**The commodification of the self - the case of life coaching**

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# Introduction

Marx claims that Industrial Capitalism commodification processes of goods and labor result in alienation and commodity fetishism. In other words, the structure of capitalist production demands from us to frame labor power and goods as economic objects of exchange which are submitted to the laws of the market and undermine and conceal he social relations at their basis. In consumer capitalism, not only material goods and labor come to be structured as commodities, but symbolic goods, lifestyles and experiences as well, as part of the construction of self identity. How is it that economic repertoires come to frame not only consumer goods and work, but social relation and even the self itself?

The institutionalization of the ideal of self realization as part of an ideology of de-institutionalization, and the socio-cultural historical context of its triumph (the authentic self as the goal of personal life). The role of therapeutic culture in the production of the language and practices of self realization. The intertwinement of the romantic ideal of authenticity and the rational actor in the construction of self-identity, lifestyle and sociality. This discourse has come to be institutionalized in work-life, personal life and leisure activities.

This cultural discourse is disseminated into the social fabric and becomes available as an interpretive and practical repertoire by various practices. This article focuses on one such practice, namely life coaching which has become a popular and widely available service in the last 20 years in the "western" world.

Flexible work market, fluid social relations and flexible selves. Different meanings of the concept commodification of the self (mainly as a result of structural elements) in various contemporary contexts – social media, dating sites, work market, etc. (to make the theoretical introduction of the thesis simple and accessible).

To simply put the meaning of the term I am putting foreword, and to highlight its importance in the analysis of contemporary technologies of the self and socio-cultural frameworks – the infusion of rational-economic-marketing practices and repertoires into the frameworks of self understanding and social guidance. People do not only refer to their material property and their work as goods to be sold in the market and in terms of economic calculation of cost and benefit, but to themselves and their social relations as well.

I will now turn to show how coaching represents an advanced and unprecedented stage in the process of commodification of therapy and selfhood, both as a process of producing and reproducing therapeutic repertoires and technologies, and as an hermeneutic process of self-understanding and social orientation.

# Part I: the emergence and development of coaching

A Marketdata report from 2009 estimated that 40,000 people in the U.S. work as life or work coaches, and this $2.4 billion market is growing 18% per year. According to a survey commissioned by the International Coaching Federation (ICF)[[1]](#footnote-1) in 2006 50% of coaches work in the U.S. alone and the rest in Europe, Asia and Australia. Almost 70% of all coaches are women, only 40% practice coaching on a full time basis. 53% of the coaches have acquired an advanced level of education (i.e., Master's Degree or PhD). As for the clients' profile, 90% are 30 years old and above; the majority of which are between the ages of 38-55. Coaching sessions cost on average $100-150 for life-coaching and about $150-300 for business or executive coaching, but can reach even higher fees in the case of high level CEO's. A sessions' length is generally one hour, and most coaching "packages" include 8 to 12 sessions. These sessions can be conducted face to face (54.5% of coaches), or over the telephone (41.9%). In addition, coaches utilize emails to allow continuous communication through short virtual interactions which enable it to expand into various daily life situations.

This data shows how vastly this industry has grown over the past 20 years since its emergence in the late 80's, changing the rules of "traditional" psychotherapeutic practice: the sources of therapeutic authority; the forms of qualification and legitimation; and the ways in which therapy is evaluated and distributed. Moreover, it implies a transformation in the techniques, repertoires and objective of therapy.

The origins of coaching are hard to trace because unlike other therapeutic practices it did not emerge as an academic discipline, a system of knowledge or a school of thought. Rather, it emerged more organically form the business field and the market of self-improvement by utilizing a variety of well established and known therapeutic and management techniques and repertoires, reconfiguring and adapting them specifically to the changing corporate world and the market of self-improvement, while weaving them into business and economic repertoires and practices. Therefore, an account of the history of coaching can only be imprecise and fragmented.

Nevertheless, I will draw this history by examining the emergence and development of coaching as a new practice in the corporate world and the cultural industries of Well-Being and self-development and the ways in which it spread from corporate and business service to daily life. This historical outline will focus on the ways in which coaching was formed and developed and how it represents the infusion of market logic and entrepreneurial discourse into the cultural production and reproduction of techniques of the self.

### The birth of coaching in the changing corporate world

During the 80's, leadership development techniques and managerial consultation practices in American business corporations have increasingly been referred to as 'Executive Coaching' (Kilburg 1996). This was a part of the attempt to formulate a new managerial model and leadership development programs in the changing corporate environment, aiming at enhancing personal and organizational performance and goal attainment with new techniques. This new model focuses on developing the manager's cognitive and emotional competence by learning "soft" communication skills, such as active listening, empathy and assertive speech on one hand and strategic, and rational techniques such as clarifying self-interest and setting goals in relation to specific projects, calculating future profits and risks, setting performance measures and monitoring personal goal attainment, on the other hand. These ideas have resonated in management professional literature since the 90's, when theoretical attempts were made to formulate new leadership models to meet the emerging organizational and corporate demands, with concepts such as "transformational leadership", "authentic leadership" and "inspirational leadership".

These management models are shaped by what Eva Illouz (2008) calls "therapeutic emotional style": it bases the manager's ability to motivate and control others on their emotional ability to listen, show concern, engagement and feel empathy (a set of interpersonal and communicative skills and emotion management techniques often called "emotional intelligence"). It facilitates the construction and maintenance of social networks and peer relations, a central resource in the new flexible corporate and work market environments, and demands the practice of authority without the ouvert demonstration of power (Illouz 2008, p. 88-95). In this model, managers' authority is grounded in their personality and individual skills and abilities, and they are required to motivate their workers effectively through inter-personal relations; to help them recognize their own skills and talents and develop them to their full potential; to recruit them to organizational goals through their self-concept; to increase cooperation and avoid conflicts; and finally, to produce and enhance the manager's self value in this complicated process.

This new management model emerged in the settings of organizational efforts to develop managers' and workers' motivation and self-management skills as part of wider changes in organizational structure, forms of control and work relations, namely the flattening of hierarchies, the emergence of working groups and decentralization of control, the centrality of knowledge and information to the process of production, and the growing flexibility and instability of working environments (Boltanski and Chiapello 2004; Fleming 2009). This change is often referred to as the emergence of information economy, in which the growing flexibility of social and economic relations demands inter-personal skills to create and manage social networks, for their centrality to corporate production, especially in information-rich environments (Benkler 2006). As Michael Hardt (1999) argues, in this new form of production, the most valuable form of labor is "affective labor", which produces interpersonal relations, communication skills, and a variety of feelings such as ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement and passion. In this organizational context, coaching emerged as a central form of affective labor and one of the main technologies for the production of affect and sociality in organizations. It infused the ideal of self realization into corporate practice on one hand, and on the other hand infused managerial and business discourse into daily life. Thus, its spread and effect can be explained by the high value of such service and the lack of such service or profession in the main-stream counseling field.

The main point here is that coaching was not established as a profession, a discipline, a body of knowledge or a theory, rather as a solution to emerging new corporate needs and problems, which, arose from the deep changes the corporate world had undergone: a new régime of justification and model of management (Boltaski and Chiapello 2004, 2005), new emotional style and communicative ethics (Illouz 2008), and new mode of production of knowledge, information and corporate sociability (Hardt 1999). It was only from the mid 1990's when efforts were made to consolidate, theorize, empirically legitimize and professionalize this eclectic practice, and in many ways, these efforts are still going on in different forms.

### From the corporation to daily life

During the early 1990's, quite parallel to its growing demand in corporations, coaching services were offered for different uses – both for corporations and for everyday personal life – as a joint venture of corporations, professionals and cultural entrepreneurs in the market of self-improvement. Coaching emerged as the new commercial trend and a rather valuable set of techniques for self-transformation alongside exisating services such as Erhard Seminars Training (EST), the Landmark Forum, Tony Robbins and Franklin Covey seminars and organizational development services offered by consultancy firms (Williams and Anderson 2006, p. 4). While Executive Coaching emerged from leadership development programs and the entry of transformational technologies into business, Life Coaching emerged from the infusion of entrepreneurial business language of project management into daily personal life, addressing a variety of audiences outside the corporate world (Prior 2003), offering its services of self-improvement for different aspects of personal daily life and social contexts such as career, family and social relations, romantic life, leisure activities and lifestyle fashioning.

Although coaching has no founding father, Thomas Leonard is recognized as the cultural entrepreneur who established this practice in the market of self improvement. Leonard was Budget Director for Landmark Education in the United States in the early 1980's and was thoroughly familiar with their training techniques and economic profitability. However, Landmark worked with groups, while Leonard was interested in working with individuals. As a financial adviser by profession, Leonard noticed that when he worked with individuals on their finances they wanted more than just financial advice. Finance was only the inclusive numerical representation of one's life and actions and while sorting out their finances people intended to sort out their lives as well. Leonard started working with clients on a one-on-one basis to help them improve themselves while offering a variety of psychological and economic ideas and techniques from different fields. In his experimentation, a coaching methodology began to form, and even though it lacked any empirical or theoretical basis, it was shaped as a useful new commodity in this industry. In 1988, Leonard began teaching a course called 'Design Your Life' and the following year founded what he called the 'College for Life Planning'.

In 1992, Laura Whitworth, previously an associate of Leonard, opened the Coach Training Institute (CTI), offering qualification programs for coaches. This was the first attempt to institutionalize coaching as a new professional arena. In the same year, Leonard founded CoachU, creating an edge of competition to the CTI. Leonard also founded the International Coach Federation (ICF) in 1994 as yet another training entrepreneurship but after some disputes emerged between him and other members of the ICF, who wanted the organization to be a professional association of coaches, he withdrew from the ICF. CTI and ICF are still the most prominent institutions in the distribution of coaching practices, although many other schools and professional groups have been established since in the US and abroad.

While previously therapeutic authority was grounded in professionalism and prestige, and achieved through a long course of academic and professional qualification, intellectual merit and scientific legitimacy, the qualification process of coaching is a relatively short course with hardly any academic prerequisites. Moreover, official certification is not necessary in order to practice coaching.[[2]](#footnote-2) Various training institutions have different professional standards and certification programs that range from 20 hours courses to 126 hours programs. Training is offered by various institutions mainly by private coaching schools and professional associations but also by some colleges and universities in some countries (as part of business management, organizational development or organizational consultancy programs, or as an external certificate apart from a formal degree).

In addition to its spread through training institutions and professional associations, the rhetoric and practices of coaching were distributed through management advice manuals, self-help books, journal and periodical columns, popular consumer culture and mass media. Best sellers such as the book and movie "The Secret", TV talk-shows, and makeover reality programs[[3]](#footnote-3) have immensely contributed to the popularization and distribution of coaching language techniques. In addition, the newly rising medium of the internet was quickly utilized to develop virtual professional communities and online social networks contributing to the quick and wide distribution of coaching. Unlike earlier formations of professional groups, who gathered around a social center, in this case real (as opposed to virtual) social relations were not essential. The distribution of coaching occurred through the market, popular media, consumer culture, and mediated virtual communities which contribute to its decentralized reproduction.

From this short historical account it appears that coaching does not consist in a new body of knowledge, an elaborated theory or an established discipline. Rather, its central feature is the improvement in the commodification of therapeutic, spiritual and economic repertoires, knowledge and techniques: its ability to reconfigure and reutilize various well established ideas and techniques to suit new uses. As the production of commodities is the production of use value for others that can be realized through exchange in order to make a profit, the development of coaching illustrates such a process in the interrelations between corporations, professionals and cultural entrepreneurs in the production of a new service for self-improvement. Moreover, the production and distribution of coaching takes place in the market of self improvement and popular culture, and not through academic institutions. However, organizing therapeutic services in markets is not a new phenomenon, so how does the case of coaching represent a different process of commodification?

### Markets, self improvement services and consumer choice

The 20th century saw the institutionalization of the psychotherapeutic relationship as an economic transaction of mental health and therapeutic services. This dyadic relationship is institutionalized as both a professional practice which is concerned with the individual's psyche, and an economic form of exchange, utilizing formal qualities of the latter (secrecy, freedom of contract and depersonalization) to establish the former (introspection, self exposure, self transformation). In light of Simmel's (2004) insight into the depersonalizing quality of money in economic exchange, the establishment of therapeutic services implies the construction of interpersonal relations that include no prior engagements and commitments, which are excluded from everyday social relations, bound by professional rules and have no further social consequences beyond therapy (involvement, debt, etc.). They are initiated, settled and concluded by payment. Counter-intuitively, this depersonalizing and alienating quality of the money economy, is the very condition for the establishment of a new form of intimate relation which is essential to the therapeutic practice, exactly because it frees the individual from other social relations in which he is embedded and creates an exclusive interpersonal relation with the therapist.

However, this basic structural feature does not necessarily mean that the production and exchange of mental goods, their form and content, are governed by market logic in all therapeutic practices or in all times and places. I suggest that being a part of an economic exchange demonstrates only a very basic and formal meaning of commodification, but it fails to distinguish more complex developments and aspects in it. In order to fine-tune the meaning of commodification in contemporary therapeutic markets and in coaching in particular, we have to take into account the following questions: what are the objectives of therapy, what is being delivered or promised, who is the subject/target audience of the service, and how is it evaluated.

Understanding coaching as a service of self-improvement which competes with other services in the therapeutic market means that market logic is infused into the reproduction of the practice, and the production of the cultural repertoires and techniques it offers, in the sense that specification, effectiveness, efficiency and meeting the demands of clients become the dominant criteria in the light of which therapy is evaluated, and the central rules of and constraints over the reproduction of therapeutic technologies of the self. The main attempt in coaching is to produce easily personalized, simple, effective and efficient techniques for self-transformation and the achievement of improved selfhood, personal well-being and happiness.

However, commodification as a form of production of therapeutic repertoires and techniques is just one aspect of this process. The other aspect relates to the micro-sociological structures and cultural content of the discourse and practice of coaching, and the ways in which they are populated by economic and business techniques and frameworks.

# Part II: techniques repertoires and narratives in the construction of selfhood

Commodification of therapy and selfhood does not consist only in having a price tag, being embedded in economic exchange, or economically recycling pre-existing objects, relationships, ideas and practices. Rather, it is a specific socio-cultural process of meaning making which includes distinct models of subjectivity and sociability. This process is generated by *commercial technologies for the production of the new person*, which denote the centrality of market logic (effectivity and efficiency in the production of value) not only in the production of therapeutic repertoires and techniques and the structuring of the therapeutic relation, but in their content as well.

How does a process of self fashioning through a hybrid language of emotions and entrepreneurship looks like? Through what practices is it established? In order to demonstrate how coaching practice and discourse infuse entrepreneurial techniques and frameworks into daily personal life, I draw on my ethnographic fieldwork and portray the distinct features of the coaching discourse and practice. I examine the construction of therapeutic relations and structure of interaction, the interpretive repertoires and techniques of reflexivity, the therapeutic narrative and techniques of self-transformation, and suggest they are all organized as a project of commodification of selfhood.

## The structure of the coaching therapeutic interaction

As implied earlier, coaching rejects the hierarchical therapist-patient a-symmetry, in order to construct an empowering and egalitarian coach-client "peer" relations (strongly resonating the customer service model) which are designed to personally suit the client, in the purpose of quickly producing self improvement, increasing self value, personal satisfaction, self-esteem, induce passion or excitement. In addition, the medical language of "traditional" psychology, gives way to a consumerist and economic language. In so doing, it transforms the underlying assumptions concerning the subject and the objectives of therapy: the individual is not a patient but a client, and the aim of therapy is not to fix, cure or heal mental deficits or problems, but to empower personal strengths and positive emotions. As the basic humanistic belief goes, there is nothing to fix or heal in a person because nothing is broken or ill. Instead, the focus is given to finding one's authenticity and constructing a life project.

The first session is usually dedicated to mutual introduction, which in addition to the informal interpersonal "chemistry" it intends to provide, formulates the relationship in a formal contract (in some cases it is a signed agreement), concerning the objectives of the client, their goals and vision, the mutual expectations and obligations regarding the coaching process, and procedural details: costs, duration, place and time for sessions, etc. The relationship is framed from the very beginning as a contractual and transformational relationship, aiming to produce personal change by defining specific issues the clients brings up, and specific goals which are conceived as meaningful and necessary for their well-being, life purpose and self-identity.

It does not intend to provide a holistic analysis and deep understanding of one's life and psyche through introspection and retrospection. Rather to enable segmentation of one's life, actions and self-understanding to specific social situations and definite goals. As we will see, this segmentation enables one to weigh and calculate their actions in different social sphere in relation to one another in order to choose where and how one can realize the highest reward. The focus on specific issues allows the condensation of the process to 8-12 meetings in which a project of self realization (in relation to a definite goal) is constructed and set on the way. Coaches offer clients to maintain contact and get support by email and phone between sessions, and assign "homework" (tasks to perform, forms to fill, information to gather, self monitoring etc) from one session to the next. By this, they weave the coaching practices into daily life more closely.

The course book of the CTI Co-Active coaching course, which is given to participants in the program worldwide, describes the first session as follows:

"Creating a relationship also involves discovering the necessary background and other personal information that will be useful in the coaching. For example: what are the main areas of focus this client wants to bring to coaching? What goals have they set? What are the values they want to honor in their life? What motivates them to action? How have they created change in the past? What works?" (Co-active coaching course book p. 2-16)

In this relationship, the coach is not considered the source of knowledge about the individual neither does he intend to analyze or interpret his words. Instead, following the spirit of the Humanistic Movement, the client is conceived to be whole and resourceful, in both meanings, as an assemblage of personal resources, and as an inner motivated self-enterprising individual. He is the bearer and owner of the self knowledge required for the coaching process in which it unfolds by a conscious and calculated action and translated into a project of self realization. Resonating Carl Rogers' humanistic ideal of authenticity, the authentic core of the Self is conceived to be hidden from the client himself, but within his reach. Uncovering, clarifying, empowering and actualizing one's authentic self becomes the main objective of the coaching relationship.

The coaching therapeutic relationship establishes the basis for constructing distinct cultural repertoires, practices of reflexivity, and techniques of self-transformation which are used in order to bestow value on one's self identity, while reinterpreting the self and its social relations, and changing one's habits, personality traits, emotions, ways of thinking and behaving.

## Coaching's mode of reflexivity

Many critics argue that reflexivity is a central feature of late modernity (Bauman 2007; Beck and Beck-Gersheim 2002; Giddens 1991; Illouz 2008; Lash, Giddens and Beck 1994), and results from the structural and institutional changes of social life, namely, their individualization. In this context the central source of moral guidance is no longer related to objective moral authority or external obligations, but grounded in the reflexive project of the self (Giddens 1991). This personal life project is constructed and managed by the individual, according to subjective criteria, and for his or her achievement of emotional authenticity. However, I would like to focus on the cultural aspect of contemporary reflexive practices, as illustrated in the case of coaching, by characterizing its specific form of reflexivity: how does it encourage the individual to examine and understand himself? Through what repertoires and techniques is it done?

Reflexivity as an act or practice of self awareness has to be defined according to the cultural repertoires, techniques and rituals it utilizes in order to interpret the self and others, frame social situations, and guide the individual to action in various social spheres. Saying that, I will conceptualize reflexivity as a technology of the self: a set of practices and interpretive repertoires "[…] which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state-of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality" (Foucault 1988, p. 17). These technologies involve certain mode of attention one directs towards oneself, and certain modes of evaluation using to bestow value and meaning towards oneself. In addition, they problematize certain mental objects, which are considered to be the substance of reflective awareness and reflexive practices, or in Foucault's terminology, they are the *Ethical Substance* of reflexive practices: "the way in which the individual has to constitute this or that part of himself as the prime material of his moral conduct." (Foucault 1990, p. 26)

While every act of self awareness simultaneously objectifies and subjectifies the self (Simmel 2004) this process can take a variety of forms depending on the cultural categories and social institutions by which it take place. I argue that in the special case of coaching, reflexivity is used to commodify the self, i.e. to constitute the self as a desirable and valuable object, for the individual and certain others, which can and ought to be designed, shaped and performed to produce the highest personal value, in both economic and very non-economic sense, through a hybrid language merging utilitarian, entrepreneurial, emotional and psychological repertoires.

The coaching mode of reflexivity is characterized by several features: **Firstly**, it is performed through specific practices and rituals of mediated self-awareness/reflexivity which discards the idea of the subconscious and the exposure of inner conflicts and aims to define and empower personal resources; **Secondly**, instead of tracing mental disorders and problems, it focuses on defining, experiencing and satisfying personal wants, needs, desires, aspirations and emotions; **Thirdly**, instead of being holistic, reflexivity is practiced in relation to a specific life situation, personal goal or issue, in order to produce self-understanding and personal change; **Furthermore**, discarding of the retrospective narrative of suffering underlying psychoanalysis, reflexivity interprets and orients the self through a prospective narrative which outlines the project of self realization, and involves instrumental and utilitarian approach to the past, mapping of the present and a construction and pursuit of a desired future; **Moreover**, it includes techniques of calculation and choice, as central means to discover and actualize one's authentic selfhood; And **finally**, far from being an activity which is restricted to produce a form of self-knowledge in the therapist's clinic, it is strongly connected to personal performance and individual action, both as a target and as means of emotion-management and production of self-appreciation through recognition. These aspects are further discussed.

### Mapping and branding the self: constructing the self as an object of value

The coaching mode of reflexivity is not concerned with analyzing reasons and causes of one's behaviors, thoughts, emotions and biographical events, and awareness or knowledge of them is not considered therapeutically valuable or useful. Rather, it focuses on what emotions, thoughts, attitudes, behaviors and experiences one wants to change – which should be discarded and which adopted, experienced or expressed – and how to do it effectively. It is not intended to create an inclusive explanation of one's life, but to produce positive personal changes in specific settings. For that matter, it is not meant to produce retrospective self-knowledge through "talk cure" and confession like practices, such as psychoanalysis offers, but to gather personal information which is relevant to the process of self realization.

The coach uses a standardized set of questions to direct the client to self understanding by clarifying, assessing and mapping what one considers important or valuable in one's life; what one's aspirations, desires and wants are; what are one's behavioral, cognitive and emotional patterns/habits, and whether they contribute to achieving one's personal goals or block them from doing so. Or, as Adi, a 40 years old coach eloquently phrased it: "Resources, this is the name of the game. Your resources are your abilities, your strengths – those you are aware of, and especially those you are **not** aware of – we stir up what you don't know about yourself, and those resources have to be put to work."

Reflexivity here acts simultaneously in two directions: the virtual future self and the actual present self, which have to be fine tuned and retuned to one another. It aims at uncovering the authentic self as an ideal self image to be actualized in the future, as well as aiming at mapping the actual self, their current habits, ways of thinking acting and feeling in terms of strengths/resources and barriers – evaluated in relation to a specific goal and social context.

It is not done only through conversation and questions but in some cases by forms ("assessment tools and exercises") which the client fills by himself or with the coach. One of the most common forms is the "wheel of life", a round diagram, which asks the client to assess their current satisfaction in different areas of their life, which are represented by 8 sections – to which one can add more – including categories such as career, family and friends, money, romance, personal growth, fun and recreation, health, and physical environment. These categories can be personalized according to what clients see relevant to them but the idea is to map one's life according to the level of satisfaction derived from different areas of their life, to locate the sites where change should be induced, and to come up with a plan to improve one's overall satisfaction by setting goals and a project to achieve them. Recently, mobile life coaching apps have been distributed, intending to facilitate this evaluation and monitoring of satisfaction, as another new coaching tool for clients, or even as a new form of eCoaching, turning the mobile phone into "a customised personal coach".[[4]](#footnote-4)

This form of self knowledge is not stable and lasting, and does not concern the "core" or inner structure of the Self. Rather, the Self is constructed through a constant feedback loop which provides information that, in turn, is used to calculate and choose between different courses of action. Different forms of information are used for this matter – information about oneself obtained by techniques of reflexivity and emotional, behavioral and cognitive self-monitoring; information about one's social image, behavioral patterns and performance extracted through self monitoring and rituals of self-presentation such as role play and simulations in the coaching sessions; and information about environments in which the individual is engaged or intends to be engaged in. Information never includes its own interpretive framework, which is necessary in order to decode it, give it value and enable calculation and decision making. This lack enables its individualization/personalization since it demands to construct such a framework in subjective terms such as needs, wants, personal vision and goals, which are later weaved together in a prospective narrative of self realization.

Clearly, the act of reflexive mapping is not intended just to provide information about one's current status or social location in relation to one's aspirations but rather amounts to a process of self-branding in which the bright sides and positive personality traits and skills, or strengths, are highlighted, amplified and focused upon, while negative ones are diminished and put aside. As Hearn (2008, p. 198) puts it, "Self-branding involves the self-conscious construction of a meta-narrative and meta-image of self through the use of cultural meanings and images drawn from the narrative and visual codes of the mainstream culture industries. The function of the branded self is purely rhetorical; its goal is to produce cultural value and, potentially, material profit." Lair et al (2005, p. 308) add that " Rather than focusing on self-*improvement* as the means to achievement, personal branding seems to suggest that the road to success is found instead in explicit self-*packaging*: Here, success is not determined by individuals’ internal sets of skills, motivations, and interests but, rather, by how effectively they are arranged, crystallized, and labeled—in other words, branded." In self-branding practices, concepts of product development and promotion are used to market persons for entry into or transition within different social spheres, which are conceived of as markets, and to some extent tend to acquire structural traits of markets (work, education, dating sites and virtual social networks). Nevertheless, while Hearn and Lair et al examine this phenomenon in TV reality shows, virtual networks, corporations and work markets, coaching infuses this practice into daily personal life as a form of self-styling.

Self-branding reflexivity aims to produce motivation, excitement and passion, a sense of self value, self esteem, and a sense of ability to pursue and achieve one's dreams and aspirations. Thus, it is central not only in order to produce an experience of self-appreciation as personal empowerment but to construct and practically pursue a project of self-realization.

### Projecting the self into the future: constructing a prospective narrative of the self

The second aspect of self-branding reflexivity, as briefly mentioned earlier, focuses on constructing a desired future – desired self-image, wanted lifestyle, aspirations concerning career, social relationships, leisure, family and romantic partners. In this case, the production of positive emotions, passions, optimism and excitement hardly necessitate the shadowing or diminishing of "negative" or un-flattering aspects of one's personality, behavior, past experiences or current situation since it refers to a completely virtual future, in the sense that it is not currently actual but possible (See Shields 2003). Since it is not constrained by the contingencies of the present, it remains open, elastic, populated with a variety of possibilities and easily colonized. This denotes a transformation in the therapeutic vocabularies, narratives and models of healing – from focusing on the depth of the past and the psyche to the width and openness of the future, as the central object of problematization and interpretation. However, in order to be relevant as a project of self-realization it has to be translatable/convertible to an actual plan and specific actions, and in some cases its pursuit and accomplishment demand their measurability in some way, whether arithmetically, emotionally or socially, by setting performance measures to monitor progress and navigate through one's life's project successfully.

The construction of the authentic virtual self is accomplished through techniques of self imagination: questions directing and encouraging the individual to develop, imagine and verbally articulate personal dreams, fantasies and visions of their aspired life. One of the self-help coaching books presents it as a string of questions:

"What is it that you desire and keeps slipping away? Imagine that you have it, whatever it is, now what? [...] Now that you have it, what does it give you that you didn't have before? What does it look like? What do you feel when you have it? Do you see yourself differently now that you have it? Do others see you differently now? And what about your daily life – is it significantly changed and better in any way?" (Blanchard and Human 2004, *Leverage your best ditch the rest,* p. 24.)

This passage illustrates how imagination is used not only to construct fantasies but also as means of self experimentation to probe personal aspirations and their prospective contribution to one's self image, social recognition and life improvement. The imaginative construction of the desired life and self image serves as a personal compass to facilitate individual orientation in current social relationships, to expand one's ecology of choice, to produce excitement, induce action, and to facilitate choice from different courses of action. These technologies of imagination elaborate the information gathered from the mapping process, but are also used to examine and evaluate the prospective experienced utility of the realization of one's goals and vision.

Colin Campbell (1987, p. 70) suggests that modern individualistic hedonism utilizes the imagination and practices of "day dreaming" to induce pleasure which stems from the expectation for exciting future experiences. These techniques of imagination or rather visualization are used to produce what Campbell calls *emotional control*, i.e. the efforts modern people make to decide on the type and intensity of the emotions that they want to feel, manage and experience them as pleasant. These practices of fantasizing take a central place in the construction of individual life project and the prospective narrative framing it, but they are used not only to produce pleasure, excitement and desire, but as techniques of colonizing the future (Giddens 1991). The imagined future is used to anchor one's reflexive life project, and enables the attribution of meaning and value to current events, relationships and personality traits, in relation to the prospective personal narrative. However, more than a detailed narrative, it is a more or less detailed plan for turning one's life into a productive and successful project.

When fantasizing is successful, the desired self image is set as a goal to be pursued and performed in everyday life. Thus, one's goals should be identified as one's desires, dreams and idealized aspirations, but at the same time be translatable to concrete actions in specific situations in order to provide the desired outcome. The process of translating desires into a plan for action, and their realization by a specific action in daily life is described by Osnat, a 47 year old coach:

Interviewer: What positive emotions or goals do people set for themselves?

Osnat: Wow, there is no limit – finding the right romantic partner, personal aspirations "I want to be this and that", professional aspirations "I want to be a CEO, I want to be successful". "I want"… this is the point.

Interviewer: What process do they have to go through in order to achieve it?

Osnat: You divide it into steps: "I want to be a writer", okay, what do you need in order to achieve it? And so you divide it and say "Okay, here are the steps you have to take, you go stage by stage, ticking off each stage as you go along and there you are". You have to divide it because dreams usually seem very distant and thanks to these steps you can get them closer and you understand that in order to get it you have to move through these stages, and then you can see it happening. You have to detail the dream that seems to be out of reach in order to make it real and achievable.

Translating one's vision into a course of action is preceded by translating every social situation and life event into an individualized and utilitarian "private language" which interprets its objects in psychological, subjective and emotional terms, as outcomes of one's actions and choices and her responsibility to manage them effectively. This utilitarian language functions to a-moralize personal goals, aspirations and wants, as to include a vast array of aspirations, wants and self-identities. In order to have personal practical implications and to fit into one's personal life project, everything has to be subjectified by this language, focusing on one's ability to reflexively and independently control and change life circumstances by changing one's own habits, attitudes, emotions and actions or by changing one's social commitments and relations.

Not only current habits, social relations and behavior are examined in the light of the prospective life project and their effectiveness in achieving it, but also attitudes toward past events, and feelings originating from the memory of such events. The prospective projection of the self, demands to deconstruct and reconstruct one's interpretation of past events.

Changing unwanted emotions and attitudes related to negative past experiences, is done by a popularized version of Cognitive-Behavioral techniques of mood therapy, originally developed to reduce anxiety, depression and stress, to reframe the individual's interpretation of past events and experiences and reshape them to be productive in generating personal satisfaction and positive emotions. Reinterpreting an event can mean changing its importance in one's life by marginalizing it and "putting it behind" if it is conceived as negative or "blocking", or, when it is conceived as positive or valuable, centralizing it as important to one's self image. While Cognitive Behavioral Treatment evaluates beliefs, emotions and attitudes by their ability to reflect what is normal and reasonable and what is distorted and exaggerated, here the criteria is "what do you gain from it", i.e. what value one can derive from such an emotion, attitude or experience. Is it blocking or enabling the achievement of one's emotional life's project, and whether those benefits can be achieved in a more constructive way. In short, it seeks to capitalize the past, as well as personality traits, emotions and abilities in order to turn it into a productive tool, emotionally, socially and economically.

This way, the fragility of the present gets stabilized and draws meaning not from retrospection and analysis of past events and experiences as the sources of selfhood, but from future aspirations and fantasies about the imagined desired self. The past is important as a point of departure and a resource for self-development, not as a source of self knowledge to reflect upon. The past has to be mapped and tagged as personal resources and obstacles to be elaborated on in planning the prospective life project and as information to be used in realizing it.

Examining and reshaping attitudes towards past events, personal habits, abilities and traits, and towards social relations and roles, involves a dialectic move between disenchanting and rationalizing them (instrumentalizing social relations and personal properties through examining their cost and benefit to oneself) and re-enchanting and emotionalizing them (idealizing and naturalizing). This dialectic process involves processes of evaluation, calculation and choice, as means for increasing productivity and self-value while moving in and between social spheres.

### Technologies of evaluation, calculation and choice

Personal choice is a structural consequence of modernity, one of the moral and cultural hallmarks of post-industrial consumer societies, and a liberal moral ideal. It is a structural consequence of individualization, the complex and highly differentiated division of labor, and marketization processes which act to expand and specify different possibilities of action the individual confronts, whether as a producer or as a consumer; and a liberal moral imperative, which establishes it as the main source of legitimacy to one's action. In the sphere of consumption, individuals come to shape, know and express themselves through their choices of consumption and presenting their actions as patterns of choice which manifests their authentic self.

The centrality of the ethics of personal choice is related to the ideals of freedom, autonomy and self determination. In contrast to the ideal of choice in religious and classic moral philosophies, in which the moral framework in which choice has to be made is given and objective, in individualistic liberal morality the individual is demanded to construct a personal framework which could direct him to the right choice, while the "right choice" is evaluated by its usefulness in producing self-value and personal reward. To do this, self interest and emotional authenticity are recruited as moral sources of legitimacy, and technologies of choice are activated.

As we have seen in the construction of the prospective narrative, coaching encourages individuals to problematize various life situations and mental properties as objects of calculation and choice in order to direct the individual to action in constructing and pursuing one's life project. The ideal of choice is used as a general framework to interpret life stories, events, behaviors and attitudes, as Anna, a 24 year old coachee phrased it "I am where I am today because of the choices I made in my life". In this framework, choice means that every action, way of thinking or feeling has to be understood as one of many alternatives, which is more valuable since it is more effective in supplying personal satisfaction, since it meets self interest or personal desire of some sort. The very basic technique is to ask "what do I gain from this" in relation to various mental and social objects and situations, to formulate them as cost-benefit calculation, and to reach a bottom line which points to the most effective course of action. It is used both in constructing personal goals and prospective narrative, and in daily situations as means of orientation, self presentation and action in various social situations.

For example, one of my interviewees, a 40 year old woman, this technique of calculation enabled to bring up, consider and evaluate different courses of action, to bring up options that were earlier considered irrelevant or weren't considered at all and to re-evaluate what was previously taken for granted. As she describes it, it includes opening up "a window", presenting new possible courses of action, focusing on what exactly is at stake in the situation, what is important for her, what she is expecting to gain or ready to loose while choosing a course of action, what makes her get "stuck" and what promotes her. In this process, options that were previously considered irrelevant or weren't considered at all are reevaluated, trying to asses the risk involved in following them and their potential damage to her goals in relation to their benefits. She used this technique first to decide what she is to do with some work issues and career considerations, and later implemented it to personal and familial issues as well.

The inclusive use of cost-benefit calculation denotes the pervasiveness of economic and utilitarian repertoires as central measures to evaluate alternative courses of action and justify personal choices. The dissemination of the ideology of consumer choice into daily life by coaching practices does not necessarily entail the colonization of life worlds by instrumental rationality, or at list not without changing its meaning, since in many cases an arithmetic calculation is not possible or unnecessary. Even when calculation takes an arithmetic form, it is used as act of evaluation and judgment, which tends to draw heavily on emotional authenticity. Thus, reframing actions and situations as personal choice demands specific intentionality which measures everything in relation to the self, and constructs one's self value, authenticity or personal benefits as the only factors that tips the scales. These regime of justification and mode of evaluation aim at granting personal freedom from existing social commitments and personal habits, by establishing a space in which they are reevaluated and reconsidered alongside other alternatives. Moreover, technologies of choice act in two directions: they are implemented when confronting an actual choice, and they frame given situations as non-obligatory and exchangeable, by constructing them as a personal choice, enabling or even demanding to probe alternatives.

This technique entails several assumptions: **first**, every life situation or mental state can be framed as a result of personal choice, hence holding the individual responsible for their consequences or for their change, and dissolving any social, economic or psychological determinism. **Second**, every situation has to be structured as one alternative among a wider ecology of individual choice, which one can adopt or discard according to her self-interest or emotional authenticity. **Third**, different and incommensurable forms of value from different social spheres can be weighed in relation to one another, for example satisfaction and material reward, career and personal life, family and leisure activities, emotional costs or benefits and material ones, etc.

Designing and executing a new form of individual behavior, thinking and feeling which is more beneficial to the individual is the central goal of coaching. For this matter, evaluation calculation and choice are not merely cognitive exercises but are deliberately used to reshape action and self presentation in various social contexts. This is done by strategic self presentation and performance in various social situations where the self is to be performed and are the central site to bestow self value through social recognition.

To summarize my claim, coaching discourse illustrates the commodification of selfhood since it constructs subjectivity, self-understanding and social relationships according to a market/business model. It utilizes economic practices, criteria and frameworks to reframe the self, her emotions and social relations as the main objects of productivity, profit and value in both economic and non-economic senses. This framework combines rational procedures for practical orientation and enhancement of productivity – clarifying self-interest, planning, goal setting, cost-benefit calculation, efficiency, choice and performance measurement – with emotional-therapeutic practice – such as reflexivity, clarifying and shaping emotions, wants, desires and tastes, and self monitoring techniques – in order to construct self-identity and produce personal satisfaction and happiness. In this case, the construction of subjectivity and sociality is conducted according to the utility (emotional, social or economic) they produce, and their usefulness in constructing and achieving a project of self realization. In this framework, techniques of evaluation calculation and choice come to be central for moral guidance and the construction of self identity.

# Conclusion

Why and how this very explicit economic/entrepreneurial/marketing discourse is so easily used to frame the self and the social? I suggest that we should answer this question by examining and probing the relations between processes of commodification and cultural repertoires of the market and the ideal of individual freedom, authenticity and autonomy. The reason why individuals do not reject this discourse for being alienating and rationalizing is that it is conceived of as liberating. The market is the social sphere where practices and rhetoric of individual freedom were institutionalized and these cultural repertoires weave instrumental rationality with personal freedom and self realization. So the phenomena of the commodification of the self has to be understood not only in light of market culture and consumerism but in relation to our modern ideal of freedom.

The intertwinement of commodification, authenticity and individual freedom, result in what Zigmunt Bauman calls "subjectivity fetishism", but this in turn doesn’t give us a simple critic of contemporary culture and society, since as it criticizes commodification it implicates our ideals of freedom and authenticity, once conceived of as the moral basis for the critic of capitalism.

Market culture, authenticity and the problem of freedom. To conclude, I want to expand the scope of our view. Instead of sinking into the common critics of commodification, which are abundant, I would like to raise some questions concerning our common ideal of freedom, individual freedom of course. What is our common concept of freedom? How has it developed? Where and through what ideas and practices has it institutionalized?

To offer possible "ways out" of this problem – we are personally in love with the economic ideal of freedom, but hate its social and individual consequences. [to review the views on the problem of freedom] Concepts such as "masterless slaves" or "government through freedom" only highlight the problems our notions of freedom create: we are either worried whether some ideals and practices limit our freedom or, alas, function as an ideology or a form of discipline, or we are worried about the social inequalities these practices of freedom promote, or even worse, the new forms of inequalities derived from them.

To end with a question

The masterless slave/ the slave with no master - government through freedom – and the question of freedom. The use of market freedom as an ideal and cultural model/framework to interpret and conduct personal and social life. (putting aside the question whether markets give freedom to individuals or enslave them, the economic sphere is where the modern ideal of individual freedom (self-interest, rights, personal utility, freedom of contract, etc.) has institutionalized, and where the repertoires and practices of such freedom have been forged.)

Marx and Engels described the process in 1848 in the Communist Manifesto:

“The bourgeoisie, wherever it has got the upper hand, has put an end to all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations. It has pitilessly torn asunder the motley feudal ties that bound man to his “natural superiors”, and has left no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous “cash payment”. It has drowned out the most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervour, of chivalrous enthusiasm, of philistine sentimentalism, in the icy water of egotistical calculation. It has resolved personal worth into exchange value, and in place of the numberless indefeasible chartered freedoms, has set up that single, unconscionable freedom - Free Trade. In one word, for exploitation, veiled by religious and political illusions, it has substituted naked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitation.

“The bourgeoisie has stripped of its halo every occupation hitherto honoured and looked up to with reverent awe. It has converted the physician, the lawyer, the priest, the poet, the man of science, into its paid wage labourers.

“The bourgeoisie has torn away from the family its sentimental veil, and has reduced the family relation into a mere money relation.”

Foucault on the problem of freedom and self-slavery: Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and other writings, 1977-1984. p. 242

1. PricewaterhouseCoopers’ International Survey report for the ICF. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Professionals from a variety of occupations – such as psychologists and organizational consultants – deliver coaching services without any specific qualification but as another technique they apply, as market demand for it rises. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. There are various examples for this "Makeover" reality shows, but it is most prominently represented in shows such as "The Swan" a Fox reality show that was launched in 2004, in which "ugly" women are going through a process of extreme makeover which includes plastic surgeries, cosmetics, and fashion self styling, accompanied by a coach. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <http://www.zdnet.com/a-life-coach-in-your-pocket-3039289952/> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)