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Entrepreneurship as the New Common Sense

We have not emerged from the “iron cage” of the capitalist economy to which Weber referred. Rather, in some respects, it would have to be said that everyone is enjoined to construct their own.
—Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval, “The New Way of the World, Part I: Manufacturing the Neoliberal Subject”

In its May 2014 issue, *Wired* magazine featured an account of the trials and tribulations of Boomtrain, a Silicon Valley start-up that was struggling to find the funds to get started up. The Netflix-style recommendation engine that Boomtrain was creating was of some interest to investors and bigger tech companies. However, these investors wanted to see the fruits of the firm’s high-end labor *before* passing along serious money. In the increasingly cart-before-horse world of investment funding, Boomtrain was thus finding it difficult to keep afloat as it tried to cash in on the Internet boom. The plucky duo at the center of Boomtrain vowed to keep at the project nonetheless. After all, hard work, risk-taking, and the ferocious challenge of a crowded, competitive marketplace were a necessary part of the high-tech entrepreneurial adventure—a series of trials that, rather than

constituting an impediment to their efforts, all but guaranteed success in the end.

Articles about entrepreneurial efforts in the tech world are the bread and butter of *Wired*, which gravitates to reports about the smarts of computer nerds and the savvy of money men, told through narratives that make it seem as if financial and social success is, in the main, inevitable in the new world of the devices and gadgets that increasingly mediate our lives. What made this article about Boomtrain distinctive is that it challenged the “fantasy that entrepreneurship—and, more broadly, creativity—can be systematized . . . that success in the startup game can be not only taught but rationalized, made predictable” (Lewis-Kraus 2014: 110). “The promise of professionalized entrepreneurship has had a particular allure in recent years,” writes the article’s author, Gideon Lewis-Kraus. “Starting a company has become the way for ambitious young people to do something that seems simultaneously careerist and heroic” (110). Yet, despite its warnings about the impossible conditions faced by tech innovators, Lewis-Kraus’s cautionary tale does little to deflate the dream of entrepreneurial success currently circulating in the world. In the context of a magazine devoted as much to the cause of the entrepreneur as to reporting on the cool new gadgets and apps, the story of the struggles faced by Boomtrain comes across as an exception to a now general and increasingly widely accepted rule: the entrepreneur has become a model of how to be and behave, and not only in the world of business. Entrepreneurship has come to permeate our social imaginaries in a way that has quickly transformed its claims and demands on us from fantasy into reality. *We are all entrepreneurs now*, or, at a minimum, we all live in a world in which the unquestioned social value and legitimacy of entrepreneurship shapes public policy, social development, economic futures, and cultural beliefs and expectations.

The ideas and ideals of entrepreneurship explored by the contributors to this issue of *South Atlantic Quarterly* constitute a new way of being and behaving in contemporary social life, the full force and social import of which are only now beginning to be felt. Its signs are all around us: from the millions of dollars expended by governments on programs and policies to support entrepreneurship to the flurry of new business books devoted to the subject (see, e.g., Tardy 2014, Sisson 2013, and Brogan 2014); from the global success of the reality TV show *Dragons’ Den*¹ to Mattel’s recent announcement of a line of Entrepreneur Barbie dolls;² and from the explosion of startup incubators and accelerators³ to the rise of programs and institutes devoted to entrepreneurship at universities around the world.⁴ Even fields commonly

thought to exist outside of the sphere of business and labor, such as artistic and cultural production, have been colonized by discourses of entrepreneurship.⁵ Entrepreneurship exists in the twenty-first century as a commonsense way of navigating the inevitable, irreproachable, and apparently unchangeable reality of global capitalism.

The concept of entrepreneurship extends back to the eighteenth century, when economist Richard Cantillon (2010) famously described the term “entrepreneur” as a “bearer of risk.” This idea of the function of the entrepreneur, reinforced in the early twentieth century by economist Frank Knight (1921) and others, has remained the same for much of capitalist modernity. Entrepreneurship was understood as an important if minor element of capitalism—the site at which individuals and small groups would take chances on hitting the economic jackpot through the invention of new products, services, and means of distribution. These risky interventions would take place within an extant social landscape in which power was mobilized and organized via states and corporations in largely predictable ways. The exciting dice toss of entrepreneurship worked only to the extent that the general operations of capital were framed by the boring logics of standard economics. To some extent, it may seem as if entrepreneurship has remained a minor practice, especially given the continued presence of large corporations offering “fixed wages” (Cantillon’s rubric for non-entrepreneurs) whose reach now extends across the globe. William Whyte’s famous investigation of the post-war corporation, *Organization Man* ([1956] 2002), which explored the collectivist ethic that shaped US businesses such as Ford and General Electric, finds its equivalent today in texts detailing the operations of giant high-tech companies, including Facebook executive Sheryl Sandberg’s best-selling corporate autobiography *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead* (2013) and David Eggers’s *The Circle* (2013), a novel about the dangers of large e-corporations and the impact of their practices on democratic life and individual privacy. The content and ethos of corporate power might have changed substantially over the past half century, but its overall form and social function seem, at least from one perspective, to have changed less than we might think or hope.

And yet, even if one cannot gainsay the continued presence and power of corporations, what *has* changed is the status of the entrepreneur, who has been thrust to the center of the economic imaginary with breathless speed and insistence. As the essays collected here flesh out, the entrepreneur stands as an exemplary figure because, as Stuart Hall and Alan O’Shea (2013: 8) characterized the commonsense importance of another contemporary

structure (neoliberalism), it provides a basis for “frameworks of meaning with which to make sense of the world.” Entrepreneurship is a sticky idea around which contradictory and multiple constellations of other ideas coalesce; like many instances of common sense, this one sutures together certain (irresolvable) contradictions and challenges, making the existing situation seem natural, to-be-expected, and thus not only bearable but (in this case) anticipated and exciting. Rather than appear as a folkloric, inconsistent, and internally riven structure of everyday logic, common sense presents itself as the spontaneous realization of rational individuals, so that instead of being seen as a singular fluke, the entrepreneur is abstracted and universalized into a model for all citizens (indeed, a model that may have the potential to replace the citizen as such). As an aspect—perhaps the *central* aspect—of how we are coming to imagine the correctly functioning society, the figure of the entrepreneur is one around which political, economic, aesthetic, and educational structures have been and are still being reshaped: this more than anything else justifies its exemplary position at the outset of the twenty-first century—a position that is quickly coming to define the normal operations of markets *and* societies around the world.

No longer a minor figure at the margins of capital, slowly propelling it in new directions, nor just a harmless buzzword of the age, soon to be replaced by another when its glow starts to fade, the entrepreneur is the neoliberal subject *par excellence*—the perfect figure for a world in which the market has replaced society, and one whose idealization and legitimation in turn affirms the necessity and veracity of this epochal transition. The figure of the entrepreneur embodies the values and attributes that are celebrated as essential for the economy to operate smoothly *and* for the contemporary human being to flourish. When self-proclaimed “startup evangelist” Anna Vital (2013) claims on her blog that soon “everyone will have to become an entrepreneur” it is only in part because of the miraculous process through which they “create value out of nothing.” In a period when many workers in the global North toil away at what David Graeber (2013) has termed “bullshit jobs”—meaningless positions in administration and service that seem to exist “just for the sake of keeping us all working” rather than actually producing anything (see also Kolbert 2014)—and older forms of work in productive industries have been automated into nonexistence, entrepreneurial engagement is held up as a way to both gain an income *and* give one’s life *meaning*: simultaneously careerist and heroic, to return to Lewis-Kraus’s (2014) Boomtrain article.

We are all entrepreneurs now; everyone will have to become an entrepreneur. If entrepreneurship has become common sense, it is in part because of

the degree to which governments have become involved in the process of creating entrepreneurial subjects. In Canada, for instance, otherwise cash-strapped governments have freely committed millions of dollars to programs to support entrepreneurial endeavors, with the majority of programs targeted at youth.⁶ The college and university system stands as one of the primary sites to which these funds have been directed. (The contributions to this issue by Dan Harvey and Miranda Joseph describe in distinct ways the entrepreneurial ethos that defines the practices and self-understanding of contemporary universities.) In Canada, an October 2013 report by the Council of Ontario Universities (2013: 1) put it bluntly: “Entrepreneurship, upon which economists say economic growth depends, has moved from the margins to the mainstream of university education.” In the United States, courses of study in entrepreneurship are among the fastest growing programs at both undergraduate and graduate levels,⁷ and universities have already come to be ranked according to the number of entrepreneurs and companies they produce as well as the level of capital raised by their students.⁸ In entrepreneurial studies programs one does not dryly study the phenomenon of entrepreneurship—track its history, understand its function and role in contemporary capitalism, and figure out what entrepreneurs do. Rather, as the description of Northern Michigan University’s (NMU) “Entrepreneurship Major” makes clear, these programs are explicitly designed to create new forms and modes of subjectivity:

At NMU, we believe entrepreneurship is a mindset . . . a way of thinking, of acting, of engaging the world in a pursuit of new opportunities in the face of risk and uncertainty. Entrepreneurs are both dreamers and doers, market leaders, as well as market finders. For us, entrepreneurship is a full contact extreme sport. Our program is geared for you to learn a skill set that will increase your likelihood of success in an entrepreneurial setting or even a corporate setting in need of entrepreneurial thinking. In our program, you will learn by doing not just by reading from a book. (NMU College of Business 2014)

Why are entrepreneurial subjects needed today? The language of risk and uncertainty that has always accompanied entrepreneurial activity has today become generalized. Everyone has to be an entrepreneur because in the absence of society—of the guarantees of formal and informal security and welfare once provided by community and state policies and programs—risk is a universal condition of existence.

There are two principal dimensions of today’s universal risk and uncertainty. First, the disappearance of sites and spaces available for accumulation engenders a desperate need for state and capital to innovate their

operations.⁹ The risk for contemporary capital today is an outcome of *both* the need for change in a period of ever more intensive and extensive processes of accumulation *and* the potential failure to make the changes necessary to be able to take advantage of new sites and spaces of accumulation. Either changing *or* standing still may result in failure; success, on the other hand, has become far more difficult in a period marked by increasingly limited possibilities of growth. For late capitalism, entrepreneurial subjects are ideal ones, as they make minimal demands on the state while also working tirelessly to ferret out new possibilities for profit within a system whose logics have brought it treacherously close to collapse.¹⁰ In this context, investments in the production of entrepreneurial subjects via the mechanisms of (for instance) postsecondary education are a small price to pay to address threats to the system from both stasis and change.

The second dimension of risk today exists for those subjects who inhabit contemporary capitalism. As a great many commentators have noted, contemporary life is lived in increasingly difficult and precarious circumstances.¹¹ Indeed, in *Precarious Life* (2006), Judith Butler names our corporeal existence as *fundamentally* precarious—a state of vulnerability shared universally, if distributed unequally across the globe, and offset only by the practices of community and society that might help make life less nakedly violent and treacherous. Such ameliorative practices—social assurances and formal insurances, for example, which developed in many countries following the Second World War—have, at least since the 1980s, had their efficacy and efficiency impeded when they have not been dismantled altogether. Though some thinkers—most notably Giorgio Agamben (1998)—treat precarity as a mode through which power is mobilized and sovereignty consolidated via directed exclusions of and within populations, precarity has in fact become a universalized condition of contemporary experience due to the practices of the neoliberal state and global finance. Entrepreneurial subjects arise in response to this universal precarity: they are actors needed by states and capital alike to invent new forms and spaces of accumulation, but they also constitute a model of subjectivity appropriate to the uncertainties that attend contemporary capitalism. Instead of chafing and complaining about the retreat of the state and the disappearance of society, or about their abandonment to the hostile environs of the contemporary labor market, entrepreneurs embrace the openings left behind by the retreat of the state as spaces wherein they can shape their own subjectivity with the greatest freedom imaginable. In this light, the disappearance of the state is not viewed as a consequence of a series of political decisions that favor the operations of cap-

italism and further the ends of an economic elite but rather as a clearing of the way for a new condition of contemporary life linked to the historical victory of liberalism and the ubiquity of new communication technologies, and the fantasies of the unfettered individual freedoms that attend both. In a perverse way, the new programs of entrepreneurship appear to meet a demand that preexisted them, and not vice versa; states appear to be doing only what their precarious subjects want them to in order to help them actualize their economic possibilities and social freedoms.

For the entrepreneurial subject, the suspension of society and its collectivist impulses has produced opportunities hitherto unavailable. For such subjects, the world is not replete with divisions of power and privilege that skew one's opportunities within it, predetermining possibilities through a game of social and economic fate. On the contrary, a society of entrepreneurial subjects confronts the world in a variant of the Rawlsian "original position," experienced now not as a thought experiment, but as reality (Rawls 1985: 223–51). As Dardot and Laval (2014b) note, for the entrepreneurial subject, "the distribution of economic resources and social positions is exclusively regarded as the consequence of trajectories, successful or otherwise, of personal realization." Entrepreneurship aims to level the playing field within societies, making success or failure no longer a condition of social differences or state power, but a matter of individual ability and desire. In the entrepreneurial imaginary, we all start on equal footing. The availability of new technologies and the accessibility of information about the general operations of the economy and society means that individuals can shape themselves through their own efforts into whatever they might want to become. The discourse of the entrepreneurial subject thus confuses formal and actual freedom; it consists of a strong belief that the formal freedoms we experience within contemporary capitalism in fact constitute an actual freedom that might challenge the limits of capitalism itself.¹²

We can see this misrecognition of the lived realities of contemporary society at work most obviously in the dreams championed by Silicon Valley, as in **Brian Chesky's (2014) call for a "Shared City"** or **Peter Thiel's Seasteading Institute and Thiel Fellowships**,¹³ and in all kinds of so-called social entrepreneurship as well. In his "Shared City" manifesto, Chesky (founder of the hospitality start-up AirBnB and proponent of the sharing economy and collaborative consumption)¹⁴ laments the loss of community in modern, urban societies, and calls for new forms of community fostered through the sharing economy via companies like AirBnB, Uber, Lyft, and others. Chesky (2014) hopes to "foster and strengthen community [and] bring back the

idea of cities as villages,” in which “people become micro-entrepreneurs, and local mom and pops flourish once again.” Thiel (cofounder of PayPal and a serial entrepreneur) cofounded the libertarian Seasteading Institute in 2008; the organization has as its goal “the creation of ocean city-states in order to advance humanity through innovative startup governments” (Seasteading Institute 2012). The Thiel Fellowship program was founded in 2011 to “rethink what it takes to succeed and improve the world” by providing up to twenty young people under twenty years of age with \$100,000 each to “focus on their work . . . research . . . and their self-education,” with the caveat that they *not* attend university during the two-year fellowship. Both Chesky (in urbanism and community-building) and Thiel (in education and governance) imagine a better, more fulfilling world peopled by autopoietic microentrepreneurs—enterprising citizens free to take up and solve any challenge outside the constraints of race, gender, sexuality, class, and history. Such technologically mediated utopian desires remain stuck at the level of logistical form—centered around circulation, distribution, and consumption—rather than engaged in generating real change at the levels of production, labor, or value. They constitute attempts to rethink *process* without ever questioning the *system* in which those processes operate; and rather than imagining different futures, they remain trapped in a perpetual present, a cycle of unending creative destruction in which nothing fundamental can ever change. At the same time, with their calls to reshape how we imagine education, urban life, and government, they participate directly in expanding the field of enterprise far beyond Silicon Valley.

It is important to insist on the ways in which entrepreneurial subjectivity presents as potentially available to every segment of society and form of economic activity. In *Why Don't American Cities Burn*, Michael Katz (2012) describes in detail the shift of the language and social technologies used to name and address the problems of the crumbling cores of US cities and the poor who inhabit these spaces. From the 1970s to the present, the term *underclass*, “a concept covering up the old idea of the ‘undeserving poor’ with a veneer of social science,” gave way to a celebration of “the entrepreneurial energy and talent latent within poor people who were waiting for a spark of opportunity to transform their lives” (Katz 2012: 101).¹⁵ An important step in this shift in the United States was the insistence in a series of articles by Harvard business professor Michael E. Porter (1995) about the entrepreneurial energies in inner-city communities—energies that simply needed the right kind of business-friendly programs to enable them to flourish, thereby producing the black and Hispanic middle-classes that generations of govern-

ment programs had failed to create. For Porter, it was clear that “today’s large and growing pool of talented minority managers represents a new generation of potential inner city entrepreneurs” (62). The expansion of programs designed to encourage poor entrepreneurs in the United States was mirrored by similar poverty-reduction strategies around the world, most notably by Nobel Prize winning economist Muhammed Yunus, who had helped found Grameen Bank, an organization designed to give loans to poor entrepreneurs.¹⁶ In the words of C. K. Prahad (2006: 1), another business professor intent on saving the poor by including them in the world of profits, “if we stop thinking of the poor as victims or as a burden and start recognizing them as resilient and creative entrepreneurs and value-conscious consumers, a whole new world of opportunity will open up.” Of course, as Silvia Federici (2014: 239) points out, an “ideology of micro-entrepreneurship” that sees the poor as creative entrepreneurs has the effect of “hid[ing] the work and exploitation involved” in financialized poverty alleviation, as well as the links between micro-entrepreneurship and debt rather than self-creation or job satisfaction.

The reassessment of those at the bottom of the social pyramid as entrepreneurs produced two important changes that have had an impact on the whole of society. First, it helped to legitimate the rollback or elimination of government social programs designed to help the poorest members of society, including direct transfers of resources via unemployment or welfare funds. The designation of these programs as “unsuccessful”—as unable to magically square the circle of capitalist accumulation and its generation of class divisions—paved the way for experiments in underclass entrepreneurship that continue to this day. Second, and perhaps even more significantly, the designation of entrepreneur as a new ideal of contemporary subjectivity has produced a change in how the poor understand themselves. Many now feel that they have no way to escape poverty other than by becoming entrepreneurs, especially given their extremely limited alternatives. Since the discourse of entrepreneurship insists that self-volition is all that is needed to generate results in our flattened post-society landscape, the outcome is that poverty can now only be a personal failing, not the consequence of social divisions, history, and the organization of power. The erasure of any gap between entrepreneurial success and personal effort and morality and the devolution of social, political, and economic issues onto atomized individuals have powerful effects; in the case of microfinance, they have instituted what Lamia Karim (2008: 10) calls a “political economy of shame,” wherein economic success or failure translates into a discourse of honor so that “honor and shame codes act as the collateral” for microloans.

Although the development and promulgation of entrepreneurial subjectivity frequently appears, and thus often gets discussed as if it actually *is*, located in the global North, as the structures of microfinance show, this model of subjectivity has spread around the globe. Indeed, work on the global informal economy highlights the importance of an entrepreneurial spirit for making one's way as a member of this 1.8-billion-strong workforce (Williams and Nadin 2010: 364). The ten-trillion-dollar-strong do-it-yourself economy (*L'économie de la débrouillardise*), colloquially known as "System D," demands entrepreneurial, innovative, and self-reliant subjects (Neuwirth 2011);¹⁷ the traits required for the kind of celebrated entrepreneurs in Silicon Valley and Waterloo, Ontario, are just as necessary for the hawkers, importers, bootleggers, market merchants, restaurateurs, scavengers, mechanics, and other entrepreneurial subjects whose labor takes place off the books all over the world. Indeed, the prevalence of such micro-entrepreneurs suggests that they, rather than the more large-scale versions we generally point to (e.g., Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, Mark Zuckerberg), might best demonstrate new entrepreneurial forms of subjectivity. Further, if we think of the women accessing microfinance and other *débrouillards* as performing entrepreneurship in the same vein as that of the tech workers lauded in the pages of *Wired*, we may begin to think that perhaps the common sense of entrepreneurial success that I have been describing through much of this introduction, with its belief in freedom to achieve on a level playing field that exists outside the constraining barriers of privilege, in fact occupies the most privileged position of all: once again we see that some playing fields are more level than others.¹⁸ Even so, the mode of entrepreneurship that is most commonly identified in the cultural imaginary with the first-world male tech worker is a mode of subjectivity fast being adopted elsewhere. As the *New York Times* (Jacobs and Gough 2014) notes, the IPO fantasies connected to the Chinese company Alibaba are an index of a broader social development in China. "The rise of Alibaba and its founder, Jack Ma, has proved instructive for a generation of young Chinese—not just as a road map to riches, but as a lesson in entrepreneurial individualism," write Andrew Jacobs and Neil Gough, commenting that today, "thousands of young people across China are creating start-ups of their own, driven by visions of what they might do if they, too, strike it big."

One last point needs to be made: not only are we all expected to be entrepreneurs today, we are all expected to like it; from the perspective of entrepreneurial common sense, *there are no unhappy entrepreneurs*. Entrepreneurial subjects make no demands for *any* systemic change on the system

they inhabit. They inhabit it gladly, treating it as a space of unfettered possibility and excitement, and they tend *not* to fantasize different social futures, even if many entrepreneurs operate within a form of techno-utopianism in which they imagine that the combination of their activity and technological innovation will solve all the ills of both the individual subject and the planet as a whole. The dominance of entrepreneurial subjectivity therefore makes some recent assessments of affect in contemporary capitalism appear off the mark. Jane Elliott's (2013) description of personhood in neoliberalism as a form of "suffering agency," or Eva Illouz's (2007) discussion of the "cold intimacy" of capitalist life, fail to capture the excitement and enticements of entrepreneurial being. In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Jürgen Habermas (1991) describes a process by which bourgeois society divides into the ferocity and coldness of the market and the warmth and sentimentality of family life, each pressured and undone by the necessity to maintain this artificial and ultimately unworkable division. If this sharp division has broken down over time for a whole host of reasons (aesthetic and cultural as much as political and economic), the outcome is perhaps the opposite of what was imagined—not a society cold in all aspects of life, but one amenable to an active existence that no longer has time to occupy different affective categories at different moments.

Lauren Berlant's (2006) description of a "cruel optimism" that constitutes the dominant mode by which subjects experience contemporary society is a productive way of understanding the nature of entrepreneurial subjectivity. But here, too, a key difference remains that makes entrepreneurialism at once a more productive and a milder mode of being. For Berlant (2006: 23), a tendency exists for contemporary subjects to "choose to ride the wave of the system of attachment that they are used to" instead of leaping into new, potentially better social forms. This "reanchoring in the symptom's predictability" allows subjects to accept the limits of the quotidian and to project the capacity for change onto an unreachable horizon (31). However, as the utopian situation for the entrepreneur remains always *the present*, cruel optimism transforms virtue into vice. The affect attendant to entrepreneurialism is not one that dissipates the energies for change through a faux reconciliation with the present, as mediated by optimistic fantasies of the future. Rather, it affirms the desirability of the present circumstances that enable entrepreneurialism and equates subjects' systems of attachment with an ideal system of belonging and behaving such that, even as entrepreneurs insist on the significance of their contributions in shaping the future, they occupy an ahistorical social landscape in which time stands still.

“The new subject is the person of competition and performance,” write Dardot and Laval (2014b); “the self-entrepreneur is a being made to ‘succeed,’ to ‘win.’” The “performance/pleasure” apparatus that Dardot and Laval (2014b) outline captures the dynamic at the heart of contemporary entrepreneurship. The subject of contemporary capitalism no longer participates in a producing/saving/consuming cycle that balances the sacrifice of work with the goods and pleasures attained as its result. Instead, today’s subject participates in an economy of surplus. The demand to *produce* ever more is part of a system in which an imperative exists to *enjoy* and to *become* ever more. The injunction for maximum performance in life *and* work, exemplified for Dardot and Laval (2014b) in professional sports, has become mandatory throughout the social field: “subjects are enjoined to ‘surpass themselves,’ to ‘push back the limits’ as managers and trainers say.” The imperative for surplus constitutive of the entrepreneurial subject fundamentally alters the power dynamic in the work relationship. The management of subjectivity—its array of desires, beliefs, and behaviors—for optimal work performance, which has been at the heart of the discipline of business administration (and even more so for human resources), has become more and more important as profits have declined and affective forms of labor have become a more prominent feature of Western economies. Entrepreneurial subjectivity requires no external monitoring, no system or apparatus by means of which the individual is adapted to the needs and structures of the enterprise. Instead, the subject of production and the psychological subject are one and the same: they are always already identical, insofar as (for the entrepreneur) creating an enterprise and creating a self *is the same activity*. The endless drive to exceed one’s capacities across hitherto distinct spheres of life activity—at work, at the gym, as a parent, as an investor—creates a subjectivity that produces as much as possible in as many areas as possible, and it does so at every waking moment.

Importantly, the imperative for pleasure and performance not only attaches to success but also (and perhaps more securely) to failure. Entrepreneurs have unrealistic ideas of success and unhealthy fantasies about the productivity and necessity of failure. A study of 3000 entrepreneurs revealed that 81 percent believed that their businesses had a 70 percent or greater chance of success—a wild overestimate. In addition, entrepreneurs who have failed previously are likely to fail again: a 2009 study (see Surowiecki 2014: 36) revealed that first-time failures would come to the same end, and, indeed, that second-time entrepreneurs would fail even more often. The likelihood of failures is not buried under the ideology of success—the operant ideology

of liberal capitalism in which each and every person can become middle-class bourgeois subjects. On the contrary: entrepreneurial subjects embrace and even seek out failure as an important, even *essential*, dimension of their activity. Samuel Beckett's induction in *Worstward Ho* to "Try again. Fail again. Fail better" (2009: 81) has been taken up as a defining motto of entrepreneurial culture, which thrives on the idea of risk, and which celebrates the extreme risks that might produce short-term failures as potentially generating long opportunities and openings in the market never before imagined.¹⁹ For the entrepreneurial subject, failure might well be more important than success. The cyclical process of risk and failure enacts a classical version of Sigmund Freud's repetition compulsion: if you fail, start something new; if you succeed, launch an initial public offering, get the hell out . . . and start something new. And yet, just as with cruel optimism, the compulsion to enact failure produces a different outcome than that imagined by Freud: neither belated mastery of a traumatic event nor a form of repression in need of an outlet, the entrepreneurial repetition instead bolsters capacity and agency. The repetition of failure becomes a badge of pride, a marker of living well, of engaging in properly ethical behavior, and of having achieved the good life.

If one had to describe the vision of the world outlined by neoliberalism in a sentence, it would be this: it is now the market that supplies the state with its principles and mandate, rather than the state guiding, shaping, and supervising the market on behalf of those subjects who (at least in theory) collectively legitimate the state's actions and practices. The multiple claims and demands that the logic of entrepreneurship makes on us constitute an incredibly powerful and appealing common sense, one increasingly difficult to challenge or critique; in a world of risk and uncertainty, this logic not only offers possibilities of order and control but also makes claims on human flourishing and self-fashioning. We have now all been given the freedom to become a new kind of petite bourgeoisie, but without the constraints of bourgeois morality or the crippling desire to become anything other than ourselves; and in the process of our work as entrepreneurs, we will once and for all get rid of the limits of wage labor and its far-too-crude (and now antiquated) modes of generating value. These are class fantasies shaped to manage and disavow the very real collective challenges that we face—and not just with respect to socio-economic justice: no amount of social entrepreneurship will be able to address the ills of global capitalism, no matter how many apps and websites pop up aiming to address poverty or the maldistribution of income.

The rapid rise of the entrepreneurial subject indexes a change in the structure and organization of power with which we have yet to fully grapple.

The status of entrepreneurship as a new common sense of subjectivity and economic practice—an accepted mode through which a congruity is achieved between a responsible, moral, self-fashioning individual and an economic-rational individual—would suggest that it constitutes an ideal subjectivity for neoliberal forms of governmentality, one that it has been searching for all along. Thomas Lemke (2001: 201) reminds us that “neo-liberal forms of government feature not only direct intervention by means of empowered and specialized state apparatuses, but also characteristically develop indirect techniques for leading and controlling individuals without at the same time being responsible for them.” Entrepreneurship would appear at first glance to exemplify such a mode of indirect control sans responsibility. Yet as much as it might thus represent the smooth operations of contemporary governmentality, it may be that the fast embrace of its logics also poses a challenge and a threat to state apparatuses. While it may begin as an indirect technique of control, the discourse of entrepreneurship makes it clear that this practice lies *outside* of and beyond the claims of government. It is a mechanism of selfhood and subject formation that begins from the premise that there is no one to count on, no one who can do anything for you other than you yourself.

The production of subjects responsible only for themselves—a responsibility measured primarily via the dictates of the market—means that, from the perspective of such subjects, even a stripped-down state apparatus is one that does not properly function in the twenty-first century. Today, the state is outmoded, for whatever else the state can be it cannot be entrepreneurial by definition. The state has had to insist on the production of entrepreneurial subjects because it itself is unable to respond to the demands and insistences of a marketplace fueled by a desperate search for value anywhere and everywhere. Governments cannot be entrepreneurial, nor can NGOs. However, luckily, entrepreneurs can use their unique insights and ideas to address the built-in limits of governments, a barrier that is one of scale but also temporality. In generating subjects to address the risks faced by the state—especially risks connected to the production of value, as Melanie Gilligan and Marina Vishmidt point out in their contribution to this issue—the state hopes to shirk responsibility while netting the economic benefit of entrepreneurs. However, why entrepreneurial subjects would see government as anything other than an inefficient, expensive apparatus in an era when most apps are free and can be downloaded on one’s phone with the touch of a smartphone screen is open to question. Entrepreneurship may be simultaneously the height of neoliberal subject formation *and* its limit—a peak on the other side of which lie subjects with no fidelity or loyalty to governments or states.

We are far from the end or even significant reconstitution of the biopolitical state apparatuses that Michel Foucault analyzed so productively in his late lectures. And the downloading of responsibility onto subjects in an era in which that responsibility is configured primarily in relation to participation in the market hardly constitutes the end of the state or the creation of new subjects and communities in relation to it. And yet, should we not welcome the cracks that might appear in the operations of biopolitics at its fullest operation? Even as we might be cautious, wary, and worried about the creation of entrepreneurial subjects—for all the reasons we outline here—might there also be, strangely, openings in its rejection of a neoliberal state apparatus that has otherwise appeared to operate as if nothing could stand in its way? The mania for entrepreneurship that exists today in all manner of social, cultural, and economic practices outlined by our contributors to this issue point to a terrifyingly complete accommodation and identification of the self with the market, a brave new world made up of subjects who believe they exist in a society freed of the castes that Aldous Huxley imagined would comprise a future command economy. At a moment in which the state of power can be captured instantly by invocations of the 1 percent versus the 99 percent, this cannot help but be alarming. Still, there is a kernel of political possibility, a hint of imaginative self-reliance and rejection of the status quo, in the desire to produce one's own life, failure or no, against the dictates of class or origin, that speaks to political inventiveness and possibilities just over the horizon.

Notes

My coeditor for this issue, Dan Harvey, played an important role in shaping this introduction.

- 1 After beginning in Japan as *Tiger of Money*, *Dragons' Den* has gone on to have nation-specific versions in twenty-six countries. Along with *Shark Tank*, the American version of *Dragons' Den*, viewers in the United States have been treated to *American Inventor* and *The Profit*, British viewers can enjoy *The Big Idea*, and Chinese viewers can check out entrepreneurial wannabes on *Yíng Zài Zhōngguó* or *Win in China*.
- 2 As part of its marketing strategy, Mattel has linked Entrepreneur Barbie to eight female entrepreneurs, who act as her "Chief Inspirational Officers." They include Reshma Saujani, founder of Girls Who Code, Deborah Jackson, founder of microfunding site Plum Alley, and Gina Rudan, founder of leadership training company Genuine Insights (see Hudson 2014).
- 3 Business incubators and accelerators are intended to speed up the development of business ideas, to weed out those deemed untenable, and to link entrepreneurs with investors and potential clients; while some provide funding, many only offer guidance. Although total numbers of such organizations are not available, the United States-based National Business Incubation Association (2014) lists 2200 members from 62 countries.

- 4 A few Canadian examples include the Entrepreneurship HUB at the University of Alberta (<http://entrepreneurship.ualberta.ca/ehub>); the Wilson Centre for Entrepreneurial Excellence at the University of Saskatchewan (<http://www.usask.ca/wilsoncentre>); and the University of Toronto's Entrepreneurship Hatchery (<http://hatchery.engineering.utoronto.ca>). US examples include the National Collegiate Inventors and Innovators Alliance, which partners with 200 colleges and universities to support student and faculty entrepreneurship (<http://nciia.org>); the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee's Start-up Challenge (<http://uwmstartupchallenge.com>); and the Arthur M. Blank Center at Babson College (<http://www.babson.edu/Academics/centers/blank-center>).
- 5 Toronto alone houses two centers for entrepreneurial artists: Artscape, which offers a "Creative Entrepreneurship Program" (<http://torontoartscape.org>), and the Toronto Centre for Entrepreneurial Art and Design (<http://www.tcead.com/>). For an examination of the relationship between artistic practice and entrepreneurship, see Marina Vishmidt (2013a) and Stephen Shukaitis and Joanna Figiel in this issue.
- 6 To give one example, in 2014, the Government of Ontario pledged \$51 million to a range of programs that "provide young entrepreneurs with business skills, capital to start and grow a small business and the opportunity to gain experience and expertise through R&D internships" (Ontario Ministry of Research and Innovation 2014).
- 7 The scope of programs in entrepreneurial studies makes even a partial survey difficult. To offer just a small sense of the embeddedness of entrepreneurship as a field of study in the contemporary university, consider the now numerous centers and institutes devoted to the subject across the United States, including the Greif Center for Entrepreneurial Studies at the University of Southern California, the Wolff Center for Entrepreneurship at the University of Houston, and the Center for Entrepreneurial Studies at Stanford University. State colleges are equally well endowed with entrepreneurship centers: there are top-ranked programs of study offered by the University of Missouri-Kansas City's Regnier Institute for Entrepreneurship and Innovation and the University of Oklahoma's Center for Entrepreneurship. In 2011–12, the program offered by the University of Houston had two thousand registered students.
- 8 See, for instance, "Venture Capital Monthly," a report produced by the company Pitchbook, which ranks universities according to their ability to produce venture capital backed entrepreneurs. By this measure, the fourth best university in the world is the Indian Institute of Technology; Cambridge, Oxford, and the University of London do not place in the top fifty.
- 9 This is in essence Joseph Schumpeter's (1934: 66) oft-cited view of the need for entrepreneurs in capitalism: "the carrying out of new combinations we call 'enterprise'; the individuals whose function it is to carry them out we call 'entrepreneurs.'" Schumpeter identified five new "combinations" that entrepreneurs can undertake: new goods, new methods of production, the opening up of new markets, the creation of a capacity to use new raw materials, and reorganization of an industry (i.e., the breaking up of a monopoly situation [1934: 65–66]).
- 10 For an account of the crisis situation of contemporary capital, which includes a long-term decline in the rate of economic growth, see Wolfgang Streeck (2014: 35–64).
- 11 In addition to Beck 1992, Butler 2006, and Agamben 1998, see, among others, Southwood 2010, Fisher 2009, Davis 2006, Bauman 2004, and Harvey 2003.

- 12 See Slavoj Žižek's (2003: 122) helpful reminder of the distinction between formal and actual freedom: "Formal freedom is the freedom of choice within the coordinates of the existing power relations, while actual freedom designates the site of an intervention that undermines these very coordinates."
- 13 See www.seasteading.org and www.thielfellowship.org, respectively. For more on Thiel's ideas on education and Thiel Fellowships, see Shaffer 2011, Kelly 2012, and Griswold 2014. For more on the seasteading movement, see Mieville 2007.
- 14 For more on the sharing economy, see Gansky 2010, "All Eyes on the Sharing Economy," Nanos 2013, and Friedman 2013.
- 15 For additional details, see especially Chapter 4, "From Underclass to Entrepreneur: New Technologies of Poverty Work in Urban America," 101–50.
- 16 See Yunus 1999. For critiques of microfinance as a means of alleviating poverty and empowering women, see Karim 2011, Vishmidt 2013b, and Federici 2014.
- 17 For more on the informal economy, see Davis 2006, Neuwirth 2006, Venkatesh 2008, Williams and Nadin 2010, and Harris 2013.
- 18 For an excellent overview of the forms of exploitation and violence effaced in the common sense of entrepreneurial possibility, see Mies 2014.
- 19 Beckett's phrase from *Worstward Ho* reads, "Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better" (2009: 81). *Slate* columnist Mark O'Connell (2014) claims, "The entrepreneurial class has adopted the phrase with particular enthusiasm, as a battle cry for a startup culture in which failure has come to be fetishized, even valorized."

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