

Review of Paul du Gay and Glenn Morgan (eds.) *New Spirits of Capitalism? Crises, Justifications, and Dynamics*

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Not long after *The New Spirit of Capitalism* was translated into English, Essex University Business School arranged a 2-day workshop on whether this heavy book did justice to the sociology of post-1968 capitalism. The event assumed a format with which the majority of contemporary academics will be entirely familiar. First of all, the not insignificant amount of preparation-and-attendance time required would, in all but the most privileged of cases, have to have been considered as an initial investment in anticipation of medium-to-long term returns. Furthermore, for those who decided that the investment of time was worthwhile, a series of break-out and report-back sessions was coordinated and a mutually satisfactory level of take-away point consensus eventually resulted. This was essentially a reading group treated as a project. Given how *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, as anybody who had read (about) it already knew, is itself a book about the proliferation of projects since 1968, there was ample opportunity for snake-eating-its-own-tail-albeit-in-a-jaded-fashion discussions (a project on projects, a project about projects which might lead to other projects, a project-based projection of projects guided by a treatise on the essence of projects, etc.) which was lamentably under-exploited. The exact opposite complaint can probably be made against much of what follows here.

If the phenomenon of reading group as project sounds in any way unfamiliar or unpalatable then that is to the detriment of *The New Spirit of Capitalism's* overall argument. In other words, if you don't both understand and approach your work-life activities as a series of overlapping and potentially conflicting projects then either you are playing shadow games in an artificially lit cave, or else these two authors are. For many of us today live, Boltanski and Chiapello argued, in a projective city, a world where initially being and subsequently remaining connected to the right sorts of projects is a highly prized skill, if not the most highly prized of skills. Huault and Rainelli-Weiss offer one of the reviewed book's many helpful accounts of what this sort of work-life entails when they write

For those living in this projective city environment, it is important never to run short of projects, to know how to pass easily from one project to another, and to multiply occasions for making projects. Thus, connexionist beings, the 'worthy person' in the projective city, are both physically and intellectually available, reactive and mobile. Flexible and multi-tasking, they know how to take risks. They can handle ambivalence and are always ready to exploit any opportunities that come their way (p. 188).

What Boltanski and Chiapello wanted to demonstrate isn't so much the demographic characteristics of the projective city populated by connexionist beings, though such a project is by no means apart from their concerns. What they really wanted to underline, demographics aside, were the subtle ways in which life within such an environment has come to be *justified*. How, they asked, has contemporary capitalism become this way? Why have so many people signed up to this way of working? How, in other words, have people come to embrace the new spirit of capitalism? This is the main question which the book principally addresses and is also the main question which Serrano-Velarde's chapter, for this reviewer one of the two clear highlights of the reviewed volume, poses at the level of European Higher Education Policy. Her message, inspired by *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, is likely to disturb the anti-connexionists still surviving among us: contemporary academics are active participants within, rather than detached observers of, the new spirit of capitalism.

The Essex project's break-out sessions also underlined the apparent indiscernibility between the

ostensibly contemporary capitalist labour processes discussed within Boltanski and Chiapello's book, on the one hand, and the labour processes experienced by contemporary academics, on the other. Steffen Bohm, one of the project's co-organisers, remarked how one of the book's chief virtues lay in its description of what today's knowledge work is like - in its ability to give an historical-sociological perspective upon so much of what is now done in the name of work. Hugh Willmott's contribution to the present volume, by way of contrast, strikes a much less appreciative tone by acknowledging the value of project-Essex (p. 98) before pretty much skewering the object of its focus – Boltanski and Chiapello's book - from a variety of angles. We can certainly agree, with Willmott, and with the many others written about and writing within the current volume, that *The New Spirit of Capitalism* is by no means above criticism. In doing so, we might also need to acknowledge, no doubt reluctantly in some cases, that there are also good reasons why it has come to be regarded as an eminently important work, the kind of book which books get written about.

Paul du Gay and Glenn Morgan have edited and contributed towards one such book. Rather than assessing Boltanski and Chiapello's work on the terms its authors had originally set themselves, however, du Gay and Morgan's rather strives to consider *The New Spirit of Capitalism*'s "capacity to speak to and elucidate the contemporary crisis of financialized capitalism" (p. v). The volume therefore comes at *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (originally published in 1999), from the perspective of the new financial crisis of capitalism, asking how much of what Boltanski and Chiapello then wrote still offers sufficient insight now. The editors' introductory chapter, then, for me the volume's other clear highlight, offers a bibliographically bountiful articulation of its central concern along its various dimensions. The remaining twelve chapters then adopt three basic dispositions towards *The New Spirit of Capitalism*: 1) They put it into broader conceptual context (Boltanski, Chiapello, du Gay (I), Thrift and du Gay (II)). 2) They apply its framework to a variety of empirical scenarios (Huault and Rainelli-Weiss, Hull Kristensen, Ötsch et al and Serrano-Velarde). 3) They criticise it (Willmott and Parker). Susanne Ekman's chapter, which brings the volume to a close, straddles categories 2 and 3: this is to the detriment of these categories, however, rather than to her chapter, of course.

So those who have already read *The New Spirit of Capitalism* will find much here that will engage and challenge their impressions of it. Those that have not yet read *The New Spirit of Capitalism* can read this book, instead, and allow some of its impressive impressions to masquerade as their own.

This, of course, is the semi-vacuous and border-line trivial but nevertheless formally correct stuff of back-cover blurbs: the sort of thing which books about books are supposed to have said about them anyway. So beyond the obvious, I'll mention the two most jarring features of this fifteen-person collaborative project. Firstly, with respect to content, the book's post-financial crisis framing renders it relevant to audiences within sociology, economics, politics and the social sciences more generally, rather than only to the narrower and more specialised audience of Boltanski and Chiapello scholars. Nevertheless, its first duty should, I think, be shown towards those interested in *The New Spirit of Capitalism*. This, unfortunately, isn't always the case. Nigel Thrift's chapter, specifically, has more to say about his forthcoming book than it does about Boltanski and Chiapello's. A Duke University Press book co-authored by "one of the world's leading human geographers and social scientists" (p. x), is important news, of course, I'd just prefer not to have read so much about it here. Furthermore, on the issue of content, I question the wisdom of including two chapters, by the same author, on the abiding significance of the work of Max Weber, in a book devoted to *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, not least of all since the fact of this particular author's seminal contribution along these lines is already rightly widely acknowledged.

Secondly, and this is where snake and tail become most indistinguishable, there is a sociologically

unsettling aura surrounding this book. Its' very first sentence places Warwick Business School at the very forefront of the project and with good reason: many of its authors have either passed through, or else are currently residing within, WBS. What is more, the book is the eventual outcome of a WBS workshop. So in addition to characterizing this book as a questioning of *The New Spirit of Capitalism* from the initial purview of WBS, its past and present incumbents, and its' widely dispersed associates, it is also fair to characterize it as a case study in much of what Boltanski and Chiapello had initially set out to portray. Recalling Serrano-Velarde, contemporary academia is a very obvious place to look for a concrete empirical example of the new spirit of capitalism. This edited collection itself stands testament to this, one of its own most persuasive arguments.

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