

Capitalism and the Spirit of Critique: Activism and Professional Fate in a Contemporary Social Movement/NGO

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Abstract

Luc Boltanski's and Ève Chiapello's recent work on the 'new' spirit of capitalism has attracted considerable attention. This article seeks to (1) examine contemporary social movement organization (SMO)/NGO activity in the light of their analysis; (2) ask whether this 'spirit' is a return to the original and 'authentic' 'economic cosmos' that Weber described in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Attac is taken as the indicative case, and our analysis is based upon research into one of its national groupings, namely Attac-Austria. The paper focuses upon the relationship of professional fate (*Berufsschicksal*) and extra-professional activity, in this case political activism; a focus which has to be complemented by the conceptual tools of Weber's analyses of individual professions. The latter supplements the abstraction of 'spirit' by relating it to the ineluctable tension between exceptional and ordinary professional action. How, in this context, is political activity shaped by the actual or anticipated project-based professional activities of the current cohort of the politically active?

Keywords: Attac, Boltanski and Chiapello, NGOs, professional fate, social movements, spirit of capitalism.

1. Introduction

In good time for the centenary of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (hereafter *PESC*), Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello (1999 and 2002) have offered us an account of capitalism's putative new spirit. In many respects the picture they draw of modern capitalism is a highly familiar one within contemporary social theory and sociology; one repeated by proponents and critics of 'neo-liberalism' and 'globalization' alike, and popularized by Richard Sennett in his best-selling *The Corrosion of Character*. But what is distinctive about Boltanski's and Chiapello's analysis—even in comparison to Sennett's—is the prominence given to changes in the conduct of life associated with this new spirit. It is this, rather than the shared term 'spirit' alone, that

invites a comparison between their analysis and that offered by Weber at the turn of an earlier *fin de siècle*.

Wilhelm Hennis has long argued that a – perhaps the – key concept in Weber’s science of ‘man’ (*Menschentum*) is *Lebensführung*, the conduct of life. And so it is Hennis (2000a: 27) who draws our attention to the following passage:

*We want to investigate, on the one hand, the types of ‘selection processes’ that large-scale industry carries out – according to its immanent requirements – on that part of the population bound to it via its professional fate; on the other hand, the type of ‘adaptation’ of ‘manual’ or ‘mental’ labour in large-scale industry to the life conditions that this industry offers them. In this way, the question should gradually be addressed: what kind of man (*Mensch*)¹ does modern large-scale industry, by virtue of its immanent characteristics, fashion (*prägen*), and what professional (and thus, indirectly also extra-professional) fate does it hold in store for him? (Weber 1908: 37, emphasis as in original).*

By replacing ‘large-scale industry’ with ‘project-oriented regime’ we get a strikingly close approximation to Boltanski’s and Chiapello’s research problem. Similarly, if we accept Hennis’ view that Weber’s central problem is ‘the “cultural meaning” of the economic form which has come to dominate modernity’ (2000a: 164), then the parallels become even more apparent. On this account, the starting point – the given – is the life *orders* and the *powers* associated with them; each with their ‘given regularity’ and ‘organized form of rationality’: ‘each of these orders makes a demand, forms, characterizes a variety of “impositions” or perhaps opens up possibilities for future conduct, involves a formative tendency for the “personality”’ (Hennis 2000b: 65). Hennis goes on to ask: ‘what becomes of the person who enters such an order, or is caught in the “power” of one...?’ Under capitalism – the modern economic form – this question becomes translated into one of *Berufsschicksal* (professional fate), which is so central to the above Weber quotation, and indeed to the whole essay from which it comes. Also striking in this quotation is the hint that professional fate indirectly shapes the fate of the whole person. What for Georg Simmel (1990 [1900]) is the central promise of (capitalist) negative freedom – that the whole person is *not* affected by the labour relation – is, by implication at least, for Weber empty, or at least merely formal. Our personal fate cannot – or can no longer – be disentangled from our professional fate.

1. ‘Mensch’ is gender neutral, except in a strictly grammatical sense. Hennis’ translator, Keith Tribe, gives good reasons why the term has to be translated as ‘man’, despite the latter’s gendered connotations (Tribe 2000: 207-208).