference, appointing the “creative stakeholder” as moderator and se-

eking possibilities for improving cooperation in a round-table discussion. In this personality model, identity is *corporate identity*, the “certainty of having a strong team of many ‘true selves’ in oneself” (Besser-Siegmund/Siegmund 1991: 132). Invoking the image of the round table as an instrument of consensual democracy, democracy as a model of individual self-understanding, confirms Foucault’s (1986) original thesis regarding the doctrine of virtues during the time of the Roman Caesars. It states that the rationality of the government over others is the same as the rationality of the government over itself.

It is doubtful whether the conflicting souls in one’s own chest may be pacified in this way. Yet anyone who feels torn between career and the joy of living at least stays in motion. Confronting the individual with contradictory demands is a consistent feature of mobilizing the enterprising self. The catalogue of key qualifications, which the self-help literature both postulates and promises to convey, must ultimately confront even the most ambitious self-optimizer with unsolvable tasks. The structural excessive demand is intentional, as it generates the continuous tension that never lets the individual come to rest, because he must balance all progress in one direction with an equal endeavor in the other direction. Subjectification here proves to be the art of keeping a balance, yet it is a balance that does not seek an imaginary center, but rather the co-presence of extremes. What is sought here are the paradoxical hybrid figures that Manfred Moldaschl and Dieter Sauer have identified as the common learning goal of self-management manuals and innumerable coaching seminars:

the assertive team-player or the lone warrior with team ability, the customer-oriented smooth operator with corners and edges [...]; the gifted self-marketer, who places his concerns in the foreground; the empathetic moderator with a keen sense for situations that can be turned into capital; and the practical rationalist, the utilization maximizer with insights into the requirements of the whole. (Moldaschl/Sauer 2000: 221)

If it is the case that only enterprises with flexible organization, “flat hierarchies” and a high degree of innovative potential can assert themselves in the rapidly changing markets, then it would seem obvious to re-orientate the self-management of individual human capital to project management as well. “Contemporary individuals,” writes Nikolas Rose (1996: 157),

are incited to live as if making a project of themselves: they are to work on their emotional world, their domestic and conjugal arrangements, their relations with employment and their techniques of sexual pleasure, to develop a ‘style’ of living that will maximize the worth of their existence to themselves.

The self-transformation “from subject to project” (Flusser 2001) has no other goal than to constantly set itself new goals. Yet the autonomous administration and accumulation of one’s own human capital reaches far beyond professional life and recognizes neither free time nor privacy. It belongs to the definition of a task force that it is called into being with regard to a particular task, and after that, is dissolved again. Its being assembled, like its lifespan depends solely upon its function. Transferred to the relation of the self, what results is an image of not only manifold, but also highly fluid egos; an image that always recombines itself into new compositions. The widespread catch-

phrase of the theories of subjectivity in the 1980s and 90s of a patchwork identity would still have to be radicalized: The enterprising self is not the same as a patchwork quilt, which, once it has been sewn, no longer changes its pattern, but like a kaleidoscope shows a new image with every turn.

It is not the principle of non-closure per se, but rather its specific mode that distinguishes this regime of work from traditional programs of self-discipline: unlike the disciplinary subject that never stops beginning, the project manager of the self is never able to finish anything (cf. Deleuze 1990). Permanently continuing education, life-long learning, personal growth – the self-optimization imperative implies being compelled to permanently achieve more. This compulsion to outdo oneself is driven by mechanisms of competition. Because one can assert his position only for the moment and only in relation to his competitors in the ubiquitous labor, attention and relationship markets, no one can simply rest on his achievements. Today's recipe for success is tomorrow's path to ruin.

The function of the entrepreneur, as the economist Joseph Schumpeter wrote in 1942 in what has now become as classic definition, is to

reform or revolutionize the pattern of production by exploiting an invention or, more generally, an untried technological possibility for producing a new commodity or producing an old one in a new way, by opening up a new source of supply of material or a new outlet for products, by reorganizing an industry and so on. (1976: 132)

Schumpeter still believed that economic development would leave less and less room for entrepreneurial initiative and ultimately make this capitalist variant of the revolutionary subject disappear. “Rationalized and specialized office work,” he conjectured,

will eventually blot out personality, the calculable result, the ‘vision’. The leading man no longer has the opportunity to fling himself into the fray. He is becoming just another office worker and one who is not always difficult to replace. (1976: 133)

There are many indications that exactly the opposite has occurred, and Schumpeter's economic definition of the role of the entrepreneur has meanwhile become the general guideline for individual life management. Particularly because it is obvious that the individual is replaceable and superfluous, the permanent reform or revolution of the subjective “production structure”, in other words the consistent economization of all areas of life, appears to be the only chance to avoid being made redundant. Anyone who is not prepared to “fling himself into the fray”, according to the maxim of the entrepreneurial self, has already lost.

The Self-Enterprising Woman

The enterprising self, as outlined here so far, appears to have no gender. In fact, the total mobilization under the auspices of the market affects men and women equally, but not necessarily in the same way. This ambiguity also characterizes the training programs that are addressed specifically to women and promise to make them fit for the daily battle of competition. On the one hand, the values, rules of action and self-

practices that they propagate hardly differ from what the self-management books without a gender-specific target audience – and I found no titles conceived exclusively for men on the relevant bookshop shelves – offer their readers: everywhere the same invocation of autonomy, creativity and self-initiative, the same exhortation to continuous improvement and the same, virtually unbounded belief in the power of believing in oneself. Yet women’s guides to success do not proclaim a special “feminine path to fame and fortune”, which could be disregarded as mere target group marketing, but rather they maintain that the female self-entrepreneur in spe has to deal with other problems and therefore needs strategies and tactics that are different from those of her male counterparts. Accepting Althusser’s notion of interpellation, one can say: The message is identical, however women are invocable and invoked still more so in their identity as women.

The following observations are tentative, particularly since they are not based on a systematic analysis of the genre. Although I presume that the more or less random selection of titles is representative (especially due to the high degree of redundancy), I have no positive proof that they are.

What is immediately striking when we look at books such as *The Princessa. Machiavelli for Women* (Rubin 1997), *Success Suits Me (Erfolg steht mir gut, Lazarowicz 1999)*, *The Bitch Principle (Das Zickenprinzip, Haen 2000)*,¹ or *Women Take Off (Frauen starten durch, Buholzer 1999)*, is the key position of composite terms beginning with “self-”: self-esteem, self-assurance, self-respect, self-confidence, etc. The guidebook authors postulate that these are the most important characteristics to develop, yet they start out by depriving their readers of them due to their gender. As one management trainer writes, in every encounter she has had with women in countless seminars and consultations, something creeps in,

which has bound us women together over the course of the last 2000 years and continues to bind us together: a profound fear. Yes, the existential primal fear of sanctions and punishment, if I do not remain the unassuming, good little girl. (Buholzer 1999: 16)

Another author diagnoses a female “anorexia of power”:

The thing that stands between many women and the ability to get what they want is a proclivity toward self-denial. We have all seen this self-denial manifested in our behavior toward food and appetite, and in its most extreme form in the disorder anorexia. But anorexia is a symptom of a deeper aspect of self-denial: a preference for powerlessness. (Rubin 1997: 80)

These kinds of sweeping attributions are frequently intensified by the equally sweeping thesis that men are in the exact opposite situation:

Men regard new things as a challenge, and they are usually of the opinion that accepting challenges is part of the essence of being a man. Women, on the other hand, who always have an eye on their surroundings to a far greater degree than their male contemporaries (who are primarily concentrated on themselves), are afraid of exposing themselves to criticism and embarrassing themselves by attempting something that they have not (yet) mastered. The consequence of this, however, is that women are often the obstacles in their own paths. (Haen 2000: 94 5)

In these formulations, it is not difficult to recognize exactly the dichotomous gender role stereotypes that these self-help books claim to overcome. They ascribe precisely the same deficits to women that they promise to cure. The invocation of feminine power is always also that of its deficit. In this way, they not only construct an imaginary “we”, but legitimize their own position of authority: anyone who wants to become an entrepreneur of her self, according to the implicit message, must first recognize her own need for advice and get help from professional advisors. Before any recipes for success, the female self-help authors first sell themselves.

The emphasis they place on the composite terms with “self”, as mentioned above, also points beyond claiming their own role as experts. A positive and frank relationship with oneself is intended to represent the key not only to personal satisfaction, but also to professional and private success. And since the principal rule, “people do to others exactly what they do to themselves” (Rubin 1997: 28) also applies to the positive, self-appreciation, self-responsibility and self-awareness are supposed to enable coping with the ethical challenges of a multiply endangered future. “Not until we stop leaving responsibility up to external regulations and start with ourselves,” asserts the credo, “will there really be a chance for a new ethic. We must not wait, but start right away” (Buholzer 1999: 43). It would be too short-sighted to criticize this figure of the woman starting with herself as depoliticized, a narcissist revolving only around her own ego, or disregard her as a naive model of late Protestant ethics. Rather, the call for individual self-respect, as Barbara Cruikshank demonstrates, is a highly political project: “Building self-esteem,” she writes, “is a technology of citizenship and self-government for evaluating and acting upon our selves so that the police, the guards and the doctors do not have to” (1999: 91). What she illustrates using feminist program writings and social political campaigns against poverty and discrimination against women in the USA receives ample confirmation in the guides to success: the call for self-esteem, self-confidence, self-assurance, etc. – the terms are largely interchangeable – does not constitute an apolitical subject that locates its liberation in the imaginary inner space of the psyche. Overcoming feelings of inferiority, recognizing one’s own potential and acting sovereignly become the subjective precondition for an economy of governing that depends on rationally calculating individuals, and therefore stimulates rather than impedes their capability for self-direction. This is the revolution which – cited at the beginning of this essay – *The Body Shop* founder, Anita Roddick proclaimed, and it is fitting that her cosmetics line, which prints the series of business principles, “Against Animal Testing”, “Defend Human Rights”, “Protect Our Planet”, “Support Community Trade” in every brochure, has now incorporated the claim, “Activate Self-Esteem.” Without an optimistic self-image and confidence in being able to change one’s own ideas, in other words, without that which behavior psychology calls self-efficacy (cf. Bandura 1997) and uses as the foundation for numerous counseling and therapy concepts, the universally invoked entrepreneurial spirit would never get off the ground. Only those who believe in success are willing to invest – in themselves or in another project.

There is nothing personal about the “self” compounds in this sense, rather they designate a general program that applies to all, at least to all women. There are three dimensions in this: a feeling of self-worth, self-awareness, etc. is, first of all, something that one needs to have – a *binding norm*; secondly, something that one can never have enough of – an *open-ended telos*; and thirdly, something that one can enhance through methodic instruction and practice – a *learnable skill*. Although the women’s guides to

success capitalize on both the normative and the teleological, they primarily offer technologies with which their readers can improve their relationships with themselves. This particularly involves writing methods that serve self-exploration, self-affirmation and self-obligation. The enterprising self – at least in its female variant – is a literary program consisting of, among other things, autobiographical admissions, diary notes, stories of wishes and encouragement, aphorisms, a cathartic writing-out, and finally of contract texts, in which the individual makes a binding agreement with herself to reach certain goals. Taking one’s life in one’s own hands means, first of all, becoming the author of one’s own story.

As the first step on the way to becoming a “peremptory bitch”, Renate Haen, inventor of the “Bitch Principle” suggests the following exercises:

Take a piece of paper and write the heading *What do I have that men don't have?* List all the points you can think of. [...] Prepare a second list with the heading *What do men have that I don't have?* Then write down at least ten more points. [...] Compare the two lists. You may be amazed by the many advantages that you have as a woman. Keep these two lists and take a look at them again from time to time whenever you need ‘woman power’. Perhaps you have noticed that you envy men for some characteristic or another. [...] Prepare yet another list, this time with the heading *What do I find good about myself? Ten reasons why I can be satisfied with myself.* Start with the first argument that occurs to you. The moment you write it down, you will hear a voice telling you why you are wrong about that or just ‘fooling yourself’. [...] Write down everything this voice says to you until it runs out of ‘arguments’. Now write down who raises each objection: your mother? Your father? Your boss? A teacher? Your sister? Your partner? Your girlfriend? [...] With this exercise, you will find out who ‘forbids’ you to be satisfied with yourself. Once you have discovered the originators of your inner blocks, you can use the following exercise to take the wind out of their sails. Which of the three opposing voices that you identified in the previous exercise are the most important to you? Write a letter to each person. Don’t hold yourself back, but write uninhibitedly, say what you always wanted to tell this person. Berate them, if you need to, take them to pieces, and just let yourself go. (Don’t worry, you will never mail these letters.) You will notice that your letters will have a tremendously liberating effect on you. (Haen 2000: 68-166)

It continues in this style for an entire seven-week program. However, the training units are prefaced with an exhortation: “It is important, however, that you *do* the exercises – just reading through them will not help!” (2000: 63). With this form of literary self-production, disciplining and aestheticizing moments are intrinsically interwoven. Practice – doing the exercises – here means both regular and regulated repetition for the purpose of achieving perfection, as well as a playful *exercitium* intended to give one’s own life a self-chosen and thoroughly formed structure.

In comparison, Sonja A. Buholzer, business consultant and author of *Women Take Off* (1999: 99–100) adopts a businesslike tone. She recommends keeping a “personal journal of success” and writing down “at least three experiences of success each day”. Aside from this, she emphasizes the “commitment strategy” and individual “benchmarking”: “Set your goal projects for one year, for five years in writing as a contract with yourself,” she advises and immediately simplifies the matter by providing a template with lines for name, date and signature. The goals here cannot be set too high. “Break your limits!”, she urges her readers.

Unless you are prepared and determined to consciously overcome your limits every day, you will only feel woman-power in a withered version. To avoid this, you need big goals. A bar that is set too low will not allow you to jump out of the box of limitations. (Buholzer 1999: 220)

Of course, such heroic endeavors cry out for a balance, but the book even provides contract templates for periods of relaxation: “I will make a note in my agenda of when my ‘carefree days’ are,” states a relevant self-obligation. “I will reserve at least one day each month for this, and I will not tolerate anything unpleasant under any circumstances” (Buholzer 1999: 77).

Whereas the obtrusive contractualism of the guides to success – there is literally nothing that cannot be regulated per contract – represents a general characteristic of neoliberal self-management techniques and therefore is not necessarily gender-specifically coded, the no less obtrusive instructions for affirmation draw from the store of feminist empowerment strategies. This also applies to autosuggestive techniques such as “meditation with the inner jewel”, an imagination exercise with which the “peremptory bitch” in spe is to assure herself of her inner strength for “at least twenty minutes every day” for three weeks:

Imagine that your entire abdomen is filled with a gigantic, brilliantly colored jewel. Observe this jewel with your inner eye. Delight in its color, its power, its clarity, its infinitely many facets, in which radiant light breaks. Now let the energy of your inner jewel flow into your heart until it is completely filled with this loving power. (Haen 2000: 89–90).

I don’t know whether the thought of a crystalline abdomen is actually pleasant, but when it is a matter of seeking the experience of overcoming limitations, a question like this may be too prosaic.

Yet the same applies to the appeal to form networks and seek mentors. Whereas exercises such as the jewel meditation refer to self-experience oriented and/or esoteric currents in the women’s movement, the call for informal support systems ties in to concepts of self-organization and autonomous women’s projects. This means that the female entrepreneurs of themselves should systematically build up what male competitors already have and use to exclude women – old boys networks, in sociological terms: affiliated relationship networks with a high degree of loyalty outside the realm of “official” hierarchies. On the other hand, presumed specifically female forms of association and leadership are supposed to be far more suitable for meeting the demands of contemporary company organization than male cultures of dominance. Fashionable labels such as “synergetic thinking”, “emotional intelligence”, or the leadership model of “care and coach” (Buholzer 1999: 45) then emerge in this context. These are qualities that women are presumed to have developed to a far greater degree than men, due to gender-specific socialization experiences, and which should now prove to be a selection advantage in the daily survival of the fittest. Whereas thirty years ago Herbert Marcuse, and with him many others, idealized woman as the revolutionary subject, because women are allegedly less integrated in the capitalist utilization structure, the “second nature” resulting from thousands of years of oppression is now conversely supposed to enable women specifically to assert themselves in this same utilization structure. Contrary to Marcuse, who cited Angela Davis “as the antithesis of the principle of achievement”

(Marcuse 1974), the guides to success present the liberation of women as the most advanced form of this principle.

One author, for instance, invokes the superiority of the female dolphin strategy in comparison with the male shark mentality:

Dolphins swim in groups, are friendly, non-aggressive, flexible, fun-loving, lively, and yet they still defend themselves extremely well when attacked. Sharks swim around alone, attack anything and everything, are belligerent and inflexible, but they are still inferior to dolphins in a case of attack. (Lazarowicz 1999: 45)

The unmistakable lineage is found in the type of community formation that feminists of the seventies and eighties especially regarded as perhaps the most important medium for overcoming inequality and oppression and for uncovering the buried potential of each individual woman – the women’s group. In an atmosphere of open communication based on solidarity and free from male hegemony, both individual autonomy and a capability for non-hierarchical cooperation were supposed to grow, making it possible to attain precisely the soft skills that every project team depends on today.

Another author even has the audacity to recommend the survival strategies of female concentration camp prisoners as a model. “In the German concentration camps,” writes Harriet Rubin (1997: 154–5) in her Machiavelli adaptation,

women were routinely organized by their guards into groups of five. The bonds developed by the ‘fivehoods’ were one of the reasons women outnumbered male survivors throughout the camp system. They acted as mothers, sisters, daughters to each other, strengthening the will to survive.

Here empowerment becomes the heedless exploitation of past suffering.

In cynical stories like these, there is a flash of the “grammar of hardness” (Fach 2000: 114), which is also inscribed, despite all the semantics of empathy and gentleness, in the instructions for female self-optimization. Behind the rhetoric calling for cooperation instead of confrontation and suggesting a prestabilized harmony of personal development and professional career, the barely concealed scenario of a merciless battle of competition is lurking. The hymn of women’s solidarity is thus linked with an urgent appeal to limit this solidarity to those who can foster one’s own progress. Even networking can operate in a Social Darwinist way: “Surround yourself with people who are on the same path as you are and who want to win,” writes Sonja A. Buholzer (1999: 173), encouraging her readers to drop possible scruples.

Avoid dealing with the self-proclaimed victims of this world. Do not feel bad about this, but rather respect the self-responsibility of these people, too. This behavior is not unsociable and it does not indicate a lack of philanthropy. You have the right to make an uncompromising selection of people who are good for you, who have left behind the comfortable zone of unassumingness like you. (Buholzer 1999: 173)

Becoming an entrepreneur of oneself is also a desensitization program.

Mobilization of opposites

However, it would not be doing justice to these women's guides to success to regard these "behavior tenets of coldness" (cf. Lethen 1994) as their actual truth and unmask sisterly dolphin strategies and motherly mentoring as merely an ideological veil. Rather, it is precisely the permanent jumping back and forth between a grammar of hardness and a grammar of care that characterizes the training programs for the female variant of the enterprising self. The particular key that the entrepreneur of herself decides to play is left up to her own tactical calculations or her intuition, but what is important is that she is capable of playing both. Closely linked to this is the continuous switch between the affirmation and the dissolution of gender stereotypes. Here too, the contradictions are inherent to the program: the female enterprising self is just a "composition of opposites" (Rubin 1997: 66). To be able to mobilize all resources and adapt flexibly to all challenges, women must call to mind their fundamental otherness, to which end even the most traditional of all models of femininity is taken out of mothballs again: "If you want to be a good manager, first be a good mother" (Buholzer 1999: 27). On the other hand, though, they should also separate themselves from their gender and become virtuosos at identity switching, knowing how to play the men's game when necessary, yet demonstrate superiority by being able to leave this game at any time and play by their own rules. The self-management programs are not gauged to the masculinization of women or the cultivation of their femininity, just as little to whatever kind of ideal of androgyny, but rather to the sovereign accommodation to the changing demands of the customer and competition, this time this one, the next time another, and sometimes demanded by yet a third.

Gender appears as a performative act. However, unlike the inspired subversion of a feminist politics of identity, gender is not about undermining the compulsion to express clear gender-characteristics through parodistic multiplying; rather gender identity should be poised to be consistent in the service of success, and likewise the norms of flexibility should be subordinated, like any other dimension of the self. The entrepreneur of her life – like her masculine counterpart – has many genders.

The mobilization of the oppositions, and even this applies to men as well as women, corresponds to opposing strategies of mobilization: The guidebooks for success postulate in the same way a rational and a charismatic form of self-governance. On the one side, the enterprising self should be a calculating accountant of one's own life, who is a computing administrator of the costs as well as the benefits of one's own life, and on the other side, a genius of motivation, who relentlessly strives for new achievements of the highest kind, and who shoots off an ongoing firework display of creative ideas. Self-discipline and enthusing the self run parallel; this also explains the obvious incoherence of self-management programs that at the same time constantly promote both modes of optimizing. The checklists, contract formulas, and feedback systems, the releasing of passions, and the affirmation-, (auto-)suggestion- and boundary-crossing techniques all serve the disciplining control and practice. Just as the one leads the subjective striving, the other gives them the energy.

What does the mobilization of opposites mean in the context of possible resistance against this model of subjectification? Where is the place of negation, if – in the words of Harriet Rubin (1997: 58) – "love and war are not opposites", but corresponding

halves of a single strategy? Criticism of the technologies of human management faces a doubly difficult task, for these technologies consistently replace “being governed” with the command of self-governance, and dissolve contradictions into nothingness by turning self-governance into a program. In any case, the attempt to play the one side off against the other would be in vain. The attempt would only end up like the rabbit in the fairy tale, who, no matter how fast he runs, never catches up with the hedgehog, who avoids the compulsion towards identity; he is never passed by the rabbit because he doubles himself with the help of his wife. No matter which *point de résistance* the criticism of the enterprising self relates to, this self calls back to it constantly, “I’m already here.” One cannot avoid the casual pressure to self-market either through practicing heedless policies of self-interest or by consistently directing action towards the ethics of all-round responsibility, neither with male power nor with female strength, and certainly not – to quote a guide to success once more – through “an appropriate mixture of female and male brainpower at *every level*” (Buholzer 1999: 111). Perhaps something might be achieved if the temptation to throw objections against the programming of the self in a program of their own could be avoided. Freedom that is more than merely the freedom of the marketplace may only arise where we stop trying to manage it.

Notes

1 The German word “Zicke” – a female goat – roughly corresponds to the contemporary positive use of “bitch”.

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