

# Personal Branding as Myth and Ritual:

Career Advice Texts and the Meaning of Work in an Age of Precarity

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# The Meaning of Work Revisited

- A poor man's history:
  - Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*
  - Hughes, Goffman as students of work organizations
  - Morse and Weiss, "The Meaning and Function of Work and the Job" (1955)
  - Eli Chinoy, *Automobile Workers and the American Dream*
  - Managerial rhetoric: "Design and Devotion" (Barley/Kunda/Ailon)
- New perspectives for our time?
  - Beck, Bauman: Enlightenment ideals decay into self-help efforts at the individual level
  - Boltanski and Chiapello: new discourses about work set powerful limits on worker resistance
  - Du Gay: "enterprise discourse" infuses market logic into worker identity
  - Suggestive... Evidence?

# Goals of this project

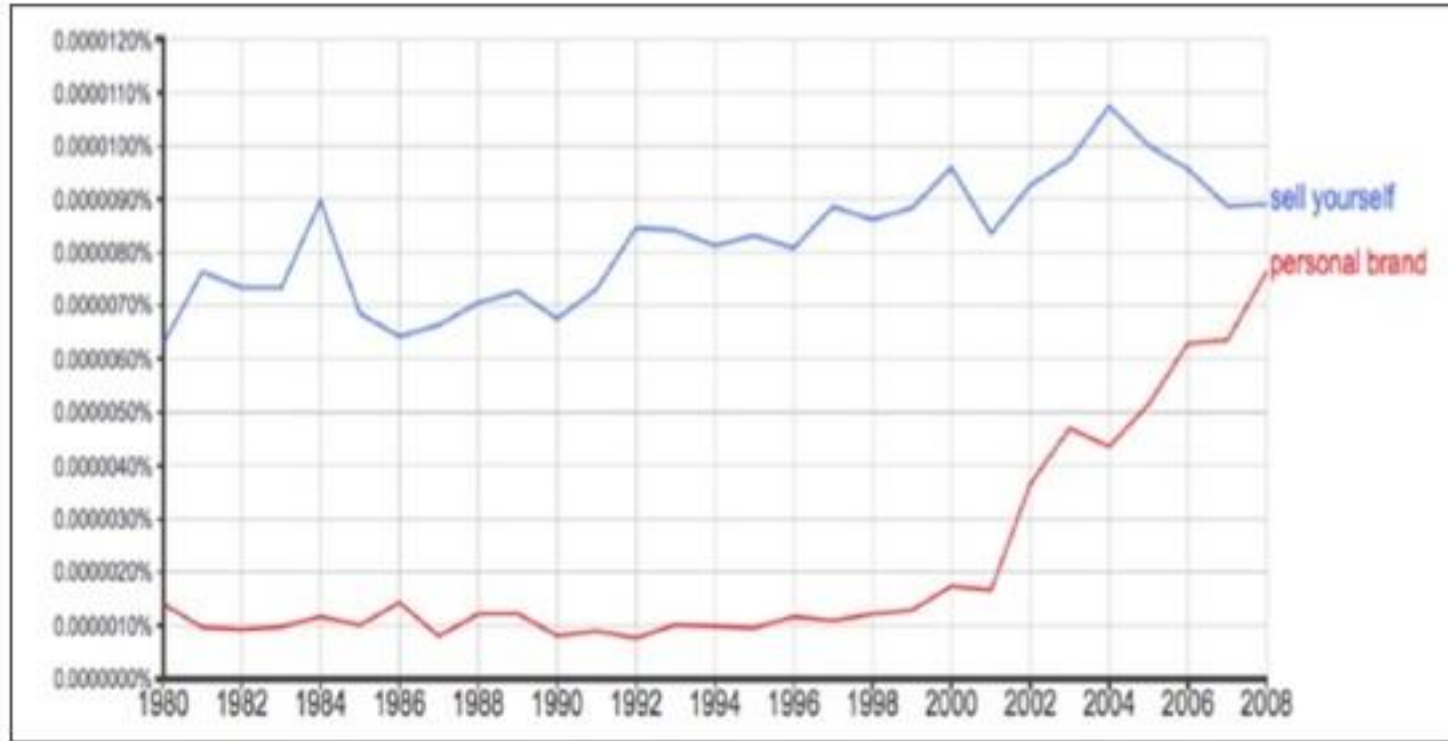
1. To strengthen these latter theories through empirical analysis of managerial ideologies
2. To explore a neglected area in the study of work: the popular business press (which has evolved in important ways);
3. To link analysis of work to contemporary social theory more closely than before

Here: some humble steps in this direction

In a recent article,\* I tried to

- Examine the proliferation of new genres in the popular business press (see nGram);
- Develop a content analysis of the most prominent books devoted to “personal branding” as a distinct genre; and to
- Explore reader responses to these books, in a preliminary way
- Today, I delve more fully into responses to on-line texts, especially among the precariously employed

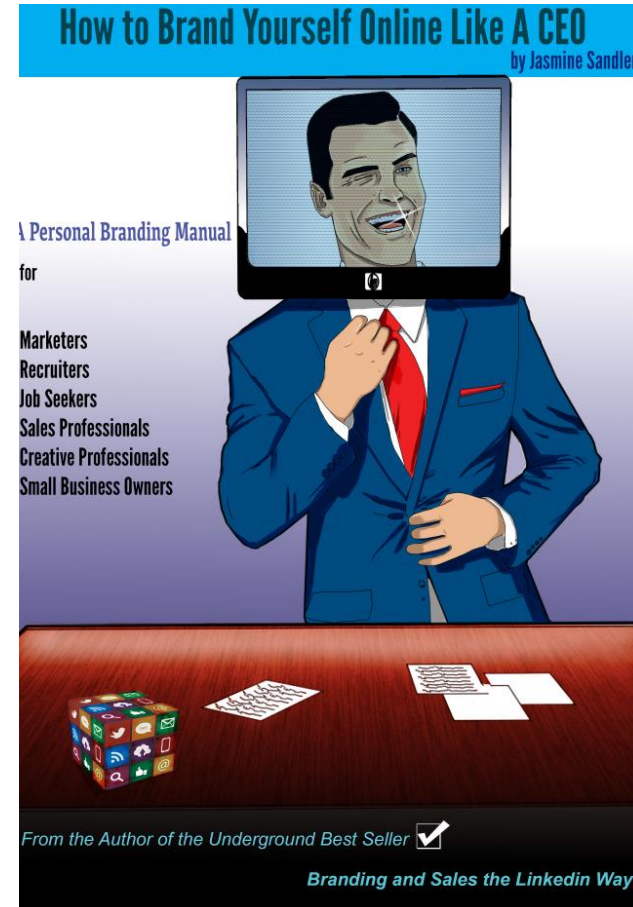
\*See Vallas and Cummins, “Personal Branding and Identity Norms in the Popular Business Press,” *Organization Studies* 36, 3, 2015.



**Figure I.** Trends in the Use of Two Discursive Constructs in 7 Million Digitized Books, 1980–2008.  
 Source: Google nGram.

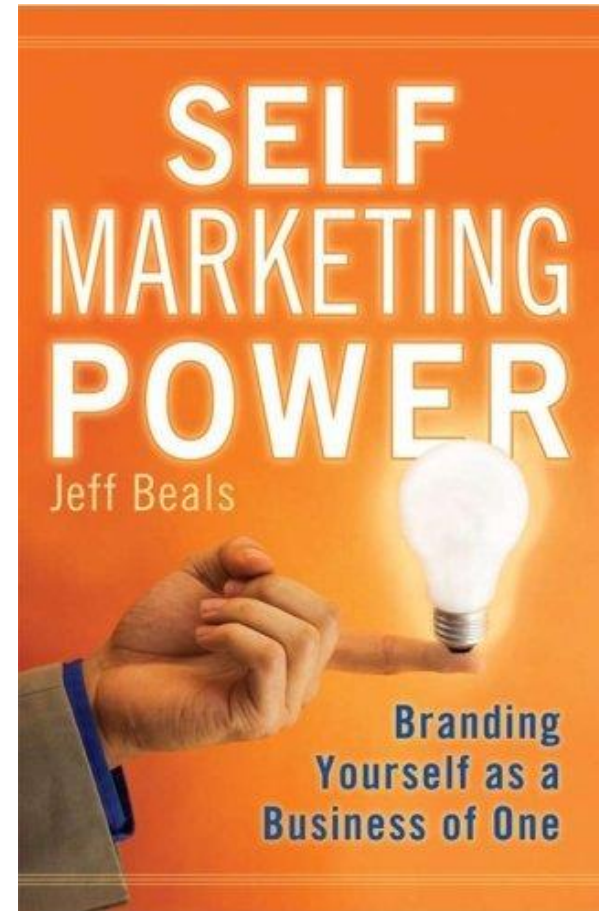
# Personal Branding: A Poor Man's Guide

- 1980s: Brands Matter
  - Mergers and Acquisitions change capital accounting
  - Activists take note of the prominence of the brand
    - Naomi Klein, *No Logo*
    - Thomas Frank, *One Market Under God*
- 1990s: The Rise of “Employee branding”
  - Aesthetic labor (Warhurst)



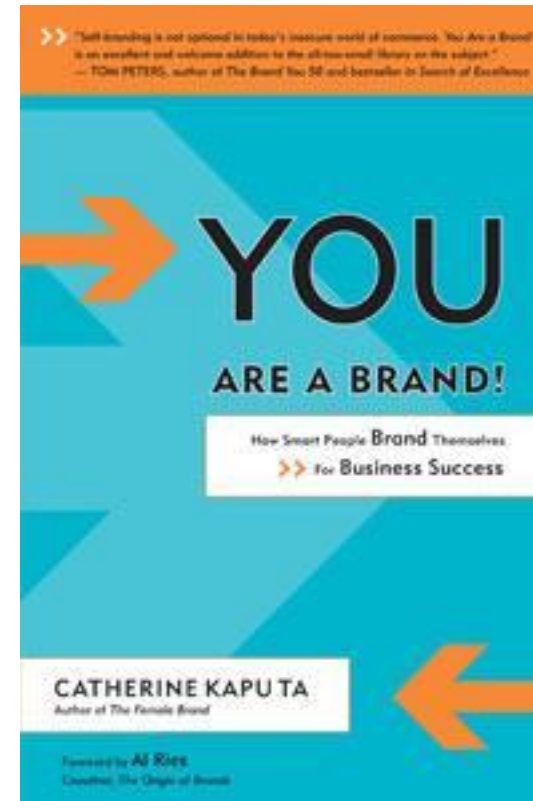
# Now: Personal Branding

- Key themes:
  - The end of Fordism → Me, Inc.
  - Just as firms expand by accumulating reputational capital, so must you!
  - Result: an explicit and conscious commercialization of social interaction –and the self
  - Key is becoming an enterprising self, via exercises, focus groups & training in free agency



# Branding as a doubly mythological form of “market populism”

- It promises empowerment... yet counsels a surrender to market ideology
- It promises to uncover the “real you,” hidden beneath the bureaucracy... yet it conjures a new-and-improved, market-friendly self





## Questions posed in this paper:

- How widespread is the discourse of personal branding?
- How do job seekers and employees respond to it?
- What variations seem to exist and why?
- In what respects does personal branding seem to shape job seekers' thinking about the employment relationship?

# The data

- Fieldwork at 6 career development seminars and workshops
- Interviews (N=75) with college educated job seekers and white collar employees
  - Began by focusing on young employees, using alumni from local universities
  - Expanded sample to include job seekers in precarious labor market situations (especially, the long term unemployed)
  - Also interviewed branding instructors and career coaches
  - Here, can give a taste of the findings

# Findings

## 1. *The Rhetoric of Personal Branding is Everywhere...*

“Oh, it’s online, you know, [in] groups. Just the different career websites and blogs, it's all over the place, this branding.” (unemployed paralegal)

“In the past ten years, it has entered the psyche of, everybody, really. Everybody in the business world. And right down into your church, your synagogue, whatever. The religious sphere. This is a new... Kind of, everything is a product. A brand.” (chemical engineer, out of work for four years)

# Findings

Responses such as this were common without mention of personal branding:

“You have to have your personal brand. It’s like, what are you known for? Because, you know, *I am the product, and the service is what I do, and the hiring manager is the customer.* So you have to think about it in terms of marketing my brand, and my brand is, like I’ve said, is providing growth in enrollment through mission leadership and excellent service. That’s who I am (emphasis added)” (an unemployed administrator in higher education, in her 50s)

*2. There was variation in how interviewees responded...*

Following Collinson, “Identity and Insecurity” (2003), I distinguish three types:

- **Resistant** (challenge the terms of the rhetoric, on principled or practical grounds)
- **Dramaturgical** (uses the rhetoric strategically while seeking to protect one’s “real” self)
- **Conformist** (incorporates or embraces the rhetoric)

*...but the last type is the most prevalent response*

## i. Examples of “resistant” responses

“I find it extremely hard to create a brand for a person, as opposed to a service... and overall I’m quite turned off by the infusion of marketing concepts into the job search field... I just hate it. Maybe that’s just my scientific background.”

(PhD in molecular biology, unemployed for several years)

“It’s very much a capitalist economy, right? Sell yourself or you don’t get hired...I just find it artificial and forced and catering to the corporate world.” (social scientist studying the Middle East)

## Resistant responses, cont'd

“I tell you what, when I was working with these big corporations I was working with sales people all the time. I know all of this type of talk about branding and marketing and sales so I know exactly what you're talking about. In the past ten years it has entered the psyche of everybody. Of everybody in the business world. Everything is a product. I am a product to be sold with a brand. On the other hand, I am *not* a brand. I am *not* a product. *I am a unique individual with skills and personality.*”

(chemical engineer badly hurt in a corporate layoff, jobless for several years and now seriously ill)

## ii. Examples of “dramaturgical” responses

“I try to project all the personality traits that have been valued by my previous employers.” (unemployed health care administrator, 55)

“You have turn your interview self *off* and turn your real self *on*. It’s Like a hat that you wear.” (blog editor, 26)

“I enter into campaign mode”(public relations officer in late 40s)



### iii. Examples of “conformist” responses

“Absolutely... Whether you’re looking for a job or looking to hire people, I totally subscribe to [the view] that you *are* a brand... There’s just a whole bunch of elements that go into your brand. And if something is missing, that’s a part of your brand, so it’s not complete. I mean there’s no question. From the shoes on your feet to your mannerisms, the way in which you speak, the words you know. You have to be cognizant of that and try to get control over what your delivery is and how you speak.”

(sales manager in high tech)

### iii. Conformist responses, cont'd

“And once you’re inside the organization, once you’re inside the job, you have your personal brand *inside* the organization. So... Now it used to be that your supervisor would write a performance review and that was it. *Now*, most organizations that I’ve come across give “360 reviews,” so your personal brand is critical. Because there may be 8 or 10 people who are being asked for their perception of your value to the organization. And that gets into not only *what* you do but also *how*. So your personal brand fits into the ‘how.’”

(Unemployed sales director in engineers firms)

### iii. Conformist responses, cont'd

“You have to practice it all the time. You have to practice it to everybody, even when you’re at the grocery store. If it’s someone you know, you turn around and you tell them your branding statement. You tell them. Because, a lot of people will say “I didn’t know you did that! I didn’t know that that was you!” And “Oh my gosh! So and so works at such and such.” And it can lead you right into that [job opportunity]. So I think it’s very important that you do that, that you do it all the time. ... I’ve helped a lot of other people brand themselves.”

(Unemployed specialist in educational technology, in her early 60s)

Note: this woman eventually “unbranded” herself

### iii. Conformist responses, cont'd

“I got my daughter on LinkedIn when she was 15, so she could begin her personal branding...If you go to her LinkedIn page, you'd have to say, 'My God, for 17 years old, look at her personal branding!' So yes, I've been an advocate and a teacher of personal branding... I've been helping young people do that as a matter of course for the last decade...You have to give the value proposition of you.”

(high tech consultant working on information security projects, in her late 50s)

3. *Financial references to skills and self were fairly common, quite apart from branding discourse*

- People spoke of “investing” in potential employers, as if engaged in a financial venture
- They referred to their personalities as their “equity” and spoke of “pushing their assets”
- They spoke of showcasing their “value proposition” to maintain their job security

#### *4. Responses were not static, but subject to movement across the types (or even contradictory combinations of them)*

One paralegal, now unemployed for two years, gave this narrative account of her thinking about personal branding:

- Initially resistant (“I don’t have or need a brand”).
  - Was “sweating bullets” at the idea of branding herself.
- Was “close to desperate,” so attended seminars...
- Now, fluent in branding:
  - “I try to incorporate everything I can, everything that’s useful, in the hopes of bettering and developing me, my brand.”
- She would like one on one coaching to enhance her brand

# Sources of Variation in Responses

- Alvesson and Willmott (2002) view responses to “identity regulation” as reflecting the discursive resources have at their disposal
- My data support this notion --resistance was greater among
  - those with training in the sciences (in biology and the social sciences);
  - those embedded in communities of practice (e.g., technical writers);
  - And younger people who are embedded in youth networks
- Yet material conditions are important too.
  - the “dull compulsion of economic relations” took its toll, wearing down resistance among the more experienced workers

# Implications and conclusions

- There *does* seem to be a “new spirit of capitalism,” and it *does* foster a market mythology in ways that are worrisome
- An “incorporation of worker subjectivity” is common, re-shaping the meaning of work and workers under neo-liberalism
- But personal branding is not a totalizing phenomenon
  - It infuses individual self-interest into the corporate world
  - This can foster tension between *employer* brands and *personal* brands
  - Question is whether it also fosters cynicism and distrust toward employers, emphasizing possible conflicts in the interests of each



# Questions remain

- What will the “career” of personal branding look like over time?
- How do individuals respond when branding discourse fails?
  - Personal blame? Lane (2011), Sharone (2014)
  - Discarding the ideology? (Williams and Connell 2010)
  - Arguably, when the value of fictitious commodities is threatened, their bearers assert their status *as* commodities all the more fervently.
- How does the proliferation of social media generally reshape worker subjectivity? (Arguably, it fosters an implicit brand consciousness)

# Final suggestions:

- Theoretical:
  - To grasp the new meaning of work, we must explore popular representations of work, employment and careers beyond the boundaries of the organization
  - Needed are critical public voices that can question the colonization of workers' life worlds
- In practical terms:
  - Needed is greater public support for “free agency” at the *collective* level, fostering creativity without individualization