Building a radical career imaginary: using Laclau and Mouffe and Hardt and Negri to reflexively re-read Ali and Graham's counselling approach to career guidance

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Abstract

In this article I explore what the work of Laclau and Mouffe and Hardt and Negri has to offer career theory and models. There is value to engaging with key concepts from these political economists to inform and expand career guidance's capability to support social justice. The argument is made that the concepts offer novel and valuable resources for the development of career theory. These concepts are applied to undertake a reflexive re-reading of Ali and Graham's counselling approach to career guidance.

Keywords: Political economy; Laclau & Mouffe; Hardt & Negri; social justice; career guidance

Introduction

Career studies is an interdisciplinary field which draws on a range of subject areas including education, psychology, sociology, business studies and labour market economics. In this article, I will move outside of these normal disciplinary resources to explore what the field of political economy offers to support theoretical development in career guidance and particularly to provide new resources for critical and social justice informed approaches.

In this article, career is understood broadly as "the coming together of our life, our learning, and our work" and as "a framework for interpreting social realities and the place of individuals within them" (McCash et al., 2021, p. 9). This kind of broad definition of career means that I am interested in individuals' multiple life roles: as worker, as family member, as learner and as citizen. Such a definition requires theories to move beyond a purely vocational focus to meaningfully explore the experience of career.

The educational practice of career guidance seeks to intervene in the development of people's careers and to help "individuals and groups to discover more about work, leisure and learning and to consider their place in the world and plan for their futures" (Hooley et al., 2018, p. 20). Much career guidance is focused on the individual and on developing their capacity to manage their career, to make choices, move through transitions and take action to improve their lives. Career guidance can also act on the demand side of the labour market, seeking to "influence the opportunity structures in the interests of the client group as a whole" (Killeen & Kidd, 1996, p. 166). Importantly it can also act on the social environment by engaging with individuals and influencing their thinking and decision making. Indeed, it is possible to argue that if career guidance was not able to influence the impact that individuals make on their social, cultural and economic environment, there would be little purpose in its existence.

Where career guidance claims to advance social justice, this ability to act simultaneously on the individual and on the opportunity structure, is critical. The dialectic between the individual and social structures, between things as they are and how they could be is a fundamental concern of career guidance as an educational practice, but it is also the concern of the field of political economy.

Political economy as a discipline addresses the relationship between the world as it is and as it could be and the inter-relationships between the economic context and the social and political forces that are acting on and shaping that context (Balaam & Veseth, 2020). Such forces include the career trajectories that individuals pursue and public policies including those which relate to career guidance.

In this article I will draw on the work of two groups of post-Marxist/Gramscian theorists, arguing that some of the key concepts of Laclau and Mouffe (e.g. Laclau, 2012; Laclau & Mouffe, 1885/2001; Mouffe, 2018) and Hardt and Negri (e.g. Hardt & Negri, 2000; 2005; 2009, 2017) can be borrowed and repurposed for those seeking to create emancipatory forms of career guidance. Both pairs of theorists offer a critical analysis of the world as it is and explore the mechanisms through which the world can be changed. It is this combination of an analysis of context and a belief in the possibility of agency that evokes parallels with forms of career guidance which seek to both foster understanding of the opportunity structure and build individuals' agency to respond to it.

I use these theories drawn from political economy to undertake a reflexive re-reading of an existing model of practice. Thomsen (2017), drawing on the work of Cunliffe (2004), describes reflexivity as a philosophy-driven practice which emphasises a critical stance and questions assumptions about reality, actions and ethics, which notices ideology and tacit assumptions and considers how practices can be transformed. The theories and concepts which I will outline from political economy provide a critical challenge to existing ways of seeing the world and can be used as a lens to re-encounter the familiar and reframe and reinterpret it from a new ontological stance. When career guidance is reimagined through this kind of lens it provides the counsellor and the client with new tools and approaches through which they can engage in a reflexive circle of career development and social transformation through the enactment of their career.

It would be possible to undertake this kind of reflexive re-reading on a variety of different models and approaches to career guidance. In this case, I will focus on how they can enrich one-to-one career counselling, drawing on Ali and Graham's (1996) four-stage counselling approach to career guidance (clarifying, exploring, evaluating and action planning). This model is widely used in the training of careers professionals in the UK and presents a clear articulation of how career counselling can be organised in practice. For those unfamiliar with the model it will be described in detail latter on but it has similarities with a range of others stage-based models used in domains such as school counselling (e.g . Hornby (2003): exploration, intervention and empowering), what Egan (1990) calls "skilled helping" (exploration, challenge and action planning) or coaching (e.g. Whitmore et al., 2013: goals, reality, options and will). The purpose of undertaking a reflexive re-reading of the counselling approach to career guidance is not to champion or critique this model, but rather to provide a concrete demonstration of the way in which concepts from political economy can be used.

Ideologies of guidance
Career guidance "operates at the interface between the individual and society" and "facilitates the allocation of life chances" (Watts, 1996, p. 171). It typically acts on the level of the individual to support them to self-actualise, improve their situation and empower them to make the most of the possibilities afforded to them by the existing social structures (Hooley, 2015). Many career theories have focused on the role that career guidance can play in empowering individuals and have largely

taken the social structures as read. Whether they have focused on matching personality to occupations (Holland, 1997), the development of individuals across the life course (Super, 1980) or the idea that individuals can shape their own career narratives and design their lives (Savickas, 2012), the focus of intervention has typically been the individual, not least because it seems far easier to intervene with individuals than with organisations, governments and the political economy. Yet, other theorists working in a sociological tradition have argued that this belief in the transformative power of career guidance is born of hubris and is a misrepresentation of the power of individual agency in the face of socio-economic structures (Hodkinson, 2009; Miller, 1999; Roberts, 1977; Vieira et al., 2018; Willis, 1977). In this article, I explore how specific concepts from political economy can support new thinking and theories informed by these sociological critiques, but which still hope to preserve space for agency.

Signifying career guidance

Considerable effort has gone into defining career guidance. The OECD's (2004) definition highlights the function of career guidance ("to assist individuals, of any age and at any point throughout their lives, to make educational, training and occupational choices and to manage their careers" [p.10]) and then goes on to list a range of different approaches that may be utilised to do this. Hooley et al.'s (2018) definition is offered as a corrective to the individualism and acceptance of neoliberal norms found in the OECD definition. This alternate definition highlights "individuals and groups", the development of "individual and community capacity", the problematisation of "power relations" and the imagination of the world as it could be (p. 20). Such definitional contestation highlights the elasticity of the concept of "career guidance" and the way that it can be rethought and enmeshed into different epistemic traditions and political projects.

In many ways, career guidance can be thought of as what Laclau (1996/2007) describes as an "empty signifier". That is, it is a concept which is difficult or impossible to define, but which gains an understood meaning by its position within a system of signification, politics and power. Laclau is not the first writer to work with the concept of the empty signifier, but his definition is different in important ways from that advanced by Lévi-Strauss (1987) or from Derrida's (1982) related concept of *différence*. Laclau argues that the emptiness of a signifier is linked to its political position and its ability to achieve hegemony by simultaneously representing multiple demands or meanings. So, while for other poststructuralists, the empty signifier is an ontological discovery which shapes the way that reality is perceived, for Laclau it is a political device which allows those engaging with it to shape reality through a struggle over the competing chains of signification which lend meaning to an empty signifier.

So, the concepts of "career" and "career guidance" become meaningful because they hold a place within a system of concepts, terminology and ideas, which are themselves underpinned by political and ideological assumptions. So, the OECD definition of career guidance sits within a system of signifiers related to individuals, economies, skills, efficiency and so on and which are underpinned by neoliberal assumptions and human capital theory. In Hooley et al.'s definition this constellation of signification is extended and, in some cases, replaced with concepts like community, solidarity, critique and social justice. Yet, the empty signifiers of "career" and "career guidance" can potentially hold all of these definitions together allowing the terminology to continue to organise a political field in which there may be disagreement and antagonism.

The signification of career guidance is therefore an important area to attend to when considering a more emancipatory, critically informed kind of career guidance. The concept of the "empty signifier" reminds us of the importance of defining our terminology, but also of noticing how others are defining the same, similar and related terms. Such a way of thinking moves us away from the idea

that there is a single "correct" definition of "career guidance" or "social justice" and helps us to recognise the contested nature of these terms and reflect on the political implications of these definitional differences. By subjecting the core concepts of the field to critical scrutiny and redefinition it becomes possible to open the ontological space on which new more emancipatory theories and practices can be built. While the signification of "career guidance" remains unexamined any new initiatives are likely to be built on weak and inappropriate foundations. The recognition of the empty signifier and the utilisation of new concepts drawn from different epistemic traditions lays groundwork that can ultimately support a more ambitious reimagination of what career guidance is, what it is seeking to achieve and how it can be practiced.

Key concepts outlined by Laclau and Mouffe and Hardt and Negri

Hardt and Negri and Laclau and Mouffe are major figures in political economy with extensive back catalogues both as individual writers and as pairings. Both explore and expand the concept of radical democracy, offering a critique rooted in Marxism, but reinterpreted through critical poststructuralism. Both also draw on Gramsci and, perhaps most importantly, both have been taken up and cited by contemporary political movements (Day, 2004; Robinson & Tormey, 2009).

I am not the first person to view the work of these two pairs of theorists together. Like me, writers such as Dyer-Witheford (2007) and Knott (2016) consider that there is value in both sets of writers and in exploring the dialectic between the two. By discussing the two groups of theorists I am not seeking to diminish the differences between them. Rather I am seeking to surface new concepts that can inform and expand the chains of signifiers available to career studies and career guidance.

The work of Laclau and Mouffe and Hardt and Negri is conceptually rich and I have identified a small number of main concepts that are particularly relevant to analyses of theories of career and career guidance. These are set out in Figure 1 and then expanded on in the subsequent two sections. Later I will revisit the same concepts and use them to re-read Ali and Graham's counselling approach to career guidance.

Figure 1. Key concepts in Laclau & Mouffe and Hardt & Negri.

	What is the political economy within which career takes place?	How it is experienced?	How it can be challenged and transformed?	What is being sought?
Laclau & Mouffe	*Hegemony* describes the agreed upon social reality within which individuals conduct their careers.	As relations of *subordination*, *oppression* and *domination*. And through *antagonism* between different political *adversaries*.	Through the creation of a *pluralistic* political project which recognises and respects *chains of equivalence* (through which different actors have an equal claim to justice).	The realisation of a *democratic imaginary* through which existing social relations can be remade.
Hardt & Negri	*Empire* describes a multi-faceted global system within which power can be exerted by a range of different actors.	Both individually as a *singularity* and collectively as part of the *multitude*.	By coming together in *assembly*.	The expansion of the *common* (the resources and experiences that are shared by all and bring us together).

Laclau and Mouffe

Laclau and Mouffe's work is an attempt to wrestle with the setbacks experienced by the left from the late 1970s onwards and to propose an alternative strategy through which a new kind of anti-capitalist politics can be created (Smith, 1998/2003). Beginning with *Hegemony and socialist strategy* (Lacleu & Mouffe, 1985/2001) they subject the political projects and theories of the twentieth century left to scrutiny, ask what went wrong against the background of neoliberal advance and examine possible ways forwards. Out of these enquiries several key concepts emerge that may prove to be useful to the field of career guidance: hegemony; subordinations, oppression and domination; antagonism and adversaries, pluralism, chains of equivalence and the democratic imaginary.

At the heart of Laclau and Mouffe's thinking is the concept of hegemony (Lacleu & Mouffe, 1985/2001). For them, the concept of hegemony is a narrative that links diverse forces, events and experiences together into something that appears to be a coherent and universal whole. The hegemony frames the opportunity structures within which individuals act and develop their careers, but also helps us to understand the dynamics of power that have contributed to the creation of such opportunity structures.

Hegemony is not monolithic and may include a range of social actors who disagree about some things, but such disagreement will be framed and constrained within a limiting narrative. Such a concept of hegemony helps to explain how political possibilities, and the career horizons of individuals, are shaped and framed. It is not simply a top-down process through which the will of the ruling class is imposed, but a contingent negotiation between social actors through which power is exerted to create an agreed-upon social reality.

The concept of hegemony is useful in analysing how subjectivity and political possibilities are created, but it also provides insights that can be harnessed by social justice informed political projects. To achieve any kind of social change actors articulate their own vision of an alternative society in a way that relates to the particularity of the moment. In others words, their political project is essentially about the creation of a new hegemony. In a similar way, individuals who are seeking to develop their career also need to understand and act in relation to hegemony as this offers them an understanding of what social reality is and how power is exercised within it. Ultimately their career development is a creative act which seeks to bring into being a new personal reality which much either relate to the existing hegemony or proceed in tandem with the creation of a new hegemony. For those analysing career guidance the concept of hegemony encourages reflection about how career guidance interventions relate to existing hegemonic structures and assumptions and importantly how they do or could relate to competing hegemonic projects.

Much of Laclau and Mouffe's work is focused on considering how political movements can ultimately establish a new kind of hegemony. They argue that such movements need to be able to recognise and celebrate pluralism to do this. They view (social) justice as plural, noting that it is not owned by any individual or group e.g. white people, the working class or women. Rather successful political movements and the radical democratic society are characterised by the recognition of multiple experiences and claims to justice. In this context, one of the key aims of radical movements for change becomes to establish "chains of equivalence" (Lacleu & Mouffe, 1985/2001, p. xviii) between various identities and struggles. These recognise the equivalent claim to justice of different groups and the inter-dependence between these different claims. Such a concept offers individuals a career resource if they can recognise the intersection of their aims with those of others and build a chain of equivalence with them.

The centrality of the idea of pluralism to Laclau and Mouffe's thinking should not be interpreted either as an idealistic one in which all differences of opinion and interest will just fall away, nor as a kind of compromise politics where a mean point is sought between the different interests in a struggle or in society. Rather they argue that politics and justice are best viewed as the struggle of adversaries who, whilst having "in common a shared adhesion to the ethico-political principles of democracy" (Mouffe, 1999, p. 755) have disagreements about a range of issues about how society should be organised or how particular problems should be solved. This leads to the development of the conception of agonism which celebrates the existence of pluralistic perspectives, asserts the right for adversaries to advocate for those perspectives and views democracy as a framework for the struggle between such different perspectives.

Laclau and Mouffe are sceptical that there can ever be an end state where social justice or democracy are fully achieved. Rather they seek to move towards an agonistic democracy within which pluralistic perspectives can be surfaced, engaged with and a viable form of social organisation agreed upon without closing off the possibility of continued debate and change. Such a perspective celebrates dissent and difference rather than viewing it as a challenge to the social order. It also champions democracy and encourages people to view their participation in society as a process of active citizenship. In such a vision careering is not about negotiating a stable opportunity structure, but about contributing to the creation of new forms of social reality through the exercise of agency on both an individual and social level.

Within hegemony individuals are engaged in a process of reflection about the legitimacy of structures and their position within them. Laclau and Mouffe make a distinction between *subordination*, which they argue is where an individual is "subjected to the decisions of others" (Lacleu & Mouffe, 1985/2001, p. 153) and *oppression* which is where this subordination has become

a site of antagonism (disagreement and struggle) between the parties involved in it. Finally, they describe *domination* which is where relationships of subordination are seen as illegitimate by parties beyond those involved in the relationship. So, for example, a relationship between a parent and a child may be constructed hierarchically with the child in the subordinate position. But, it is only when antagonism between the parent and child emerges that this relationship may be viewed as oppressive in that the subordinate position prevents one party from doing what they want to do. In such a situation other actors may view the antagonism as legitimate, perhaps viewing a discussion about bedtimes as being an appropriate antagonism for a parent and child, or as illegitimate, perhaps viewing the parent as damaging the development of the child by preventing them from engaging in education, and at this point it could be seen as a relationship of domination.

The distinction that is made between subordination, oppression and domination provides a useful structure for the development of critical consciousness (Freire, 1970/2005). It allows people to explore the structural arrangements that exist within their lives including those that exist within learning and work and consider whether these arrangements do or should lead to antagonism. This process of critical enquiry into the relational and hierarchical nature of social relations is at the heart of social justice approaches to career guidance. Career guidance is not just about accepting what is, but also encouraging individuals to interrogate the existing world, explore how it works, who benefits from it and what might be done to change it. Laclau and Mouffe's work helps to open up questions of ethics and politics by encouraging individuals to ask whether the relationships in their lives are antagonistic and/or legitimate. Importantly it also situates this reflection within the context of community and solidarity by supporting the identification of allies through recognising those who are in similar positions and those who would have concerns or objections to forms of domination. Such a conception of subjugation, oppression and domination again returns us to Laclau and Mouffe's recognition of the legitimacy of multiple voices and the possibility of disagreement. But, rather than seeking to define domination in absolute terms, they place responsibility in the hands of people to define what is acceptable and unacceptable and how human relations should be organised.

This debate therefore becomes a key lens through which we can interrogate our careers and the social relations that comprise them. In our careers, we regularly subjected to the decisions of others. Laclau and Mouffe's work suggests that career guidance should address these relations of subordination head on and encourage individuals to reflect more deeply on their nature and legitimacy.

The ultimate stage of this kind of critical consciousness is not simply the critique of domination, but rather the development of a *democratic imaginary* (Smith, 1998/2003). Such an imaginary is the belief that existing social relations can be remade, that domination can be challenged and that new ways of organising society can be found. In other words, it is the belief that another world is possible and that it is possible to create a new hegemony. A democratic imaginary is not simply a blueprint for a new society but also a series of practices and forms of social relations that need to be embedded into norms and institutions. The democratic imaginary is both the journey and the destination. It includes policies and plans but it also includes the development of the institutions and ethics that will move us towards new forms of social organisation.

Within any democratic imaginary, individuals need to be able to find a personal story that clarifies not just what the institutions of the state, economic relations or the political system will look like. Nested within any political economy is the lived experience of individuals and their imaginaries of the future. Laclau and Mouffe's focus on the macro perspective of the political economy does not afford them space to consider the individual's experience. They argue that through the recognition of domination, the coming together into chains of equivalence and the development of a democratic

imaginary, individuals can improve their position, address grievances and forge new forms of social relations. But, they do not look closely at the intersection between the individual's imaginary for their own life, what we might call their *career imaginary*, and the wider democratic imaginary. From the perspective of the field of career studies, this is an omission that needs to be addressed with further thinking about how the individual and social imaginaries can be developed and addressed in tandem.

Hardt and Negri

Hardt and Negri's work covers many similar themes to Laclau and Mouffe although they bring a stronger analysis of the existing political economy and an alternative framing for thinking about how change happens. If anything, their work is broader in scope and more poetic in expression. Hardt and Negri rethink the phenomenon of globalisation and consider what possibilities for counter-hegemonic struggle exist within a globalised and digitised world. They offer us the concepts of Empire, the singularity, the multitude, assembly and the common.

They began by setting out their description of the postmodern political economy, which they refer to as *Empire*, and describe as follows.

> *Empire establishes no territorial center of power and does not rely on fixed boundaries or barriers. It is a decentered and deterritorializing apparatus of rule that progressively incorporates the entire global realm within its open, expanding frontiers. (Hardt & Negri, 2000, p. xii)*

For Hardt and Negri there is a global order, but it is not dominated by a single state such as the USA or China, or by a supra-state organisation made up of institutions like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Nor is it a chaotic free for all within which states and other actors have little power to shape a liquid marketised world. The system that they describe (Empire) contains space for all of these things, but it is a combination of states, supra-state and market actors that provide the order for the global political economy. Empire is complex, diffuse and dynamic. It cannot be encompassed by a particular ideology such as neoliberalism, or a particular institution or collection of institutions. It does not have a single position, but rather serves as a framing and co-ordinating device within which different global actors can operate. It is in Hardt and Negri's words "a mixed constitution for global governance" which "implies, in equal measure, processes of homogenization and heterogenization. Rather than creating one smooth space, the emergence of Empire involves the proliferation of borders and hierarchies at every geographical scale." (Hardt & Negri, 2019).

Hardt and Negri offer an analysis that can explain diverse phenomenon and recognise their inter-connectedness as part of a global system. So, US (liberal) imperialism, Russian oligarchy and Danish social democracy can all co-exist within Empire. On one level such different political systems and ideologies exist as competitors, but through the global constitution of Empire they can be brought into a symbiosis. Similarly, divisions between states, corporations, NGOs and other actors can be viewed as competitive, but within the decentred context of Empire, all can operate in a way that ultimately allows all to continue to act and maintain their diverse power bases.

Empire offers a high-level analysis of the environment within which individuals are pursuing their careers. It encourages recognition of the differences and inequalities that exist between different aspects of that global system, whilst also recognising that it does function as a system. In Empire is an analysis of the nature and operation of what career theory might describe as the "opportunity

structure" or the context. But it adds value to these concepts as it foregrounds the constructed and ideological nature of the environment within which individuals career.

Within Empire, we are all diverse and different. We have complex identities and our relationship to Empire and to each other is unique. Hardt and Negri describe individuals as *singularities* by which they "mean a social subject whose difference cannot be reduced to sameness, a difference that remains different" (Hardt & Negri, 2005, p. 99). Such a claim is obvious and aligns well with many career theories' focus on the primacy of the individual and the belief in their specific set of talents and capabilities. But for some, it also represents a break with progressive political traditions that emphasise similarities based on identities or positions like gender, class or nationality as the basis for political action (e.g. Cremin & Roberts, 2011). Hardt and Negri answer this critique by offering an alternative conception of how solidarity can be constructed through the recognition of the *common* and through the articulation of a new collective political actor which they describe as the *multitude*.

> *Once we recognize singularity, the common begins to emerge. Singularities do communicate, and they are able to do so because of the common they share. We share bodies with two eyes, ten fingers, ten toes, we share life on this earth, we share capitalist regimes of production and exploitation, we share common dreams of a better future. (Hardt & Negri, 2005, p. 128)*

The common is their description of what brings people together and provides a basis for solidarity and shared interest. The common is "the air, the water, the fruits of the soil, and all nature's bounty" (Hardt & Negri, 2009, p. viii), but it is also shared language, culture, knowledge, ideas and experience. Empire provides cover for those who wish to privatise the common, removing the basis for collective action. But, some commons, such as language, are difficult to privatise, and new commons are being born all the time, created by forms of social action as well as other productive activities. The example of the internet provides an illustration of both the creation of new forms of commons and the way in which Empire facilitates the privatisation of such commons and even utilises new technologies to erode existing commons such as the right to privacy (Zuboff, 2019).

The common offers a resource for individuals' career that can be tapped into. We do not go into our careers alone with just our labour and our talents, but rather draw on a vast array of commonly held resources from oxygen, to culture, to the social and psychological contracts that exist to define the roles of workers and employers. Hardt and Negri ask us to consider that this stock of commonwealth is not fixed, but something that we can contribute to through our careers and expand access to through political actions.

> *The multitude is the sum of singularities connected by the commons. It is possible to conceive the multitude as a political actor as it brings together singularities but does not reduce them to a single feature in the way that extant categories like "the proletariat", "the people" or "the masses" do. Rather "in the multitude, social differences remain different. The multitude is many coloured, like Joseph's magical coat" (Hardt & Negri, 2005, p. xiv).*

Hardt and Negri acknowledged that when solidarity is built on this kind of pluralistic basis it is difficult for "a social multiplity to manage to communicate and act in common while remaining internally different" (p. xiv), but in a world made up of singularities it is not possible to organise based on monolithic categories. They therefore argue for a new approach to social and political organisation that they call *assembly* (Hardt & Negri, 2017). This is the process of bringing the multitude into creative, entrepreneurial and democratic fora to enable singularities to act together

(as a multitude) to expand the common. Hardt and Negri's work stops short of providing a clear organising guide but their arguments lead towards democratic, decentred organisations which remain distinct from the political mainstream. Their work also suggests that this kind of collective assembly may be a practical strategy that people can use to advance their careers by reshaping society in their interests and the interests of those who they assemble with.

Reflections

The work of Laclau and Mouffe and Hardt and Negri provides us with an account of society and enriches our understanding of the context within which we are careering, helping us to see the forms of power and vested interests that shape the terrain for our careers. Importantly they also encourage thinking about what it is possible to change and how such change takes place. For both pairs, the focus is on widening the possibility for change and creating a democratic imaginary. Both foreground the idea that social structures are contingent on the behaviour of the actors within those structures and set out theories, strategies and tactics that might lead to change.

The possibility for purposeful social change and the interaction between individual career imaginaries and the imaginaries advanced by political projects are rarely discussed within career studies and career guidance. Yet the reality is that during the span of most people's working life they may witness and play a role in several shifts and changes in political economy. For example, those who are just leaving the workforce in the UK in 2022 will have lived through the end of the British empire, the liberal social reforms of the 1960s and 1970s, the oil crisis, the rise of neoliberalism and Thatcherism, New Labour, the great recession of 2008, austerity, Brexit and finally finished their working career with the Covid crisis. Many people will have been active participants in these moments of political economy as supporters of different positions and alternatives, voters and activists. Even those that have resolutely tried to ignore the world of politics and the economy will have shaped the social possibilities through their quiescence and in both intentional and unintentional ways through the enactment of their careers.

Attention to political economy in career studies and career guidance is not an optional extra that can be layered on for those with an interest in politics. Rather it is fundamental to understanding the opportunity structure and figuring out the possibilities that exist for careering within it.

A reflexive rereading of Ali and Graham's counselling approach to career guidance

I would now like to utilise the concepts set out in Figure 1 and discussed in the last section to undertake a reflexive re-reading of Ali and Graham's model which demonstrates how a career professional can undertake a career counselling interview. Demonstrating the relevance of concepts such as hegemony, the singularity, assembly and the career imaginary to a popular model of career guidance practice will hopefully refute the charge that the kind of theoretical concerns outlined in this article are impractical or impossible to implement.
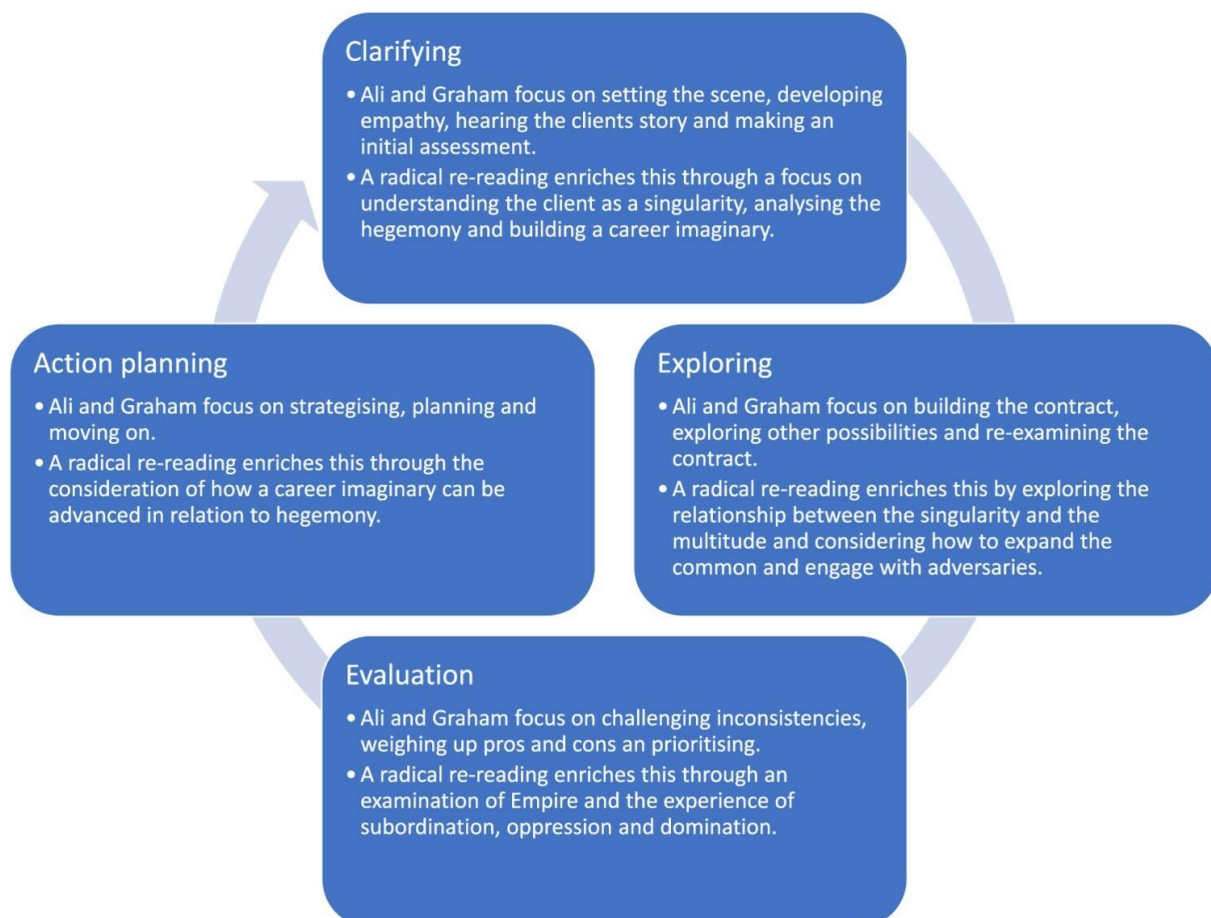
Ali and Graham's (1996) "counselling approach to careers guidance" sought to provide a practical articulation of the utility of key counselling concepts and approaches for use in career guidance. At the heart of their approach is the development of a model consisting of four main stages: clarifying, exploring, evaluating and action planning. These stages are then broken down further to provide practitioners with a detailed blueprint for how to run a career guidance interview complete with suggested questions and interventions and hypothetical examples. They then go on to show how key counselling skills and tools as well as information about the labour market can be deployed within this framework.

Ali and Graham's model is rooted in Rogers (1957) person-centred counselling, although they incorporate a wide range of theories into their model. Nonetheless, the Ali and Graham model, with its strong interest in non-directive forms of counselling, can be seen as an example of what Watts (2015/1996) describes as the liberal ideology of guidance. Ali and Graham developed the model to provide a practical way that this kind of person-centred approach could be delivered within the typical constraints of limited time and resources, faced by careers professionals working in the UK. As such it offers a model for a relatively short, single session career counselling interview although it can be adapted for use in longer multi-session interactions.

The model is based on four stages (Ali & Graham, 1996) which show how the counsellor guides the client through from an initial encounter where the purpose of the interaction is clarified through to a final encounter where the client leaves with an action plan for how to move their career forwards. These stages are sequential, but also recursive, with practitioners working through them and looping round to revisit earlier stages as appropriate.

Figure 2 sets out the four stages proposed by Ali and Graham as the basis for career counselling. It also shows how some of the key concepts used by Laclau and Mouffe and Hardt and Negri can be used to enrich this model. These will be unpacked and explored further throughout the rest of this section with italics used to demonstrate where the stages outlined by Ali and Graham might be enriched using the key concepts from the political economists.

Figure 2. Enriching Ali and Graham's counselling approach to career guidance through a reflexive re-reading.

Clarifying
- Ali and Graham focus on setting the scene, developing empathy, hearing the clients story and making an initial assessment.
- A radical re-reading enriches this through a focus on understanding the client as a singularity, analysing the hegemony and building a career imaginary.

Action planning
- Ali and Graham focus on strategising, planning and moving on.
- A radical re-reading enriches this through the consideration of how a career imaginary can be advanced in relation to hegemony.

Exploring
- Ali and Graham focus on building the contract, exploring other possibilities and re-examining the contract.
- A radical re-reading enriches this by exploring the relationship between the singularity and the multitude and considering how to expand the common and engage with adversaries.

Evaluation
- Ali and Graham focus on challenging inconsistencies, weighing up pros and cons an prioritising.
- A radical re-reading enriches this through an examination of Empire and the experience of subordination, oppression and domination.

It is important to be clear that this kind of reflexive re-reading is not about the *introduction* of ideology or political concepts into career guidance. As Watts (2015/1996) reminds us, all forms of career guidance adopt a socio-political stance. This is true even where such a stance is unexamined or unexpressed. It is also worth noting that students and clients participating in forms of career guidance have rarely assented to any particular socio-political perspective in advance. Where career guidance is undertaken reflexively the practitioner should foreground such assumptions and perspective as part of contracting (during what Ali and Graham describe as the clarifying phase).

One of the strengths of person-centred approaches is that they foreground the dialectical nature of counselling, recognising the individual as an expert in their own life and viewing the counselling encounter as co-constructed by the two participants (Gothard & Mignot, 1999). Ali and Graham emphasise active listening, understanding and interpretation as key to their model arguing that career guidance is first and foremost empathetic to the experience of the individual. But they then discuss a range of techniques and processes, including the introduction of information, challenging the perspective of the individual and interpreting what is said. All these processes highlight the dialectical nature of the encounter and provide a strong basis on which a reflexive re-reading of the model can build. The aim is not to abandon person-centred and co-constructive counselling but rather to explore how they can be grounded in an alternative analysis of political economy and support the development of a critical consciousness which offers more rather than less possibilities for careership. The shift that is proposed is not from a person-centred, listening approach to a didactic one, but rather between using different kinds of interpretation of the world to understand and respond to the issues presented by individuals.

Clarifying

During this stage of the interview, the practitioner will talk with the client, seeking to understand who they are and what they are looking for. Ali and Graham emphasise empathy and listening and focusing on making an assessment of the clients' vocational maturity. This might have the effect of individualising the clients' experience and pushing the political economy into the background. However, a reflexive re-reading of this stage allows us to understanding the client's experience as a unique expression of their *singularity* whilst also recognising the multifarious competing identities and experiences (gender, race, employment status and family position) that comprise them.

The shift from a person-centred approach to a focus on *singularities* reframes the subject of the interview and allows us to see how they fit into context and to assess their social and political power. To achieve this the practitioner listens to hear how the client perceives and locates themselves within the hegemony. Considering what kind of world they believe that they live in, what possibilities exist for them and which of the plurality of social actors and voices they believe will help and hinder their career development.

The practitioner is also listening to hear the individual *career imaginary* that the client articulates. What are they looking for from the session and from their life and what kind of world do they hope to live in (the *democratic imaginary*)? Clients' imaginaries are often likely to begin from a highly personal place, but they will always have a social aspect. All career aspirations involve not just the individual, but also other people, organisations and social systems. Client's imaginaries may also include hoped-for states such as a desire to live in a world that is fair, where hard work gets rewarded or where people can see their value. These democratic imaginaries should be recognised and used to inform the rest of the interview.

Exploring

In the second stage of the interview, the practitioner asks questions to draw out more from the client and to better understand them and their goals. A reflexive re-reading would also encourage the clients to consider not just how they could live in the world, but also in what kind of world they wished to live. Ali and Graham emphasise the process of contracting in which the practitioner clarifies what the client wants to achieve and provides some challenges around these objects, encouraging the consideration of alternatives and then re-contracting. This offers a useful structure but one which, in the model's current articulation, tends to encourage thinking about individualistic choice making. In one of their examples, Ali and Graham focus on helping a client to consider alternatives to a career in advertising and to deconstruct what it is that he is interested in within the field of advertising.

By re-reading this stage we can broaden the range and type of alternatives that are being considered. The stage becomes focused on deepening clients understanding of their *singularity*, their relationship to others as singularities and their role as a part of the *multitude*. To achieve this the practitioner needs to ask questions about the relationships that they have and about who they believe can help them and has interests in *common* with them (exploring the existing *chain of equivalence* that they have built) and about where *antagonisms* exist that need to be managed or resolved.

Such an exploration of their singularity in the world opens their understanding of the system within which they live (*Empire* or *hegemony*) and the way in which they believe their hopes are framed and constrained by this system. Such discussion should explore who their *adversaries* are, who is challenging them, competing with them and seeking to achieve aims that may be in tension with their own aims. It should also include reflection on the *common*, what resources they have and what interests they share with others. Recognising that they have a wide range of common interests with those around them, even those that they may perceive as adversaries.

Evaluating

In the third stage of the model, the practitioner is supporting the client to build an analysis of their situation and to consider how best to move forwards. Ali and Graham adopt a person-centred approach to this stage focusing on what the client has brought and considering how to challenge inconsistencies, weigh up pros and cons and prioritise. If the practitioner has followed a reflexive re-reading of the model to this point she is likely to be presented with a wider range of options to work with, for example considering a range of options through which they may make common cause with those around them to act on the opportunity structure alongside more individualistic forms of careership. In such a reflexive re-reading we are focused on building critical consciousness, by empowering clients to better understand the systems that they are interacting with (*Empire*) and see their relevance to their life and their career concerns. A recognition that the challenges that they face are not purely individual, but part of a broader, if still complex and decentred system, provides a basis for evaluating career challenges and considering what kinds of strategies might be utilised.

The practitioner may encourage the client to think about the relationships of *subordination* that they are in and consider whether these relationships should be understood as relationships of *oppression* or *domination*. Supporting this kind of reflexive thinking is both about allowing clients to gain a clearer understanding of their situation and to consider what resources they can use to change them, particularly through connecting to the *multitude* around shared *commons*.

Action planning

Finally, within the action planning stage the career practitioner works with the client to plot a way forward to a desired *career imaginary*. In this phase, Ali and Graham focus on the development of

solutions and the creation of action plans to take such solutions forwards. Such action plans are designed to be practical and common sense with the practitioner assisting "the client to break major tasks down into smaller, more achievable action points" and to focus on what "is within the reach of the client" (Ali & Graham, p. 57). So, in their example interview, the client raises concerns about access to funding, but this is ignored presumably because the client has generated a strategy to address this through asking her father for money. The implications of taking money from family are explored in some depth, but the reasons why the state does not provide funding are left unaddressed.

By reworking Laclau and Mouffe's concept of the democratic imaginary, this stage of the model becomes focused on supporting clients to build their *career imaginary* beyond the impoverished possibilities offered by the status quo. Instead, career practitioners can encourage and support their clients to build a more expansive vision of what the good life could and should be and help them to consider what they could do to bring this about. Such an imaginary serves both to clarify interests and desires and to reveal the space that exists between aspirations and what is possible within the current hegemony.

This re-reading of the model allows me to suggest an expanded role for the careers practitioner, who could work with clients to foster agency in individual, collective, personal and political forms. Such an approach views contemporary *hegemony* as providing a context for career action, but also recognises that hegemony is not solid, but rather capable of being melted and recast under sufficient pressure. In such a situation, adaptability, of the kind venerated by many career theories (e.g. Savickas, 1997), becomes just one strategy amongst many others that can be discussed as part of the action planning stage.

The career practitioner can encourage consideration of who the client can build connections with, both by identifying those who are experiencing similar kinds of *antagonism* and *oppression*, but also through building *chains of equivalence* with others whose struggles might be different, but whose solidarity could help to transform the situation. For example, a recognition that a clients' career may be being held back through homophobic bullying could be challenged both by finding and *assembling* with other gay people, but also by reaching out to other groups that have experienced similar identity-based bullying and building common cause.

Reflecting on this reflexive re-reading

The reading of Ali and Graham's counselling approach to career guidance offered above could be expanded further both theoretically and practically. It would be possible to deepen each of the phases, providing typical questions and working through scenarios as Ali and Graham do in their book. It would also be possible to work through the counselling skills that they use to implement the model and show how active listening, understanding and interpretative skills could be repurposed to a more radical end, alongside new skills which include an understanding of the dynamics of collective organising and the reflexive use of theory. This is not the purpose of this article and Ali and Graham's model is offered as a way of illustrating how the theories of political economy can aid reflexivity and consideration of the possibilities and limitations of career guidance models. It is hoped that this illustration may be useful to future attempts to create more socially just approaches to career counselling.

Ali and Graham, and the generations of practitioner's that have employed their model, may be surprised or uncomfortable with it being put to this kind of use. The model's location within a person-centred paradigm seeks to exclude externalities and normative outcomes, such as those informed by social justice. Contrariwise, a career counselling model influenced by Laclau and Mouffe

and Hardt and Negri requires the practitioner to be deeply engaged with the external world, on the side of social justice and striving towards a radical democratic imaginary. Such a reflexive re-reading of Ali and Graham's model removes its reliance on liberalism, maintaining the apparatus of intervention, but redefining the empty signifier of career guidance in ways that connect with an analysis of political and economic power and a belief that agency can be exercised collectively in order to change social systems.

The rationale for making this change is that despite the emancipatory promises of person-centred counselling, it is unable to live up to this aspiration as it seeks to exclude so much from the counselling relationship (Hooley, 2015). As Watts (2015/1996, p. 184) puts it, "the liberal approach is in practice closely aligned with the conservative one. It tends to regret any inequalities, but its non-directive character means that it avoids confronting them."

The introduction of a new ideological centre to person-centred career counselling approaches should therefore not be viewed as a backing away from Ali and Graham's aspiration to "equip individuals with a clearer understanding of themselves and their potential for future career development" (Ali & Graham, 1996, p. 1). Rather this new theoretical underpinning opens up new options and provides more space for practitioners to reflects on the individuals possibilities to explore their career imaginary and develop it alongside wider movements for social justice.

Final thoughts

In this article I have introduced the thinking of Hardt and Negri and Laclau and Mouffe and sought to demonstrate their utility to the career field. The concepts highlighted such as Empire, antagonism, chains of equivalence and the common have been advanced as a new chain of signification for the empty signifiers of career guidance and social justice. By using these concepts to reflexively rethink the signifier of career guidance, what it is trying to achieve and how it can be done, we open up new possibilities. The theorists point us towards new analyses of the world, allowing us to recognise how the opportunity structure is enmeshed in global structures of power, politics and inequality and to believe that it is possible to radically remake this political economy through agentic collective actions. The job at hand, for both theorists and practitioners, is to consider how the experience of the individual and their careership interacts with the political economy and with collective endeavours to shift and change it. Through a reflexive re-reading of the counselling approach to career guidance, I have explored one level at which these connections can be made. There is much more to be learned through a critical and reflexive engagement with existing theories, models and practices. Indeed many other contributors to this special issue will be exploring similar issues, often using related theoretical traditions. There are undoubtedly many synergies and cross-fertilisations that can emerge from this collection.

With respect to Hardt and Negri and Laclau and Mouffe, there would be value in considering further how they might enrich our understanding of the education system and of organisations. How they provide insights into the relationship between individuals, the collective, bureaucratic systems and power. And in building further on the work that has been begun in this article to explore how their theories might enrich other forms of career intervention. In particular, the career education curriculum and forms of work-related and work-based learning seem ripe to be re-theorised with these concepts.

Career describes the individual's trajectory through life, learning and work into the imaginary of the future. The theorists discussed in this article are exploring the same questions through the lens of politics, economics and social movements. They offer us an analysis of the context through which we are careering and an imaginary of what the future may hold. Perhaps most powerfully they offer us

strategies and tactics for moving forwards, and it is this belief in the real possibility of changing the world that is the most powerful contribution that they make to the armoury of the careers practitioner seeking social justice.

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