

Unpaid Internships, Employability and the Construction of the Subject

IIPPE 2017

13th September

Beatriz Casas González

Overview

- Contextualising the topic
- Theoretical framework: why Foucault (again)?
- Research findings
- Questions and reflections for activism

Contextualising the topic

- How I came to the research question
- Unpaid internships and the restructuring of labour markets and higher education systems
- Unpaid internships in Germany
- *Report on Quality Indicators of Lifelong Learning (2002), Lisbon Strategy (2000) and Bologna Declaration (1999)*
 - Lifelong learning strategy should address all aspects and stages of individuals' lives across social institutions
 - Main goal: enhance employability and ensure that people's knowledge and skills match the changing demands of jobs and occupations, workplace organisation and working methods

Contextualising the topic

- Lifelong learning purses the alignment of individuals, educational and labour market interests and goals.
- A key mechanism to achieve this aim is promoting a constant will to learn, maintaining curiosity and interest in new development and skills
- “Bridging of academic studies and professional activities and making firm links between them is beneficial for achieving an enhanced employability. (...) Internships are a recommended element of degree programmes” (Experts Working Groups 21st-23rd of 2004:1).

Contextualising the topic

- On research design:

- Where?

- When?

- How?

- Who?

Brief description of the interviewees

Expert	Brief Description
E1	Director of University's Career Service
E2	Coordinator of Master programme
E3	Employment advisor of the "Agentur für Arbeit" on campus

Interviewee	Brief Description	I6	Self-identified male. Aged 27. German and non-German citizen. 14 th university semester. 2 internships (both unpaid). Parents with mixed formal educational attainment. Master self-funded and through parental support.
I1	Self-identified male. Aged 26. German and non-German citizen. 10 th university semester. 1 internship (unpaid). Parents with mixed formal educational attainment. Master self-funded and through parental support.		
I2	Self-identified female. Aged 26. German citizen. 11 th university semester. 6 internships (paid and unpaid). Parents with higher formal education. Master funded through parental support.	I7	Self-identified female. Aged 25. German and non-German citizen. 10 th university semester. 4 internships (all unpaid). Parents with higher formal education. Master self-funded and through parental support.
I3	Self-identified male. Aged 26. German citizen. 11 th university semester. 4 internships (paid and unpaid). Parents with higher formal education. Master self-funded and through scholarship and parental support.	I8	Self-identified female. Aged 24. Non-German citizen. 10 th university semester. 3 internships (both paid and unpaid). Parents with higher formal education. Master funded through scholarship.
I4	Self-identified female. Aged 26. German citizen. 11 th university semester. 4 internships (all unpaid). Parents with mixed formal educational attainment. Master self-funded and through scholarship and parental support.	I9	Self-identified female. Aged 22. Non-German citizen. 10 th university semester. 2 internships (1 unpaid and 1 paid). Parents with higher formal education. Master funded through scholarship and parental support.
I5	Self-identified male. Aged 34. German citizen. 24 th university semester. 4 internships (all unpaid). Parents with higher formal education. Master self-funded.	I10	Self-identified male. Aged 27. Non-German citizen. 10 th university semester. 3 internships (all unpaid). Parents with higher education. Master self-funded and through loan and parental support.

Theoretical framework: Why Foucault?

- Problematisation of “normality: *“to bring assumptions and things taken for granted again into question, to shake habits, ways of acting and thinking, to dispel the familiarity of the accepted, to take the measure of rules and institutions”*
- Governmentalisation and the construction of meaning/truth: *“governmentalisation is indeed this movement through which individuals are subjugated in the reality of a social practice through mechanisms of power that adhere to a truth”*

Theoretical framework: Why Foucault?

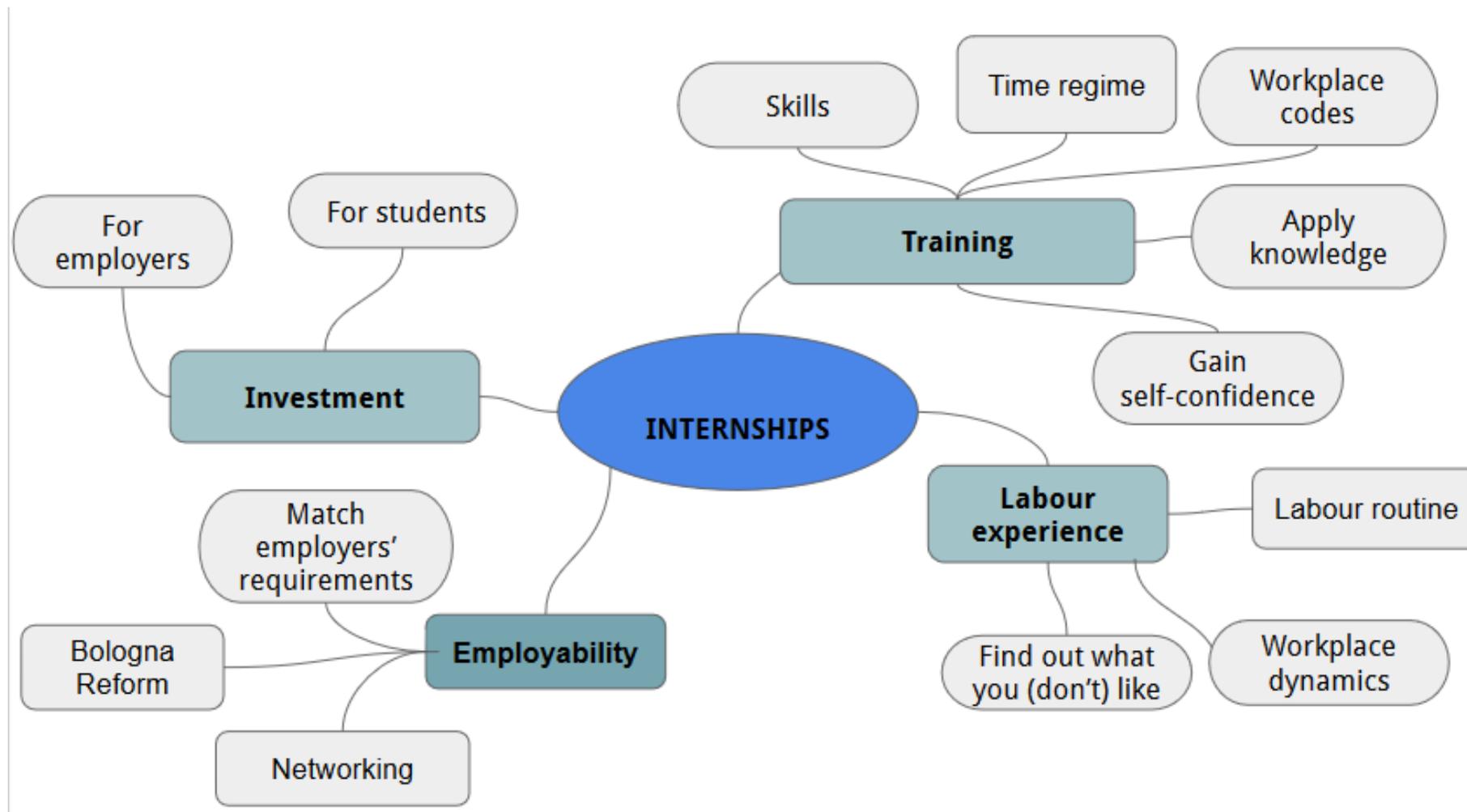
Government and subjectivation: *“a form of power that applies itself to immediate everyday life, categorises the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him that he must recognise and others have to recognise in him. It is a form of power that makes individuals subjects”*

But there is space for critique! *“critique is the movement by which the subject gives himself the right to question truth on its effects of power and question power on its discourses of truth (...) and insure his desubjugation”*

Research findings

- Summary of interviews analysis
(with “experts” and students)

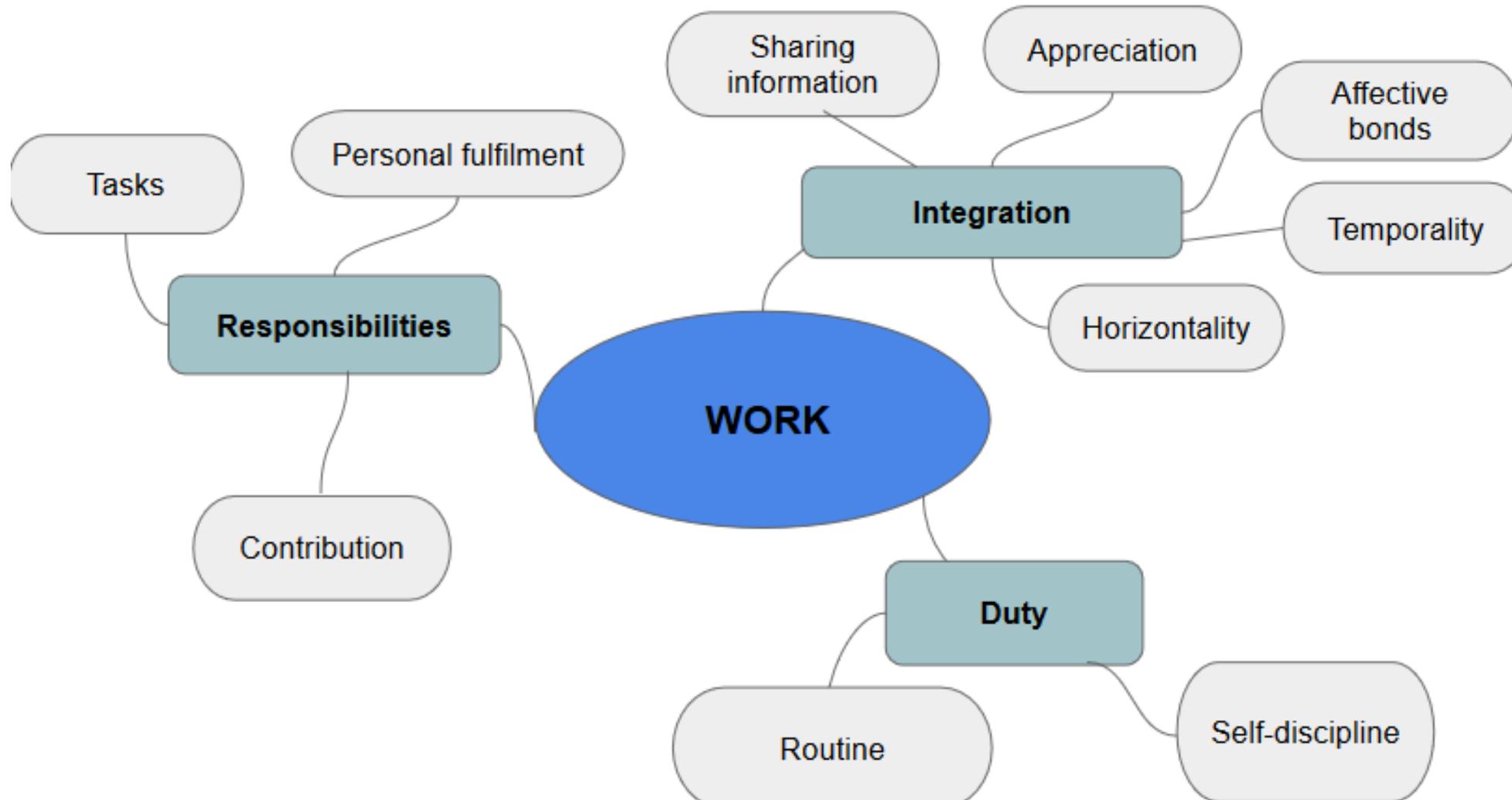
Research findings: Experts on the purpose and meaning of internships



Research findings: Experts on the purpose and meaning of internships

- Transfer of discourses, in line with the policies above analysed (special mention to Bologna Plan)
- Enhancing students' employability as a key argument for internships
- Emphasis on the transition between education and employment systems, and the alignment of education and labour market
- Skills as a fundamental element of training
- Internships framed as an investment, both for employers (investing in potential labour force) and students (investing time, energy and money for an eventual employment)

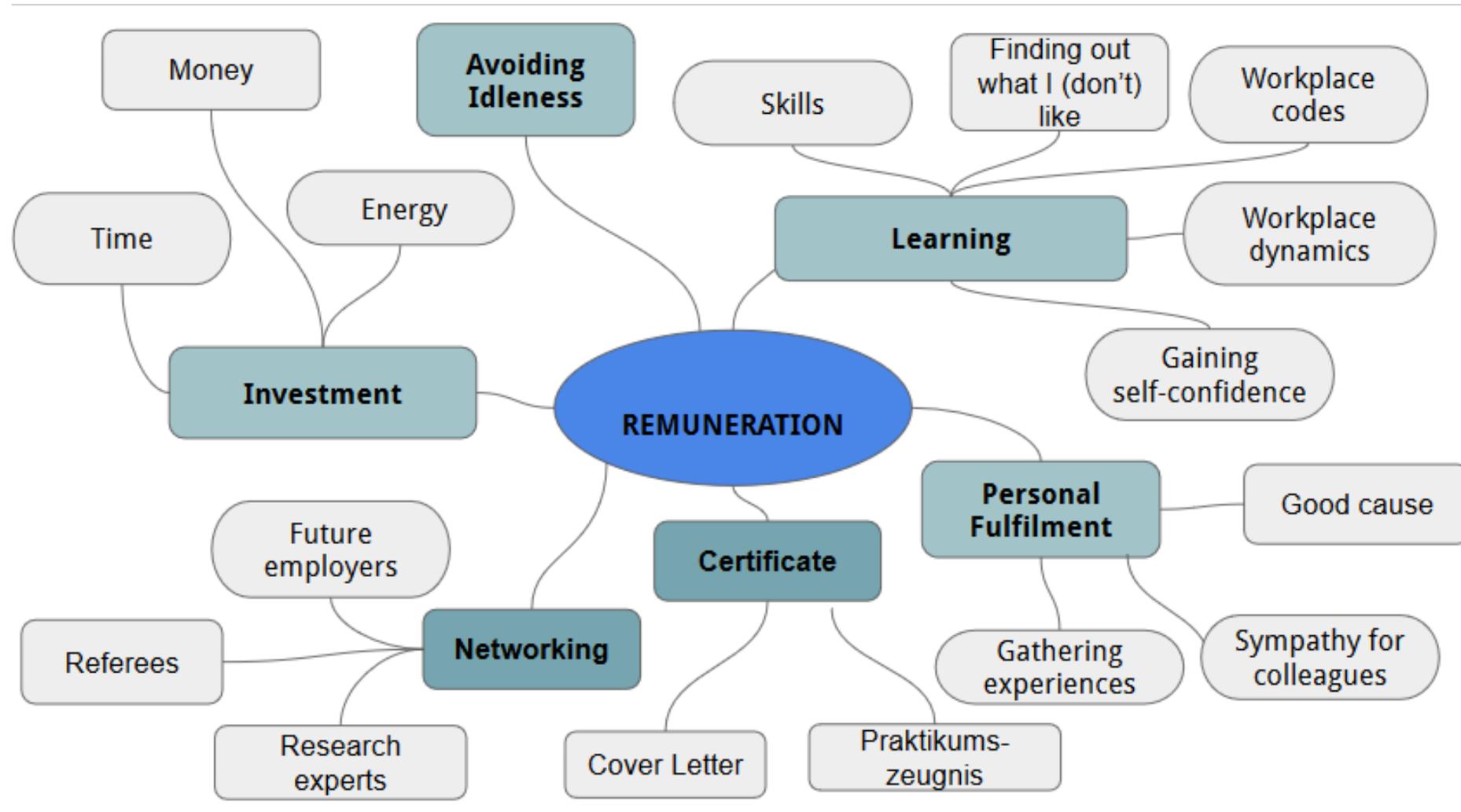
Research findings: Students on the meaning of work



Research findings: Students on the meaning of work

- “Work” is defined through a set of shared subjective feelings, such as a sense of responsibility, integration and duty (subjectivation of work).
- Monetary remuneration (wage) occupies here a secondary place.

Research findings: Students on the meaning of remuneration



Research findings: Students on the meaning of remuneration

- Remuneration framed in non-monetary terms, although an economic rationale seems to mediate the participants' motivations for undertaking unpaid internships.
- Unpaid internships are seen as an investment in the own social and human capitals, with the goal of enhancing the individual employability.

Research findings: Unpaid internships and inequality

- **Internships reproducing structural inequalities**

“Mine is actually a tremendous privilege, not everyone has it, I mean, not everyone has access to these chances, to learn something in internships. There is a huge gap between those that can afford it and those that can’t. And those that cannot afford to work for free are out. This is how the system works” (I2)

Research findings: Unpaid internships and inequality

Internships reproducing structural inequalities

“I have reflected a lot about the fact that not being paid, and even having to pay rent on top of that, is an extreme way to select those that can apply for the internship (at the embassy abroad). I was in a good, nice position, because I had saved and I could afford the internship” (I3)

Self-reflection, which, in turn, signals high levels of cultural capital.

Research findings: Unpaid internships and inequality

- Internships as an individual strategy against structural inequalities

“I could have done the internship in Perú without much problem, because I know more people there, I have an uncle here, another there (...) but I wanted to do it here (...) even if I think that it’s more difficult for me than for my German friends (...) but now it’s getting better, if I do an internship in a certain organisation I can then get to know others that are similar” (I8)

Research findings: Unpaid internships and inequality

- Internships as an individual strategy against structural inequalities

“R: And now that we’re approaching the end of our masters, how do you feel about your employment chances?”

I5: One should maybe take into account that I’m quite old. Hmm... not good, to be honest, but this doesn’t have to do with our study but with my “broken CV”, I don’t have much useful labour experience, which I try to compensate with the internships (...) I think the last internship has improved my employment chances, on the one hand in relationship with my CV, on the other, in terms of ‘vitamin b’”

Research findings: Unpaid internships and inequality

Internships as an individual strategy against structural inequalities

“I feel disadvantaged because of being a foreigner, which might affect my chances to get a job, so this is why I wanted to do many internships, to legitimate myself against things they (potential employers) might have against me, like: “you’re a foreigner and German is not your native language” (I8)

Questions and reflexions for activism

*“Many young people strangely boast of being “motivated”:
they re-request apprenticeships and permanent training.*

*It’s up to them to discover what they are being made to
serve, just as their elders discovered, not without difficulty,
the telos of the disciplines” (Deleuze 1992:7)*

How to act against those disciplines and the interests they
serve?

Questions and reflexions for activism

- Individual awareness is a necessary but insufficient condition:

“Unpaid internships are a mark of a fully hierarchised society that naturalises the fact that if work is not socially valued, it does not deserve to be paid (...) I used to think this (working for free) was normal, maybe hoping to get a job eventually (...) But even if you’re aware of the dynamics, of the structures, you cannot avoid being part of them. To the extent that less than a year ago, I was accepting another internship at the Embassy, which wasn’t paid either” (I10)

Questions and reflexions for activism

- Especially when own position is privileged. How not to play by the rules when these favour, to some extent, oneself? But:
- Being able to decide not to play also implies a privileged position
- Even in those cases where the game rules are not favourable to the own positioning, internships are seen as an individual strategy to counter such negative effects.
- Individual strategies cannot be socially transformative (?)

Thank you!