



## **The New Spirit of Capitalism**

*Luc Boltanski , Ève Chiapello*

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In this major work, the sociologists Eve Chiapello and Luc Boltanski go to the heart of the changes in contemporary business culture.

Via an unprecedented analysis of the latest management texts that have formed the thinking of employers in their organization of business, the authors trace the contours of a new spirit of capitalism. They argue that from the middle of the 1970s onwards, capitalism abandoned the hierarchical Fordist work structure and developed a new network-based form of organization which was founded on employee initiative and autonomy in the workplace – a ‘freedom’ that came at the cost of material and psychological security.

The authors connect this new spirit with the children of the libertarian and romantic currents of the late 1960s (as epitomised by dressed-down, cool capitalists such as Bill Gates and ‘Ben and Jerry’) arguing that they practice a more successful and subtle form of exploitation.

In a work that is already a classic in Europe, Boltanski and Chiapello show how the new spirit triumphed thanks to a remarkable recuperation of the Left’s critique of the alienation of everyday life – a recuperation that simultaneously undermined the power of its social critique.

## **The New Spirit of Capitalism Details**

Date : Published September 17th 2006 by Verso (first published 1999)

ISBN : 9781859845547

Author : Luc Boltanski , Ève Chiapello

Format : Hardcover 601 pages

Genre : Sociology, Economics, Politics, Nonfiction, Philosophy

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# From Reader Review The New Spirit of Capitalism for online ebook

## Matthew Summers says

Who gives a shit about this.

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## Joey says

I've read the prologue and this looks amazing albeit enormous. I will try, and perhaps fail, but learn a lot in whatever I get through.

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## Peter Harrison says

This is a classic modern work of sociology, which sets out to unpick the relationship between society, politics, and the mechanisms of the economy.

The key concept presented by the authors is that in order to survive capitalism needs to be accompanied by both a "spirit" and a "critique".

The "spirit" is a positive expression used to inspire commitment to the continuation of capitalism. Passive non-resistance is not enough, the system needs active commitment from both workers, managers, and leaders to continuing to reproduce that system. The "spirit of capitalism" then is "the ideology that justifies engagement in capitalism" by defining "not only the advantages which participation in the capitalist processes might afford on an individual basis, but also the collective benefits, defined in terms of the common good, which it contributes to producing for everyone." (Boltanski & Chiapello 2018, p.8)

In other words this spirit articulates the shared vision capable of delivering the broad support of society for the continuation of capitalism based on a collective understanding of the common good.

The authors use management literature to develop an analysis of that shared vision, on the (reasonable) basis that the guidance presented to managers is a clear indication of how the system is "supposed" to work, in a way that supports the most efficient running of that system. Using this technique they contend that for much of the twentieth century the spirit of capitalism was built on secure jobs and hierarchical progress with accepted union rights supporting the division of increasing wealth in a way perceived to be fair.

Each spirit is accompanied by "critique" with two emphases. A 'social' critique that addresses the impact of the system on inequality and distribution of wealth, and an 'artistic' critique that addresses the impact on individual human psychology. It is the interaction between the way things are supposed to work (the 'spirit') and critique that drives the stability of the status quo. The system responds to criticism which in turn reacts to new developments in an ongoing dialogue.

With a strong French perspective the authors outline how the critique of post-war capitalism dominated by large monolithic firms with hierarchical bureaucracies and the accompanying "second spirit" of capitalism peaked with the events of 1968. In Britain it is possible to perceive a similar situation in the various crises of

the 1970's. Under the impact of critique not only workers but also managers and owners reached the point where they were no longer able to maintain the belief that the system could continue as it then existed, or was capable of maintaining the common good. The prevailing spirit broke down, unable to respond to criticism of the stifling effect of bureaucracy, the inauthenticity of mass produced commodity consumerism, and distributional mechanisms built around (white, straight) male dominated industrial workplaces.

As a result of this breakdown, a new spirit of capitalism has begun to emerge that is able to respond to this criticism. Again, built up from the management literature - this time of the 1990s - it is one based around flexible working in networked environments which deliver more individual control over life and work, but also a more precarious life style. Ahead of their time, what the authors are describing is the modern world of the 'gig economy', the zero-hours contract, and the 'precariat'. This third spirit neutralises the critique of the second spirit by allowing more focus on the individual and less on the collective, allowing the subsequent development of 'identity politics', accompanied by the break up of the large monolithic companies into many loosely linked component parts. The move away from inauthentic mass commodity production is exemplified by the creation of new 'artisan' products. This new system they term the "projective city", because it is upon relations built around individuals collaborating in projects rather than working in command-and-control hierarchies.

The authors theorise that after a hiatus when this new third spirit was in the ascendant and the old critique of the 'second spirit' of capitalism was neutralised, new forms of criticism are becoming visible. They highlight the exploitation inherent in a network model of employment where the freedom and flexibility available to the few is built on the requirement for many to work cheaply and without security, to be discarded when it suits the business. Corporations similarly are broken up into flexible and loosely connected parts to avoid both tax and other social obligations. This provides the basis on which criticism might resume, although the authors are clear that modern critical thought has yet to catch up with the changes visible in what might be called the relations of production. Critique is necessary however to keep the system 'honest' and without it, it falls prey to its worst excesses, as can be demonstrated from the experience of the last 10 years. There is also a lesson here for Jeremy Corbyn's revitalised Labour Party who it feels are still refighting the battles of the past, rather than trying to identify the new critique that will drive the changes of the future.

The authors disclaim any direct connection to Marxism or a Marxist analysis of capitalism, and reference a sociological historiography from Weber and Durkheim onward. However what they seem to describe are the detailed mechanics of the 'hegemony' articulated and theorised by Gramsci. What they describe as the "spirit" of capitalism is simply the mechanism through which the dominant class acquires the subservience of the rest of society to the continuation of the existing system.

Especially fascinating is the dialectical tension between the 'spirit of capitalism' and the critique directed at it. The two remain in dialogue throughout and cannot exist without each other. As the last 20 years have demonstrated, capitalism needs effective criticism to prevent it from falling into the self-destructive pattern identified by Marx.

This book is a detailed and fascinating explanation of the interaction between modern society and economy. While not directly Marxist, it is a fascinating accompaniment to Marxist thought and a spur to reflective thinking about how revolutionary change in the modern world might come about.

This review is also available on my blog <https://marxadventure.wordpress.com/2...>

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## **Hal says**

Recommended by Kevin via Sascha

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## **Tara Rahimi says**

Not an easy read, great theory. blew my mind.

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## **Khisraw Amini says**

As the authors mention in the book that the critique of capitalism needs to account for the facts of the transforming world of work, in order to keep up with the displacements of capitalism and develop its critique, this book is an ambitious endeavor to develop a systematic account for understanding capitalism in its entirety and history. What we have seen of the critical tradition on capitalism have been often reactionary fleeting remarks on the certain aspects of the current economic arrangement of the world that interested their authors and looked unjust to them, and made them to raise their voices, rather than expounding on how it came to be so and what the just arrangement should look like. This way, we have had critiques reflecting certain resentments against the destructions of globalism or wars, which would be easily buried in the oblivion by the powerful machinery of the capitalist justification, so to speak.

This itself, as the book shows, is a sign of the decline of critique in the last decades of the 20th century. The dramatic displacements that capitalism has gone through during this period have been bigger than what the journalistic critique is capable of catching up with. Also, the authors show that, the artistic critique of liberation and authenticity, which has been prevalent even to this time has proved to be an easy ground for capitalism to neutralize it and turn it to a justification for its own enterprise. One reason may be that this critique did not feel the need to understand capitalism in its entirety, which is inalienable from socioeconomic injustices, and propose elaborate suggestions. So it is not a surprise that the force of this type of critique at times can easily be targeted at the state rather than particularly capitalism.

Making sense of capitalism in its historical transformation would require a serious critical account that accounts for all relevant aspects and reveal its subtle displacements in their historical continuities. This book sets a good example for this.

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## **Mirza Sultan-Galiev says**

Ever stood under blinding florescent lights stocking shelves or any other such drudgery while thinking of how much fun, you an "independent team member" are having in your "flexible, fast paced workplace"?

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## **Peter Mcloughlin says**

Very dense. The argument is that Capitalism has shifted since the 1970s from a paternalistic bureaucratic operation that characterized the post-war era. To a more individualistic but exploitive mode with a great deal of freedom for workers but little security. This security vs. freedom tradeoff seems to be the conundrum of the two modes of capitalism between the postwar era and the more recent era. The book was very theoretical with little concrete to ground the analysis. It would have been easier to comprehend with specific examples. Way too much theorizing.

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## **Brandon says**

great work, but i don't like the translation... i wish they had kept their terminology consistent with their other articles and presentations in english

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## **Elfie Mc says**

Pretty much hits the nail on the head in terms of modern work ethics/patterns/general morality through a combination of empirical cases, exploring the political, social and emotional impacts. Essential reading for anyone who has ever felt disillusioned by the current work mentality.

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## **Malcolm says**

Every so often I find myself reading something that I regret having put off for so long, and this is one of those cases. It is a vital contribution to the sociology of work, to social and cultural analyses of the 'contemporary condition', and to understandings of the current social order and contemporary politics: a big claim, I admit. Boltanski and Chiapello have not set out to explore the material characteristics of contemporary capitalism – the organisation and concentration of increasingly globalised business, profit margins and corporate organisation, labour force dynamics, concentration and mobility and so forth – although these things are key to their analysis. They have, instead, set out to explore what we might see as a more anthropological concept – the deep structures of the cultures of contemporary capitalism, and looked at both its leading practitioners/functionaries and its critics. This means that they have analysed the ways that the corporate world talks about itself, the language it uses in management education, and therefore the ways that business conceives of its own ways of making sense of its world – that is, of business cultures and practices. It also means that they are interested in change, in how these discourses of culture have varied and as a result what is new or different about the current situation. Both of these things – the question and the methods – in and of themselves make this an extremely important contribution to social, cultural, economic and political understandings of the contemporary world.

Boltanski & Chiapello make two important broader points based on a reading of historical sources, sociology and business related academic literature, and in doing so blend scholarly worlds in ways we seldom see – Boltanski is a big name in French sociology and Chiapello a much younger associate professor of business and management. The first point is that capitalism may be seen to have gone through three stages – the first

of dynamic entrepreneurial growth centred on individual actions and family firms (mainly during the 19th and early 20th century), the second one of institutionalised consolidation and collective corporate activity centred on the role of the professional manager and impersonal ownership/shareholding, in part in a response to the inter-war economic crises (from the 1930s through to the 1970s) and the third centred on diversified organisation and ownership associated with new technologies and contemporary forms of globalisation: these eras overlap, of course. These first two forms they see as being able to be classified in different circumstances as centred on tropes – they call them logics of justification – they classify as *inspirational*, *domestic*, *reputational*, *civic*, *commercial* or *industrial* – not that these shorthands mean much in this brief overview of a 650 page book. In their view, however, these systems do not effectively grasp the current social and industrial forms that better seen as *projective* by which they mean that the ‘logic of justification’ for social and corporate organisation and ‘success’ is based on shorter term organisational and personal connections based around specific activities (projects), which may include several concurrent sets of activity. This, in itself, is a significant contribution to contemporary scholarship and understanding – but they do more.

The second set of analyses to advance is centred on critiques of capitalism that they see as having four principle arguments – it is a source of *disenchantment* and *inauthenticity*, it is a source of *oppression*, it is a source of *poverty* and *inequality*, and it is a source of *opportunism* and *egoism*. These issues they see as feeding into two types of critique – a ‘social’ critique centred on exploitation and poverty and an ‘artistic’ critique centred on authenticity and freedom/liberation. One of the defining characteristics of current forms of political power, they see, is the appropriation of the ‘artistic’ critique to the current ‘projective’ or ‘connexionist’ spirit of capitalism. But this is getting ahead of myself.....

The other key thing about this analysis is that Boltanski & Chiapello have set out to look at the ways the corporate world ‘trains’ its functionaries – so they engage in a very close reading of a set of management texts from the mid 1960s and mid 1990s to explore how those texts talk about what it is that managers do, and therefore how business (capitalism) operates. In the manner of good scientists, they also include appendices in the book that shows us their data, their classification systems and their principal findings (I do like open scholarship!). They find that there is an increasing deployment of terms and ideas associated with the elements of the ‘artistic’ critique in the 1990s’ texts compared to the 1960s’, although also that many of the ideas associated with the second ‘pre-connexionist’ era remain as well. Alongside this shift, they point to an active dismantling of what they call the defences of the world of work – trade unions and so forth – and a significant shift in the balances of power between workers and employers. However, alongside this dismantling of the ‘social’ critique they also find a significant revival in the ‘artistic’ critique in new social movements, attempts to restrict increasingly pervasive commodification and demands for more secure conditions of life.

Amid all of this – it is not an easy read, this is serious scholarship, not popular or journalistic critique – there is a potent argument for and justification of critique, and Boltanski and Chiapello are refreshingly eclectic in their use of sources. They draw on, amongst others, Marxist critique, radical Durkheimian approaches, those influenced by Weber, and by Nietzsche. In doing so, they also see critique as progressive – not a return to what there was but a building of something new. They do, however, despair over the decline of class as a focus for social critique, and there is a superb critical discussion of the emergence of a concern with ‘social exclusion’ (rather than poverty, oppression and so forth).

In a review in the *New Left Review*, Sebastian Budgen (see *NLR* 1, Jan/Feb 2000) described this as “an ideological and cultural analysis, a socio-historical narrative, an essay in political economy and a bold piece of engaged advocacy” while correct I don’t think that quite does this service. Despite its focus on France as a data source and as a place to test in social contexts the shifting balances between social and political sources

– this book has a powerful global significance (it is not too difficult to translate the French conditions and forces to other social contexts and ask compelling questions there) and it deserves to be read, used and considered in much wider settings than it seems to have been.

Whereas much of the material I read is often little more than a restatement of previously made arguments into slightly new settings – and as such important contributions to understanding, this is a rare book that amounts to a major analytical shift and points to new frames and modes of analysis. It deserves to be a classic. I expect that I will have to revisit several times, and that each time I will find new things, new ideas and new ways of shaping both questions and answers that deal with work, social life and struggles, and contemporary politics.

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### **Jesper Balslev says**

En skandale at den her bog ikke er oversat til dansk. Meget præcis og overbevisende analyse af projekt- og netværkssamfundets opståen, kritikkens rolle i kapitalismen, legitimeringsmekanismer etc.... Grand theory, fyldt med frugtbare forslag til hvordan en lang række af vores nye problemer kan adresseres, forstås, løses...

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### **Joseph Jeon says**

Many pages too long, but great.

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