# Ideology in Neoliberal Higher Education: The Case of the Entrepreneur

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## Abstract

*Entrepreneurship skills have become a naturalised part of many curricula in higher education, especially in arts contexts. But what does the term actually mean? By investigating entrepreneurship research, and connecting it with political philosophy, we explore the ways in which the elusive figure of the entrepreneur, both in the academy and in society more generally, is far from being natural or inevitable, and is actually an elaborate type of construction with contradictory features.*

**Keywords:** *Entrepreneur; Higher Education; Neoliberalism; Ideology Critique; Arts; Music*

## Introduction

Many recent curricula and political policy drivers within sites of contemporary Anglo-American higher education involve in their development the naturalisation of a set of privileged terms or signifiers. Far from being natural or inevitable, these are actually identifiable forms of social construction that are utilized for specific ideological and political aims, particularly in the context of neoliberal educational discourse. Examples might include: the ubiquitous figure of the ‘entrepreneur’; the precise status of the term ‘widening participation’; the student as ‘consumer’ of an educational product. What links these terms together within higher education is an assumption that each is a kind of necessary good that leads to advantageous effects and consequences for students within the context of a knowledge economy. Each is posited as rooted in some

kind of incontestable reality or natural state of affairs: in the USA and UK, students pay tuition fees, so naturally they are consumers; widening participation is founded on the principle of democratic access to higher education and notions of social justice; students must prepare for the world of work in which economic opportunities can be identified and actualised, and therefore need to acquire entrepreneurial training, and so forth.

We propose that the 'entrepreneur' is one of these terms that exist on multiple, competing and often contradictory levels that need to be carefully separated and analysed; firstly at the level of language and discourse, and secondly in terms of the affective and cognitive ways that their legitimacy is sustained through performativity and individual action. Most importantly, we will also see how such terms are actually types of social construction utilized to enact certain kinds of precise cultural work, which are often explicitly political in nature. We will explain how, in the literature on entrepreneurship, this figure is both under- and over-determined, revealing both its instability as a concept, but also the manner in which this instability itself makes the term ideal for utilization within the neoliberal art school or university.

The central premise we present is that the various definitions of the entrepreneur condense a series of opposed features that serve to underpin a symbolic displacement onto the figure itself, a displacement that is sustained by the affective power of fantasy. We consider various confusions regarding the precise status and definition of the term entrepreneur, and suggest that the nebulous nature of these definitions, and the fascination they produce, point to something deeper, which we explore via approaches to ideology that have recently surfaced in different debates in political philosophy, critical theory, and feminism.

Showing how the term entrepreneurship itself condenses these series of opposites, we highlight it as a ‘symptom’ of neoliberal educational ideology, particularly regarding the way its acquisition implies a ‘levelling out’ of class differences, the building of social cohesion, and the manifestation of economic opportunity. We will examine *five* such condensed opposites: site and attribute; historical and ahistorical; cause of debt, and solution to debt; singular and generic; necessity and impossibility.

## 1. Site and Attribute

The figure of the entrepreneur has attracted significant recent attention, both within higher educational writing, and more widely across political and economic discourses. The traits, behaviours and outcomes that are said to constitute entrepreneurship have occupied an increasing volume of research that attempts to: legitimize its study (Veciana, 2007); critically understand the proliferation of entrepreneurship education in higher education (Armstrong, 2005); explore it as a societal phenomenon, and a solution to economic and social problems (Lundström and Stevenson, 2005). Across much of this research, the entrepreneur is posited as necessarily 'good’, and the 'why' of entrepreneurship is assumed as given within both developing and evolving late capitalist societies: As Aldrich and Martinez (2007, p. 292) suggest: 'no-one doubts the importance of entrepreneurship but the merits of specific approaches to its study have been the subject of prolific debate'.

Recent research attempts to categorise common entrepreneurial attributes on the one hand, as a way of creating a set of translatable and replicable behaviours, and on the other, as a way of giving some form of coherence to often competing definitions of what it is to be an entrepreneur. Pittaway and Cope (2007) found, through a systematic literature review, a lack of consensus on what entrepreneurship education actually is, while Hébert and Link (2009, p. 1)

broadly suggest that 'there may be almost as many definitions of entrepreneurship as there are students of the subject'. Identified characteristics, behaviours and attitudes are located around ideas of the creative disrupter, originating in the work of Schumpeter (2010), or as an active newcomer to business, who detects or creates business opportunities that did not previously exist, which can then be exploited to maximize profits and create a better economic environment for the consumer (Cuervo, Ribeiro and Roig, 2007). Some definitions posit the entrepreneur as an individual who locates creative mechanisms in order to augment their own wealth and power, whilst others focus on defining activity based on the creation and development of positive opportunities more widely (Szirmai, Naude and Goedhuys, 2011).

The first opposition we identify relates to one of the most important aspects of this literature, summarised as confusion between *site and attribute* embedded within the definition of entrepreneurship. Firstly, entrepreneurship is habitually constructed in a location or place within a market environment that exhibits the capacity for added value. This is perhaps natural; there are arguably always situations in which there is a latent capacity for profit generation, or the extraction of capital within a given socio-economic scenario, because, fundamentally, all markets exhibit structural inefficiencies. But what is interesting is that the site of entrepreneurship is often secondly conflated with something else, namely, a set of psychological characteristics, attributes or traits that somehow guarantee that these efficiencies *are* actually identified and exploited. Consider, for example, the following conclusion from a study funded by the Higher Education Academy (UK):

> "Performing arts could and should be at the forefront of entrepreneurship – as the skills of imaginative and creative thinking, teamwork, innovation, role play and presentation are central to this area – so we should promulgate these skills to others

> working in entrepreneurship. Entrepreneurship allows for knowledge to be developed through practice and encourages students to apply their skills and understanding to real-world problems and challenges." (Evans, 2010, p. 37)

Here the 'creativity' and 'imagination' of the artist-student is correlated with an ineffable 'entrepreneurial spirit', reappearing here as a set of hidden traits specific to the performing arts that can connect a situation to economic profit through entrepreneurial intervention. This is actually something quite different. Utilizing terminology from Hacking (2000), the term 'entrepreneur' is simultaneously socially constructed to represent both a (subjective) *object*, an (economic) site, or place in a market, *and an* idea. This, in itself, represents the first contradictory definition of entrepreneurialism.

## 2. Historical and Ahistorical

Central to the task of contemporary approaches to ideology is to situate it as a misrepresentation of reality, a distorted lens through which we experience the material conditions of the world. But both classical Marxist and post-Marxist texts concentrate on how ideology is a type of epistemological problem, how it exists and functions at the level of knowledge and discourse, and how it becomes epiphenomenal, disconnected and autonomous from the material reality it purports to represent. Ideology, for Marx, is a set of beliefs that sustains itself through certain modes of signification and language, but also points towards the hidden grounds of discourse and knowledge, and the purported rationality on which such discourses are based, a process that is instigated by conflicts of power.

Slavoj Žižek, like others, similarly posits ideology as a process of production of practices and knowledge that serve the production and legitimation of power relations. However, there is a further manoeuvre present in this contemporary

variant: the critique of ideology always points additionally to the extra-discursive, to practices that are mediated by, but not exhausted in language, and operates at the intersection between: ideology 'in itself', as a series of ideas, narratives, and discourses; ideology 'for itself', in its recursive and self-perpetuating materiality (such as the famous 'ideological state apparatuses'- like education and the law- that sustain these discourses); ideology 'in and for itself', when it penetrates into communal and the microsocial practices and becomes 'naturalised' (Sloterdijk 2003: 16-24).

And we shall follow, as does Ogbor (2000) and Jones and Spicer (2005, 2009a, 2009b) in their critical analysis of the entrepreneur, this contemporary strand of ideology critique, originating in political philosophy and psychoanalysis, which suggests that the study of ideology not only rests on the analysis of language and discourse, but also in the pre-linguistic core of ideology within fantasy structures. These are theories of ideology as additionally performative, about action and affect, or 'enjoyment' as well as knowledge, and involving selections that privilege existing power structures (Žižek 2009; Haslanger, 2012).

Following the first approach to ideology, our second contradictory opposition can be described as involving, at the level of discourse about entrepreneurship, a problematic *ahistorical gesture that works bi-directionally through history*. On the one hand, students are exposed, particularly in the arts, to exemplars of creative entrepreneurship that simply involve the backwards projection of a set of traits constructed in the present onto a past historical actor. For example, any number of canonical figures from the high art tradition have been posited as entrepreneurs (see, for example, Weber, 2004). This type of retroactivity matches traits of the historical individual involved with selective contemporary criteria, omitting those historical details, contingencies and failures that render comparison inoperative or at least arguable. But there exists here an equally

ahistorical manoeuvre, which is simply the suggestion that the socio-cultural context in which the historical 'entrepreneur' was living and working can simply be transplanted to the present in an unaltered fashion. In the arts, the capital networks that traditionally sustained the relationship between production and finance were often nascent, and completely different to those within which art and finance operate in the present day. As a celebrated example, the Renaissance composers William Byrd and Thomas Tallis were granted in 1575 a 'monopoly' on the printing and distribution of all polyphonic music in England, and in any language. This example is often cited as somehow exemplary, representing a model to contemporary musicians and composers today. But the historical contingencies and contexts of the English Renaissance, in which there was only an embryonic notion of 'competition' and indeed of a 'market' in music at all, fails to be congruent with the current highly mediatised context for the distribution of music in late modernity, embedded as it is in all manner of complex commercial copyright legislation. Despite this failure of historical translation, the figure of the artistic entrepreneur, with obvious further historical links to the artistic *impresari* of the nineteenth century, maintain a powerful hold on the social imaginary within arts education (for more on the historical links between music and entrepreneurship, see Starr, 2004).

But despite these occasional detours into deep history, entrepreneurship research implicitly maintains more contemporary Fordist communication-production relations, theorised by Marazzi (2011) as the necessary separation of the economic world of entrepreneurship from the political system more generally. Different discourses frame the entrepreneur versus those within economic and political governance. This contrasts with what Marazzi considers to be the merging, in post-Fordist neoliberalism, of mechanisms of production and communication in which this separation is disrupted. Consequently, the relationship between what entrepreneurship actually constitutes and why

entrepreneurship should be so readily accepted as a positive is ethically and critically lacking within current higher education discussions, and often ignores these important historical contingencies. Arguments against this criticism (e.g. Drucker, 1999 Shane, 2003; Roscoe, 2011) often fall back to a simple accusation of naivety in how entrepreneurship is defined in critical approaches, but more successful work identifies the so-called 'dirty' characteristics of entrepreneurship, and critiques entrepreneurial advocacy as sustaining rather than problematising existing social injustices (Ogbor, 2000, Murtola 2008; Jones and Spicer 2009a) or failing to be sufficiently ethically differentiating (Olaison and Sørensen, 2014). The continuing consequence of an uncritical adoption of entrepreneurial studies within curricula and educational strategies can therefore be seen to be reproducing some of the pernicious effects of neoliberalism, particularly vis-a-vis rising levels of financial inequality, and what Wendy Brown (2015) has memorably articulated as the rise of *homo economicus*, the subjective result of the reduction of all cultural phenomena to varieties of economic fundamentalism.

Turning from discourse to fantasy, we extend the arguments of Spicer, *et al* (2005, 2009a, 2009b) that situate the entrepreneur as a type of empty signifier that is implicated in relation to its role in reproducing social hegemony. This approach proposes that entrepreneurship is more than just an elusive concept at the level of language, but suggests that it also functions affectively as a type of 'phantasmatic smokescreen' (Kenny and Scriver, 2012) or 'illusion trick' (Alvesson, 2013), privileging certain forms of economic behaviour, and becomes dangerous when the entrepreneur-as-signifier is not analysed more deeply within political contexts (Kenny and Scriver, 2012), or as part of a social imaginary where 'common understandings' make 'everyday practices possible, giving them sense and legitimacy' (Jelink, 2015, p. 154-5).

## 3. Cause of Debt, and Solution to Debt

The neoliberal university has been extensively theorized in the recent literature on Anglo-American higher education (see, for example Maskell and Robinson (2001); Molesworth, Scullion and Nixon (2011); Docherty (2011); Holmwood (2011); Collini (2012; 2017); Williams (2013); Rolfe (2013); Wellmon (2015); Fabricant and Brier (2016); Newfield (2016)). To provide a short summary, many of the above authors' argue that higher education has become characterised by: marketisation through the introduction of student tuition fees, resulting in the pervasive notion of consumer satisfaction; an accountability framework that promotes consumerism through the guise of protecting public money; a fundamental change in the relationship between institution, teacher and learner; a focus on recruitment; income generation from research activity. Postcolonial, critical race studies, and feminist accounts of the university have also offered significant critiques of neoliberal higher education, with the additional premise that privileged historical models of the university often implied by neoliberal critiques are in themselves ethically problematic. Analyses focus on how the inherent regulation of power in university organisations reproduces practices of exclusion, and maintains epistemic violence through the governance of knowledge (e.g. Henry, 1994; Ali, 2009; Harney and Moten, 2013; Emejulu, 2017). And much of this literature intersects in a united opposition to the now dominant idea within higher education: that the university subscribes to a capitalist mode of production, existing to contribute to a knowledge economy, coupled with a political emphasis on the essential utility of knowledge.

But within higher education, now re-positioned as a market, one of the key attributes of the entrepreneur- that of the identification and exploitation of gaps in the market- becomes structurally necessary:

> 'It is the levels of uncertainty and complexity in any environment and the associated threats and opportunities that dictate the need for entrepreneurial response... Universities are facing higher levels of uncertainty and complexity in their environment as well as greater entrepreneurial pressures from within..' (Coyle, Gibb, Haskins, 2013, p.10)

The entrepreneur is posited as a catalyst in disrupting societal patterns, and the actions of entrepreneurial individuals are seen 'to change existing obsolescent societal patterns (of relations, organization and modes of production), and renders them more compatible with the changed environment' (Etzioni, 1987, p. 175-6). This is a way of positively situating the figure of the entrepreneur, and entrepreneurship more generally, as a contributor to society that can expose inefficiencies of the 'old economy', and often functions in research as a form of legitimization that ignores the social and critical contextualisation that has given rise to the figure itself (Jones and Murtola, 2012).

In this context, the third contradictory opposition present in the discourse on entrepreneurship appears when we look more closely at the connection between training, knowledge, and debt economies. There is a certain posited logic here, we suggest, that goes something like this: in order to gain access to knowledge and training, those students that are recipients of student loans must undergo an immediate change of economic status, or what has been referred to as a process of 'economic subjectification' (Lazarrato, 2012). From the start of their education the status of the student has changed: they are always-already a debtor, and this creates a state of pre-emption regarding the relationship between student, institution and projected future levels of ongoing student debt.. The institution is posited as the solution to the debt problem created for the student by the institution itself, and the figure of the entrepreneur is crucial here.

Within conventional economic rationality, if a higher education institution cannot provide ways of enabling the individual to benefit from the ‘graduate premium’ by developing necessary skills, then why would that individual want to pay for this until its value had been proven? (Newfield, 2016, p. 20). The answer is that the institution recreates the entrepreneurial figure from the historical past as both *the solution to and as a pre-emption against, a student debt problem*, which fundamentally changes the temporality of the pedagogical exchange versus one free from this pre-emptive threat. As such, this argument continues what Clegg (2010) describes as the conception of the future as empty and open in relation to the complex temporality of 'employability' in higher education discourse, and functions as an example of temporal narratives reproducing hegemonic structures (Rossatto, 2005). The educational context has advanced from developing employability skills, itself not unproblematic, to privileging the role of the entrepreneur as the guarantor against the prolongation of the student’s current debt. It is not difficult to isolate here how the entrepreneur embodies, at the ideological level, a sense of fascination and ‘enjoyment’: this is the figure that secretly has access to previously undiscovered sources of capital. As an example of this tendency, a recent author justifies the introduction into an arts institution of a curricular strand in creative entrepreneurship:

> "Only by giving emerging arts professionals a solid grounding in creative entrepreneurship can we guarantee their survival after they leave our doors, and ensure the artistic leaders of tomorrow are aware, focused and world class." (Gaunt, 2016)

The word 'guarantee' here tacitly assumes that the provision of focused artistic training is no longer enough to ensure that a student will embark on a successful career, in this case as a professional musician. Similarly, the word 'survival'

coexists within a neoliberal frame as a form of control (Giroux, 2010). It follows that entrepreneurship skills are positioned as an essential aspect of arts training that the institution is offering in exchange for student fees (Clark and Jackson, 2017). In higher education therefore, the entrepreneur is both ubiquitously present, in the injunction to be entrepreneurial, and absent; a lack of entrepreneurialism is indexed to any future failure to resolve an individual's debt burden. Success or failure in a chosen career can be linked to the level of entrepreneurship a student can demonstrate. The justification for entrepreneurial training therefore 'loops back' from a constructed future to justify itself as the solution to a current debt and future earnings problem, resembling the logic of a tautological circle. The inevitable conclusion here is that in a strict structural sense, the figure of the entrepreneur is simultaneously both the partial cause of, and the solution to, the economic subjectification of students vis-à-vis the imposition of debt.

## 4. Singular and Generic

There is a link between the legitimizing of the entrepreneur in higher education and society more generally, and the embedding of entrepreneurship in all levels of education. This is reflected in how prominently entrepreneurial training features within an educational system. The higher the legitimation, 'the more the educational system will dedicate itself to educate and train entrepreneurs' (Etzioni, 1987, p. 183). Therefore, if a society has accepted entrepreneurship as a necessary condition for social mobility and economic success, it is similarly necessarily expected that the education system will support its development. Similarly, as a characteristic of neoliberalism, entrepreneurship manifests itself in frameworks that identify the advancement of human wellbeing through free trade and free markets, private property, and individual liberty, and is subsequently seen as a natural mechanism for eradicating poverty (Harvey, 1989).

The role of education in both promoting entrepreneurial success and providing mechanisms for social mobility and sustainability focuses on how entrepreneurship can be taught and how entrepreneurs can be 'made' (see e.g. Bjerregaard and Lauring, 2012). However, programmes of study, particularly in areas where entrepreneurship education is positioned as a counter-mechanism to poverty, are unproven, or at best 'show promise', in producing entrepreneurs who are subsequently economically independent (Cho, 2015). That not every entrepreneurial endeavour will be successful may seem self evident, especially when the role of risk is considered (Aldrich and Martinez, 2007), but the promotion of entrepreneurship as a solution to economic and social issues is arguably over-emphasised: 'entrepreneurship is not a rational, orderly search process but a statistical assault of thousands of endeavours, a small subset of which is successfully advanced' (Etzioni 1987, p. 178). Nevertheless, the demand for graduates, academics and higher education institutions to demonstrate an increasingly entrepreneurial 'attitude', reproduces an uncritical 'faith in the market as a discovery process for entrepreneurs to acquire the knowledge and information that would enable them to take risks and innovate to provide new goods and services to consumers' (Lee and McBride, 2007, p. 5-6).

Even when this market is not necessarily positioned as the driver for the creative act, the entrepreneurial act manifests in the way in which the artist, in the following example a dancer, is led to understand themselves:

> Dancers create products that are not always market orientated. Instead they need to find markets for it after creating it. This requires different approaches to marketing – creating demand rather than meeting it. This therefore requires an understanding of the market, its trends and an understanding of context and what has gone before. (Burns, 2007, p.7)

Here, the rationale is maintained that entrepreneurial behaviour is required for the creative and artistic act to be successful, whether or not the individual is market-focused or not. The work created is not market-oriented and thus this maintains a perceived separation or independence from any contextual implications that may undermine artistic integrity. And by connecting the 'intellectual property' (Burns, 2007, p.8) of the act choreographic creation to the need to develop entrepreneurial behaviours, we can now proceed to our next opposition..

We can identify this if we understand how the ubiquitous (although contested) entrepreneurial attribute, that of being a ‘risk-taker’, is conflated within higher educational ideology with its opposite: one who demonstrates fiscal prudence. Undertaking an entrepreneurial education is marketed to students as a type of sensible guarantee that their loans can be paid off. It is posited as a necessary part of the preparation for the maintenance of individual responsibility in ever-changing future circumstances, where risks are involved. In the previous example, the dancer must become entrepreneurial, even if they are not idiomatically market-driven, because this is the necessary condition of survival within a future economic context. This is because the future:

> 'may be produced by forces which transcend the comprehension and capacity to act of the individual, but it is the individual's lot and duty to pay its price, because there are no authoritatively endorsed recipes which would allow errors to be avoided if they were properly learned and dutifully followed, or which could be blamed in the case of failure' (Bauman, 2007, p.4).

Entrepreneurship then, is posited as a kind of insurance policy to the student body as a whole, not to a subset that actually may become ‘entrepreneurial’: it condenses *the singular with the generic*. Entrepreneurialism is posited as a type

of risk-free approach to investing in an education. The term entrepreneur in this case condenses the singular risk-taker with the generic and prudent manager of future debt. As a further variant, empirical research has shown that people who identify as entrepreneurs are actually classifiable or reducible largely to males with a threshold socioeconomic status that have access to pre-existing capital (Levine and Rubinstein, 2013). Yet the 'skills' supposedly embodied by such individuals are assumed to be translatable in a generic sense to all students, regardless of background, geography, or economic status, and as such promote heteronormative assumptions (Ahl and Marlow, 2012).

## 5. Necessity and Impossibility

The problem of the assumed good of entrepreneurship (Aldrich and Martinez, 2007) emerges in a small number of ethically critical approaches within entrepreneurship studies that pose the often unstated question regarding the exact nature of the assumed benefit of entrepreneurial social innovation (e.g. Tedmanson, Verduyn, Essers, and Gartner, 2012; Kenny and Scriver, 2012). The appeal to social mobility and escape from poverty that often legitimizes entrepreneurial education is highlighted as an argument that often targets the vulnerable and those at the so-called 'Bottom of the Pyramid' (see Schwittay, 2011). This is problematic when we consider the way in which this functions as a mechanism linking the privatisation of public assets (higher education) with the disinvestment in socially deprived communities, and subsequently defines these populations as 'disposable' (Fabricant and Brier, 2016, p. 29-31).

This becomes relevant in terms of the earlier suggestion that situates ideology within individual action and affect, and not just in how ideology centres round the discursive formations of the famous 'superstructures' of Marx or 'state apparatuses' of Althusser. We must also consider the ways ideology ensures the perpetuity of its base, though its actions on the psychological processes of the

individual. Such approaches theorize ideology in terms of its function as a type of mask projected on top of real and irreducible social and class antagonisms that are produced by Capital itself (Laclau and Mouffe, 2014; Žižek, 2009). The fantasy construction of an organic and harmonious societal 'whole', for example, is the way many political ideologies function to seemingly protect individuals from the ineliminable structural fault lines and necessary inequalities running through capitalist societies themselves. Globalized capitalism has idiomatically created the conditions for the demise of old 'essentialist' politics and caused the proliferation of new multiple political subjectivities. New social constructions, such as the entrepreneur, are opened or foreclosed in the course of the different flows of capital, creating expansions and intensifications that are themselves manifestations of class divisions.

An ideology operates to cover up this fundamental antagonism through strategies of displacement, often involving the projection and attribution of this antagonism to some 'other' or, in a positive sense, to a saviour figure. This displacement is sustained at the level of language and discourse through processes of symbolic and often contradictory overdetermination, as has been the case with the signifier 'entrepreneur'. The constructed 'object' or figure of ideology demonstrates a set of opposing attributes, which are a symptom of the antagonism that is displaced onto it, and it is through these over-determinations that we can read its status *as* a symptom. In an ideological construction, we often see how this displacement or attribution to the 'other' often just externalises contradictions and excesses that are internal to a society itself, and through which these excesses achieve a positive 'form'- the 'other' becomes the external placeholder for the internal divisions present in all societies. Ideology therefore operates in a contradictory fashion by externalising its own internal problems and fissures.

Ideological configurations also act at more basic cognitive, somatic and affective levels, through the way that these same objects of ideology both embody and deny the impossibility of an ideology itself (Žižek, 2009) or operate as veiled pre-emptive threats (Massumi, 2015) This always relates to how ideology promotes itself as a kind of levelling agent against existing social antagonisms, how it acts as a kind of promise of security, social cohesion and democratic economic opportunity. And we also see how the critique of ideology must pay attention to the shifting dynamics of ideology construction itself; how ideologies are selected for the ability to stabilize often unethical and unequal power relations (Haslanger, 2012).

In this vein, our final opposition suggests that what entrepreneurship exactly 'is', is actually *required* to be nebulous and ineffable. It must be just indistinct enough to allow for the final overdetermination, of *necessity and impossibility*. A recent longitudinal study in the USA of career destinations of music conservatoire orchestral graduates showed there to be ca. 3,000 such graduates seeking only c.150 orchestral jobs currently advertised (Flanagan, 2008). We see then, that the tacit promise of a 'world class' career as a professional musician, dancer, or actor is, in a strict sense, not possible for each graduate (see Moore's critique of neoliberalism and the musical entrepreneur, 2016).

The final level of construction of the entrepreneur links this impossibility to a posited necessity. Only this type of extra ineffable quality provides the 'guarantee' of career success and it is precisely this emptiness that provides its essential utility as a concept. For the institutional promise to operate effectively, the exact nature of this quality must remain elusive, so that it can be credited if the student is successful, and acts as a kind of insurance policy for the institution if the student is not- it is the ‘way [neoliberal educational] ideology takes into account its own failure in advance’ (Žižek 2009, p. 127, [our

addition]). This is precisely how the construction of the term entrepreneur operates at the level of fantasy; it both embodies and denies the impossibility inherent in all models of ideology as a mask hiding the fissure of (class) difference.

The educational promise behind entrepreneurship is always predicated by the acquisition of social and financial capital that aims to overcome these irreducible antagonisms of class and economic difference. But it does so at a price. It is a logic that operates through the promotion of traits like 'risk-taking' that actually support and maintain the same institutional structures they otherwise aim to democratise; for every winner of a risk taken, there is simultaneously a loser (Harvey, 1989). And the posited solution to this problem, to this uncertainty, of the wider problem of 'guaranteeing' student success within a climate of austerity politics is seen to be - more entrepreneurialism! It is precisely the uncertainty and precarity of the student career situation, itself caused by entrepreneurial variants of neoliberalism, and the problem of the structuring of future life with debt that necessitates the need for entrepreneurialism itself. But in fact, the marriage of entrepreneurship with higher education happens at a perhaps newly evolved moment within the neoliberal colonisation of higher education, amidst rising inequality in global economic systems (Picketty, 2014).

## Conclusion

We have suggested precise definitions of what it is to be an entrepreneur, and to acquire associated entrepreneurial traits, are nebulous or often contradictory. If there is perhaps one point of agreement within entrepreneurship research it is that there is no agreement. The common justification for this lack of clarity is commonly assumed simply to be a lack of research. The essential traits of the entrepreneur are assumed to be discoverable through further scholarship, which

has hitherto failed to capture its essence. We have proposed an alternative position, namely that the competing definitions of both the entrepreneur and the constitution of entrepreneurial skills have their own particular dynamics which makes them amenable to scrutiny using the tools of contemporary ideology critique. We have shown this elusiveness is in itself the essential attribute that makes the figure of the entrepreneur suitable as a privileged signifier within neoliberal higher education.

The logic of the entrepreneur embodies a type of temporal and tautological circularity that 'has the power to produce the reality to which it responds … The future comes back to present itself in the present to trigger a reaction along a different path of action than it would have eventuated otherwise- the threat makes the future self-causing' (Massumi, 2015b, p. 23). Breaking this cycle would necessitate the abandonment of the marketised turn within higher education. We can now see how this turn, and the constructed figure of the entrepreneur, are in a precise structural sense, coextensive with each other.

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