

Ideology and the Economic Subject: The Role of the Entrepreneur within Conservatoire Education (0321)

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In recent years, many authors have sketched the various pernicious effects implicated in the introduction of the neoliberal higher education institution (see for example Collini 2012). These have included: the increasing marketization of the sector through the introduction of student fees, resulting in the ubiquity of the notion of consumer satisfaction; an increasing accountability framework that similarly promotes consumerism through the guise of the protection of public money; a fundamental change in the relationship between institution, teacher and learner; reductions in teaching grants and the promotion of 'best practice' themes within learning and teaching, and a focus on recruitment and income generation from research activity. These factors have all contributed to the construction of the now dominant idea within higher education that the university subscribes to a capitalist mode of production that exists to contribute to a knowledge economy, coupled with a political emphasis on the essential utility of knowledge. And many of these trends have crossed over from the large cross-faculty higher education institution to the art school. In amongst this debate however, Stefan Collini makes a passing reference to a subsection of publicly funded institutions that have as their main function the conservation of the past:

“A third function [for the justification of universities] is the preservation, cultivation, and transmission of a cultural tradition, [which] cuts some ice if it is understood to be confined to a small number of outstanding institutions, somewhat analogous to the case for national galleries and museums.’ (Collini 2012: 91).

And this idea of the preservation of tradition it perhaps evidenced most strongly within the music conservatoires, which will be the main focus of this paper. Such institutions, it will be argued, present somewhat of a contradiction within the wider higher educational context outlined above. On the one hand, pedagogical models within conservatoires are still dominated by historical 'Master-Apprentice' models that are seen as their primary currency. But simultaneously, and in a parallel development, the peripheral curricula in many such institutions are now firmly focused on producing graduates who can demonstrate attributes derived from corporate ideology. Students are increasingly expected to be not just artists, but 'artist-producers' and to facilitate this tendency, many conservatoires are currently embedding and validating the idea of 'creative entrepreneurship' within their academic programmes.

The main focus of this paper will be to take a critical look at the social and ideological construction of the role of the 'entrepreneur' within conservatoires, a critique that will be threefold. Firstly we sketch how this notion has arisen naturally in relation to contemporary constructions of the 'artist' as 'artpreneur' (Harvie 2013). We then link this to its manifestation within music institutions via a distinctly ahistorical gesture, which seeks to relocate in the present the notion of the artistic 'impresario', displacing it from its origins in a distinctly different set of historical circumstances and contingencies in the eighteenth to nineteenth centuries.

Secondly, we will argue that the precise function of the socially constructed role of the entrepreneur within music conservatoire education exhibits a series of contradictions and overdeterminations that

make the concept suitable for established models of ideology critique (see for example Žižek 1996). The entrepreneur, we will argue, is simultaneously *present* (the ubiquitous injunction to ‘be’ entrepreneurial) and *non-present* (the implicit threat that failure as an artist now coincides with a failure to be not entrepreneurial enough). It represents both a surplus and a lack; it is both the solution and the blockage to student progress. The figure of the entrepreneur, we will argue thirdly, also embodies a very particular kind of fascination and enjoyment. Within the current context of imposed austerity economics, we suggest that the role of the entrepreneur has been (re)constructed to perform two opposing functions. Firstly, entrepreneurship is presented as a kind of special and ineffable skill, embodying an indefinable ‘je ne sais quoi’ that has the power to unlock secret sources of capital, and in economic and artistic contexts where capital has become increasingly difficult to secure. But secondly the idea of the entrepreneur has been introduced as a kind of insurance policy against institutional failure; it is the figure and attribute constructed ‘to take into account the failure [of neoliberalized higher educational] ideology in advance’ (Žižek 1996, [our addition]).

The final part of the paper will investigate how the notion of entrepreneurship is also simultaneously embedded within the logics of student debt financing, through an interrogation of the introduction and application within higher education of the notion of the ‘economic subject’: “What is required, and cuts across the economy and modern day society is not knowledge, but the injunction to become to become an economic subject.... in the debt economy, to become human capital is to be part of the debtor relations that are understood as the archetypal relation of capitalist society exhibited in the entrepreneur itself” (Lazaretto, 2012). We will close with the suggestion that an appropriate critical consciousness within higher education needs to be introduced; one that rejects the injunction that students must become economic subjects who are ‘entrepreneurs of their own lives [...] of their own human capital’ (Lazaretto, *Ibid*).

Preliminary Bibliography

Stefan Collini: *What Are Universities For?* Penguin, 2012

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Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Verso 1989