

Chasing Happiness through Personal Debt: An Example of Neoliberal Influence in Norwegian Society

Salman Türken, Erik Carlquist and Henry Allen

Introduction

This chapter investigates a Norwegian TV show called *Luksusfellen* (The Luxury Trap). Each episode follows an individual or a couple who are having problems with personal debt. Like many others of its ilk, it presents a variety of indebted individuals whom the hosts try to help out of their predicament. What this particular show provides is an acute example of how debt, and implicitly the debt industry, is articulated in a public arena. It also enables an analysis of how various discourses around debt are both constructed and reproduced. This analytic frame is with particular reference to sociocultural dimensions and how often complex personal circumstances are presented as simplistic financial ones. Debt, and the debtor–creditor relationship, functions in a social capacity as much as it does a financial one. Understanding how the social conditions, specifically the various discourses, around debt are constructed is of significant importance as these attempt to smuggle in various moral and political assumptions, which contribute to legitimating and reproducing the currently hegemonic neoliberal ideology.

We begin with an overview of some recent literature on debt as a sociocultural phenomenon, and outline our theoretical framework based on a Foucauldian understanding of neoliberal governmentality. We then present a discourse analysis of *Luksusfellen* and discuss its implications for the subjectivity of debtors participating in the show and the audience, arguing that such debt TV programmes function as technologies of governmentality.

Understanding debt as a social phenomenon

Debt as a political and sociological phenomenon, beyond being merely a financial condition, has seen increasing interest, especially since the 2008 financial crisis in which “toxic” debt is broadly understood to be a fundamental cause. By analysing cultural products, such as debt TV shows such as *Luksusfellen*, we gain a better understanding of how debt exists as a social and political phenomenon (Atwood, 2008; Graeber, 2011; Lazzarato, 2012; Ross, 2013).

To begin, Atwood (2008) paints a comprehensive picture of what these programmes entail, which is worth reproducing in full:

We seem to be entering a period in which debt has passed through its most recent harmless and fashionable period, and is reverting to being sinful. There are even debt TV shows, which have a familiar religious-revival ring to them. There are accounts of shopaholic binges during which you don't know what came over you and everything was a blur, with tearful confessions by those who've spent themselves into quivering insomniatic jellies of hopeless indebtedness, and have resorted to lying, cheating, stealing, and kiting cheques between bank accounts as a result. There are testimonials by families and loved ones whose lives have been destroyed by the debtor's harmful behavior. There are compassionate but severe admonitions by the television host, who here plays the part of priest or revivalist. There's a moment of seeing the light, followed by repentance and a promise never to do it again. There's a penance imposed – *snip, snip* go the scissors on the credit cards – followed by a strict curb-on-spending regimen; and finally, if all goes well, the debts are paid down, the sins are forgiven, absolution is granted, and a new day dawns, in which sadder but more solvent man you rise the morrow morn. (Atwood, 2008, pp. 41–42)

What Atwood suggests, in line with Graeber (2011), is that there is a significant religious dimension to how debt as a concept is discussed in contemporary Western culture, and that this dimension to the discourse has a long history. Both Atwood and Graeber consider that essentially we are born into a debt to God for our life, and we spend our lives trying to pay it back but only really ever make the interest. The individualising tendency of this religious dimension occurs in parallel with our principal concern regarding neoliberal ideology. In this ideology the individual is positioned as being the principal agent of responsibility in their life

while society more broadly, and the debt industry specifically, is not of significance. In this way debt is a social condition couched in religious/moral language and discourse that ultimately creates subjectivity through a particular power relation. Particularly interesting in assessing *Luksusfellen* is how the concept of debt and the relative indebtedness of individuals are discussed and constructed, both explicitly and implicitly.

Moreover, Graeber's (2011) arguments regarding debt take into account not merely financial debt but a variety of obligations that people owe to one another. This is important because it shows how debt as a social relation is rooted in how individuals interact with each other, and do so in a variety of very different human societies. A sense of obligation, and more specifically debts, forms social bonds between people. According to Graeber, debt relations are fundamentally social relations and are therefore also relations of power: someone owes, and someone is owed. Lazzarato (2012) takes this further to suggest that contemporary subjectivity, and by extension the contemporary social order, is in large part determined by these debt relations. This is especially important for contemporary Western society where money and debt are reified and treated as though they exist independently of and alongside "social relations", with finance being treated as mere calculation. Graeber argues that debt is fundamentally, and has been throughout millennia of various human civilisations, a social relationship – from the slave trade, to medieval blood feuds to the financial crisis today. In all of these circumstances there are people in positions of power who are owed something by those who are then subjugated or exploited in some way through being indebted.

Within this social dimension to debt, specifically financial debt, has also always been an additional religious aspect. This concerns the way in which debt and sin are related – that being in debt is somehow sinful or, as Atwood puts it more starkly, "financial debt as a metaphor for sin" (Atwood, 2008, p. 47). It is not only in the language used in the discussion of debt but also in the overbearing moral dimension to attitudes towards both debt and debtors that it is somehow sinful. Graeber suggests that in the major religions, Christianity specifically, people owe a "life debt" to the saviour – their whole lives being repayment for the ultimate sacrifice of the son of God. These religious aspects, as Atwood argues, can be witnessed in how this kind of TV show operates to position the protagonist as a sinner who needs saving from themselves, and the experts who will help them to "see the light".

This is a crucial part of seeing further that debt, and money more broadly, is a social relation that requires tacit agreement among those involved. This agreement is implicit and is also how ideology functions (Billig, 1999). In this way there is a shared understanding among people about particular social concepts and the relationships that may underpin the concept themselves. This is particularly the case in what debt, and being indebted, means for people, and how this is either reinforced or undermined by particular social and political conditions. In this way, contemporary technologies of governmentality such as the TV show reinforce and reproduce these narratives and discourses with the result that a particular social and political order is upheld. In addition, a power relation between the debt industry and the majority of citizens of Western democracies is instituted. Both middle and working classes are engaged in a debt economy in order to fulfil particular visions of “the good life” through acts of consumption, in which their often unrealisable dream is to be relieved from the burden of these debts. The fact that it often goes without question that it is people as individuals who are held entirely responsible for their relative indebtedness is part of the way in which this ideology functions.

Going further, Lazzarato (2012, p. 24) discusses debt in terms of its being the social condition of our time, and suggests that it is fundamentally a power relation: “Debt is finance from the point of view of the debtors who have to repay it. Interest is finance from the point of view of creditors, security-holders who guarantee they benefit from debt.” For Lazzarato, debt, and the creditor–debtor relationship, has become the lynch-pin for contemporary neoliberal capitalism. This is made apparent in both how universal these relationships have become, being recognizable to all, and how the debt crisis has consumed normal politics – collective decision-making is very much about how we managed the debt, both in terms of national and personal debt. This is particularly the case when seeing the rise and the popularity of “austerity” as a political manifesto (Blyth, 2013).

Following from the arguments of Graeber and Atwood about the social nature and deeply moral dimensions of debt is the importance of debt to contemporary subjectivity. This is vital in considering how debt TV shows such as *Luksusfellen* function as technologies of governmentality. Foucault argues that citizens are governed in ways that produce, and reproduce, forms of subjectivity that make them more easily governable. This is achieved through various “technologies of governmentality” – that is, strategies and techniques that both knowingly and unknowingly conform to and articulate this “governmentality”. Individualisation of the social and responsabilisation of the individual are two major

technologies of neoliberal governmentality, as Rose (1999) elaborates, and which we argue apply to programmes such as *Luksusfellen*. These shows position both the subject and the audience through the (re)production of particular discourses, and these discourses function to govern and discipline subjects, especially with regard to morality, sin and guilt. As our close reading will show, these are ways in which subjects are understood and understand themselves in terms of the debtor–creditor relationship and how the debt industry is, or more likely is not, taken into consideration.

In short, individual debtors, those participating in TV shows and often the audiences too are constructed through a variety of discourses around debt which contain implicit power relations. The language of debt is linked to its history as a social institution, to religious dimensions, and to how individuals today are understood as citizens. In order to be part of society, all individuals are scrutinised as debtors:

The logic of debt now structures and conditions the process of individualization, a constant for social policies. Each individual is a particular case which must be studied carefully, because, as with a loan application, it is the debtor's future plans, his style of life, his "solvency" that guarantees reimbursement of the social debt he owes. (Lazzarato, 2012, p. 131)

What this demonstrates is that debt's historical roots in religious discourse, as discussed by Graeber and Atwood, are bound to contemporary subjectivity and how indebted individuals are both financially in debt but also suffer from the associated social pressures. It is the social dimension of debt, the more abstract form, that we are concerned with here, and how these particular discourses are reproduced in debt TV shows. The abovementioned literature suggests that debt has a heritage of being far more than just a financial condition, and that debt today strongly shapes the social identities and relations of contemporary citizens of most Western nations. Despite the fact that Norway is more insulated from global economic pressures, due to the lack of national debt, the significant sovereign wealth from oil revenues and the strong, well-functioning welfare system, the presence of personal debt in people's lives is still significant and most importantly normalised.

Individualisation and neoliberal governmentality

So far this chapter has discussed how debt can be understood in social and cultural terms, and what part this plays in the functioning of the debt industry. Now we will connect this notion of “debt subjectivity” with broader social theory, and then move to consider the context of Norway and the empirical example of Luksusfellen.

As well as living in increasingly indebted societies, we also live in increasingly individualised societies (Beck, 1992; Bauman, 2001). Beck states:

In the individualized society, the individual must therefore learn, on pain of permanent disadvantage, to conceive of himself or herself as the center of action, as the planning office with respect to his/her own biography, abilities, orientations, relationship and so on ... As a consequence the floodgates are opened wide for the subjectivization and individualization of risks and contradictions produced by institutions and society. (Beck, 1992, pp. 135–136)

Such processes of individualisation have been fuelled by strong global developments towards neoliberalism in recent decades, shaping both political-economic practices and “common sense” (Bourdieu, 1998; Harvey, 2005). In contemporary societies, individual selfhood is continually produced through the discourses and practices of neoliberalism (Rose, 1999). Our arguments in this chapter draw heavily upon Foucault’s (2008) understanding of neoliberal governmentality. Neoliberal governmentality as “conduct of conduct” refers to the ways in which neoliberalism works by installing in society a concept of the human subject as autonomous, rational, individualised, self-directing and decision-making agents who understand themselves in terms of human capital. The individualistic subject of the Enlightenment which came to fore in the early stages of capitalism has been refashioned as an entrepreneur. Neoliberalism encourages individuals to become self-entrepreneurs and demands a stronger degree of self-determination by pushing subjects toward engaging individually in the solution of the social problems of life – for example, illness, unemployment, education, poverty – which have been seen as more collective concerns, and have more recently been the very essence of the welfare state (Ferge, 1997; Foucault, 2008). In doing so, neoliberalism replaces more overtly coercive disciplinary mechanisms on society and fabricates the subject as someone who is autonomous yet governable, engaged in self-monitoring and self-disciplining. The self-understanding of the individual is repeatedly constructed through an internalised discourse as being the master of their own existence,

compulsively leading the subject to engage in endeavours of self-improvement and self-critique. Ultimately, these rational (“individual”) subjects therefore become the only sites of blame for their own misery. Such Foucauldian perspectives resonate well with Beck’s theorisations of the individualisation of risk.

Workings of neoliberalism are particularly strengthened by the psy-complex, which contributes to further individualisation of the social through various discourses and helps to preserve the status quo, namely neoliberal governance (Rose, 1999). The psy-complex refers to all institutions relating to human sciences, particularly psychology and its affiliates, which diffuse in society a certain type of psychological expertise – the heterogeneous knowledges, forms of authority and practical techniques that make it possible for individuals to construe and conduct themselves in certain ways. Rose’s claim is that “the psy disciplines and psy expertise have had a key role in constructing ‘governable subjects’ ... making it possible to govern human beings in ways that are compatible with the principles of liberalism and democracy”, shaping the private selves in contemporary societies (1999, p. vii). He further states:

However constrained by external or internal factors, the modern self is institutionally required to construct a life through the exercise of choice from among alternatives. Every aspect of life, like every commodity, is imbued with a self-referential meaning; every choice we make is an emblem of our identity, a mark of our individuality, each is a message to ourselves and others as to the sort of person we are, each casts a glow back, illuminating the self of he or she who consumes. (Rose, 1999, p. 231)

The psy-complex contributes to spreading the values of autonomy and self-realisation. As can be read from the quote above, conduct of conduct is achieved through personal labour to assemble a way of life within the sphere of consumption. Self-realisation is thus imagined to be achieved by becoming a consumer. Indeed, globally, the contemporary way of living is characterised by consumerism (Miles, 1998). We are increasingly exposed to the mantra “To have is to be”, and living in consumer societies, “the very essence of being” is equated with “having; that if one has nothing, one is nothing”, as Fromm asserted earlier (1978, p. 25). Thus consumerism and debt also provide an illustration of how a particular form of governmentality functions through the reproduction of particular discourses around debt, and

in so doing it produces particular individualised subjects. *Luksusfellen*, as we will show, contributes to this process and is emblematic of it.

Debt in Norwegian society

Although Norway remains one of the most successful welfare states with prominent social democratic values, Norwegian society has been increasingly influenced by neoliberal policy. This happened with the introduction of New Public Management in the 1980s, with increased privatisation, deregulation of markets and incorporation into the global market economy. Citizens of the welfare state have increasingly been constructed as consumers (Nafstad et al., 2007) who, to a large degree, depend financially on debt. There is also a widespread discourse of materialism in Norwegian society, especially among the youth, who not only establish relationships and bond with peers through activities such as shopping (Brusdal and Lavik, 2008) but also understand happiness, to some extent, in terms of material possessions (Türken et al., submitted). Moreover, the debt economy is sustained not only by financial institutions (e.g. banks and credit card companies) that provide less restricted consumer loans than before, but also by state regulation and deregulation that encourage young people to become debtors (e.g. education loans, mortgage regulations). As mentioned earlier, in this respect subjectivity, and to a degree citizenship, is bound together with being in debt – in order to own property, a car and so forth one needs to take on debt. Citizens are thus influenced and shaped into agents who keep the debt economy in place.

Debt, then, has arguably become part and parcel not only of the financial structure of Norwegian society but of the lived experience of its inhabitants. Some 83% of households are in debt: the average debt for a Norwegian household (not including students) increased from NOK 626,000 (Norwegian krone) in 2004 to NOK 104,800 (approximately EUR 135,000) in 2011 (Statistics Norway, 2013). In 2011, 209,222 out of a total of 250,456 students were receiving education loans from the state (Lånekassen, 2013). Additionally, the percentage of households reporting to have consumer debt, as opposed to mortgages and education loans, increased from 12% in 2007 to 20% in 2011. Credit card usage involving following-month payment, as opposed to debit cards, increased from 41% in 2007 to 65% in 2011 (Lavik and Tufte, 2011). Such numbers imply that in Norwegian society most citizens, including students, have been structurally transformed into debtors.

Luksusfellen

The TV show (*Luksusfellen*) is introduced on its website with the following words:

“To get into the luxury trap” has become a common phrase used for individuals whose overconsumption of clothes, travel, electronics and other consumer goods is funded through borrowed money ... When the money is used on everything but bills and the down-payment of credit cards, and the debt increases to such a height that one cannot see a way of out of the problems, Luksusfellen experts come to help.
(authors’ translation)

Luksusfellen is a popular show in Norway that is aired by the commercial channel TV3. Currently in its tenth season, it has an average audience of approximately 250,000 (e-mail communication with TV3), which is considerable given the Norwegian population of roughly 5 million.

Drawing upon Foucauldian understandings of governmentality and discourse, we will outline ways in which individual debtors are constructed by the programme as certain kinds of subjects. We will also discuss how the psy-complex through the involvement of expert psychologists and economists in the programme contributes to constructing the neoliberal subject and the enforcement of neoliberal governance. In doing so we will discuss the extent to which the psy-complex may sustain the debt industries by placing demands on individuals (debtors) and neglecting the social factors that constrain their choices, thus stigmatising those who fail to measure up to the moral imperatives of the dominant discourses.

Method and analysis

Foucauldian discourse analysis

Subjectivity cannot develop independently of culture. Each society or culture contains diverse discourses that have implications for subjectivity. Connolly (1998, p. 14) asserts that as “discourses tend to define how the social world is ordered and organized, then it is inevitable that discourses will reach into the very hearts of individuals and come to influence and shape

their sense of identity”. A Foucauldian understanding thus maintains that discourses create certain ways of being that, when negotiated and taken up by individuals, have implications for their subjectivity and experience (Hook, 2001; Willig, 2008). Discourse analysis can be utilised to provide knowledge of how particular understandings of the self and the world are diffused in society. It also offers the possibility of questioning and challenging those understandings, as discourses function ideologically and present an oppressive version of the world, defining what is normal and what is deviant (Parker, 2005). The ways in which we make sense of our world enable us to become particular kinds of subject. A discursive framework then affords us the view of, in our case, debtors as practising how to be a certain kind of person or “do identity” by negotiating meanings that are embedded in the various discourses that they face, in this case through *Luksusfellen*.

We start our analysis by presenting the typical script of *Luksusfellen*, showing how the programme develops in each episode. We have chosen the most recent complete season (the eighth) for our analysis. Then we investigate how debt is constructed in *Luksusfellen* and analyse interactions between the debtors and experts. We do this by analysing the discourses that the experts and the debtors draw upon and by discussing what subject positions are enabled by those discourses. Our argument is that these shows provide an example of a technology of governmentality that supports the debt industry in Norway through the normalisation of debt and the disciplining of subjects (audiences and participants) into being financially literate, or at least knowing how to be financially literate and feeling guilty about not living up to this.

The script

The eighth season consists of 14 episodes. Each episode (about 45 minutes) begins with a presentation of the debtor by means of a montage, including scenes from their daily life, and interviews of the participant and a close friend or relative. The montage, including voiceovers by the participant and the narrator, serves to associate the participant with a financial problem and a particular consumption or spending style. A short presentation of the two experts – a financial advisor and a psychologist, follows. Thereafter the experts arrive at the home of the participant, and are greeted by them and the close friend or relative. Usually one of the experts stays in the home with the participant, while the other expert typically goes out (e.g. for a walk, to a café) with the accompanying person. The participant is then invited to

describe their financial situation, including an estimate of the amount and composition of their debt. Other people, sometimes the accompanying person, are often portrayed as being negatively affected by the financial situation and its management. The participant and the accompanying person are then left alone, and sometimes their emotional reactions to the situation are shown. After having assessed the financial situation, the experts return, often with a message that the debt is even larger than the participant initially thought. The expert confronts the participant about practical consequences and moral concerns. The participant is then presented with an authorisation that temporarily transfers the management of their finances to the expert, which the participant then signs. Again, the participant appears to be left alone and often displays troubled emotions. Usually a commercial break takes place at this stage.

After the break the experts present a magnetic blackboard, categorising the monthly expenses of the participant by use of NOK 1,000 and NOK 500 notes which are fixed to the board under headings such as “food” and ”transportation”. This exercise is conducted in the home of the participant. Typically, participants show surprise at the level and composition of their consumption. Other illustrations with “pedagogic” aims are then shown – for example, the experts slicing and eating a cake with no pieces being left for the participant. The experts then present possible methods to improve the financial situation and alleviate the debt, such as quitting smoking or selling a car. The solutions sometimes require a considerable life change on behalf of the participant, such as taking on an extra part-time job. In some episodes the participant is asked to make telephone calls to, or participate in meetings with, creditors to negotiate, say, down-payment plans or postponements. In other episodes, experts engage in off-screen negotiations on behalf of the participant. In the third section of the programme, the participant is portrayed as moving into in a new phase of better managing their debt. A revised blackboard budget is presented, the participant allocating bank notes according to the instructions of the experts.

The final phase of the episode invariably involves the experts returning to visit the participant after about a month. During this follow-up the participant and experts co-narrate a story of progress and typically display smiling faces. The experts return the signed authorisation to the participant. They then present the participant with a corporate-sponsored gift of around NOK 20,000 – for example, grocery coupons or a month’s supply of fuel for driving to work.

Overall, a typical episode of *Luksusfellen* involves a debtor and usually a significant other, two experts (often an economist and a psychologist), the debt problem, the creditors and a solution.

Constructing debt

In *Luksusfellen*, debt is hardly ever posited as a shared problem requiring a structural or collective solution. It is rather framed as a result of the individual's irresponsibility, as a result of a lack of thinking or reflection on the part of the individual debtor, or as a lack of financial literacy. Any contextual explanation is left out. Any construction of debt provided in the programme posits it as the individual's own problem, to be resolved by the individual themselves. Such construction of debt functions in a reductionist way and conceals the structural elements or mechanisms of the current economic system, thus masking many important dimensions of the debt industry that we intend to draw out here.

Occasionally the debtor, and the viewers of the show, are reminded by the experts that the consumer debts that most debtors struggle to pay back have a "horrendous interest rate" (e.g. 15%). While this fact is openly shared with us, the show or the experts never question why actors/creditors in the financial sector should demand such interest rates. On the contrary, this high interest rate is taken for granted and the individual debtor is instead encouraged by the experts to shape up and "take control" over their debt situation.

Additionally, the creditors in *Luksusfellen* are portrayed not only as innocent but also as good actors within the financial sector. The audience is reminded that the debtor is, also figuratively speaking, in debt to the creditors who could by their legal right seek legal action, although mostly they don't. As the psychologist in Episode 7 informs us, the debtors are "dependent on creditors' patience and kindness". In this way the TV show can be said to function to normalise the debt industry and its practices while debt is constructed as solely an individual's problem.

From failed subjecthood to entrepreneurial subject

In each episode we are introduced to a debtor who is constructed as a failed individual. This person is morally condemned by the experts for not living up to the standards that are

expected of normal citizens in contemporary society. The failed subject, in different episodes of the show, is described as an individual who “spends too much”, has an issue with “impulse control”, is “struggling”, is “partying too much”, is “in need of personal transformation” or needs to engage in “self-development”.

In Episode 14, for instance, we are introduced to debtor M. We are told that M had been partying and spending a lot of money. He has six different credit cards to afford his lifestyle and now has a debt of about EUR 50,000 which he has been struggling to pay back. His friend portrays him as “a good guy”, yet “as failing with [the management of] money”. The narrator contributes: “He has to tidy up his life now if he is ever going to have a normal future”. Thus, right from the beginning of the show, as in each episode, the debtor is constructed as a failed individual and as lacking financial literacy to manage his life.

The narrator and the experts in the TV show implicitly construct an ideal/competent subject of contemporary society. This subject is posited as someone who is rational, responsible for their own life choices and autonomous, implying a certain isolation from (significant) others or society in managing life – and crucially being able to manage their debt. The debtors in *Luksusfellen* are constructed as failing when compared with this standard. Accordingly, the programme operates to position the debtors as sinners who need to be saved from themselves, and the experts are depicted as those who will help them to “see the light”, as Atwood (2008) suggests. The construction of the debtor as a sinner justifies the intervention by the experts in order to transform the subject into an entrepreneur who, according to Foucault (2008), then understands themselves in terms of human capital and thus develops into a competent citizen/subject/debtor.

Discourses of rationality, responsibility and entrepreneurship

The most frequent discourses we encounter throughout *Luksusfellen* are those of rationality and individual responsibility employed by the experts. The debtors are constructed as sinners because apparently they do not act rationally and they take responsibility for their choices. Accordingly they are disciplined by the experts:

Expert, economist: “You say you don’t have an overview ... to get 6 credit cards in the space of a year, that’s insane ...”

Debtor: “I don’t know what I was thinking.”

Expert, economist: “No, I don’t think you have thought at all.”

...

Expert, psychologist: “You are fooling yourself.”

...

Expert, psychologist: “We cannot make your debt disappear.”

Debtor: “No, I don’t expect that either.”

Expert, psychologist: “Yes, it is you who after all has to fix this. But we will of course help you get there.”

Debtor: “Thank you.”

In this dialogue between the experts and the debtor in Episode 14, we witness the disciplining dimension. First the debtor is portrayed as failing to “think at all”, drawing on a discourse of rationality. No one with the slightest capacity to think (rationally) would behave the way he did to get himself into this mess, as the expert puts it. Furthermore, he is given full responsibility to solve the problem. We witness that he is indeed disciplined as he accepts his fault and takes full responsibility. Later in the show the debtor admits that he “needs to reflect” upon and fix things; after all, he “is in control”. Such a discourse of individual responsibility places the burden on the shoulders of the individual debtor while limiting any possibility of considering the complex ways in which debt can become a problem in peoples’ lives. This results in an ignorance of social and structural mechanisms of society that make being in debt (the behaviour) possible for individuals.

In each episode of *Luksusfellen*, the proposed solution to the debt problem is that the debtors become entrepreneurs of themselves. The debtors are constructed as having the potential to change and to become better versions of themselves. Experts here function to influence the debtors to “internalise” the problem and thereby seek solutions within. Each debtor in each episode is taught several techniques to become the better version of themselves in order to increase their financial literacy and manage their debt. The disciplined individual thus feels the need to refashion and develop themselves. The debtors seem to accept the construction of themselves by the experts as “self-made”, and they are willing to increase their value and capacity by drawing upon a discourse of lifelong learning, which is argued to preserve neoliberal governance (Olssen, 2006). No debtor, regardless of age, gender or ethnicity, in any episode shows resistance to this construction. They all, either implicitly or

explicitly, accept that they need to change, while debt as a social or a structural phenomenon remains unquestioned.

For instance, talking about the options for debtor M in Episode 14, as mentioned above, to get out of the dire situation that he is in, the experts make the point that he needs to make better use of his abilities:

Expert, psychologist: “I think all people feel good about themselves if they can make use of all of themselves [their full capacity].”

Expert, economist: “It is going to be tough ... he needs to do everything in his power to increase his income.” The first quotation implies that the debtor has apparently not done enough to make use of his full potential and, as such, can be blamed for his debt problem. Employing a discourse on the inner life of the individual, the psychologist represents the psychocomplex, implying that the subject who develops himself to become a competent debtor would also feel good about himself. The only conceivable solution to the debt problem then lies within the individual debtor. The economist supplements the psychologist’s advice: the solution is “doing everything in his [debtor’s] power” to increase income – for instance, getting an extra job – as was the case in the episode analysed above.

In a repetitive manner, each episode shows us a debtor, characterised as a sinner, who is constructed as the person who is solely responsible for their debt problem, while the systemic and structural mechanisms that make such behaviour (indebtedness) possible for individuals are taken for granted and kept out of discussion. The debtor in Episode 7 is a good example. The narrator informs us:

“[He] has [NOK] 1.5 million in debt because he has for a long time been struggling with impulse control. The experts through several exercises have tried to help him change his behavior ...”

Here, again, the debt problem is attributed to the internal or psychological characteristics of the debtor. This construction is arguably enabled by a discourse of individualism which also permeates psy-expertise. Understanding such a complex problem as debt only in terms of individuals’ inner characteristics is reductionist and may often lead to fundamental attribution error in which the contextual factors that influence subjects’ behaviour are ignored, a common bias in Western societies that is well established by social psychological research (e.g. Markus and Kitayama, 1991). Indeed, recent mainstream psychological research tends to construe

overindebtedness mainly in terms of individual's irresponsibility, financial incompetence and/or inability to delay gratification (Walker, 2012). Such individualising/psychologising constructions of the problem also limit the solutions to the potential changes that the debtor can make of their own accord:

Debtor: "I must try this. It is going to be tough but I have to try."

...

Debtor: "There is plenty of stuff I have to sort out on my own ... I have got to do this. I have started doing it."

Expert, psychologist: "So, you take responsibility?"

Debtor: "Yes, I do."

...

Expert, psychologist: "What you need from now on is better structure, predictability and routines."

Later on, while talking to the camera, the psychologist informs us: "It is totally decisive that [he] gets the right habits and changes his behavior." What is proposed as a solution to the debt problem here is "work on the self by the self" (Rose, 1999). This discourse of individualism not only enables a subject position of a guilty debtor but also limits the responsibility for the solution of the problem as residing within the boundaries of the individual. Thus a self-developing entrepreneurial subject is enabled by this discourse, which functions in ways that are consistent with neoliberal governmentality. It seems that the debtor understands themselves and what they can and should do through the particular position of this subjecthood of guilt and repentance.

Expert roles, lack of resistance and disciplined subjectivities

The narrator of the programme informs the audience in each episode that the experts "are eager to increase people's knowledge about the economy" and "have for a long time been helping individuals in dire situations ... They wish to provide people with simple tools so that they can better manage their economy in everyday life." The experts are portrayed as knowledgeable individuals who play their role as "priests or revivalists" (Atwood, 2008) and only want to help debtors to increase their financial literacy.

However, in their help to the debtors as exemplified in both of our examples above, the experts contribute to individualisation of the debt problem which is principally a social and structural, as well as a political, problem. The psy-knowledge deployed by the experts thus functions to conceal the workings of the debt economy. Individualisation of the debt problem and responsabilisation of the individual debtors thus normalise the debt economy in a particular way.

Discourse analysis opens up an understanding of individuals as active agents who engage in and negotiate with, but who can also potentially resist, the dominant discourses and subject positions that they enable (Willig, 2008). Our analysis, however, reveals that in *Luksusfellen* there is limited resistance by the debtors to the dominant discourse of individual responsibility which the experts consistently draw upon in their disciplining of these “failed subjects”. The debtors in each episode are portrayed as completely “obeying” the experts and they appear to internalise the subjectivity that is offered to them. They are constructed as accepting the position of the failed and struggling subject who, with the help of the experts, can improve themselves to become a competent, financially literate, morally responsible individual. The words of one of the debtors are illustrative of the success of *Luksusfellen* in disciplining, and of the degree of subjectification which is achieved by the show: What I appreciate most is that they [experts] “kicked me in the ass” and lifted me up to finally tidy up [my economy] and sort of provided me with a good instrument to get in control of things. I am sure I will manage myself ... I am positive about the future ... (debtor in Episode 14)

Given the dominant underlying assumption of individualism that permeates all of the subject positions offered to the debtors, *Luksusfellen* is suggested to contribute to (1) individualisation of the social and (2) responsabilisation of the individual, both of which are mechanisms of neoliberalism (Rose, 1999). As an example of neoliberal influence, the programme achieves and promotes “multiple responsabilization of individuals” for their own actions and risk, which implies that responsibilities for risk minimisation (getting rid of the debt in the case of our debtors) become a feature of the choices that are made by individual debtors as consumers (Dean, 1999). Such interpretation resonates with Beck’s (1992) discussion of the individualisation of risk in contemporary societies, revealing especially the expert discourses

which demand that individuals control the risky futures that they are headed towards as morally failing indebted individuals.

Similarly, Lazzarato (2012, p. 46) considers the debt relationship as a way in which capitalism reaches into the future in order to address the risk of not knowing what the future will hold: “The effects of the power of debt on subjectivity (guilt and responsibility) allow capitalism to bridge the gap between present and future.” In this way the social dimensions of debt and the subjectivity of debtors are fundamentally connected to the way in which the economic system functions – there are structural elements in how individuals behave with regard to the debtor–creditor relationship.

Concluding remarks

Our point in this chapter is not to advocate one form of financial understanding over another but to indicate how the various demands on individuals (debtors) that are made by neoliberal discourses and the psy-complex neglect the social and structural factors that constrain and influence individuals’ choices, and thus potentially stigmatise those who fail to measure up to the moral imperative of the dominant discourses. Indeed, in each episode of *Luksusfellen* we are introduced to a failed subject who is condemned morally, or punished, for the life choices that they have made. This again reflects the moral dimensions of guilt and sin as discussed by Graeber (2011) and Atwood (2008). The subject, with the help of experts, is disciplined through several exercises to become a morally acceptable individual – namely, an obedient and responsible subject who develops themselves to be able to pay their debt. In addition, the audience is simultaneously disciplined through engaging with the narrative of sin and redemption. The audience is shown how one should be indebted, what is the correct way to take on debt and what is not.

The episodes powerfully convey the normative message of transitioning from inadequacy to success by means of moral judgement by experts, emotional displays, scenes of punishment, confession, insight and change. If the rational autonomous individual takes responsibility to refashion themselves, learn new ways of being, engage in self-improvement and fulfil expectations of financial literacy, there will be no hindrance on their way to success. The individual is constituted as “the master of her life” (Bauman, 2001) who is thus obliged to “work on the self” to accomplish life (Rose, 1999).

Underlying the two major subject positions – the failed and the self-improving – among participants is the fundamental assumption of individualism: none of the positions offered allows for collectivity or group identity. The entire narrative is focused on the individual’s personal (ir)responsibility, (un)awareness and (un)willingness to change. These are powerful ways in which to frame the future selves of debtors, and also viewers of the TV show by extension, setting up a constraining binary (positive self/negative self) and impressing on the debtors, and the viewers, their personal responsibility to manage life on their own or be consigned to endless struggle and disadvantage.

Overall, as exemplified by the discourses employed in *Luksusfellen*, neoliberalism, by strengthening individualism, provides social control, and legitimates and reproduces the existing social structural mechanisms with all of their inequalities. In shows like these, the social and structural components of the debt industry remain taken for granted and hidden, but through detailed analysis we can draw attention to them.

Notes

<en-group type=“endnotes”>

<en><label>1</label> Ross (2013) also develops this line of argument to suggest that, in fact, in the USA at least but increasingly in Western Europe, we are living in “creditocracies” where credit, and therefore debt, has become omnipresent. </en>

<en><label>2</label> Although, as Williams (1974) suggested, advertisements form part of the media text by becoming part of the flow of images and information, we have chosen to concentrate on the actual show due to space. We recognise this possible extension. </en>

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