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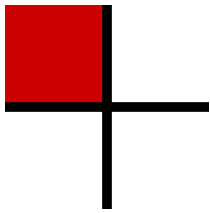
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Guilty lives: The authenticity trap at work*

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abstract

This paper argues that guilt is central to the contemporary fixation with personal authenticity. Building on Basterra's (2004) analysis of guilt and the tragic form, I argue the search for authenticity represents an act of agency, a struggle against external social determination. This struggle is embodied in a whole series of minor 'authenticity rituals' that we become passionately attached to. These rituals provoke compulsive self-monitoring within the subject. Instead of freeing ourselves from control, the search for authenticity actually deepens it in unexpected ways.

Introduction

An emerging trend in contemporary western culture is the profound *guilt* we are supposed to experience given the 'false' and unhealthy lives we lead. This profound guilt, in part at least, stems from the feeling that we are somehow inauthentic. The desire to assuage our guilt by groping for authenticity can take many forms. It infuses television talk shows such as *Oprah* and *Dr Phil* (Guignon, 2004), various self-exploration technologies such as self-help literature (Hazelden, 2003) and forms of therapy that help us to discover our 'true selves' (Illouz, 2008). The theme of authenticity in broader culture has been brought into the economy. Employees increasingly demand the ability to express themselves at work and consumers demand products that are 'authentic' (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2007). Organizations have responded to these demands by becoming self-fashioned merchants of authenticity. Marketers seek to ensure that the authenticity of the products they sell is carefully managed and nurtured (Gilmore and Pine, 2007). Some companies have sought to brand themselves as ethically responsible employers that foster more humane and authentic working patterns (Land and Taylor, 2010). Employees seek to develop careers that allow them to remain true to themselves (Svejenova, 2005). Many mainstream firms have responded by incorporating aspects of social responsibility and work-life balance into their activities in a bid to allow their employees to be 'true to themselves' at work (Fleming, 2009). Even the CEOs of giant corporations are encouraged to practice 'authentic leadership' by remaining true to their values and communicating them in an open and inspiring fashion (George and Bennis, 2008).

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Why have so many become attached to this search for authenticity? To answer this question, I begin with the assertion that modern authenticity involves finding oneself through rebelling against oppressive higher powers (the Gods, Family, the Corporation etc) which we feel prevents us from being ourselves. Instead of celebrating this search as a form of liberation (Berman, 1972), I will argue that it actually involves a profound ‘turn inwards’ (Arendt, 1958) whereby social struggles are pushed back onto the individual. This results in the search for authenticity becoming an internal psychological struggle rather than collective political struggle. Sometimes this is a liberating ‘event’ where an individual fundamentally disturbs the symbolic matrix in which they live, cutting an individual’s attachment to the symbolic co-ordinates that had entangled them (e.g., Contu, 2008). These breaks, however, can also carry the cost of a ‘symbolic death’ which destroys an individual’s sense of self. Building on the work of Gabriela Bastera (2004), I argue that another important cost of the struggle for authenticity is *guilt*. The demand for authenticity is bound up with a feeling that we have never done enough. In order to assuage this sneaking suspicion, we engage in a whole series of minor ‘authenticity rituals’. These rituals help us to feel like we are being true to ourselves. We become passionately attached to these rituals for reasons I shall explore and this results in a compulsive self-monitoring of everyday life. Instead of the struggle for authenticity freeing us from the various forms of control and oppression we find ourselves subjected to, it can actually deepen them.

In order to make this argument, I will proceed as follows. In the first section I will review existing accounts of authenticity and conclude modern authenticity involves rebellion against a higher order. In the second section, I will examine existing criticisms of authenticity, focusing on how authenticity involves a turn inwards. In the third section, I will argue that the modern search for authenticity can take on a tragic form through the experience of guilt. The fourth section explores how this guilt is discharged through a whole series of ‘authenticity rituals’ that we become passionately attached to. The paper concludes by drawing the argument together and offering some ways out of what I call the *authenticity trap*.

Theorizing authenticity

The question of authenticity has been a preoccupation in the West for many years.¹ According to classical accounts, authenticity usually involves being true to some sort of higher scheme. For Plato, for example, one was authentic when one assumed the characteristics of an ideal. This was achieved through self-mastery of the kind that an ideal carpenter or ideal warrior might achieve (Taylor, 1989). In early Christian thought, authenticity entailed a display of fidelity to the demands of God. For instance in *Confessions*, St Augustine own journey to become authentic involves turning away from the base demands he is affronted with in the external world and heeding the true

1 There are a number of excellent reviews of the concept of authenticity available. Perhaps the classic account of the development of the concept is Charles Taylor’s *Sources of the Self*. In what follows I largely rely on this account to briefly sketch out the historical evolution of the modern concept of authenticity. Other accounts of the development of the concept of authenticity can be found in Trilling (1972) and Guignon (2004).

voice of God within his soul (Taylor, 1989). For St Augustine, fidelity to this higher power was to be found within oneself.

In *Confessions*, we find the seeds of the modern view of authenticity – being true not to some higher power but to oneself. Being authentic involves heeding the voice within, *despite* the directives of higher powers (such as socially proscribed ideals or the expectations of religion). According to this view, authenticity is seated within our inner world of the self and the forces that menace it are seen to come from the external world. The universe beyond our skin ceases to be a place saturated with meaning, filled with mysteries, and haunted by magical creatures. Instead, all magic, meaning and creativity lurk within. So, in order to become ourselves and be authentic, we must rebel against the demands of the external world tempting us to be people who we do not want to be (Guignon, 2004). Such demands mark the opening of modern forms of radical individualism and the assumption that our lives are something to be fashioned by us rather than by stultifying higher powers (Berman, 1972).

While radical individualism is frequently celebrated, it also comes at a significant cost. Instead of personal authenticity connecting an individual with broader ‘ideals’ which are shared in a society, it pushes an individual back onto themselves. An individual can no longer expect to find who they really are in the relationships they have or the institutions they reside within. This is because these ‘external’ influences are thought to pervert a true sense of self. Inner truth can only be revealed through a careful and detailed examination of one's own thoughts, desires, and motives. This kind of examination often involves significant effort and work and creates what Michel Foucault calls a ‘subject of inwardness’ (for a discussion see Taylor, 1984). An individual's private world becomes the space in which they are able to experience and discover the truth of themselves (Arendt, 1958).

Part of this culture of inwardness involves a sense that one of the greatest, and indeed most pressing possible tasks that we face is to discover who we really are. Much of the naïve pop-psychology that feeds the authenticity industry assumes that our true self is like some kind of lost tropical island which can only be rediscovered through carefully charting the dangerous waters of external temptations. However, these ideas have been repudiated by many recent philosophical treatments of authenticity (e.g., Taylor, 1989; Guignon, 2004). According to such critiques, one of the central themes associated with developing a sense of authenticity involves inventing plausible narratives of self. For instance, Charles Taylor (1992) argues that the modern desire for authenticity is often prompted by a feeling that our life is shattered and it is difficult, if not impossible, to piece our life together in a meaningful way. He suggests that reclaiming authenticity would entail the provision of a space where we can once again craft coherent narratives that bind our life together.

The task of crafting ‘authentic’ self-narratives is as difficult as it is pressing. However, this yearning for authenticity has fuelled a boom in all manner of expressions and explorations of who we really might be (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2007). Many professional fields ranging from literature to religion to philosophy have adopted what Theodor Adorno (1964) calls ‘the jargon of authenticity’. Similarly, politics has increasingly become dominated by various movements who claim to allow us to express

some inner truth. We also seem to increasingly expect politicians to lead a true and fitting lifestyle. There are many consumer products including reality television, organic products, and a wide range of psycho-spiritual therapies that promises a return to the lost island of ourselves. Within the workplace, we also find that the theme of authenticity has become central to contemporary management discourse (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2007). For instance, some companies set out to market authentic products or services such as 'real country music' (Peterson, 1997). Others want to provide a workplace culture which allows employees to connect with their real values (Land and Taylor, 2010) and ensure employees can express their diverse and idiosyncratic identities (Fleming, 2009).

Towards a critique of authenticity

Attempts to infuse all aspects of life with authenticity certainly appear at first sight to be an important step in addressing the loss of meaning we often experience in modern social life. Authenticity is conceived as a kind of magical cure-all for many of the tainted aspects of modern life such as meaningless work, empty products and valueless politics. The upshot is that authenticity has become an important theme that is difficult, if not impossible to call into question (cf. Adorno, 1964). After all, who would not want to 'be themselves'? In what follows, I will seek to question this apparently unquestionable good of modern social life by outlining some of the possible criticisms around the notion of authenticity.

Perhaps the most striking thing about cultures of authenticity is that they are often the result of careful manipulation and manufacturing. Notions of authenticity have been produced by a whole industry that includes motivational speakers, consultants, managers and media personalities who purport to champion cultures that allow people to 'just be themselves' (Fleming, 2009). This involves an attempt to create a sense of realness about what are ultimately highly artificial and constructed experiences. Perhaps nowhere is this manufacture of authenticity as widespread as it is in the cultural industries (Jones, et al., 2005). One foundational study of the tourism industry found that many tourists sought to escape from shallow experiences devoid of any genuine meaning (MacCannell, 1973). Many tourists have a strong desire to experience 'the real side' of a place they are visiting by venturing 'behind the scenes' of the façade. However, these back regions which tourists seek to experience are also carefully constructed, manipulated and managed by the locals. Thus the 'real' 'back stage' of a tourist destination is as much a constructed chimera as the inauthentic 'front stage'. Similarly, a study of country music found that many fans were very concerned about the music they listened to being real (Peterson, 1997). To cater for this demand for 'real' country music, music producers manufactured a sense of authenticity by using various motifs, styles, themes and even personas that were seen to embody the Southern rural roots of the country music. Underlying these two studies is the insight that authenticity does not just involve the presentation of cultural forms that are true to historical precedents. Rather, authenticity is fabricated through a process of often wilfully misremembering the past (Halbwachs, 1992). Real country music and real tourist experiences are carefully manufactured products. So too is a sense of personal

authenticity. Being true to ourselves therefore involves consuming a whole series of commodities and experiences that have been carefully managed and manipulated.

Because many opportunities to be authentic are manufactured, they frequently come at a significant cost. After all, the activities associated with authenticity require some time as well as resources. Resolutely attending Yoga classes, engaging in relationship counselling, attending Neuro-linguistic Programming courses to foster 'positive thinking', taking time out to educate children in an African village or trekking in Nepal all require significant material resources as well as free time. Indeed, historical commentaries on the rise of modern concerns for authenticity point out that it was largely born out of a middle class milieu who had time and resources to engage in periods of introspection. This is why Adorno (1964) points out that the search for and celebration of authenticity is a particular middle class conceit which the stable professions found so appealing in mid-twentieth century Europe.

One of the particularly striking things about the middle class proclivity for authenticity is that it significantly blurs the boundaries between public and private life. It involves projecting the internal search for authenticity into ever more public spaces. Almost any aspect of social life, even the most apparently inauthentic, becomes a potential zone for articulating our true self. For instance, employees seek to express and explore their authentic identities in their place of employment (Fleming and Sturdy, 2011). This encourages employees to bring what had previously been considered as private sentiments such as love, desire, and emotions into the workplace (Illouz, 2006; 2008). At the same time, we also witness the extension of the workplace into all aspects of our private lives (see also Fleming and Spicer, 2004). This can mean the number of hours and effort devoted to work time is radically extended. Many of the activities such as socializing, undertaking leisure activities and even romance become implicated with work. As our private life shifts into the public sphere it becomes denuded of intimacy and subjected to forms of cold instrumental calculation. Moreover, our public life becomes increasingly infused with emotive and highly personal expressions that had once been curbed by reason, rationality and due process.

Why is this a problem? Blurring the boundaries between private and public lives enables many aspects of 'private life' to be harnessed by the capitalist economy. This entails the commodification of aspects of life which are drawn from what had previously been considered to be the non-commodity sphere such as 'human beings, scenery, Cafes where people feel comfortable, tastes, rhythms, ways of being and doing' (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2007: 444). By commodifying these 'authentic' activities which had previously been outside of the cycles of commodity exchange, it becomes possible to 'revive the process of transformation of non-capital into capital, which is one of the principal motors of capitalism, on new bases and, consequently, to meet the threat of a crisis of mass consumption that loomed in the 1970s' (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2007: 443). One classic example of how this occurred is when management pressed into service aspects usually considered to be outside the workplace such as private identities, sexuality, and sub-cultural knowledge. By allowing them to 'just be themselves' (Fleming and Sturdy, 2011), employees make their rich social labour available to the managerial gaze. A whole range of previously uncommodified

labour that took place outside of work is harnessed by organizations to become an important way that corporations exploit value.

Another example pertains to the way consumers are now often intensely engaged in the production and innovation of the products and services they purchase (Arvidsson, 2006). The work of these highly involved consumers becomes an important source of value that is exploited by large companies. In many ways, cultures of authenticity merely represent a more complex instance of this whereby the emotion and the aesthetic labour of searching for and expressing oneself is captured by the organization. For instance, one study of a small clothing company found that employees' hobbies such as surfing and skateboarding were central to the company expressing its brand (Land and Taylor, 2010). By claiming employees' hobbies as part of the brand message, the company could make their products seem more 'real' and ultimately ensure consumers were willing to pay a premium price.

A corollary to blurring the boundaries between public and private life is a situation where working life is increasingly experienced as a kind of therapeutic activity. This means that any problems encountered in the workplace are not seen as caused by social structures. Rather, they are thought to be the result of an internal psychological yearning for authenticity. The consequence is what Hannah Arendt (1958) called the 'great turn inwards': a situation where we seek to address a traumatic social world through a confrontation with ourselves. Almost all points of engagement become a kind of internal struggle, something to be remedied through internal reflection. Instead of engaging in meaningful social struggles, the authenticity seeker turns back to themselves in an effort to work with their emotions, their worldviews and perhaps their most personal habits.

Despite the widespread celebration of being oneself, some critics have called this desire into question. They have pointed out that authenticity is frequently a carefully manufactured commodity which is produced by a vast culture industry. Consuming (manufactured) authenticity is not for everyone: it typically requires both time and money. Even for those who have these means, (manufactured) authenticity can have serious consequences for its consumers. It can mean that our innermost emotions become an object of public dialogue and deliberation. This can result in the colonization and commodification of our private lives. It can also mean that almost any social and political struggle comes to be projected within ourselves. This effectively traps the authenticity search within ourselves. In the following section I would like to explore how this authenticity trap works.

The tragedy of authenticity

One reason why we get trapped by the search for authenticity is that it entails a degree of *enjoyment*. In an attempt to recapture our sense of lost authenticity we struggle against the codes of sociality (as mentioned above) and this creates an exhilarating experience some have identified as close to de-subjectification (see Contu, 2008). By overcoming boundaries, we may suddenly feel free and unfettered. But as Jacques Lacan points out, enjoyment, or more precisely *jouissance*, always has two sides (also

see Fink, 1997). There is the pleasure, but it is always too much pleasure insofar as it becomes painful. The excessiveness associated with transgression does not just involve an experience of freedom. It also evokes an experience of complete contingency. We experience this when we realise that things do not have to be as they are – they could potentially be rather different. Often this experience of contingency evokes a sense of horror as even our most stable certainties are washed away. This horrific experience can lead us to step back from the brink as our search for authenticity slackens.

In order to extend the idea that the search for authenticity both draws us in and repels us, I would like to now turn to Gabriela Bastera's (2004) argument that modern subjectivity (i.e., subjectivity which seeks to find itself, often through rebellion) takes on a kind of tragic structure marked by guilt. Let me briefly summarize how Bastera's work is useful for understanding the authenticity trap. The modern subject feels that they are denied their true self and seeks to win their authenticity by freeing themselves from an inauthentic structure. However, when they manage to wrench themselves free, they recognise that it is this very structure that gives them a sense of identity. This discovery, which is of course at the heart of many contemporary theories of the self, would lead our authenticity seeker to rue themselves for paying too high a price (their existing identity) only to receive a horrific void in return (the empty fantasy of a future self that may never arrive). The authenticity-seeker now needs to create an idea of 'objective necessity' that provides reasons for a return to this inauthentic identity. This engenders a deep tension between the attempt to escape from a counterfeit identity and the acceptance of us being dependent on this identity. This tension creates a pervasive feeling of guilt that effectively binds us to the very false self we sought to escape in the first place.

According to Bastera (2004), therefore, this resentful commitment to the very identity that we had once sought to escape is fundamentally tragic. The typical rationale usually given here is that when a character seeks to win their sense of agency (or in our case authenticity) by rebelling against the will of some higher power, they are punished for it. For instance, when an employee challenges a dominant identity, they are likely to not only face severe material consequences (such as losing their job or being sidelined for promotion) but also a kind of 'symbolic death'. This is because they lose the symbolic co-ordinates that had previously supported their sense of self (Contu, 2008). They lose an identity which provided them with a sense of symbolic support. Bastera breaks from this view and points out that the tragedy associated with the rebellious subject entails something more. It is a situation where 'autonomous action is reduced to a transitory challenge to the power of destiny, a short-lived resistance that only provokes fate's reinvigoration' (Bastera, 2004: 2). In other words, an attempt to challenge a dominant identity that one is invested in can momentarily provoke a sense of freedom, but ultimately strengthen the apparent dominance of an identity which we seek to escape from. To schematically summarize Bastera's argument, this tragedy involves a characteristic sequence: (1). a higher symbolic order exists; (2). a character enters the scene who then rebels against this symbolic order; (3). this rebellion gives them a sense of agency; (4). but it also leads to the collapse of the symbolic order they rebelled against; (5). this prompts their own realization that this symbolic order was ultimately empty; (6). this realization creates a sense of trauma in the character; (7). to assuage this trauma the character adopts a story of 'objective necessity' whereby they cannot do

anything but act in a way which reconciles them to the symbolic order they rebelled against; (8). they therefore give up on their rebellion, (9). and they remain tied to this existing symbolic order through a profound sense of guilt. In this sequence of actions the 'tragic subjects commit themselves to a conflict whose resolution always escapes them, since at a particular moment of each drama the weight of necessity disrupts the previous state of equilibrium, foreclosing any possibility of responsible initiative, or what is called human freedom' (ibid.: 19). In other words, the subject tries to rebel against a symbolic order to win their authenticity, but this rebellion is often cut short. They often return to this symbolic order and through guilt become even more profoundly tied to it.

What does this mean for our understanding of authenticity? At its most basic, Basterra's argument demonstrates that our search for authenticity is firstly a tragic activity. This is because we seek to rebel to find our true self, but during this rebellion we decide the cost is too high, and therefore we are never willing to completely grasp the authentic that looms before us. The symbolic order that we rebel against gives us our symbolic co-ordinates, providing us with something to struggle against and complain about. For instance, the overbearing corporate culture that an employee detests certainly puts an obstacle between them and 'being themselves'. But this self-same culture actually supports their identity and enjoyable fantasized future. Ironically, such obstacles to authenticity are actually the source of antagonism and feelings of 'being real'. The very things that make us feel inauthentic are those that allow us to hold on to the idea of authenticity. If a disaffected employee suddenly decided to leave their oppressive firm, they would no longer have something to blame for the loss of their real self. Instead, they would be faced with the unbearable sense of losing the very source of their lost identity (cf. Žižek, 1997: 204).

To break out of this tension, authenticity seekers might posit a sense of 'objective necessity' (Basterra, 2004). Appealing to such 'objective necessities' allows them to maintain their commitment and dependence on the structures they hope to escape from. Such stories of objective necessity involve people trying to 'create a tragic fate with which to cooperate' (Basterra, 2004: 36). These are typically narratives that explain why an authenticity seeker cannot make a final break from what makes them unhappy. Narratives of objective necessity are paradoxically crafted by the subject but cruelly place any sense of agency beyond their control. For instance, a potential corporate rebel might explain how they would like to leave the company and pursue a career as a guitarist if they did not have to pay the mortgage and have a penchant for expensive lunches. Similarly, a bored consultant might tell us they would love to spend a year in a Buddhist retreat finding themselves if only this would not damage their career trajectory. In each case, we notice that some desired break with an inauthentic identity is thwarted through an appeal to some external, uncontrollable force. The crux here is that an act of agency actually allows the authenticity seeker to surrender their agency.

This surrender often creates a profound sense of guilt that is fundamental to the authenticity trap. At a surface level, such guilt arises when authenticity seekers feel disturbed about the implications of being true to their selves. For instance, they might worry about how their rejection of the symbolic order might affect their lives. They might also worry about whether their rebellion might cut them off from others. They

might also feel guilt because their act tears at the very symbolic structure that nurtured them. For instance, a manager may have the grandiose fantasy that leaving work would in some way throw the whole system into disarray. This guilt can be embodied in the people they may have upset or a more pervasive sense that they have violated some implicit social contract. They may even feel guilty for not having been able to live up to their own heroic pronouncements of finding their true self outside of a stifling corporate world. In each case, we notice that the guilt is profoundly individualized and diffuse. The fault – whether it is for being too obsessed with the search for authenticity or not being authentic enough – lies squarely on the shoulders of the seeker him or herself.

While classical ideas about tragedy assumed the fault lies in some kind of tragic character flaw, modern concepts of tragedy shift the locus of blame from the rebellious mortal onto the Gods themselves (see Ricoeur, 1967). This leads Basterra to caution us strongly about seeing guilt as a strictly individual phenomenon. She argues that guilt actually originates in the structure that we sought to rebel against. Most self-directed workers are familiar with the guilty feelings that menace us when we feel that we should be working rather than engaging in frivolities like relaxation. Following Basterra, this feeling of guilt is not an individual's own. Rather, it is actually implicit within the configuration of contemporary self-directed work. Indeed, the very structure of many self-directed jobs means employees constantly feel guilty for not having done enough. There is always a lurking suspicion that we could have done more. Even though we find this experience of guilt unsettling, we cling to it. It is actually this sense of guilt that binds us to our work. This sense of pervasive guilt is a vital mechanism of control, particularly for relatively autonomous workers.

What is surprising is that 'guilt is the last thing we would be willing to renounce' (Basterra, 2004: 95). Why do we want to take the blame and suffer the emotional torment which inevitably follows? Basterra points out that there are three reasons for this. The first is that by representing ourselves as guilty we are able to hold on to the sense that we had some kind of autonomy and agency in the situation. By bearing guilt, we can feel like we caused something and had a heroic role of some sort. Therefore as painful as guilt is to us it also gives a sense of agency. By feeling guilty about work, we are able to feel that we might have a kind of control over it. Guilt gives us a sense that we have a choice. For instance it allows us to think that we choose whether or not we work outside office hours. Guilt enables us to avoid what is perhaps an even more unpleasant feeling that we have no control whatsoever over how much and when we work.

A second reason we are so attached to guilt is that by yielding to it we are able to maintain the broader symbolic structure we depend on. Guilt provides a zone of existential security of knowing that even if we are flawed the world itself is fine and one day we might be as well. Indeed, 'assuming guilt seems preferable to being enslaved by guilty gods' (Basterra, 2004: 33). By accepting guilt, we are able to assume that our sense of self is not completely defiled. It allows us to hope that one day it may conceivably provide us with the ability to truly 'be ourselves'. For instance, by accepting the guilt which comes with working in a job we know to be utterly meaningless, we are able to hold onto the sense that at least we are aware of its

meaninglessness. This awareness acts as a kind of guarantor that we still can perceive that another more meaningful work situation is at least potentially possible.

The final reason that guilt is so appealing is that it provides us a kind of alibi. Although we want to feel like agents, we do not want to be agents with responsibility. In order to remove this responsibility, we claim that our actions were due to some 'objective necessity' beyond our control. Thus, our sense of guilt comes down to a feeling that we could not change what happened since after all there was some kind of objective necessity. For instance, we might explain how we had to take a series of business flights during the year that created significant outputs of CO2 emissions, but nonetheless we feel very guilty about it. Such declarations of guilt act as a kind of alibi by showing that we have a moral consciousness and can recognise our wrong doings. But we also know that these wrongdoings were done under the behest of conditions that we could not change. Such guilt props up the notion that we are sensitive, intelligent and reflexive individuals who have a sense of right and wrong. But at the same time we are able to continue behaving as we would anyway (by taking long air flights, working for exploitative companies, consuming products made in sweatshops etc). By holding onto our guilt, we also hold onto the fantasy that we authentic-seeking individuals are somehow better than the inauthentic lives we find ourselves leading.

Guilt, therefore, binds us to the authenticity trap. I have argued that guilt is prompted by the search for authenticity – when we go looking for ourselves, we often must engage in the painful work of rejecting 'false selves'. However, these rejections are rarely carried through. These thwarted attempts to free us from a social symbolic structure which imposes a sense of false self upon us can give rise to feelings of guilt. These bind us to a symbolic structure we do not feel completely incorporated in. The result is that many authenticity searches remain trapped by a nagging sense of guilt that seems impossible to assuage.

Authenticity rituals

Guilt certainly has its upside. Bearing the burden of guilt is a common way to hold onto a sense that we are striving for authenticity, but at the same time being able to explain away why we remain utterly complicit in the very system that we think makes us inauthentic. But in order to bear this burden, we must come up with ways of dealing with the guilt which binds us. So what exactly do we do with the guilt associated with our failed struggles for authenticity? How do we deal with the sense of concern we feel while wearing jeans made under terrible labour conditions or engaging in various forms of environmental degradation? The good old-fashioned way of dealing with this kind of guilt would be to repress it. We might do this by denying that we were even implicated in the conditions that we feel guilty about. For instance, when faced with the brutal fact that our savings are being used to fuel ecologically disastrous industries, we might flatly deny it. Or we might claim that this is simply a lie being circulated by far left radical groups or a competing company. But this repression of guilt has certainly gone out of fashion now. Today it is expression, not repression, that is the order of the day. In therapeutic societies when we feel guilt we are asked, nay expected, to talk about it, express it, and try to deal with it. The result is that there has appeared a whole discourse

in contemporary society around our guilt (Bruckner, 2010). Moreover, this discourse of guilt is implicated in phenomena as diverse as wars that took place many years ago to the fate of small children in a country on the other side of the world to our relationships with our parents to the conditions a homeless person sleeps in. All of this is potential fodder for contemporary guilt talk.

Putting guilt to work becomes one of the central tasks of any authenticity-seeker today. When they are called upon to express their feelings, they have a readily available discourse of guilt. Of course, guilt has often been a pervasive theme in religious discourses. However, guilt talk has taken on increasingly secularized forms. For instance guilt discourses have been noted with reference to broader historical traumas such as the Holocaust (Diner and Golb, 1997), race relations in the United States (Ellison, 1996), or European imperialism (Bruckner, 2010). Guilt discourses are also an important part of everyday life. Usually they appear in relation to intimate relationships (following a betrayal for instance) or health (with regards to smoking or overeating). However, the discourse of guilt has become increasingly prevalent within the economic sphere. For example, it has become increasingly common to talk about one's relationship to work in terms of guilt: we might declare 'I feel so guilty about working for that company', or express guilty feelings for not having done enough work. The sphere of consumption has also become increasingly infused with this guilt talk. A consumer might declare 'I feel guilty when I buy factory farmed chicken' or search out 'guilt free fish' that has been caught using sustainable fishing practices.

By drawing on these guilt discourses, employees and consumers are able deal with some of the tensions implicit in the perpetually failing quest for authenticity. On the one hand, they are able to acknowledge that they can somehow see through a particular economic arrangement. By doing this they can feel that they are 'aware', 'engaged', and 'caring' people who at least acknowledge the harm they cause. On the other, they are also able to continue their practical attachment to the state of affairs that makes them feel guilt (albeit with moral quandaries). So guilt provides a way of accepting responsibility while at the same time continuing to be embroiled in the situation that made one guilty.

But these simple expressions of guilt are often not enough. Feelings of guilt often require a form of behaviour to *embody* it in a particular way. Embodying guilt allows us to connect it to the perpetually failing search for the authentic. This gives rise to what I would like to call 'authenticity rituals'. These are a range of everyday behaviour that signals our guilt, allowing us to embody a measured degree of rejection of the conditions which we think make us inauthentic. These are measured rejections in so far as they allow us to resolutely cling to structures, identities and social situations which we think are problematic, but nonetheless embody our recognition that we are after all more 'real' than these phony or oppressive social forces.

Authenticity rituals in the workplace include all manner of minor activities that show we have a life outside the workplace and can somehow transcend the strictures of the corporation. For instance, employees may festoon their workstation with objects and pictures that express their real lives (such as pictures of their families or their hobbies). In other cases, we find companies actively encouraging employees to express

themselves at work and seek to build their values into the workplace through working on projects that fit their values or maybe just redesigning their office in a colour they like.

In the sphere of consumption, authenticity rituals are played out in a range of ways. For instance, organic diets become a way of thumbing our noses at our ecologically destructive food production system, enthusiastic quest for Fair Trade products waylay our regret about the inequitable global division of labour. Recent campaigns against throwing away food are a kind of minor protest against a disposable society. For sure, all of these things are worthy and important activities which are small steps to addressing seriously pressing issues which threaten not only our sense of personal authenticity, but also life on our planet. But what is particularly interesting about these authenticity rituals is the sheer degree of emotional investment built up around them. Disturbing an employee's personal items at workplace can be the equivalent to spitting in their face. Activities like recycling have become the post-modern equivalent of saying our daily prayers. If we miss a recycling day or mistakenly put a recyclable product into a disposable bin then we may feel that we have committed a kind of blasphemy. The result is that we redouble our vigilance and ensure that all recyclables are carefully sorted and placed out for collection. Throwing away food becomes a dirty secret to be carefully concealed.

What is particularly interesting about these authenticity rituals is that they are often particularly elaborate and involve considerable time, energy and emotional investment. Think for instance of the sheer effort people are willing to put into corporate volunteering, or the hours spent making an authentic southern French dish after their visit to the farmers market. The 'objective' benefits accrued might seem fairly minimal. However, the real benefits we get out of lavishing our precious time and resources on such rituals is that they make us feel like we are able to express that we care. But above all the time and effort allows us to do a kind of penitence that works through our guilt. Instead of absolving ourselves from guilt through confession we simply ensure we buy Fair Trade this week, visit yoga class, or scrupulously sort out our recycling.

Alongside the immense effort these rituals require there is a notably compulsive aspect to them. In many cases, people desperately cling to the most minor activities which express who they really are. Authenticity seekers insist on these rituals no matter how puritan and self-denying they may be. For instance, someone who sees television as a debasing experience may become highly agitated if they find themselves in a room with someone watching 'Big Brother'. Another person may prefer to go hungry rather than eat food not prepared using organic ingredients. A third person will simply refuse to have a companion drink Coca-Cola while dining with them. By compulsively clinging to these small rituals we can reassure ourselves that we do after all have a sense of agency and that there are some things that we simply must say no to. Indeed, the guilt that is generated from our defeated search for authenticity becomes embodied in these small compulsions. Not drinking Coke or strictly eating organic foods comes to stand in for, and perhaps replace, our lost sense of authenticity. As a result, when we are denied these minor rituals, we feel that we are losing our authenticity. The collapse of these small rituals can be literally experienced as a kind of collapse of our whole symbolic universe, our whole sense of self. Being forced to watch a Hollywood action film might

not just be experienced as a minor irritation, but as a profound disturbance of our sense of self.

The ever-present guilt combined with the effort we invest in the associated authenticity rituals binds us to them irrevocably. We can become literally obsessed with monitoring all these minute rituals in our lives (and others') in order to ensure that they express our need to be authentic. In other words, our close ties to these most insignificant of reflexive behaviours becomes enlivened and given significant weight by the guilt that struggles for authenticity produce. But this obsession with the most minor activities of our everyday life means that they function as a kind of highly charged political battleground. The result is that struggles are no longer fought over political ideologies. Instead, the politics we become passionately invested in are those that are closely related to our habits and bodies. Indeed we become deeply interested in what some have called 'bio-politics' (Foucault, 1978). Broadly put, this involves political contestation focusing on life itself (Esposito, 2008). This means political struggles take place around the most basic aspects such as bodily health and lifestyle. No big ideas here. The pressing political questions are no longer your position on patriarchy – it is how many burgers you ate this month or where you stand on spray-tanning. The increasing importance of this kind of bio-politics can be seen in the fact that many contemporary political movements today are focused on quotidian issues close to the body such as health, food and lifestyle. And one of the central demands which is often bound up with these bio-political movements is a demand for authenticity – real food, real wine, real music and the ability to live a real life which is not artificially clouded by various in-authenticities.

But with bio-politics also comes bio-power. While bio-politics involves the various struggles that take place around issues of life itself, bio-power involves various attempts to regulate, control and generally discipline this life (Hardt and Negri, 2009). Typically, bio-power entails various forms of regulating the most basic biological processes such as eating, sex, sleep, bodily movement and so on. It is exactly at this level where we find what I have called 'authenticity rituals'. And because we are particularly vigilant about these rituals they become the perfect target for various kinds of intervention and control. Indeed, in our search for authenticity in these minor rituals, we often go out of our way to find ways of regulating and controlling ourselves. And when we find this difficult, we are more than willing to call on all manner of experts who can give advice on disciplining ourselves in a way that allows us to 'be true to ourselves'. The result is that the modern search for authenticity produces a perverse outcome: it does not liberate us from a nagging sense of inauthenticity. Rather, it takes what we take to be authentic about ourselves such as ways of life and our bodies and turns these into a target of control. By doing so, it actually tightens forms of control in the most intimate and immediate aspects of our lives. What is more, we ourselves become the agents who desperately try to enforce this disciplined authenticity onto our own lives. The result is that by trying to be ourselves, we become trapped in increasingly tight, guilt-fuelled circles of trying to be authentic.

Conclusion

Authenticity was once only a concern of a very small group of intellectuals and artists in the Metropolitan centres of the 19th century Europe (Berman, 1972). The idea this small circle shared was that it was good to be true to oneself (Trilling, 1972). They assumed that one's authenticity could be won by shrugging off the repressive force of higher order determinants like God, the State, the Family, and the Economy. Being true to oneself involved shrugging off an inauthentic sense of self imposed on us. As I have pointed out in this paper, the idea that the highest goal in life was the pursuit of authenticity spread during the 20th century. It became one of the central ways that people sought to question a standardized, massified and industrialized society. Today, authenticity has been diffused through all aspects of society including economic activity. It is present in the marketing of products and services (authentic tourism, authentic furniture etc), management fashions (authentic leadership) and the culture industries (authentic blues music) to name just a few. In short, we live in an authenticity economy where the most valuable asset is keeping it real.

Building on Basterra (2004) I have argued that this is because struggles for authenticity take on a kind of tragic form: an initial rebellion against an inauthentic symbolic structure is often followed by the authenticity-seeker relinquishing this rebellion in order to reconcile themselves with this identity they rebelled against. The central issue that I aimed to address in this article is the role of guilt in binding people to a loathed identity and motivating people to adopt a whole series of rather minor rituals that display a sense of being real. Our compulsive attachment to these rituals is partially driven by the difficult realization that we owe a great debt to the very symbolic structures we seek to resist. To put this another way, we feel guilty because we realize that we are completely dependent on the various social structures that make us so inauthentic. We remain attached to workplaces that give us deadening work, patterns of consumption that deliver us manufactured authenticity, and other social relations that make us feel distanced from our true selves. And to gain some sense of distance from these structures, a nagging guilt develops about our relationship with them. But at the very same time as this guilt allows a sense of distance, it also binds us ever more fiercely to dominant symbolic structures. In short, being guilty allows us to experience authenticity. But at the very same time, it binds us to fake selves. This makes authenticity into a kind of trap that is difficult to escape.

The authenticity trap poses a rather difficult question: is it possible to find a way out of this apparently endless and fruitless attempt to grasp authenticity? Simon Critchley (2002, 2007) has proposed one way. He argues that we might replace our tragic responses that are so bound up in the struggle for authenticity with a comic one. He points out that when we are confronted with our inevitable shortcomings, we often repose on the kind of tragic mode which I have described above. We seek to rebel against a position, role or broader symbolic structure which gives us a sense of self. We reject the sense of self in the hope of winning authenticity. But the price of authenticity is a kind of (symbolic) death. To put it rather starkly, to win our (true) self, we must destroy our (existing) self.

Critchley's comic response does not simply mean a little gallows humour. A comic response to the authenticity trap involves a kind of self-deflation whereby we acknowledge not just that we cannot live up to our rather grandiose claims of purity, but that these claims are also preposterous and ultimately empty. This might happen by recognising that our claims to the purity of an authentic sense of self are not achievable. This is because all authentic identities are always riven with contradictions from the start. A comic response involves recognising that these contradictions are innate and irreconcilable. It involves laughing at just how crazy it is to expect that organic apples will somehow make us whole again. While the comic stance to the authenticity trap provides a way out of the impossible claims we make upon ourselves, it too can become a kind of trap of its own. This is because it involves a form of duplicity. Like cynicism, it too can become implicitly implicated in the very situation it makes fun of (Zupančič, 2008). So to be comic means to recognise the stupidity of a structure that we are trapped within in, to point this out, but to nonetheless continue to participate in it. Indeed, such a comic stance may in fact further entrench the authenticity trap because it allows us a sense of being above it while practically participating in it.

If comedy might deepen the authenticity trap, an alternative may be offered by reconsidering the most ancient narrative genre: the epic. Tragic attempts to grasp authenticity involve a rebellion against the demands of a social structure. Comic approaches to authenticity show the limited nature of our own ability to live up to those demands as well as the very emptiness of these demands in the first place. In contrast, an epic approach entails simply carrying out demands without any tragic rebellion or comic mocking. In classical epics 'the principal of action, which belongs to the subject or self, is, so to speak, projected onto universal powers (gods) from the outside (that is, from the other side); it is applied to them' (Zupančič, 2008: 24). This involves a situation where we project all our potentiality onto some higher power such as the will of the Gods or a social circumstance. We engage in action simply because that is what is required of us. We do not foolishly question this higher will, we simply execute it. The crucial thing here is to transform non-rebellion into a more cunning rebellion. Because we do not rebel, we do not get defeated. However, in not rebelling against what is demanded, the epic character never gains a sense of agency and subjectivity. The result is that they never become a proper subject with a will of their own. Thus by mechanically carrying out the demands which are placed upon them, they are able to escape from the liberal demand to 'just be yourself' (Fleming and Sturdy, 2011). This is because there is no self to be, only demands from some higher power to be carried out. Opting for such a position would render us as a passive mechanism of the Other's desire – an actor without agency.

By taking such a passive role, many of the questions that are bound up with tragic agency such as authenticity and guilt would disappear. But so too would the possibility of individual subjectivity and agency. Such a de-subjectifying move would certainly unsettle liberal modes of power that are fundamentally premised upon harnessing individual agency. It could give rise to post-liberal forms of power. One form this might take is a kind of Hobbesian power matrix whereby individuals give away their political agency to a higher power in return for not only peace with their fellow citizens, but also peace within themselves. That is, by giving their sense of agency away they will no longer be plagued with the all the pains, anxieties and guilt that come with a sense of

liberal agency (Salecl, 2010). This kind of move can be seen in all manner of situations from religious fundamentalism to the role of experts in even the most minor aspects of daily life (such as home decoration or pet care). In doing this, we are relieved of agency but also the feelings of guilt that this entails. But at the same time we give up on the possibility of democratic deliberation by concentrating power in the hands of those who we think should know best.

A second form of this post-liberal power might be of a Spinozian type whereby the individual becomes a direct embodiment of collective autonomy. Instead of gaining a sense of agency by rebelling against a higher power or through comic deflation, the actor would seek to directly embody collective agency (Hardt and Negri, 2009). Thus, the question is no longer about trying to win back one's authenticity through rebelling against a higher other. Instead, action would involve attempting to craft a sense of collective autonomy. Many of the traps of liberal politics disappear if we shift social struggles from the quest for individual authenticity to the quest for collective autonomy. In particular, feelings of individual guilt that binds us to a symbolic structure are replaced with practical questions of how we might craft autonomy (Fleming, 2009: 164-5). While this new question might indicate a more affirmative mode of politics, it also brings new tensions and traumas that might be embodied in struggles for collective autonomy (Böhm et al, 2010).

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