**CALL FOR PAPERS**

**Give Us a Break!**

**Fitness, Precarity and the ‘Open’ Future in Corporate Performance Cultures**

CMS conference, Open University, UK, 2019

Convenors: Kay Greasley, Torkild Thanem and Pete Thomas

The corporate performance cultures of contemporary capitalism promise us that the future is wide open; that there are no limits; that, as long as you do what it takes to become the best version of yourself, the impossible is possible. While this mode of organization has already pervaded our everyday lives for some years, it shows few signs of slowing down or dying out. Stretch goals just keep getting more ambitious, work practices keep getting ‘smarter’, and the pursuit of optimized performance affects ever more aspects of our lives (Lupton, 2016; Moore 2018). At the same time, this neoliberal work regime is found to diminish wellbeing and engagement (Crowley and Hodson, 2014), which in turn necessitates the development of a raft of initiatives to bolster these factors.

A recent UK government initiated report on engagement illustrates this tension between performance, engagement and wellbeing by explicitly tying organizational goals to the identity and commitment of employees (MacLeod and Clarke, 2009). Consequently, staff are routinely trained and managed to cope with the stress that follows from working in a performance culture, through such things as stress management classes and sleep workshops, subsidised gym memberships and sports hours, as well as yoga, meditation and mindfulness sessions. Such efforts can make us fitter, stronger and better. However, as they seep further into our minds, bodies and social relations, they also make us vulnerable and precarious: they add tasks to our work and lives; they expand the areas and activities deemed wanting of performance management and optimization; yet, they are launched from a presumption that the pressures, perils and precariousness of performance culture can be managed and mitigated.

We may live in cynical times where most of us see through this cruel optimism (Berlant, 2011), knowing too well how much anxiety and stress is generated by the open-ended performance cultures of contemporary capitalism. Still, we keep participating in them, striving for if not necessarily desiring the impossible futures they promise us. Indeed, this reflects a fundamental ambiguity and openness in such forms of organization. As they work for some but not for others, they can neither be celebrated nor discarded as simply a sinister and dishonest mode of control.

Like Marx (but unlike Lenin) we therefore refrain from insisting that a revolutionary movement needs a theory, but we do need to understand the intricate and contradictory workings of capitalism’s performance cultures if we are to effectively critique them and challenge them. Without ignoring how the brutal honesty and openness of capitalist realism might make it more difficult to imagine the end of capitalism than the end of the world (Fisher, 2009), radical movements of thought and practice require a convincing account of the sad conditions that drag us down as well as a thorough analysis of the mechanisms that make it all so seductive. While our experiences may provoke resistance, Spinoza (1677) taught us that we can only enhance our power and freedom if we know the limits of our freedom.

With this stream, we therefore welcome contributions that interrogate the mechanisms and consequences of contemporary performance cultures and their promises for an ‘open’ future. We also encourage contributions that engage with thinking and practices that may enable us to break out of their strong-hold to create a more genuinely open future. In line with Marx’ (1845) *Theses on Feuerbach*, we particularly welcome contributions that flesh out “the sensuousness of human activity”; that show what it is like to live and work in corporate performance cultures, explore the lived practices and experiences of breaking out of them, or examine efforts to cultivate more genuinely open habits of thinking, working and living.

In order to explore these issues, we welcome submissions addressing a variety of themes and questions, which include but are not restricted to the following:

* Empirical accounts of organizational attempts to manage performance and mitigate the stresses of such programmes.
* Employee experiences of working in performance cultures, particularly those that reveal the ambiguity of such cultures and participants’ ambivalence towards them.
* Consideration and theorization of the links between work and non-work, such as the possible colonization of domains of life that were previously considered ‘private’, such as participation in exercise.
* What radical openings and movements might the sad affects of corporate performance cultures provoke, at a personal level and at a collective level involving groups, organizations and communities?
* As academics, what can we do to not simply question the performance cultures that delimit and close down our habits of thinking, writing and living but subvert them and replace them?

References

Berlant L. (2011) *Cruel Optimism.* London: Duke University Press.

Crowley M. and Hodson R. (2014) ‘Neoliberalism at work’, *Social Currents* 1(1): 91-108.

Fisher M. (2009) *Capitalist Realism.* Winchester: Zero Books.

Lupton D. (2016) *The Quantified Self.* Cambridge: Polity.

MacLeod D. and Clarke N. (2009) *Engaging for Success: Enhancing Performance Through Employee Engagement.* London: BIS.

Marx, K. (1845 [1969]) *Theses on Feuerbach*, trans. W. Lough. Moscow: Progress Publishers (available through marxists.org).

Moore P.V. (2018) *The Quantified Self in Precarity.* London: Routledge.

Spinoza, B. de (1677 [1994]) *The* Ethics *and Other Works*, trans. and ed. E. Curley. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Submission of abstracts

Please submit a 500 word abstract (excluding references, Word document NOT PDF, single spaced, no header, footers or track changes) together with your contact information to p.thomas2@lancaster.ac.uk. The deadline for submission of abstracts is January 31st 2019, and we will notify you of our decision by the end of February”.