

# THE ENTREPRENEURIAL SELF

*Fabricating a New Type of Subject*

Ulrich  
Bröckling

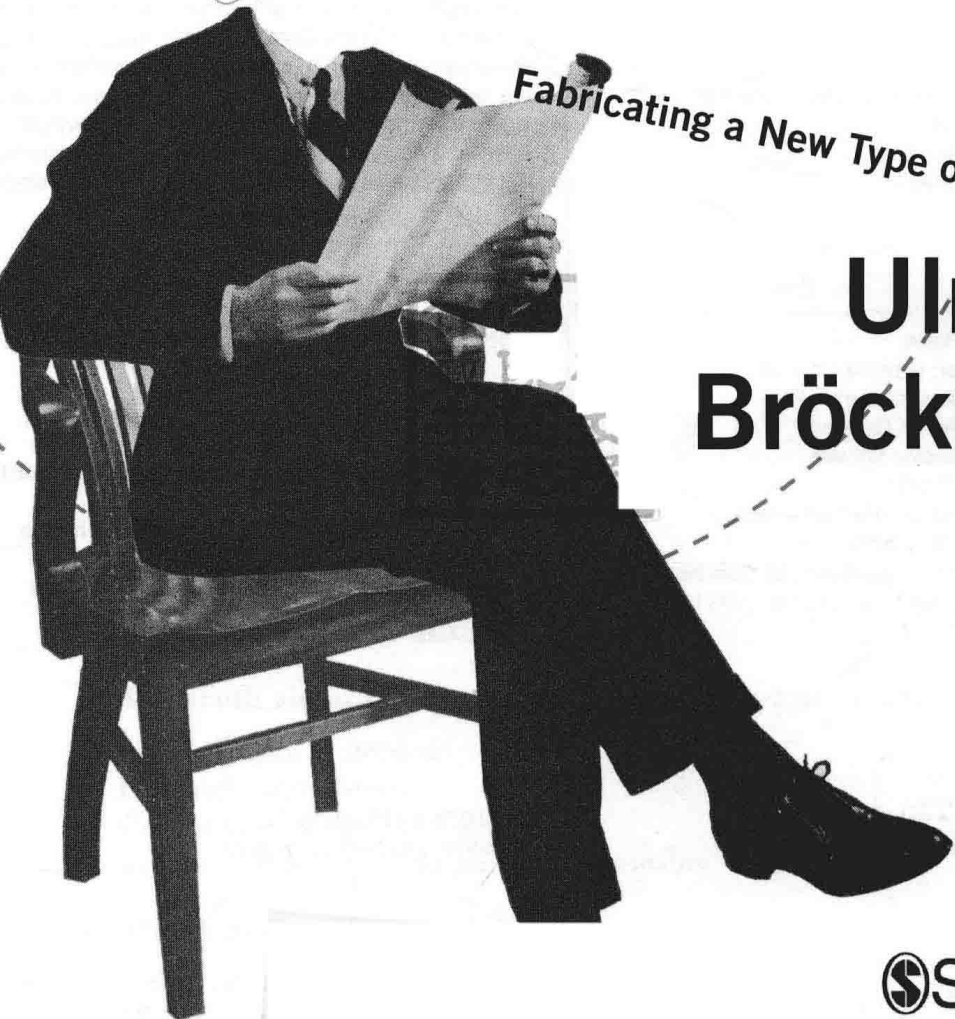
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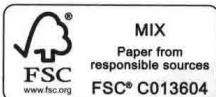
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# THE ENTREPRENEURIAL SELF



Translated by Steven Black

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Ulrich Bröckling** is professor for Cultural Sociology at the Albert-Ludwigs-University of Freiburg/Germany. His main areas of research include Studies of Governmentality, Theories of Subjectification, Political Sociology and Critical Management Studies.

# FOREWORD TO THE ENGLISH EDITION

Being an entrepreneur is more than just a profession or even a vocation, nor is it merely a variety of economic activity or the legal status of being self-employed. An entrepreneur is something we are supposed to become. The call to act as an entrepreneur of one's own life produces a model for people to understand what they are and what they ought to be, and it tells them how to work on the self in order to become what they ought to be. In other words, the entrepreneurial self is a form of *subjectification*. As such, entrepreneurial activity is less a fact than a field of force. It is an *aim* individuals strive for, a *gauge* by which they judge their own conduct, a daily *exercise* for working on the self, and finally a *truth generator* by which they come to know themselves. This form of subjectification is not restricted to independent businesspeople and shareholders. The call to see ourselves as entrepreneurs of our own lives initiates and sustains this process of constantly shaping the self. You are only ever an entrepreneur *à venir*, only ever in a state of becoming one, never of being one.

People are addressed as entrepreneurs of their own selves in the most diverse contexts, and they are susceptible to this interpellation because orienting themselves on its field of force leads to basic social recognition. Indeed, in a marketized world, acting entrepreneurially is the very condition of participation in social life. Moved by the desire to stay in touch and the fear of dropping out of the society of competition, people answer the call to be entrepreneurial by helping to create the very reality it already presupposed.

The entrepreneurial field of force may indeed tap unknown potential but it also leads to permanent over-challenging. It may strengthen self-confidence and what psychologists call self-efficacy but it also exacerbates the feeling of powerlessness. It may set free creativity but it also generates unbounded anger. Competition is driven by the promise that the most capable will reap the most success, but no amount of effort can remove the risk of failure. The individual has no choice but to balance out in her own subjective self the objective contradiction between the hope of rising and the fear of decline, between empowerment and despair, euphoria and dejection.

That is a short summary of some of the basic theses of this book. The original German edition was first published in 2007, one year before the greatest financial crisis to shake the global economy since 1929. Are the book's

arguments now obsolete? Or has its diagnosis of the rise of the entrepreneurial self become instead even more pertinent?

There is a lot to indicate that neoliberal market radicalism has at least been dampened by the events following the Lehman Brothers' bankruptcy. This applies not only to government budgeting and financial markets but also to the hegemony of entrepreneurial subjectification. Yet the call has not fallen silent. On the contrary, the crisis has increased the pressure to develop individual distinctions, 'unique selling points', in order to stay competitive. At the same time, a new figure needs to be added to that of the entrepreneurial self: the 'indebted man'.<sup>1</sup> While the entrepreneurial self is continually concerned with sniffing out profit opportunities, the indebted self must perpetually re-establish its credit rating. The entrepreneurial self is constantly required to demonstrate creativity, customer orientation, innovation and the will to take risks, while the indebted subject must, over and over again, make itself transparent, open up its books and make a convincing show of being able to pay back its credit. The entrepreneurial self is never finished with self-optimizing, while the indebted self can never retire from self-revelation.

The current study delineates the entrepreneurial self as an imperative role model from a Western, and more specifically from a German, perspective. Large parts of this depiction will also apply to other contemporary societies. Calls to become a certain type of subject are as susceptible to globalization as anything else. Yet there are cultural colourations, path dependencies and nuances. The 'New Spirit of Capitalism'<sup>2</sup> has more than just one face. In informal economies in African, Latin American and Asian countries, as well as in larger Western cities, armies of ordinary virtuosos must expend all their energies on entrepreneurial activity just to stay alive. They are propelled onward not by the old dishwasher-to-millionaire dream but by hunger. If we want to find people who closely approximate the image of the entrepreneurial self, we should look not only at the slick adventurers of new economy start-ups but also at the plastic bottle harvesters on the rubbish tips of Lagos and at the windscreen washers on the intersections of Mexico City, or, for that matter, closer to home, at the flower vendors in our bistros and bars.

I am indebted to Wolfgang Essbach, Ulrich Jaekel, Stefan Kaufmann, Susanne Krasmann, Thomas Lemke, Axel T. Paul, Matthias Schöning and Manfred Weinberg for their encouragement, criticism and many suggestions. I thank Steven Black for his careful translation, which has rendered the academic German of the original in readable English. Warm thanks also go to Leon Wolff who assisted in the search for English editions of the cited literature and in proofing bibliographic details, and also to Barbara Handke, who established contact with SAGE Publications.

Ulrich Bröckling

Freiburg, August 2015



## Notes

1. Maurizio Lazzarato (2012) *The Making of the Indebted Man: Essay on the Neoliberal Condition*, Los Angeles: Semiotext(e); Lazzarato (2015) *Governing by Debt*, South Pasadena, CA: Semiotext(e).
2. Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello (2005) *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, London/New York: Verso.

# INTRODUCTION

At first, the concierge was intending to write a genealogy of the economic subject. But he has a fancy for anachronism. That is why he has become a concierge. Or did the anachronism consist precisely in writing a genealogy of the economic subject?<sup>1</sup>

As the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze plaintively remarked in the early 1990s, the notion that enterprises have a soul is 'the most terrifying news in the world'.<sup>2</sup> The only message to top that is the injunction that everyone should transform themselves, into the last corner of their souls, into an entrepreneur on a mission of their own. This injunction is being delivered today by countless motivation gurus and self-management trainers, as well as by economists, education experts, trend researchers and politicians of almost all stripes. The present book examines this demand, the social undertow it generates and the field of force that grows up around it. The entrepreneurial self that gives the book its title involves a set of interpretative schemes with which people today are supposed to understand themselves and their lives. It involves normative demands and role models, as well as institutional arrangements, social technologies and technologies of self according to which people are expected to regulate their behaviour. In other words, the entrepreneurial self is what is fashionably referred to in the business world as a mission statement.

The figure of the entrepreneurial self is used in precisely this sense in a key document for the German discussion, the final report from the *Kommission für Zukunftsfragen Bayern-Sachsen* (Bavarian-Saxonian Commission for Future Concerns) from 1997. Anticipating in its tone much of the reform agendas that have since been made reality, the report sets an explicit political aim. It states that 'the ideal model for the future is the individual as self-provider and the entrepreneur of their own labour. This insight must be awakened; self-initiative and self-responsibility, i.e. the entrepreneurial in society, must be developed more strongly'.<sup>3</sup> The 'entrepreneurial knowledge society' of the 21st century is no longer calling for 'the perfect copyists of preset blueprints' as the 'wage earner oriented industrial society' of the 20th century had required and produced. What the economy and society really need are 'creative, enterprising people with a much greater readiness and capacity than hitherto to assume responsibility for themselves and others in all matters'. The task of the state is to provide aid in this period of transition.

Politics must 'provide an ordering framework and value orientation'. Those measures intended to stimulate 'more entrepreneurial activity and responsibility' would lead 'directly to a reduction of the social welfare state'. This, incidentally, would mean 'in no way just a loss but also a win for the individual and society'. This latter insight is however ignored by large sections of the population. For which reason, in addition to politics, the economy and the media were called on to reinforce the popular will to keep up with progress. The imperative tone is coupled with the threat that Germany's 'by international standards almost unique material prosperity, paired with social equity, a higher degree of inner and outer security, high amount of leisure time etc.' could 'collapse like a house of cards' unless 'individual views and behaviour as well as collective ideals' were reoriented on entrepreneurial practice.<sup>4</sup> This dire and urgent tone makes the report itself already part of the field of force whose construction it is proposing.

The present study is focused on the way this field of force works, on the energies it consolidates and sets free, on the way it pulls individuals in contrary directions all at once, as well as on the methods those individuals employ for adjusting their own movements to the pull. Like the commission report, this study understands the entrepreneurial self as a programme for governing. The experts commissioned by the state were pushing to have the programme carried out. The present work concentrates instead on understanding it, on bringing into relief the programme's strategic elements, making palpable how the demand is constitutionally unfulfillable and, finally, demonstrating the logic of exclusion and guilt it consequently exposes people to. Following Michel Foucault's lectures on the history of governmentality<sup>5</sup> and the subsequent 'studies of governmentality',<sup>6</sup> the current investigation extends the concept of government beyond the sphere of state intervention to include other strategies for conditioning human behaviour. The field of force of the entrepreneurial self draws on various sources, not only on the decisions of political administration and the recommendations of their expert advisers.

The materials consulted for the study are correspondingly heterogeneous. Among others, I have analysed macroeconomic, psychological and sociological theories as well as management programmes, creativity, communication and cooperation guidebooks and popular advice books, all of which had in common that they made explicit the rationale of entrepreneurial practice and method, thus enabling readers to adapt their behaviour to it as an overall ideal model of how to live. The field of force of the entrepreneurial self is a field of discourse, but it is more than just that. The investigation relies on books, journal articles and other published writings, but a large part of the literature consists of texts intended for immediate practical application: training manuals, textbooks, success guides and similar aids are less concerned with providing convincing arguments than with guiding practice – they are rarely over-blessed with intellectual brilliance, written either in an exceedingly

technical or a charismatic, invocational tone. They define a zone of the utterable and the knowable, while directed, above all, at the doable. They not only provide answers to the question 'what am I supposed to do?' but also supply detailed instructions on exactly *how* to do what one ought to do.

Of course, the survey of the entrepreneurial field of force does not permit us to state how people really move within it. Which rules and regularities they follow (including when they diverge from these rules) is of interest to the present work only insofar as their behaviour is influenced by the strategies and technologies of the entrepreneurial self and to the extent these make use of methods of quantitative and qualitative sociological research. What is being investigated therefore is not what those who are subjected to the regime and who constitute themselves as subjects via this subjugation in reality say or do, but rather a regime of subjectification. The question is not how much effective power is possessed by the imperative to be enterprising, but rather by which means the latter exercises this power. What we are concerned with is not the reconstruction of meaningful subjective worlds, behaviour orientation or shifts in the social structure, but with a grammar of governing and self-governing. Put metaphorically, the book investigates not how far people let themselves drift or how they use the current to move forward more quickly, or whether they attempt to evade it or swim against it, but rather the current itself and how it draws people in particular directions.

Concentrating on the rationale and the programmes of the entrepreneurial self poses a danger of reinforcing the sense of inevitability they endeavour to suggest. The study seeks to avert this danger by bringing into focus those programmes' inherent antinomies: autonomy and heteronomy, rational calculation and action amidst uncertainty, cooperation and competition. This approach holds open the gap between the unlimited demand and its limited fulfilment. The issue in what follows is not only what individuals are called on to do and how they are enabled to do it; the study is also about how their efforts often go wrong and how they can never entirely satisfy the requirements placed upon them.

Such a project runs at diagonals to the current disciplinary divisions within social research. More precisely, it can be attributed to a number of different departments. The study is intended primarily as a contribution to a political sociology that avoids reducing political activity to actions by the state and other big players. It is also attentive to the micropolitics of the everyday, to the structures of governance and to all the means by which individuals, public and private institutions regulate their common concerns.

Entrepreneurial practice is without doubt a specific form of economic activity and what has been referred to above as a field of force is a dynamic of assimilating all practice to the model of economic practice. The question to be further examined here is socio-economical in that it is concerned with how this practice type is made credible and made to permeate society. According to an old bon mot by the American economist

James Duesenberry, 'economics is all about how people make choices; sociology is all about how people don't have any choices to make'.<sup>7</sup> In contrast, the present study shows – and to this extent it is economic sociology – how the current economization of the social leaves individuals no free choice except to continuously choose between alternatives they have not themselves chosen. In other words, people have freedom forced upon them.

As an overall model, the entrepreneurial self develops a particular dynamism in the world of enterprise from which it stems. In the sociology of work and industry, as well as in the sociology of organization, it has long been discussed to what extent altered forms of organizing work and business have rendered obsolete the worker of the Fordist age, that type which the above-cited commission report cynically caricatures as 'the perfect copyists of preset blueprints', replacing him with the new type of the 'labour force entrepreneur' or 'entreproyee'.<sup>8</sup> The present study follows up on this discussion by investigating the way current management concepts commit employees to engage in entrepreneurial practice, deploying strategies to increase employee autonomy, responsibility and flexibility.

The entrepreneurial self is an offspring of *homo economicus*, that model of what it is to be a human, on which the science of economics bases its models of human behaviour. The description of this figure thus also falls within the anthropological branch of social science, which analyses implicit and explicit images of the human and the way such images affect behaviour. Since the study deals with at least informally sanctioned behavioural norms – the entrepreneurial self is propagated by means of the promise of success and the threat of failure – it can also be read within a sociology of norms. With its concern for the methods by which the entrepreneurial self is generated, it also contributes to a research domain that could be referred to as the sociology of social technologies and technologies of the self, and that has been to date little introduced into the discipline and at best systematically elaborated on in studies of governmentality. Sociology must here demonstrate its capacity for self-reflection, since the technologies for shaping human behaviour on the entrepreneurial model are based on sociological knowledge and methods.

Finally, mention should be made of cultural sociology. The focus is on what has come to be termed *enterprise culture*. The term does not refer to the 'us-feeling', evoked and continually stimulated by images, rituals, narratives and codes of conduct to promote employee commitment to 'their' firm and reinforce corporate identity. Nor does it refer to the inner worlds and underworlds of businesses brought to light by ethnographers of the labour world. The term 'enterprise culture' refers here to the symbolic order of that field of force that makes 'be enterprising!' the overarching maxim by which to govern the self and others, extending the model beyond the confines of business to enter all aspects of life.

## The structure of the investigation

How can a research project be successfully carried out that is situated in so many different contexts at once? The book abstains from reconstructing the field of force of the entrepreneurial self from a central perspective. Instead, it gathers together a series of individual investigations that approach the regime of subjectification from different angles, favouring exemplary examinations over a systematic presentation. The coherence of the whole consists not in an architectonics in which each element is assigned a fixed place, but in the convergence of lines.

The study begins with a methodological section (Chapter 1) which outlines the research programme, responding to impulses in particular from Michel Foucault, Louis Althusser, Nikolas Rose, Gunther Teubner and Michael Hutter. This chapter contours a *genealogy of subjectification* to be undertaken in the following chapters, contrasting it with other sociological theories. Here, we will not yet be treating the entrepreneurial self specifically but rather elaborating on what is a subjectification regime in general and how it can be studied.

Chapter 2 begins by gathering evidence, following the career of the entrepreneurial self and related figures such as the 'intrapreneur' and the 'Me Inc.' in political journalism, in current sociological research, in management discourse and finally in state measures for activating self-entrepreneurship as a means of raising employability (the so-called *Hartz-Gesetze*). This is preceded by an evaluation of the theory from G. Günter Voß and Hans J. Pongratz of the transition from employee to 'entployee',<sup>9</sup> which shows clearly the divergent research vectors that proceed from a parallel set of basic assumptions.

The subjectification regime of the entrepreneurial self is also a regime of knowledge whose power consists in no small part in conveying to people a truth about themselves, about the logic behind their actions and their social relations. This aspect is explored in more depth in Chapter 3, which analyses those economic theories and schools of thought that lend credibility to the regime of generalized entrepreneurship and establish the rationale of entrepreneurial practice.

Chapter 3 reconstructs how the precursors of German ordoliberalism, US human capital theorists and Friedrich August von Hayek, a leading proponent of the Austrian School of Economics, proposed the market as that agency guaranteeing an optimal (self) regulation of social exchange. According to this point of view, competition among market agents (also according to this view, entrepreneurial individuals are nothing if not market agents) is the source not only of economic but also of political reason and should therefore be kept free of all restrictions and strengthened by favourable conditions. The comparison of these three variants of neo-liberalism also illustrates their divergence.

The ordoliberal discussion tends to push the political protection of competition, while human capital theory construes human behaviour generally as action under the conditions of competition, thus construing *homo economicus* as an entrepreneurial self. Meanwhile, von Hayek emphasizes the randomness of market events, interpreting competition as an evolutionary process advancing independent of the will of individual protagonists.

Chapter 4 explores the question of what distinguishes entrepreneurial practice from other forms of human activity. Instead of seeking personality traits for entrepreneurs, as does economical psychology, we are here concerned with the kind of economical definitions of the entrepreneur as function worked out in particular by Ludwig von Mises, Israel M. Kirzner, Joseph Schumpeter, Frank H. Knight and Mark Casson. On their account, entrepreneurs are, first, alert discoverers of speculative profit opportunities; second, innovative, creative destroyers of existing means of production and distribution; third, risk takers; and fourth, coordinators of the production process optimizing resource allocation. These four basic functions converge where they transgress their own borders and struggle to outdo one another under the dictate of comparison.

Chapter 5 addresses the contract, that fundamental social institution for regulating exchange relations and by extension entrepreneurial activity. It has been observed that the principle of the contract is currently being extended to relations previously not subject to contractual regulation. At the same time, the specifically economical contract is pushing back other contractual traditions. From this perspective, it will be examined how transaction cost theory (Alchian, Demsetz and Williamson) defines questions of social organization generally as contract problems, evaluating contractual arrangements exclusively in terms of the transaction costs incurred. The decision to adopt this or that form of contractual agreement is thereby subject to calculation in entrepreneurial terms and to entrepreneurial risks. James M. Buchanan's constitutional economics provides an economic theory of the social contract according to which the state is brought about by individuals calculating utility maximization. Buchanan posits that people agree on collective rules of play in order to best pursue their own individual benefit, in particular to protect property. While these rules restrict people's freedom to act, they put them in a better position than they otherwise would be without state-guaranteed rights. Constitutional economics and its theory of the contract are based on an anthropology that grasps human beings fundamentally as the property owners of their own selves. In order to accumulate human capital, they need to divide themselves up into a number of distinct assets and an additional entity to administer these assets by exchange and cooperation with a view to profit.

The entrepreneurial self is not merely a construct derived from theories of economics. It is the telos written into current strategies of mobilizing and optimizing people; strategies or technologies with the effect of imperatives

operating not only within the economic sphere but in society in general. This is shown in Chapter 6. Four key concepts are examined here: creativity, empowerment, quality management and the concept of the project. Together, they illuminate various facets of entrepreneurial activity, at the same time translating them into social technologies and technologies of the self.

Creativity (Chapter 6) is an element of innovation, the ability to recognize and grasp chances for profit and the creative destruction that makes space for new things. A chief concern in this chapter is the way the psychology of creativity conceptualizes the capacity for innovation as a human faculty, a social, normative aim as well as a learnable skill, at the same time providing appropriate techniques for developing and increasing this skill.

The entrepreneurial self is supposed to be active and self-reliant. Its confidence in its own power should be reinforced and constantly self-affirmed. This purpose is served by strategies of empowerment. Chapter 7 traces the origins of empowerment back to the emancipation struggles of grassroots social movements, as well as to their disparate fields of application and appropriation. This illuminates the paradox of the empowerment programmes, which work by attributing powerlessness to their prospective recipients and then offering to eradicate said powerlessness.

The heading *Quality* (Chapter 8) points to the way the entrepreneurial self must market its human capital in such a way as to find buyers for the skills and products it has on offer. In other words, quality means customer orientation. This will be demonstrated using the example of *total quality management* – the continual safeguarding and improvement of standards through elaborate techniques of quality control which systematically extend the model of the market to include personal relations within firms. There will also be an examination of *360-degree feedback*, which integrates employees and supervisors in a panoptical system of mutual observation and evaluation intended to set in motion a dynamic of permanent self-optimization.

Chapter 9 subsequently deals with the phenomenon of the *project*. On the one hand, this means the sequencing of work (and by extension of all of life) in temporary enterprises demanding a maximum of flexibility from the entrepreneurial self. On the other hand, the idea of the project implies a specific mode of cooperation, for example 'project teams', both permitting and at the same time imposing a high degree of self-organization. The chapter reconstructs the genesis of 'projection', departing from Daniel Defoe's *Essay upon Projects*, through to alternative projects from the 1970s, before employing Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello's study *The New Spirit of Capitalism* to sketch a profile of the requirements made of a project worker. The following sections use standard manuals to investigate technologies that ensure the smoothest possible project management and self-modelling under the principle 'Project Me'.

In the conclusion (Chapter 10), the study doubles back to the sense of uneasiness it started with. As the contours of the entrepreneurial self



emerged more distinctly, its shadow sides also imposed itself with increasing force: the demand to optimize becomes interminable, selection by competition becomes increasingly relentless, the fear of failure becomes irresistible. This should all be reason enough to get out of the way of the field of force created by the entrepreneurial call. The sense of uneasiness grew in the course of the study as it became apparent how market mechanisms either absorb or marginalize opposing tendencies, recasting non-conformism itself as a measure of successful conformity to the entrepreneurial self. The closing chapter suggests *exhaustion*, *irony* and *passive resistance* as three ways of disturbing the entrepreneurial field of force. It closes with consideration of a question: How can the compulsion to be different be transformed into the art of being different *in a different way*?

Several of the considerations presented here go back to lectures and articles I have published elsewhere.<sup>10</sup> They have been reworked and supplemented here.

## Notes

1. Ernst-Wilhelm Händler (2002) *Wenn wir sterben*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, p. 470.
2. Gilles Deleuze (1992) 'Postscript on the Societies of Control', *October*, 59, Winter, pp. 3–7, here: p. 7.
3. Kommission für Zukunftsfragen Bayern–Sachsen (ed.) (1997) *Erwerbstätigkeit und Arbeitslosigkeit in Deutschland. Entwicklung, Ursachen und Maßnahmen, Teil III: Maßnahmen zur Verbesserung der Beschäftigungslage*, Bonn, p. 36, [www.bayern.de/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Bericht-der-Kommission-für-Zukunftsfragen-der-Freistaaten-Bayern-und-Sachsen-Teil-3.pdf](http://www.bayern.de/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Bericht-der-Kommission-für-Zukunftsfragen-der-Freistaaten-Bayern-und-Sachsen-Teil-3.pdf)
4. Kommission für Zukunftsfragen Bayern–Sachsen (ed.) (1997) pp. 35–44.
5. See Michel Foucault (2009) *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France 1977–1978*, New York: Picador; Foucault (2010) *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–1979*, New York: Picador. In the German editions, the two lecture series are joined under the heading *Geschichte der Gouvernementalität*, vols 1 and 2.
6. For an overview, see: Ulrich Bröckling, Susanne Krasmann and Thomas Lemke (2012) 'From Foucault's Lectures at the Collège de France to Studies of Governmentality: An Introduction', in: Ulrich Bröckling, Susanne Krasmann and Thomas Lemke (eds), *Governmentality: Current Issues and Future Challenges* (2nd edition), Abingdon: Routledge, pp. 1–34. I adopt here, and in the following, the terminology employed by Thomas Osborne who distinguishes between *studies of governmentality* and *governmentality studies*: 'The former proceed nominalistically and are basically an exercise in the history of thought. The latter resemble rather a realistic political sociology in search of just that more or less regular generalizations about our present from which the former are trying to liberate us!' The approach of the studies of governmentality is