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Mechanisms of biopower and neoliberal governmentality in precarious work: Mobilizing the dependent self-employed as independent business owners

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Abstract

In the contemporary conditions of neoliberal governmentality, and the emerging 'gig economy,' standard employment relationships appear to be giving way to precarious work. This article examines the mechanisms of biopower and techniques of managerial control that underpin—and produce consent for—precarious work and nonstandard work arrangements. Based on an ethnographic study, the article shows how a globally operating direct sales organization deploys particular techniques of government to mobilize and manage its precarious workers as a network of enterprise-units: as a community of active and productive economic agents who willingly reconstitute themselves and their lives as enterprises to pursue self-efficacy, autonomy and self-worth as individuals. The article contributes to the literature on organizational power, particularly Foucauldian studies of the workplace, in three ways: (1) by building a theoretical analytics of government perspective on managerial control that highlights the nondisciplinary, biopolitical forms of power that underpin employment relations

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under the conditions of neoliberal governmentality; (2) by extending the theory of enterprise culture to the domain of precarious work to examine the mechanisms of biopower that underpin ongoing transformations in the sphere of work; and (3) by shifting critical attention to the lived experience of precarious workers in practice.

Keywords
biopower, enterprise culture, gig economy, managerial control, neoliberal governmentality, precarious work

Introduction

Scholars have recently focused theoretical attention on neoliberalism as a distinctive governing rationality or governmentality (Brown, 2015; Dean, 1999; Foucault, 2008; Hamann, 2009; Read, 2009) and how it manifests itself in organizational power relations and the changing sphere of work and employment (Barratt, 2008; Fleming, 2012, 2013, 2014; McKinlay et al., 2012; Munro, 2012; Weiskopf and Munro, 2012; Zoller, 2008). Neoliberalism, in this literature, is viewed as a modality of governance and an order of normative reason that extends 'a specific formulation of economic values, practices, and metrics to every dimension of human life' (Brown, 2015: 30). Specifically, neoliberalism entails generalizing the enterprise form to all social relations, including human subjectivity itself (Foucault, 2008: 241). Much of the existing empirical research on the topic revolves around the notion of enterprise culture, through which market principles and commercially modeled forms of organization are introduced into employment relations (du Gay and Salaman, 1992; du Gay et al., 1996). Scholars have investigated, in particular, how 'the discourse of enterprise' prescribes particular enterprising forms of workplace identity—variations of the enterprising self (e.g. Gleadle et al., 2008)—for employees. Scholars have critically examined the identity norms, standards and ideals that the discourse proposes and seeks to impose on individuals as employees and employment seekers (Ainsworth and Hardy, 2008; Boland, 2016; da Costa and Saraiva, 2012; McCabe, 2008; Moulaert and Biggs, 2013) in different social and organizational contexts. Several scholars have also explored the ways in which these enterprising forms of workplace identity are resisted or variously enacted by employees in context-specific ways (Halford and Leonard, 2006; McCabe, 2009; Mangan, 2009; Munro, 2017; Russell and McCabe, 2015; Sturdy and Wright, 2008). Overall, these studies have highlighted the disciplinary, normalizing effects of neoliberal governmentality and the enterprise culture on employee subjectivity, demonstrating particularly how power operates in organizations through self-surveillance and self-discipline—through the 'self-disciplining subject' (McCabe, 2009; Mangan, 2009).

We know much less, however, about the mechanisms of biopower (Foucault, 2003, 2007, 2008) and the biopolitical forms of managerial control (Fleming, 2012; Munro, 2012; Weiskopf and Munro, 2012) through which neoliberalism appears to be reconfiguring the sphere of work and employment relations around 'the grain of enterprises' (Foucault, 2008: 241). By biopower, we understand here a 'nondisciplinary' form of

power that targets the lives of free individuals as populations by managing 'their environment, the milieu in which they live' (Foucault, 2003: 242–245). We know particularly little about how organizations seek to manage their workers as a workforce made up of 'enterprise-units,' enterprises for themselves (Foucault, 2008: 225), in the context of *precarious work*, that is 'employment that is uncertain, unpredictable, and risky from the point of view of the worker' (Kalleberg, 2009: 2). As a number of scholars have demonstrated, in the conditions of neoliberalism and the emerging 'gig economy' (Friedman, 2014), standard employment relationships and work arrangements 'involving stable, full-time employment with benefits and a living wage' (Vallas, 2015: 464), appear to be giving way to precarious work and new, increasingly entrepreneurial, nonstandard forms of employment (ILO, 2015; Kalleberg, 2009, 2011; Vallas, 2015). Yet, our understanding of the mechanisms of power that underpin these developments, and produce consent for the often harsh terms and conditions of employment that precarious work entails, continues to be limited.

In this article, we respond to this gap in our knowledge. Drawing on the conceptions of biopolitics and neoliberal governmentality developed in the literature on the *analytics of government* (Dean, 1999; Miller and Rose, 1990; Rose, 1999), we conceptualize managerial control as a technology of government—technology for the conduct of conduct (Foucault, 1982, 1991a)—and study how it is deployed to act upon the conduct of precarious workers to direct it to certain ends. We focus particularly on the mechanisms of *biopower* and techniques of managerial control through which precarious workers are managed as the active, productive and self-directed economic subjects of neoliberalism. The research question that guides our analysis is the following: how are workers governed as enterprise-units—as a workforce made up of individuals who reconstitute themselves and their lives as enterprises—in the context of precarious work?

The ethnographic case study on which we base this article focuses on a globally operating direct sales organization, the CloudNine Corporation (a pseudonym, henceforth CloudNine), which operates almost entirely through a network of over three million dependent self-employed workers whom the corporation refers to as 'Independent Business Owners' (IBOs). By dependent self-employment, we refer here to work in the grey zone between employment and self-employment and work relationships where the workers are formally self-employed but in fact dependent on or integrated into the organization for which they work (European Union, 2013: 25; ILO, 2003: 6). CloudNine operates through a network organization that allows it to outsource not only its sales function but also much of its day-to-day management to its self-employed distributors.

We identify and elaborate on two biopolitical mechanisms of power and managerial control that underpin the nonstandard work arrangements in our case: (1) *a contractual work design* that mobilizes the workers as free and active economic subjects through techniques of agency (Dean, 1999); and (2) *a network-based business model* that embeds the workers into a market network of socially and economically interdependent enterprises and governs them as a productive 'workforce' through techniques of performance (Dean, 1999) and community mobilization (Rose, 1996, 2000; Rose and Miller, 2008). Both of these mechanisms operate by acting upon and seeking to instrumentalize the propensities and self-regulating capacities of individuals as autonomous economic subjects—the 'homo economicus-entrepreneur' (Donzelot, 2008: 129) of neoliberal

governmentality—and to align the presumed natural tendencies of these subjects with the economic objectives of the organization. Through these mechanisms, we argue, the dependent self-employed workers are mobilized as human capital: entrepreneurs of themselves (Foucault, 2008: 226) who willingly relate to others as business partners and to their own lives as entrepreneurial projects (McNay, 2009: 63). The intervention and regulation for both of these mechanisms of biopower take place in the environment where the distributors as enterprising subjects work: the socioeconomic arrangements and interpersonal dynamics of their work.

Our study contributes to the literature on organizational power, particularly Foucauldian studies of the workplace, in three ways: (1) by building a theoretical analytics of government perspective on managerial control that highlights the nondisciplinary, biopolitical forms of power that underpin employment relations under the conditions of neoliberal governmentality; (2) by extending the theory of enterprise culture to the domain of precarious work to examine the mechanisms of power that underpin the ongoing transformations in the sphere of work in the emerging gig economy; and (3) by shifting critical attention to the lived experience of precarious workers in practice.

An analytics of government perspective on managerial control

In developing our theoretical perspective, we build on the literature on the *analytics of government* (Dean, 1998, 1999; Eräranta and Moisander, 2011; Miller and Rose, 1990; Rose, 1999), which invites us to focus our analytical attention on the conceptions of power that Michel Foucault developed in his late work on *neoliberal governmentality* and *biopolitics* (Foucault, 2007, 2008). We focus particularly on the *mechanisms of biopower* through which managerial control is exercised in organizations and employment relationships in the context of neoliberal governmentality. From this perspective, we conceptualize managerial control as a technology of government that is designed to mobilize and manage workers as the active, productive, self-directed economic subjects of neoliberalism. In doing so, we draw on and extend the emerging theory on 'biopolitical organization' (Fleming, 2012, 2013, 2014; Munro, 2012; Weiskopf and Munro, 2012). In the following paragraphs, we briefly discuss the key elements of our theoretical perspective: neoliberal governmentality as a rationality of government, biopower as a technology of power through which neoliberal governmentality operates, and managerial control as a technology of government through which neoliberal governmentality is enacted in organizations and their employment relationships.

Neoliberal governmentality

Neoliberal governmentality, in this article, refers to a distinctive rationality of government that Foucault discussed in his lectures on 'The Birth of Biopolitics' (Foucault, 2008). A rationality of government is a 'systematic way of thinking about government' (Dean, 1999: 211); a way of rendering objects of government thinkable in a way that makes them amenable to intervention, calculation and programming (Rose and Miller, 2008). Neoliberalism may thus be viewed as a *regime of truth* (Foucault, 1980: 131) that

induces effects of power by rendering the objects of power understandable and governable in particular ways. In other words, neoliberalism is a specific mode of governmentality, a mentality and order of reason, through which people are governed and govern themselves (Brown, 2015; Hamann, 2009; Read, 2009).

What characterizes neoliberalism as a governmental rationality is that it generalizes the economic logic of the market for all domains of life, redefining society and human nature in completely economic terms. A central aspect of this economization is the reorganization of all human activity and social relations around a notion of *enterprise*. Neoliberal governmentality seeks to multiply the enterprise form within markets and the social fabric and to encourage individuals to think of themselves and work on their lives as 'enterprise-units' and 'enterprises for themselves' (Foucault, 2008: 225; also McNay, 2009).

Moreover, a key invention of neoliberal governmentality is that it makes the enterprising capacities of individuals intelligible in terms of *human capital* (Foucault, 2008: 222–231). The notion of human capital is based on an assumption that people are inherently calculating subjects who apply an economic lens of costs and benefits to every dimension of their lives, and see their personal qualities, skills and social relations as a form of capital that can be 'mobilized in the search for competitive advantage' (Weiskopf and Munro, 2012: 693). It presumes and promotes competition, instead of exchange, as the organizing principle of the market and society and a variation of the homo economicus: the '*homo economicus* as entrepreneur of himself, being for himself his own capital, being for himself his own producer, being for himself the source of [his] earnings' (Foucault, 2008: 226).

Finally, neoliberalism mobilizes this active economic subject as a thoroughly autonomous and free market actor (Hamann, 2009; McNay, 2009; Read, 2009). As an enterprising self, homo economicus operates according to a principle of active self-regulation rather than passive submission (McNay, 2009). This is because neoliberalism, as a political rationality and governmental reason, needs freedom to operate. According to Foucault (2008: 63), 'it must produce it, it must organize it.' Neoliberalism thus operates through the management of freedom, deploying various technologies of biopower that leave the subject free to choose within an economized matrix (McNay, 2009).

Biopower

Biopower is a distinct, 'nondisciplinary' form of power that targets the lives of individuals and populations as free human beings 'insofar as they are living beings' by managing 'their environment, the milieu in which they live' (Foucault, 2003: 242–245). The level of intervention and regulation is not directly the individual but the 'rules of the game' in the setting where the individual operates (Foucault, 2008: 259–260). In the context of neoliberal governmentality, moreover, biopower is brought to bear on individuals as active economic subjects and their productive capacities as human capital (Foucault, 2008: 222–225).

Whereas disciplinary power targets the body of the individual, biopower targets a population of living beings *en masse* (Foucault, 2003: 242–243). While discipline is 'centripetal' in the sense that it 'concentrates, focuses, and encloses' to regulate and 'prevent everything,' biopolitical technologies are 'centrifugal' in that they continuously

expand and integrate new elements and 'let things happen' (Foucault, 2007: 44–45). Biopower, thus, functions by fostering the life of human beings as living, working and social beings (Dean, 1999: 99). In the context of neoliberal governmentality, biopower operates through mechanisms—specific sets of techniques and procedures for exercising power (Foucault, 2003: 32)—that administer life based on 'natural and economic "laws" that provide human beings with security and subsistence' but at the same time leave them free (Dean, 1999: 99).

It seems important to note, however, that Foucault's views of biopower evolved over time, and his conceptualizations of biopower take somewhat different forms depending on the specific context in which he analyzed the workings of biopolitics (Collier, 2009). He pointed out that he did not claim to offer a 'general theory of what power is' but an investigation of the set of mechanisms through which biopower operates in specific contexts (Foucault, 2007: 2). Hence, the distinction between biopower and disciplinary power might best be viewed as an analytical distinction. In practice, biopolitics operates through all forms of power, combined in 'complex edifices' (Foucault, 2007: 8), biopower and disciplinary power possibly dovetailing with each other. As Foucault (2003: 242) wrote:

> This technology of power does not exclude the former, does not exclude disciplinary technology, but does dovetail into it, integrate it, modify it to some extent, and above all, use it by sort of infiltrating it, embedding itself in existing disciplinary techniques. This technique does not simply do away with the disciplinary technique, because it exists at a different level, on a different scale, and because it has a different bearing area, and makes use of very different instruments.

In this sense, as Nealon (2008) has argued, biopower may be viewed as an intensification of power. It is a form of power that can infiltrate and intensify the operation and effects of the other modalities of power.

In the sphere of work and employment relationships, this means that the techniques of managerial control that operate through biopower do not target individual workers directly but the environment in which they operate. These types of techniques of managerial control allow the enterprising capacities of subjects to freely unfold, take their shape, and produce their effects, but also direct and channel these processes by fixing a framework and a set of parameters that define the rules of the game in the employment relationship (Venn and Terranova, 2009). In these processes, power is not primarily exerted over and through the individual by means of disciplinary mechanisms of surveillance that target the individual, which are negative in the sense that they seek to prevent, prohibit and prescribe (Foucault, 2007: 44–46). Power rather works in much more insidious ways in these contexts (Bergström and Knights, 2006; Fleming, 2013; McKinlay et al., 2012). It is exercised through techniques and procedures that mobilize workers as a population of active economic subjects, enrolling the whole life and lifestyle of the workers as a productive force (Fleming, 2012, 2014; Weiskopf and Munro, 2012).

Managerial control as a technology of government

Finally, in building our theoretical perspective, we conceptualize managerial control as a *technology of government* through which neoliberal governmentality is enacted in

organizations. Technologies of government are assemblages of persons, techniques, institutions and instruments for the conduct of conduct (Rose and Miller, 2008). The conduct of conduct refers to 'a form of activity aiming to shape, guide or affect the conduct of some person or persons' (Gordon, 1991: 2) by structuring the possible field of action of these actors (Foucault, 1982: 220–221). In the context of neoliberal government, these technologies operate particularly through mechanisms of biopower, 'governing at a distance' by creating locales, entities and persons that are able to 'operate a regulated autonomy' (Rose and Miller, 2008: 22).

From this perspective, analytical focus lies on the interventions and instruments (Rose and Miller, 2008: 11) through which power operates and managerial control is exercised, not the persons or their identities as such. For these interventions, the subject is an important instrument and 'vehicle of power' (Foucault, 1980: 98), but not in the sense of the self-disciplining subject or the docile body in the grip of inescapable disciplinary power that some critics of Foucauldian studies have discussed (Newton, 1998). Biopolitical techniques of managerial control do not necessarily seek to discipline people or make them do what somebody else wants them to do through peer discipline and self-discipline, for example. They are rather designed to improve the capacity of individuals to exercise authority over their own lives—by enabling and helping them to understand their own actions and to regulate their own conduct in specific, expedient ways. Mechanisms of biopower and biopolitical techniques of managerial control operate by producing the active economic subjects of neoliberalism 'without shattering their formally autonomous character' (Rose and Miller, 2008: 39). These mechanisms and techniques operate through the government of their freedom (Foucault, 2007: 48–49; Rose, 1999).

To sum up, in this article we set out to investigate the mechanisms of biopower and techniques of managerial control through which neoliberalism, as a particular rationality of government, is enacted in contemporary employment relations. In the empirical context of a globally operating direct sales organization, we explore and examine how precarious workers are mobilized and managed as free economic subjects of neoliberalism at a distance, and how their whole life and lifestyle is enrolled as a productive force by managing the 'environment' in which they live and work. More specifically, we focus on the biopolitical techniques of managerial control through which the organization governs its precarious workers as active economic subjects of neoliberalism.

Methods and materials

Empirical case

The empirical case study on which we base our article focuses on the CloudNine Corporation (CloudNine), which is a globally operating direct sales organization that was established in the USA about 50 years ago. CloudNine produces and markets a broad range of consumer products. It sells its products through a network of over three million self-employed, unsalaried representatives called 'Independent Business Owners' (IBOs), who de facto work for CloudNine and may best be described as dependent, self-employed workers. They are thus not legally employees but self-employed workers who are bound by the terms and conditions of their IBO agreement. They may be described as dependent

in the sense that they are offered work only if they accept that the work arrangement grants them no employee benefits (e.g. paid time off) or basic employment rights, such as the minimum wage.

CloudNine's business model and strategy are essentially based on direct selling and multi-level marketing. Distributors purchase CloudNine products and sell them directly to consumers by means of relationship referrals and word-of-mouth marketing away from a fixed retail location (= direct selling). As part of their job, distributors are also expected to recruit and 'sponsor' new distributors, and they earn override commission on the product purchases of all the distributors that they have recruited (= multi-level marketing structure). In CloudNine terminology, the distributors recruited by a distributor (sponsor) are referred to as the distributor's 'downline.' The chain of sponsors above a single distributor is referred to as the distributor's 'upline.' CloudNine distributors are thus strongly incentivized to recruit, motivate and educate new IBOs, and the sales of their downlines constitute an important part of their personal earnings.

In its promotional material (e.g. CloudNine's own YouTube channel 'We are CloudNine'), CloudNine distributorship is represented as a unique business opportunity, and most distributors start the CloudNine business to earn money—either because they are currently unemployed, earn too little in their main job, or are unsatisfied with the content or working conditions of their existing job. Closer financial analysis of the existing distributors' income levels show, however, that over time most members tend to lose rather than earn money. Understandably, then, the annual attrition rate of CloudNine distributors is high.

CloudNine represents a revealing case of the workings of neoliberal governmentality and biopower in the context of precarious work for three main reasons. First, CloudNine is well known for its strong entrepreneurial culture and corporate values that revolve around the virtues of free enterprise. Second, CloudNine works with and manages over three million distributors worldwide. The case therefore offers a particularly good opportunity to learn about the practices and techniques of biopower through which organizations seek to manage whole populations of workers. Third, CloudNine's non-standard work arrangements represent a form of precarious work that is becoming increasingly prevalent in the emerging 'gig economy' (Friedman, 2014; ILO, 2015), which allows us to explore and examine how precarious employment relations are created and maintained in the contemporary conditions of neoliberal governmentality.

Empirical materials

Empirical materials for the study comprise fieldnotes of participant observation and transcripts of personal interviews (Atkinson et al., 2001), as well as documentary material on the case organization. The participant observation for the study was carried out over a period of six months and included about 100 hours of observation. The second author joined a group of CloudNine distributors who were members of the 'CloudNine-Connection,' the largest upline in Europe. This upline organizes local, regional and international CloudNine meetings and seminars. Access to the CloudNine-Connection was gained by contacting the CloudNine headquarters for further information about the company. As a response, an upline IBO contacted the second author and invited her to his home for an informal chat about CloudNine distributorship. During the visit, the author presented herself as an academic researcher who is interested in how self-employed distributors of

multi-level-marketing companies are motivated and managed. Later, she was invited to join the weekly meetings of the local CloudNine distributors and to observe their activities in various local, regional and international meetings. By participating in the meetings and sales activities of the distributors, she could observe and investigate the workings of managerial control in practice—how the distributors were socialized, coached and trained by their sponsors; how the techniques of managerial control operated at the level of individual distributors and their downlines; and how the headquarters exercised control over the network of distributors as an organizational population in many ways. By socializing with the distributors, the author was also better able to learn about the ways in which the distributors themselves made sense of themselves and their experience as CloudNine distributors.

The fieldwork also provided the opportunity to carry out interviews with 20 currently active CloudNine distributors (D). The interviewees either approached the researcher themselves or were selected by asking the CloudNine members who participated in the study to suggest other members who might be willing to participate in an interview. The interviewees had worked as CloudNine distributors for varying periods of time and represented different levels of success. The interviews focused on the following: why the interviewees had started their CloudNine businesses; how they had been recruited; how they were motivated and supported by their upline and the CloudNine organization; the meaning and relevance of their CloudNine businesses in their work and private life; their expectations and perceived successes; and how they recruit, motivate and manage their own downline members.

The materials also include interviews with eight former distributors (FD), five friends of currently active distributors, five family members of currently active distributors, and one external critic. The length of time that the former distributors had operated as CloudNine distributors varied, ranging from four weeks to three and a half years. Their main reasons for quitting CloudNine were: low level of income; the need to instrumentalize one's social relations to earn money; and the time needed to sell, recruit, be educated, motivate others and attend the large number of formal and informal meetings. They thus offered us important insights into the lived experience of the IBOs and the criticism and resistance that the job as a CloudNine IBO generated among the distributors. The friends and family members of currently active distributors were interviewed to better understand how becoming a CloudNine distributor affected the whole life of an individual. All the interviews were audio recorded and fully transcribed verbatim.

We analyzed three sets of supplementary documentary material: (1) promotional and recruitment material (websites, videos, magazines, books and leaflets) published by CloudNine; (2) autobiographical texts produced by former CloudNine distributors; and (3) information and educational material about CloudNine and its multi-level marketing scheme published by consumer watchdog organizations. Overall, this documentary material provided us with a rich set of qualitative data for examining the nature of the CloudNine distributorship from a number of different perspectives.

Analysis

In analyzing our empirical materials, we followed the methodological procedures specified in the literature on the analytics of government (Dean, 1998, 1999; Foucault, 1991b). To identify and analyze the mechanisms of biopower through which precarious workers

were managed in our empirical case, we focused our analytical attention on the practices that were designed to 'act upon the action' of the IBOs by shaping the milieu (Foucault, 2003: 245) and the 'rules of the game' (Foucault, 2008: 259–260) in which the IBOs worked, as well as the truths and conditions that made these practices acceptable in the specific context of our case (Foucault, 1991b: 75).

From this analytical perspective, we analyzed our empirical materials in three steps. First, to get an overall understanding of the techniques of government through which neoliberal governmentality was enacted at CloudNine, we identified and mapped out the practices and techniques of managerial control through which the IBOs were managed as distributors at CloudNine. Second, using the theoretical framework that we articulated above, we investigated the power effects of these techniques and practices. We examined the ways in which the techniques and practices were deployed to shape the field of possible action for the IBOs and examined the particular conditions of possibility for agency and subjectivity that the techniques and practices sought to bring about. As a result of this analysis, we identified two key mechanisms of biopower—specific sets of techniques and procedures for exercising power (Foucault, 2003: 32)—through which the IBOs were governed at CloudNine. We refer to these mechanisms, in our analysis, as 'work design' and 'business model.' Third, we empirically elaborated on the ways in which CloudNine deployed these mechanisms to manage its distributors as active economic subjects and human capital, both at the individual and community levels.

Mechanisms of biopower at CloudNine

Based on our empirical analysis, we identify two mechanisms of biopower through which the distributors of CloudNine are governed as enterprise-units: *a contractual work design* and *a network-based business model*. Both of these mechanisms operate through techniques and practices of managerial control that are biopolitical in the sense that they seek to reinforce the vitality and productive capacities of the distributors as a workforce or a population of living human beings and human capital by shaping the economic, social and psychological conditions of their life at work according to the rationality of neoliberal governmentality (Dean, 1999: 98–101; Foucault, 2003: 242–247). Through these mechanisms, CloudNine programs the employment relationship in a way that releases and channels the 'psychological strivings of human beings for autonomy' (Miller and Rose, 1990: 26) and mobilizes the social forces of the community in a way that secures the efficient functioning of the free enterprise and serves the economic objectives of the organization. In the following sections, we elaborate on the practices and techniques through which these mechanisms operate.

Work design: Mobilizing the distributor as an enterprise-unit

Our empirical analysis suggests that the work design of the CloudNine distributor operates as a mechanism of managerial control through which the company enrolls and manages its three million self-employed distributors as free and active economic subjects

and human capital. As a technology of government, the work design functions through two particular *techniques of agency* (Dean, 1999: 167–168): contractualization and empowerment. Techniques of agency are designed to enhance and deploy people's possibilities of agency in ways that turn their desire to govern their own conduct *freely* into a productive force and valuable resource for the organization. At CloudNine, these techniques are deployed to enable the distributors to make sense of themselves and their interests as entrepreneurs.

First, the work design operates through *contractualization*. The work design is based on a legal contract of engagement—the 'Independent Business Owner (IBO) Registration Agreement'—that defines the relationship between CloudNine and its distributors as a contract between two business partners: CloudNine and the IBO as 'a self-employed independent contractor.' Hence, by signing the IBO contract, CloudNine distributors enter an intersubjective agreement about the nature and conditions of their work and thereby subject themselves to the nonstandard work arrangements that the agreement entails. The contract states: 'under your IBO Contract, you will not be treated as an employee.'

While the IBO contract specifies a set of terms and conditions that define the business relationship (e.g. the multi-level marketing scheme explained earlier), it gives the IBOs 'complete freedom' to make their own decisions about how to carry out their day-to-day work. There are no formal chains of command and control within the network of distributors that constitute the CloudNine organization, which the IBOs we interviewed also emphasized:

> Organizing every day yourself: That's when you don't experience work as work anymore, but simply as a pleasure; you love doing it. (D2)

> I always say: Nowadays, we don't go on vacation according to the calendar—we take a vacation whenever we feel like it. (D13)

In line with neoliberal governmentality, the contract thus does not enroll the distributors as workers who offer labor in exchange for a wage or salary but as 'business owners' who compete freely in the market—or rather the market that CloudNine constructs and delimits. And it is the main objective of the IBO contract to produce and guarantee this freedom (Foucault, 2008: 120) by reconfiguring the employment relationship in a way that mobilizes the IBO as an enterprise—as an economic actor who competes and engages in productive activities in the market.

Second, the work design also operates as a *technique of empowerment*: it engages the IBOs as—and promises to transform them into—active citizens and agents who are capable of being the autonomous subjects of their own lives and of taking control of their own risks (Dean, 1999: 167–168). In the next quote, for example, CloudNine makes this point clear: 'With CloudNine you have the freedom to change your life by owning your own business' (CloudNine promotional material).

In our empirical material, the IBO work design is represented as empowering, particularly in the sense that it offers an opportunity for all individuals—regardless of their

gender, background, or level of education—to 'take their lives into their own hands' (D1). CloudNine, in this narrative, is 'giving people a chance' (speech by the CEO); it offers its distributors 'the opportunity to own and build their own businesses' and to 'work on their path to success' (CloudNine promotional material). As Distributor 2 put it: '[W]hen I think of CloudNine, I think of hope for me and my family—a high quality of life, positive people, and happiness.'

Distributor 1 also explained:

> What I've learned through the [CloudNine] business [is how] to take my destiny into my own hands . . . and how to have the guts, to have the guts to say: I'm somebody, and the decisions I make are what counts, not what others say.

Becoming an IBO is thus represented as a means of gaining autonomy and agency by taking control of one's life. For workers who struggle in the job market, in particular, being an IBO is a way of demonstrating self-worth and self-efficacy in pursuing prosperity and a good life, as the following quote illustrates:

> And then [he] saw that he can do it also as a Russian [immigrant]! And he forged ahead . . . He stopped boozing, smoking, got [romantically involved with] a decent woman, got married, two kids . . . and everything thanks to his [CloudNine] business: He pulled himself out by his bootstraps! . . . So [recruiting new IBOs is essentially about] offering a chance . . . particularly for those who have little. (D8)

Consequently, through the contractual work design, the IBOs are empowered to think of 'the self as an enterprise' (McNay, 2009) and manage themselves as human capital (Foucault, 2008: 223–233). As entrepreneurs, their personal qualities, skills, expertise and vigor are to be viewed as a form of capital, a potential 'source of future income' (Foucault, 2008: 224), which should be developed and 'optimized by making rational decisions on the "investment in human capital"' (Weiskopf and Munro, 2012: 689). Hence, all the time, money and effort that an IBO devotes to the CloudNine business can be viewed as an investment in the IBOs self, as the following quote illustrates:

> It's the personal development of my wife alone that makes me think that this business is so valuable for us; it is something that money cannot buy! . . . It is unbelievable what a strong personality she has become. It's great! (D6)

Moreover, according to the logic of free enterprise, success is primarily a function of motivation, effort and determination, as the following quotes illustrate:

> This is one of the biggest and most valuable aspects for me: That I can have an impact on my income myself. Yeah, for me the most important thing is that I can define my own value. Like: 'This month you're worth 2.000 euros but next month you must earn an extra 1,000.' (D10)

> If you're willing to put in the time, effort, and hard work, the [CloudNine] experience can lead to more financial opportunity, flexibility, and freedom to determine your own path. (CloudNine promotional material)

Hence, in the interviews, the IBOs did not talk much about the products that they sell or even about their end-user customers and their needs. Instead, they reflected upon how they try to manage their human capital: how they develop themselves and coach their downline members, focus on the positive, and try to be efficient in using their scarce resources of time and energy, as in the following quotes:

> People tend to be lazy . . . it's simply a question of attitude: what do I want to achieve with this business? (D19)

> In this business, you need to encourage others. You need to be able to empower others. If you have all these energy-vampires around you, who steal your energy all day long, you have [no energy] left for yourself. How can you energize others if you yourself have no energy? . . . That's why you must be careful and avoid negative people. (D6)

The contractual work design, therefore, builds task significance and provides the IBOs with responsible autonomy. As IBOs, they can set their own goals and make their own decisions, but they must also bear the responsibility for the outcomes of their decisions. By signing the IBO contract the distributors subject themselves to rules of the game that apply in the 'framework of enterprises' (Foucault, 2008: 241) where CloudNine IBOs operate.

In this way, the work design of the IBOs mobilizes the worker as an active economic subject. The subjectivity that the work design invites the IBO to perform, however, is not that of the enterprising employee of the enterprise culture (du Gay and Salaman, 1992). The IBOs are enrolled as self-employed, precarious workers for whom life is an enterprise; they are companies of one (Lane, 2011) and the CEOs of their own lives, who must also bear the responsibility of managing the risks, uncertainties and outcomes of their own work. As one of the critical former distributors put it:

> The [CloudNine Corporation] is the only real entrepreneur in this whole marketing system. All others are dependent employees for whom no responsibility is taken nor social security contributions are paid . . . At [CloudNine] you're part of the system as an employee. You have a recruiter . . . who sets the pace and direction. You have a supplier who distributes incentives and sets the rules. (FD8)

In our case, this means that most IBOs are not making money. According to our documentary material, up to 99.6% of CloudNine IBOs do not break even, after paying for the business support material, seminar fees and travel expenses to meetings, recruitment talks and seminars. Rather, they lose money. For one former IBO that we interviewed, no regular income and no social security benefits simply meant that he got into serious debt, as he recounted:

> Running this business cost me a lot of time and money. Many years later, we were [still] paying back the debts [from investing in the business]. Many people in our downline had the same experience. We all could have gained much more by investing the same energy somewhere else. (FD8)

This is because, at CloudNine, the success and wealth of the very few distributors on top depend on the hard work and sales volume of the many lower-level IBOs of their

downlines. As IBOs, CloudNine distributors operate in the market, and, in the market, there are always winners and losers.

In line with neoliberal governmentality, then, the IBO work design is premised on a presumption that inequality is a natural, normal, even necessary, and thus legitimate relation between individuals as human capital (Brown, 2015; Foucault, 2008: 143; McNay, 2009). It is the 'equality of inequality' (McNay, 2009: 58) that stimulates market competition (Foucault, 2008: 143). And therefore, the employment relationship must also be reconfigured in a way that maximizes the creation of inequalities. This is the premise and outcome of competition (Brown, 2015: 64). Many new recruits, however, do not accept this and terminate their contracts within the first year of their distributorship. While some present themselves as 'quitters' and express feelings of guilt for 'not making it' (FD2 and FD5), others openly criticize the company, like Former Distributor 6, who ranted: '[I]t is the most unfair thing that exists! . . . I hate it!'

In sum, our analysis suggests that the contractual work design that CloudNine deploys in enrolling its distributors represents as a biopolitical mechanism of power and managerial control that mobilizes the IBOs as active economic subjects who manage themselves and their own lives according to the model of the firm and that also mobilizes them as human capital—as 'machines' that produce a stream of earnings (Foucault, 2008: 224)—who must consider the time, money and effort they devote to their work as IBOs as investments in themselves and in a better future. The contractual work design operates by releasing, framing and channeling the desires and aspirations of individuals for autonomy, self-efficacy and self-worth as a productive force in ways that serve the interests of the organization. It targets the worker at the level of employment relationship and operates by programming the employment relationship in a way that turns the propensities and self-regulating capacities of the worker into an economic resource for the organization.

Business model: Mobilizing the distributors as a network and a self-managing community

> At the beginning, I think, people go for the money! That's the reason to start this business. Today, for us, the business is about friendship, freedom, independence. (D18)

Our empirical analysis suggests that CloudNine's business model operates as a complex mechanism of power and managerial control through which the company mobilizes its distributors as a self-regulating community and a market-network of socially and economically interdependent enterprises. The mechanism operates through two mutually reinforcing techniques of government: a *technique of performance* (Dean, 1999: 168–170) and *a technique of community mobilization* (Rose, 1996, 2000; Rose and Miller, 2008). In the following sections, we show how combining these two techniques allows CloudNine to enroll and deploy the social forces of the community to create an environment that simultaneously (1) lodges the distributors within a framework of multiple interconnected enterprises (Foucault, 2008: 241); and (2) invokes the community as an antidote to the depredations of market forces (Rose, 1996: 335), or rather the stress, anxiety and interpersonal conflict that the competitive logic of the multi-level marketing scheme might bring about.

First, the business model functions as a *technique of performance* (Dean, 1999: 168–170) that mobilizes the IBOs as calculative individuals, who operate within the calculative space of the enterprise, subject to the calculative regimes of neoliberal governmentality. The business model embeds the IBOs in a market-network of interdependent entrepreneurs: the hierarchically organized network of sponsors and their downlines, which constitute the organizational population of productive subjects that CloudNine seeks to manage. The multi-level marketing scheme ties the IBOs together and mobilizes them as a community of calculating individuals who are incentivized to optimize not only their own performance but also their downlines' performance. This is because they are compensated not only for the sales that they generate but also for the purchases of their downlines, as we explained earlier. IBOs are therefore strongly incentivized to actively build and develop their downlines by recruiting new IBOs and by managing the productive capacities of their existing downlines. As a former distributor explained: 'To become successful, I need successful people around me' (FD8).

Within the calculative regime of the business model—'the frame within which decisions can and must be made' (Weiskopf and Munro, 2012: 687)—economically rational IBOs thus view their downlines first and foremost as sources of future earnings; as something that needs to be managed as human capital. As CloudNine stated in its recruitment material, IBOs normally 'sponsor' and 'help' the distributors that they recruit by offering them 'personal guidance, advice, support, and mentoring.' In practice, according to our interviewees, this sponsoring entails not only teaching the downline IBOs how to sell products and recruit new IBOs but also helping them to 'manage time efficiently,' to 'stay motivated,' to 'never give up in their efforts to succeed,' and to 'grow' as human beings and productive IBOs. The following excerpt from a speech of a successful IBO, given at a CloudNine seminar, illustrates how the IBOs make sense of their sponsorship in terms of nurturing the personal development of their recruits:

> I can only tell you: Plant the seeds, water them, water them, and water them! Sometimes I think: 'Today, I am not going to water them, it won't work out anyway.' [But if this is how you feel, water them] even more! And I bet you'll see a wonderful new flower the next morning. This is what I wish for you: many, many flowers! (D12)

At CloudNine, this sponsoring activity is organized mainly organically by the IBOs themselves and delivered through various types of training and coaching activities that take place in informal gatherings, weekly meetings, seminars and rallies that the sponsors organize for their downlines. CloudNine headquarters supports this activity by providing online training material (e.g. YouTube videos) and customer support. Moreover, successful IBOs with large downlines organize workshops for their IBOs and sell additional 'Business Support Material,' such as guidebooks on 'how-to-become-successful.'

Second, the business model also operates as a *technique of community mobilization* (Rose, 1996, 2000; Rose and Miller, 2008): a technique that is deployed to act upon the dynamics of the community and to build a community that assumes responsibility for its own 'health, happiness, wealth, and security' (Rose and Miller, 2008: 92). The basic

dynamic of the multi-level marketing scheme ties the interests of the IBOs and their sponsors together and renders them interdependent, not only economically but also socially. As one of the active distributors put it: '[Being a CloudNine IBO] is simply a business that you cannot build up on your own. You need people who support you and help you' (D14).

This interdependence creates strong person-to-person ties and allows CloudNine to mobilize the IBOs as a community, as the following quote illustrates: 'We all need family to cheer us on. We are all members of the global CloudNine family—we respect and take care of each other to foster success' (CloudNine promotional material).

In our empirical material, then, the active IBOs made sense of themselves as members of a CloudNine community—a supportive, close-knit community of '*Cloudnineans*,' (as Distributors 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 11, 16 and 20 called themselves). According to the narratives of the active IBOs, the CloudNine community is built around the entrepreneurial values of perseverance, positive thinking and continuous self-improvement. But the community is also represented as a supportive, family-like community, a community of Cloudnineans who are subjects of allegiance to a particular set of warm moral and cultural values, beliefs and commitments that can be understood 'precisely as antithetical to the "cold" mechanism of competition' (Foucault, 2008: 242). As the following quotes illustrate, being a member of the CloudNine community is like being a member of a family:

> It is like a big family . . . [W]e go a different route than most other people outside, and to do so you need to be asserted that this is the right way. And when you meet each other at the training center, maybe after a week that was not ideal, then you see that others are on stage because they have recruited. Then you do not lose faith in the business. (D6)

> It is obvious that people must support each other here, to become successful! You cannot work against each other. Whoever brings envy and resentments into this business or has knowledge of small aspects and doesn't share it, because he wants to be strong alone, fails! Either these people change, or they are sorted out. (D2)

By structuring and shaping the possible field of action of the IBOs in this way, the business model of CloudNine thus operates as a technique of community mobilization. The model operates as a technique of government that is designed to not only foster the life of the IBO as a homo economicus but also simultaneously offset or nullify the possibly destructive effects of the logic of competition, 'economic freedom,' and the market on the IBOs. As a former IBO, a vocal critic of CloudNine argued:

> CloudNine lives from the new members who start the business each month. [It] quickly realized that people don't stay for the money, because almost nobody actually earns any money. Thus, already at the beginning of the 80s, [CloudNine] started to approach the IBOs] at the emotional level. Very successfully. Common ground, dreams, hopes, forming a community, and taking distance from the rest of the world at the same time, We-feeling, led to a much stronger bond and longevity of distributorship in the business. (FD2)

From a critic's perspective, the community of Cloudnineans represents a thoroughly economized community that serves as a vivid example of the generalization of the enterprise form for the domain of social relations. In the neoliberal order of reason within

which the IBOs operate, all relationships between sponsors and their downlines become instrumental and subject to various calculations of value. All relationships are to be assessed as investments in capital that 'in one way or another can be a source of future income' (Foucault, 2008: 224). So, all new relationships can and must be viewed as potential recruits, as the following quote illustrates: 'Because whoever I cross paths with, could be my business partner in the future or my client—one of the two!' (D14).

Hence, for Cloudnineans, social relationships, free time and the self become instruments for active economic activity and for the management of the productive capacities of the individual as human capital.

Moreover, by mobilizing the IBOs as a self-managing community in this way, CloudNine is also able to tap the forces of social control that the community brings to bear on its members and thereby dovetail the positive biopolitical techniques of managerial control with the many negative disciplinary practices and techniques that 'discipline the interior of organizations' (Townley, 1994: 14). In the narratives of the critical former distributors that we interviewed, compliance with the positive entrepreneurial values and norms that bind the IBOs together, and create a strong sense of community, is continuously monitored and enforced through peer surveillance. This means that, on the one hand, positive thinking is prescribed to everybody who wants to succeed. But, on the other hand, it also means that all complaints and critical views about CloudNine and its multi-level marketing scheme are forbidden. According to the disapproving former distributors, critical voices are systematically silenced. Criticism is explicitly proclaimed as a manifestation of pessimism and lack of determination—a moral failure.

In the empirical material that we obtained through participant observation, moreover, IBOs are repeatedly encouraged to 'have faith in themselves' and to 'be positive and optimistic' about their CloudNine business. As Cloudnineans, they are urged to strive to become healthier, richer and more satisfied, in every way, both with themselves and their lives. Criticism, in this line of thinking 'creates a negative atmosphere,' 'destroys people's dreams,' and leaves people deprived of the 'chance' that CloudNine offers for aspiring individuals to improve themselves and their lives. In the IBO meetings and informal gatherings, therefore, distributors are advised to distance themselves from negative thinkers, 'killjoys' (D6), people who are 'pettifogging' (D4) and 'badmouthing' (D1).

In sum, the network-based business model functions as a mechanism of biopower and managerial control by embedding the distributors into a productive network of socially and economically interdependent enterprises—which may be viewed as a centrifugal force (Foucault, 2007: 44)—and then cushioning the IBOs from the harshness of the competitive logic of this network by invoking the community. While CloudNine does not try to control its IBOs by prohibiting and preventing certain actions, the network-based business model that it deploys generates a strong corporate culture and community that exerts social control over its members (see also Groß and Vriens, forthcoming). As CloudNine put it in its promotional material: 'You are never alone in the CloudNine business.'

Discussion

In this article, we have examined mechanisms of biopower and managerial control that generate—and produce consent for—precarious work and nonstandard work arrangements in the context of neoliberal governmentality. A better understanding of how these

mechanisms operate is important because it allows us to problematize some of our taken-for-granted ideas about how power is exercised in employment relations (Townley, 1994). By analyzing these mechanisms, we are also able to detect and elucidate some of the practices and techniques by which neoliberal governmentality is currently transforming the sphere of work and employment (Fleming, 2012, 2013, 2014; Weiskopf and Munro, 2012). With our analysis, we thus offer a critique—an account of some of the constitutive elements and dynamics of precarious work and the current conditions of neoliberal capitalism (Brown, 2015: 28)—and thereby contribute to the discussion and debate on neoliberalism and precarious work. Overall, our study contributes to the literature on organizational power in three main ways.

First, our study contributes to the emerging theory and under-researched area of 'biopolitical organization' (Munro, 2012: 346; see also Fleming, 2012, 2014; Weiskopf and Munro, 2012) by articulating an analytics of government perspective to analyze how managerial control is exercised in organizations and their employment relationships. The perspective makes an *analytical* distinction between discipline and biopower as two different forms of power that operate through distinct aims and mechanisms in the context of neoliberal governmentality. In doing so, the perspective allows us to understand how power operates in employment relationships not only by prescribing, prohibiting and preventing (Foucault, 2007: 46) but insidiously also by enabling and empowering the workers to conduct themselves and improve their productive capacities as free economic agents. Specifically, the perspective that we offer shifts attention to the ways in which power operates by mobilizing a productive workforce of individuals who are 'capable of bearing a type of regulated freedom' (Rose and Miller, 2008: 53) through techniques that are designed to shape the economic, social and psychological conditions of their life at work. In doing so, the perspective thus highlights the productive intent of biopolitical mechanisms of power and managerial control in the contexts of precarious work and neoliberal governmentality.

Moreover, while much of the existing research around biopolitical organization (Munro, 2012: 346; see also Fleming, 2012, 2014; Weiskopf and Munro, 2012) to date has been theoretical, we elaborate empirically how biopower operates in the context of precarious work. Our study shows, in particular, how biopower operates through techniques of government that are productive in the sense that they seek to mobilize the workers as human capital and as a network of enterprise-units: as a community of active economic agents who willingly reconstitute themselves and their lives as 'enterprises' so as to pursue self-efficacy, autonomy and self-worth as individuals. These techniques thus operate insidiously through the interests, desires and aspirations of workers rather than through curtailing their actions (Read, 2009). As our study shows, the very efficacy of these techniques of power depends upon the ability of the workers to govern themselves freely in ways that link their personal goals and desires to the economic goals of the organization.

Second, our study contributes to the literature on enterprise culture (du Gay and Salaman, 1992; du Gay et al., 1996) by extending the research on the 'enterprising self' (e.g. Gleadle et al., 2008) to the domain of precarious work and nonstandard work arrangements. Our study demonstrates that the enterprising self of precarious work arrangements is not the flexible, responsible, self-disciplined employee of enterprise

culture who offers labor in exchange for a wage or salary—the homo economicus of exchange. Precarious workers are rather mobilized as the subjects of neoliberal governmentality—the homo-economicus of competition—who conduct themselves as enterprise-units and human capital. The precarious worker, in this type of employment relationship, is therefore 'both a member of a firm and as itself a firm, and in both cases as appropriately conducted by the governance practices appropriate to firms' (Brown, 2015: 34). As a result, as our study shows, the 'contract of engagement' between organizations and their workers is no longer based on the idea of more or less fair 'exchange' (Townley, 1994: 13). It is rather based on the principle and dynamic of competition and redefined as a contract between two enterprises. The precarious worker is enrolled as an entrepreneur proper. They are to reconceive herself as a capitalist firm in their own right and to build their own personal brand (Vallas and Cummins, 2015: 295) and strategy (Storey et al., 2005) to compete in the market. As Brown (2015: 64) has argued, this represents a 'tectonic shift' in the nature and dynamic of the employment relationship: while equivalence is both the premise and the norm of exchange, inequality is the premise and outcome of competition.

Third, our study shifts critical attention to the lived experience of precarious workers in the so-called gig economy, where employment relations are increasingly based on various forms of self-employment, subcontracting and various forms of 'gig-work' (Friedman, 2014; ILO, 2015). We especially offer an empirical account of the mechanisms of power and managerial control through which precarious workers are currently mobilized as 'entrepreneurs' who not only grudgingly submit to but also willingly support the 'regimes of enterprise' (Sturdy and Wright, 2008: 428) in contexts that involve disproportionately high risk and uncertainty for the worker. In doing so, we also highlight the possible harmful implications of the emerging gig economy for the worker: how the new flexible arrangements, and entrepreneurial, nonstandard forms of employment allow organizations to shift the costs of employment and economic risk onto their workers, all the while removing them from important employment-bound social security benefits and social insurance programs. While some commentators have argued that the gig economy is 'a force that saves the . . . worker' by 'creating exciting economies and unleashing innovation' (Kaufman, 2013), our analysis suggests that there is also reason to believe that in many cases it is merely an excuse for corporations to avoid the costs of conventional employment and to lower their costs during downturns—particularly in contexts where high unemployment levels force a whole class of exploited workers to accept the harsh conditions that being a dependent self-employed worker or a gig worker entails (Friedman, 2014).

A limitation of our study is that we do not focus on resistance in our analysis. While our task in this article is not to offer alternatives or to identify strategies for resistance, with our Foucauldian analysis we do hope to dispel possible misconceptions that the trends and practices that we observe are somehow normal or irrevocable. With our analysis, moreover, we wish to open up the possibility of imagining something different (Townley, 1994: 17). So, what can we say, then, about the possibilities of transformative resistance (Ganesh et al., 2005) in this particular context of our study and in the context of precarious work in general?

Our study suggests that resistance from *within* the confines of the contractual work arrangement that we have studied here, is difficult, if not impossible. While we observed resistance against the exploitative work arrangements through which CloudNine operates, the people who explicitly voiced their concerns and grievances have all terminated their contracts and left the CloudNine community. In our case, therefore, worker resistance appears to take the form of 'exit and non-negotiation' (Fleming, 2014: 892–893). This seems understandable because neoliberal governmentality appears to stifle resistance by transforming social critique and desires of change into self-critique (Scharff, 2016) and a chase for 'the illusive sense of a secure self' (Clarke and Knights, 2015: 1865).

Hence, we argue that in contexts like ours, transformative resistance to neoliberalism, and the ways in which it is enacted in employment relations, calls for collective political resistance that sets as its target the transformation of power relations in the global economy (Ganesh et al., 2005: 177; also Brown, 2015; McNay, 2009). As Rose (1999: 279) has argued, these types of 'contestations are not over power and its others, but between diverse programs, logics, dreams, and ideals, codified, organized, and rationalized to a greater or lesser extent.' We call attention to an example of such possibly transformative resistance: the broader *solidarity economy movement* (Conaty et al., 2016), which might provide precarious workers and their allies with new avenues for organizing, advocacy and alternative forms of livelihood. Moreover, it seems that trade unions might also play a role in this transformative resistance. Even if the response of European trade unions to the rise of precarious employment has been mixed, many of them have recently opened up union membership also to self-employed workers and made efforts to represent their varied interests in national policy making (Keune, 2013).

Conclusion

In this article, we have investigated the mechanisms of biopower and techniques of managerial control through which precarious workers are governed in the practice of contemporary business organizations. We offer our case study as an illustrative example of the generalization of the enterprise form into the domain of work and employment relations. With the rise of neoliberalism, we have witnessed the emergence of new business models that are operated by replacing the permanent workforce with different kinds of precarious workers, ranging from fixed-term employees and temporary agency workers to self-employed freelancers and (in)dependent contractors, who either voluntarily or involuntarily work on part-time, temporary, or zero-hours contracts. In this article, we provide a theoretically and empirically well-grounded ethnographic account of the mechanisms and relations of power that underpin and create consent for these types of precarious, nonstandard work arrangements.

In doing so, we shift attention to the day-to-day management practices through which neoliberalism operates in the ongoing transformation of the sphere of work. We show how the enterprise culture of today is enacted not only by imposing a set of entrepreneurial identity norms and ideals on employees but also through concrete practices and techniques of managerial control that shift the costs of employment and the economic risk of business activity to a workforce of precarious workers by transforming the rules

of the game in the labor market. Overall, our study thus offers a critique of the practices through which employment relations are currently being reconfigured by neoliberalism. While we do not claim that all non-standard work arrangements are necessarily exploitative or unethical, we do wish to highlight the dark side of these developments. Hence, we conclude that in the field of management and organization studies, there is clearly a need for more critical research on the implications of the so-called gig economy for the lived experience of precarious workers.

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