

On the Appropriation of Critique of Capitalism

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Abstract

In their work *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) assert that capitalism needs its critique in order to sustain, and that it thus has a tendency to incorporate critique. In this paper I examine this concept of incorporation through the use of a contemporary empirical case exemplifying an attempt to respond to critique of capitalism. I argue that the incorporation of critique that Boltanski and Chiapello express in their work needs further conceptualisation in order to enable a serious discussion of how to critique in a time when critique has a tendency to get incorporated. I argue that contemporary incorporation of critique of capitalism can better be understood in terms of fetishistic appropriation, where critique is only partially and very selectively attended to, and turned towards a very particular end. Thus I argue that the consideration of means and ends is an important part of understanding how appropriation of critique works.

If the apparatuses of the capitalist cult are so effective, it is not so much because they act on primary behaviors, but because they act on pure means, that is, on behaviors that have been separated from themselves and thus detached from any relationship to an end. In its extreme phase, capitalism is nothing but a gigantic apparatus for capturing pure means, that is, profanatory behaviours. (Agamben, 2007: 87)

Introduction

In 1999 Boltanski and Chiapello published their massive work *Le Nouvel Esprit du capitalisme*, in which they explore the development of the spirit of capitalism. They propose that the spirit changes with changes in capitalism, and that there have so far been at least three different types of spirit. They historically track the changes in the spirit through engagement with the management literature prevalent in France in the last three decades of the twentieth century. Since the book's translation into English in 2005 as *The New Spirit of Capitalism* it has attracted considerable attention also in the English speaking parts of the world. Central to Boltanski and Chiapello's work is the relationship between capitalism and its critique, which is the aspect of their work that I will engage with in this paper.

The paper is divided into three parts. First, I briefly present Boltanski and Chiapello's framework, in particular with regards to their understanding of critique and its function. I then present the empirical case, which exemplifies an attempt to incorporate critique, as proposed by Boltanski and Chiapello. Third, I discuss the question of incorporation of critique of capitalism in terms of how the incorporation is best conceptualised. I conclude the paper with some comments on the consequences

of the proposed conceptualisation of incorporation and in particular its significance for the practice of critique.

Critique as a motor in capitalism

Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) see capitalism as dialectically connected to critique of capitalism. In this section I briefly outline their framework, particularly in terms of how they conceive of critique in relation to capitalism.

Boltanski and Chiapello assert that capitalism needs critique in order to sustain and develop. People working within the regime of capital accumulation must somehow be able to justify their actions. Simultaneously, capitalism gives rise to indignation: it is felt to function unfairly. Indignation only turns into voiced critique if it can be justified somehow through recourse to a more general order of justification. These orders of justification, drawn from Boltanski's previous work with Thévenot (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006), are here called cities. Boltanski and Chiapello see critique as the prime 'motor in changes in the spirit of capitalism' (2005: 27), which they define as the ideology that helps justify people's actions within capitalism. In their words:

We have seen how capitalism is obliged, if it is to succeed in engaging the people who are indispensable to the pursuit of accumulation, to incorporate a spirit that can provide attractive, exciting life prospects, while supplying guarantees of security and moral reasons for people to do what they do.

(Boltanski and Chiapello 2005: 24-25)

This 'spirit', they argue, capitalism incorporates through reference to some kind of a common good: 'In obliging capitalism to justify itself, critique compels it to strengthen the mechanisms of justice it contains, and to refer to certain kinds of common good in whose service it claims to be placed.' (2005: 42)

But Boltanski and Chiapello also assert that capitalism is an amoral system. They therefore propose that capitalism has to turn outside itself for these necessary components, and for justification, in particular. This is where critique comes into the picture. Boltanski and Chiapello argue that '[t]hrough the intermediary of the spirit of capitalism, capitalism thus *in a way* also incorporates its own critique, since it incorporates moral principles on which people can depend to denounce those of its aspects which do not respect the values it has annexed to itself.' (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005: 487, emphasis added). Critique is used for purposes of justification. As Boltanski and Chiapello put it, it is *incorporated* into capitalism. But only *in a way*, as they say, which is an important point that I will come back to.

Ultimately, Boltanski and Chiapello see capitalism and its critique as linked in a never ending, repetitious cycle of voicing of critique of capitalism and response to this critique, and see the future possibilities of critique in its continuous reinvention. This practice is, nevertheless, a necessary practice that needs to continue. As they say, 'the dialectic of capitalism and its critiques necessarily proves interminable as long as we remain in the capitalist regime ... Partially attended to and integrated on certain points, circumvented or countered on others, critique must constantly shift and forge new weapons' (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005: 40-41).

Boltanski and Chiapello identify four sources of indignation, which they argue feed critique of capitalism (2005: 37). For the last two centuries, as they put it, capitalism has been seen as a source of first, disenchantment and inauthenticity; second, oppression; third, poverty and inequality; and finally, opportunism and egoism. They explain oppression in terms of opposition to freedom, autonomy and creativity. Opportunism and egoism they explain in terms of encouragement of private interests rather than collective solidarity.

Boltanski and Chiapello link the critique, which focuses on the aspects of capitalism as a source of disenchantment and inauthenticity as well as oppression to what they call the artistic critique, and the critique, which focuses on capitalism as a source of poverty and inequality as well as opportunism and egoism to what they call the social critique. Although they acknowledge that these four sources of indignation seem incompatible in the same framework, and therefore point to the fact that researchers have often only focused on one of them at a time, Boltanski and Chiapello propose to bring them all together in the same analysis, and conduct a historical analysis of the development of critique in the second half of the twentieth century in terms of these two types of critique, that is, artistic and social.

In light of this proposed framework, how are we to understand contemporary forms of capitalist enterprise? How does the relationship between capitalism and critique come to expression? A contemporary empirical example proves useful in an effort to elaborate on the matter.

Shopsville, Inc.

The empirical case considered here is the construction of a large, new shopping centre in Finland. I have studied this project for the last three years, from the beginning of its actual construction phase in April 2005 until May 2008. The first one and a half years of this were in the time before the shopping centre was finished and opened to the public, and most of my material pertains to this period. What I noticed early on was the conspicuousness of authenticity, experience and utopia, which were appearing behind the use of city imagery as a guiding principle in the project.

Shopsville, as I will call this shopping mall here, opened to the public in December 2006. It was at that time owned by three private investors, all of whom were personally involved in its development process. I call these owners according to their functions in the process the Advocate, the Builder, and the Capitalist. The Capitalist provided most of the funding for the project, the Builder was heavily involved in the construction of Shopsville, and the Advocate designed the concept of Shopsville and worked with its marketing, managing a group of people mainly involved in the practical development of the concept.

My empirical material consists of both primary and secondary material, but I will here mainly focus on the primary material. This material consists of sustained and systematic non-participant observation of numerous closed meetings, some seminar presentations, large events and key interviews, and field notes from days spent as a non-participant observer at the project office. In this paper I will mainly engage with the material from my interviews with the Advocate, which were conducted once a year three years in a row.

Shopsville is an enclosed entity of 100,000 m². It is located by a national motorway outside of one of the main cities of Finland, it is surrounded by a parking lot of approximately 4,000 parking spaces, and it has more than 170 businesses under its roof, most of which are engaged in retail, principally furniture and fashion. It has all the characteristic elements of a shopping centre: glass and steel, handrails and conveyor belts, and it is centrally owned and operated.

But there is something uncanny about this shopping mall. It was not developed in line with existing procedures, which are clear in the highly refined industry of shopping centre development. Apart from the city imagery used as inspiration in the project, creativity has throughout the development of this mall been emphasised as a key value to be adhered to. As the Advocate puts it, 'I see as one of the cornerstones of the Shopsville brand its being, for these kinds of new innovations, a playfield for innovations of business and customer service ... here you are allowed to fail, here there must be some publicised projects that will never come off' (Advocate, 2005).

At the welcome reception for the employees and business owners of Shopsville, which was held a couple of weeks before the mall opened to the public, the event started with the Advocate's (2006b) presentation of the Shopsville concept to the hundreds of future tenants and employees of Shopsville. The Shopsville concept was presented as divided into four themes, each with a citation to clarify the point. The first theme was 'Creativity', which was described in terms of contrasts and finding a new perspective to the already existing. The second theme, 'Target', was described in terms of employees' needs for deeper meanings and more meaningful goals, and here

explicit emphasis was also put on profit as a means of business activities, not its end. The third section on the 'Aim' emphasised helping people develop into their best and letting them realise themselves, this as a means towards reaching the desired level of creativity and productivity. And this was explicitly described as a worthy effort, simply because 'its right'. The last theme was labelled 'Contradiction', and here the Advocate emphasised that the contradiction between a company's aims of responsible, social behaviour, and efficient enterprise is a myth.

This shopping centre project exemplifies an attempt to respond to critique of capitalism, as described by Boltanski and Chiapello. Responses to all four sources of indignation can be observed in the empirical material. I will give some examples from it to exemplify the response to each point of critique. The following quotes are all statements by the Advocate from interviews. Although it appears as if he is directly responding to Boltanski and Chiapello, he is, to the best of my knowledge, not aware of their work. The responses rather express some more general awareness of critique of capitalism. They are not conscious responses to Boltanski and Chiapello in particular.

In response to capitalism as a source of inauthenticity, the Advocate exclaims, for instance: 'Why is shopping, consumption, criminalised, and understood as empty consumption? Why couldn't consumption, why couldn't it also really have a content?' (Advocate, 2005). The Advocate also talks about authentic encounters: 'If we do not encounter people authentically, then Shopsville will not become a phenomenon that withstands time' (Advocate, 2005). The mall also has a space, which has been reserved for a cultural and educational centre for children, run by a

non-profit organisation. When it comes to this centre, the Advocate raises the issue of authentic concern: ‘The future is in the children and the young, so that we genuinely develop such an entity that respects these children. And that it is done with such seriousness, with such partners, who are sure to be on the same course from a values point of view’ (Advocate, 2005).

In response to oppression the Advocate says about his role in the project: ‘I act as a kind of arranger of a creative collective and giver of courage, so that people start daring to give out their creativity and dare to start realising their own ideas’ (Advocate, 2006a). He also describes the project as attracting certain kinds of people looking for a space of freedom for being creative: ‘At the moment this [project] mainly draws exactly that kind of creative...that is to say, that kind of crowd that sees here an opportunity to realise their own dream; as a kind of arena, where one can join a creative atmosphere in order to create one’s own thing together with others’ (Advocate, 2005).

In response to inequality, the Advocate states: ‘Shopsville is a kind of non-hierarchical community involving different kinds of actors, where everybody joins in to realise their own dream’ (Advocate, 2006a). He also emphasises the importance of being able to communicate this equality of all the actors involved in the project: ‘We really have to value these people, be capable of explaining (to them) that they are equally a part of this exciting adventure’ (Advocate, 2006a).

Finally, on the charge of egoism, the Advocate explains that ‘behind this is, for sure, in a way, the development of a community culture’ (Advocate, 2006a). He also

emphasises the being part of a collective, and the ability to help others within this collective in an atmosphere of trust. As he puts it, ‘through this they can feel that the other is not, in a way, taking advantage, but that one has a possibility to truly advance one’s own interests, and what’s most joyous, while furthering these one can also help the other to reach their own goals. This is surely of the most profound (part) of Shopsville’ (Advocate, 2006a).

The statements of the Advocate clearly convey an awareness of critique. This is clear, for instance, when one of the main points of the Shopsville concept put forward emphasises that there is no contradiction between efficient enterprise and responsible social behaviour, and when the Advocate asks why consumption is criminalised. When it comes to responses to this critique, it is clear that the statements of the Advocate clearly express an engagement with all four sources of indignation. The empirical case thus clearly shows an attempt to incorporate critique, in the terms of Boltanski and Chiapello.

But the interesting question is, how, exactly, this is done? The Advocate tells us that consumption can be meaningful, that his role in the project is more of a supporting role for actors to ‘dare’ realise their ideas in the context of the shopping centre, he calls it a ‘non-hierarchical community’, and his mission as one of creating a ‘community culture’ for the actors of the shopping centre. But the context is still a shopping centre. Although the Advocate emphasises authenticity, he does so within the confines of consumption. Shopping should not be criminal, it should be a morally acceptable activity. People have to be met authentically, but specifically for the purposes of the continuation of the existence of the shopping mall. The existence of a

children's cultural centre within the shopping mall also happens to be very convenient for parents, who can then easily turn to shopping while waiting for their children.

When it comes to the freedom of the collective, it is not a question of an actual, open freedom. Although people are 'free' to realise their ideas and dreams, it is a freedom predicated upon mobilisation of creativity for business purposes. It is also not a question of a creative collective that anybody can join. Some people are allowed to join, they are specifically selected as appropriate. Others are denied access. Although Shopsville is supposed to be some kind of a non-hierarchical community, not all are equal within it. There will still be owners, managers, and people in positions of power, such as the main investor, who will be more equal, and whose opinions will be more influential than others'. Although everybody is supposedly equally a part of the same adventure, there is someone in a position to tell others that they are to be valued. The matter is not expressed in terms of us all valuing each other.

Finally, although Shopsville is supposedly a question of a community, it is a very particular community. The solidarity here is not unconditional. This is a community where everybody comes together to realise *their own* ideas and *their own* dreams, creating *their own* things, and advancing *their own* interests. Here individual interests and purposes come first. The community, and the other, only come second.

Calls for authenticity, freedom, equality, and solidarity are undoubtedly discernible in the material, but if the way they emerge in this case is to be understood as incorporation of critique of capitalism, there is something fundamentally unsettling

about it. The material clearly betrays a very partial response to critique. But how is this response to be understood?

The end of critique

Although Boltanski and Chiapello point to the relationship between capitalism and critique in a historical context, their mission to revive critique is not, I argue, based on an adequate conceptualisation of incorporation. They make occasional references to critique being partially integrated or attended to, or countered or circumvented, but still, towards the very end of the book, make a loose comment on how capitalism, *in a way*, incorporates its own critique (2005: 487), without any conceptual clarification of how, exactly, this takes place. What kind of incorporation of critique do we, for instance, have here in this particular empirical context? How can this incorporation be conceptualised?

Incorporation concerns taking in something as a part of a whole. The word incorporation is based on the Latin term *corpus*, which translates as ‘body’. Thus incorporation literally means to unite, with another thing, in one body. Incorporation thus means to make something a part of the body as a whole. But as seen in my empirical case, it is not actually the entire critique that has been included in this incorporation of critique. It is a question of *limited* incorporation. But how can we understand it? *How* does incorporation work and what is it that is being incorporated?

Incorporation of critique into capitalism is partial, at the most. And the part of the critique that gets incorporated is the part that will seem most useful *within* the confines of capitalist accumulation. This partial incorporation of critique into

capitalism is thus a question of *appropriation*. Appropriation refers to an act of making something one's own, to assign something for a particular *purpose*. It is very different from incorporation. Appropriation is based on very selective incorporation.

Appropriation can also be thought of in terms of fetishisation. In fetishism, an object is cut from its context, be it the social relations of production, or a historical context, which enables it to become a magical object, detached from its sphere of meaning and inserted into a different one. Appropriation is therefore always to some degree an act of violation. When I use the term fetishism here I do not, however, directly refer to fetishism in terms of confusion between the animate and inanimate, or an object acquiring supernatural powers, which are often included in conceptualisations of fetishism, but particularly to this separation of an object from its context, which enables it to become magical.

Marx connects fetishism to industrial economy through his concept of commodity fetishism, where the commodity, when it enters the sphere of exchange, is stripped of its use-value and becomes an abstraction, an exchange value without substance. The commodity is there deprived of its historical and social context, the context of its production. In essence, commodity fetishism is understood in the following terms: 'The mysterious character of the commodity-form consists therefore simply in the fact that the commodity reflects the social characteristics of men's own labour as objective characteristics of the products of labour themselves, as the socio-natural properties of these things' (Marx, 1976: 164-165). In other words, commodities take on attributes belonging to the social process behind their production, hiding that part of their being and instead presenting themselves as autonomous items, independent of their origins.

This, as obviously unnatural, lays the groundwork for the commodity's becoming a 'magical object', a 'phantasmagoria', as Benjamin puts it (Benjamin, 1999), or, as Adorno puts it, a 'consumer item in which there is no longer anything that is supposed to remind us how it came into being' (Adorno, 1939, in Benjamin 1999: 669).

The process of appropriation can be understood as divided into two stages. The first stage involves choosing a selective, desired part of something and abstracting that part from its social and historical context. The second stage involves inserting it into another context. This can be compared to Benjamin's concept of *aura*, which he defines in terms of a relation to tradition, and the loss of aura as a loss of connection to a particular tradition (see, e.g., Benjamin 1935; 1936). Integral to this move between the two contexts, as appropriation, is a change in purpose: turning the abstracted part towards a different, desired objective as distinct from its original one.

The first stage makes fetishism possible: through this abstraction a void is created that enables the thing to become a magical, phantasmagorical object; there is space for imagination to make it into whatever is desired. Since the history of the thing does not exist anymore a new story can be made up for it. The second stage consummates fetishism by filling that void with the desired attributes, including a desired, new, purpose for the abstracted object, be it a sexual fetish, a magical, sacred, or ritualistic fetish, or a commodity fetish. The thing has become a phantasmagoria: not just a magical object, but precisely whatever you want it to be.

Appropriation of critique can be understood in these terms. Through appropriation critique is fetishised: critique, or a selected part of it, is ripped from its context, from

its purpose, leaving it partial. Without the constraints of its history and context, critique can become a magical object, a phantasmagoria. Critique can then be turned towards a new, different purpose. This can be seen in the Shopville example, where critique, when appropriated, is ripped from its social context, becomes an abstracted, mouldable entity, and is then turned towards capitalist purposes in a capitalist context.

When critique of capitalism gets ‘incorporated’ into capitalism, the crucial thing in the appropriation is thus the question of which ends the appropriation serves. In order to be able to understand how appropriation works, we need to also consider the ends towards which the critique is being put. When it is appropriated, rather than actually adhered to, the ends of the critique will change.

Therefore, in order to understand incorporation of critique as appropriation the distinction between means and ends, and the relationship between the two, becomes important. In order to understand this connection I propose to turn to thinkers associated with critical theory, who have concerned themselves with this question for some time. However, Weber’s (1922) distinction between formal and substantive rationality provides a starting point. Formal, or instrumental, rationality involves thinking in terms of calculable means towards specific ends, whereas substantive rationality is concerned with value judgements. Horkheimer (1947) is concerned with a related distinction, where he makes a distinction between subjective reason, as being concerned with means towards given ends, and objective reason, emphasising a debate about the ends in themselves. Horkheimer’s concern here is with the crisis of reason in modernity, where subjective reason, as he puts it, has taken over and objective reason has become inconceivable. As he puts it: ‘When the idea of reason

was conceived, it was intended to achieve more than the mere regulation of the relation between means and ends: it was regarded as the instrument for understanding the ends, *for determining them*' (1947: 7, emphasis on original).

Marcuse (1964) approaches the issue from a slightly different angle adding further depth to the matter in his critique of one-dimensional society. He notes contemporary society's tendency to conflate different spheres, such as 'art, politics, religion, and philosophy with commercials' (Marcuse 1964: 58), as if there were no oppositions, and no more differentiations to be made between these spheres. This results in an ambiguity, which makes criticism a difficult task, as he points out: 'The unification of opposites which characterizes the commercial and political style is one of the many ways in which discourse and communication make themselves immune against the expression of protest and refusal' (Marcuse, 1964: 82). This exemplifies one potential response to critique, towards which Boltanski and Chiapello also make a gesture. Critique can be 'incorporated' through mixing elements of critique (responses to it) with what is criticised, which creates ambivalence and makes the object of critique harder to decipher, and therefore also harder to criticise.

Marcuse engages with the irrational nature of contemporary rationality, where the ends remain unquestioned. He does not abandon the necessary question of developing means towards particular ends, but emphasises the importance of not forgetting the debate about alternative ends:

If the completion of the technological project involves a break with the prevailing technological rationality, the break in turn depends on the continued

existence of the technical base itself. For it is this base which has rendered possible the satisfaction of needs and the reduction of toil – it remains the very base of all forms of human freedom. The qualitative change rather lies in the reconstruction of this base – that is, in its development with a view of different ends. (Marcuse, 1964: 182)

But this is precisely what is lacking in one-dimensional society. Here the ends are defined in advance. The system, or framework, is not questioned, and the only thing that is open to debate is the question of different means within this given system. The sphere where different ends are debated, as Marcuse points out, is the sphere of politics. He asserts that the question of ends should also be part of science, but that in order for ends to become considered under the auspices of science, science has to step out of its positivistic skin and recognise its *political* nature.

Agamben (2000) develops this question of politics further in his conceptualisation of the term. He sees politics as pure means, or, rather, as means towards an *open* end, as a platform for debate about different ends. As he puts it:

A finality without means (the good and the beautiful as ends unto themselves), in fact, is just as alienating as a mediality that makes sense only with respect to an end Politics is the sphere neither of an end in itself nor of means subordinated to an end; rather, it is the sphere of a pure mediality without end intended as the field of human action and of human thought. (Agamben, 2000: 116-117)

Here Agamben acknowledges the shortcomings of both an instrumental approach towards a given end where the end is undebatable, and a focus only on the ends as such without any consideration of the means of reaching these ends. Instead he understands politics as an open sphere where there is space for free thought and action, where the ends are not given but debatable, as well as the means of reaching alternative ends. This is where the potential of human being lies, not in utopian dreaming of perfection, or the instrumentalisation of life.

What are then the implications of this for the question of incorporation of critique? Critique, when appropriated by capitalism, is taken from its sphere of open-endedness, a context where the ends are open and debatable, where many alternative ends can exist simultaneously and be put against each other, and it is turned into a means towards only one particular end, the end of capital accumulation. Thus the possibilities of critique, which has now become partial and limping, are closed down: it has no more potential. Its position has been locked down, it has been assigned its task.

But the treason of this type of 'incorporation' of critique is its still being presented as open ended, despite its having been tied down long ago. The people, who have been called into a shopping mall to 'be creative together' and to 'realise their dreams', are presented with an illusion of freedom. But the very foundation of this freedom is the context of capital accumulation, and their dreams and creativity are harnessed for that same purpose. They are not completely free to choose whatever creativity or whatever dreams within the confines of such a context; here, these must have commercial value, or at least hope for such.

Critique belongs in the sphere of politics, a sphere of openness, or pure means, in the terms of Agamben. Capitalism is a system of closed end, a context where the ends are given and all that remains open for debate is the most efficient means of reaching that end. When appropriated by capitalism, therefore, the potential of critique is closed down. It becomes instrumentalised, turned into a means in service of one particular, given end. Life, as outside capitalism, is an open-ended sphere, where discussion about both alternative means and alternative ends is possible. With capitalism, the second possibility is gone. To quote Marcuse one last time: 'Life as an end is qualitatively different from life as a means' (Marcuse 1972: 28).

Conclusion

In order to revive critique of capitalism, something Boltanski and Chiapello suggest is important, a detailed understanding of how it has been subverted is necessary. This includes a rigorous conceptual exposition of how its incorporation into capitalism works. If incorporation is understood in terms of fetishistic appropriation, as I suggest here, this includes, at least, consideration of the aspects of its selective incorporation and its being put towards a particular end.

What difference does it then make if we understand the relationship between critique and capitalism as one of appropriation rather than incorporation? Not only do we realise that the incorporation is not complete, but that there is a particular dynamic to it, where critique is wrested from its context, moulded, and instrumentalised, that is, put to work towards a particular purpose. Thinking in terms of appropriation also

inevitably raises the question of means and ends, and the question of the nature and location of critique.

This has consequences for the practice of critique. We can either understand it in terms of Boltanski and Chiapello, as a never ending cycle, where we just have to keep on treading water in order to barely keep our heads above the surface, knowing that the next wave will come to wash over us soon enough, thus instrumentalising critique; or we can understand it with thinkers of critical theory and other critical traditions as an open-ended endeavour, realising that critique never was incorporated in the first place, but appropriated. And by the time the appropriation is complete, critique has become something completely different. It is not critique anymore, only a phantasmagoria of it. The actual task of critique would thus remain to keep on opening up the possibilities that capitalism has closed down, and to continue to consider alternative ends as well as means. This involves turning Boltanski and Chiapello's premise on its head, and choosing a very different starting point for the practice of critique.

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