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**The commodification of the personal: labour market demands in the era of neoliberal postindustrialization**

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This article takes as its point of departure the observation that contemporary labour markets of highly developed capitalism have witnessed a new and profound focus on personal traits and characteristics such as social skills. We believe this focus is indicative of a new standard of ascribing value in contemporary capitalism and ask which are the societal and paradigmatic changes that may have led to this change. After an outline of demands to the labour force during earlier phases of capitalism the article seeks to establish an explanatory framework in current societal transformations towards neoliberalization and logics of postindustrialization. The effect of these shifts is on the one hand that the well-being of human beings is made to depend entirely on their individual competiveness, and on the other hand that postmaterial, cognitive, connexionist, and emotional assets that were hitherto considered personal and irrelevant to the sphere of production are now considered central to the labour market value of human beings. The combined result of shifts towards neoliberalism and the advent of logics of postindustrialism is thus the commodiﬁcation of the personal. In order to arrive at this conclusion we merge different theoretical contributions to the critic of modern capitalism, as we regard theories about cognitive, connexionist and emotional capitalism as complementary rather than competing approaches.

Keywords: cognitive capitalism; commodiﬁcation; connexionist capitalism; emotional capitalism; neoliberalism; personal demands; social skills

**Introduction**

When the Danish Minister of Education at that time, Soﬁe Carsten Nielsen, explained to students that ‘You are hired because of your skills, but ﬁred because of your personality’ (Engstrøm [2014](#_bookmark1)), this was not a saying she invented (just a version of the saying ‘skills get you hired, behaviour gets you ﬁred’). We ﬁnd it, however, quite telling that she, in a position representing traditional education, puts so much emphasis on extra-curricular com- petences when talking to students in 2014. Contemporary highly developed capitalist[1](#_bookmark0) societies have witnessed a striking and relatively new-found interest in such competences, illustrated by the frequent use of concepts such as social skills, social competences, life skills, soft skills, emotional competence, emotional intelligence, interpersonal skills, com- municative skills, etc. This can be seen in areas as different as women’s magazines, pre- school training programmes, reality TV, group therapies for violent offenders, etc. Our interest in this article, however, is primarily on labour market demands regarding such per- sonal traits, characteristics, and competences. We suggest that such demands to the personality represent a qualitatively new tendency in contemporary society – the emergence of a new interest in personal skills, traits, and characteristic that must be linked to broader societal and paradigmatic changes in contemporary highly developed capitalism.

This interest in personal traits, characteristics, and competences is widespread, and social skills, which can sociologically be deﬁned as ‘the ability to induce cooperation among others’ (Fligstein [2001](#_bookmark1)), seem to be of focal concern.[2](#_bookmark0) A simple googling – although not a scientiﬁc research method per se – may illustrate the prevalence of the interest in social skills across national contexts. For instance, a googling of ‘social skills UK’[3](#_bookmark0) unveils the information that 150 colleges in the UK provide courses in social skills, typically speciﬁed as ‘life skills’ or ‘practical skills’ (under hotcourses.com). A googling of ‘*compétences sociales*’, catching the interest in French-speaking countries, renders 94 million hits, the ones turning up ﬁrst having to do with work-related issues.[4](#_bookmark0) In Denmark, a googling of ‘*sociale kompetencer*’ [social competences] and ‘*sociale færdigheder*’ [social skills] reveals that the interest ﬁrst and foremost concerns children and adolescents, with different training programmes offered in schools and kindergartens.

The quotation from the then Minister of Education above linked the personal skills, traits, and characteristics of the young to the labour market demands, a link that is even more clearly illustrated by the fact that the unemployed in Denmark, as well as welfare reci- pients, quite frequently have their social/emotional performances assessed. They will typi- cally be subjected to an evaluation of their ‘resource proﬁle’, with judgments of personal skills, traits, and characteristics as part of an evaluation of their employability. Further, they may be offered training programmes aiming at inducing social skills. As an illustration an ofﬁcial Danish report singled out three particular groups of people on the edge of the labour market, one of them comprising people who lack social skills (the two other being women with ethnic minority background, and substance abusers). The report reviewed a number of methods used to induce social skills in projects for the unemployed: individual and collective talks, ﬁeld trips, co-operation exercises, training in social skills via cognitive therapy, internships, etc. (Arbejdsmarkedsstyrelsen and Rambøll Management [2008](#_bookmark0)).

Also at a national level, the aggregated amount of social skills is considered central to the overall competitiveness of nations. In 2001 the Danish government launched ‘The national competence account’. In 2005 the ﬁnal account was published (Nationale Kompe- tenceregnskab [2005](#_bookmark2)). The report included an estimate of the aggregated amount of social competences of the entire Danish population. Sixty per cent of the Danish population were estimated to have a ‘middle’ amount of social competences, 24% to have a high amount, and 16% to have a low amount (Nationale Kompetenceregnskab [2005](#_bookmark2), 76). Social competences were furthermore explicitly argued to be central to work life, as it was maintained that companies are likely to demand ‘personal and social competences’ rather than ‘speciﬁc professional skills’ (Nationale Kompetenceregnskab [2005](#_bookmark2), 61).

Inspired by the observations above, this article discusses and analyses labour market demands concerning personal skills, traits, and characteristics in the context of overall societal and paradigmatic changes in contemporary highly developed capitalism. The article thus aims at contributing to an on-going theoretical debate concerning how to under- stand the demands for social skills and related personal traits and characteristics central to contemporary capitalist labour markets. This is discussed within theories of contemporary capitalism (Boltanski and Chiapello [1999] [2005](#_bookmark0); Illouz [2007](#_bookmark1), [2008](#_bookmark1); Moulier-Boutang [2011](#_bookmark2)), but, as our treatment below will illustrate, such a discussion is incomplete unless the role of the state – which at least in the Danish case has taken upon itself the task of edu- cating in skills and competences – is taken into account.

We ﬁrst brieﬂy outline the social history of labour market demands. Thereafter we dwell at length on two interrelated societal shifts which we consider central to explaining the new focus on personal skills, traits, and characteristics: First, we discuss the impact of *neoliber- alism* on the relation between state, market, and citizen (regarding neoliberalism simul- taneously as a political ideology, a theoretical paradigm and a concrete recasting of the state). Neoliberalism implies a recommodiﬁcation of labour as well as an individualization, making the individual the prime site of intervention for increasing overall national compe- titiveness. Thereafter we discuss the impact of *logics of postindustrialization*, whereby postmaterial, personal, and emotional traits (rather than practical or technical skills) are increasingly set at the core of evaluation of individuals, particularly of their labour market value. Traits that were hitherto considered externalities irrelevant to the sphere of production are thus brought to the very centre of the evaluation of human beings’ labour market value. In this part of the article, we seek to bring together different theoretical approaches to current capitalism, arguing that the accentuation of its cognitive, connexio- nist, or emotional character may be combined. In cognitive capitalism, as well as in connex- ionist or emotional capitalism, subjectivity *in itself* becomes (viewed as) a means of production.

A brief social history of labour market demands

A quick historical outline may help us grasp the novelty of the contemporary demands to human labour. As we have already touched upon, these demands in a sense go deeper and are more emotional and personal than the demands of early industrial capitalism. It would, however, be quite naïve to write this as a simple history of increasing exploitation. The physical demands towards human labour today are in highly developed capitalist societies dramatically reduced compared to what was the case in early industrial capitalism. They have, however, been supplemented with a number of demands to the personal.

Feudal relationships were in a sense also personal and characterized by a complex set of duties between the parties. They were not strictly economic, as they were permeated by power and reciprocity, as well as honour and loyalty. Early capitalist relationships were, in contrast, characterized by their strictly economic and impersonal nature – at least in prin- ciple. The change was not brought about easily. Bourdieu ([2000](#_bookmark0)) studied the ﬁrst generation of Algerian workers and showed how they applied a logic learnt in feudal society to the new work relationships – staying with an employer out of loyalty even when underpaid, ﬁnding it unjust that an unmarried man should earn the same as one who provided for a whole family, etc. Bourdieu’s point is that an economic habitus is not a given, but is learnt over time. And part of this learning is a learning of the impersonal nature of capitalist, economic relationships of exchange (see also Polanyi [1957](#_bookmark2)).

Within an early industrial capitalist mode of production, both employers and employees were replaceable, with economic considerations as the main concern. This depersonaliza- tion played a role for the processes of alienation, which – as we shall see later – were a focal concern for some critics of capitalism. In the early capitalism analysed by Marx ([1867](#_bookmark2)), what counted was the physical labour force and the practical or technical skills of the workers. However, Marx pointed to the challenges connected to the workers’ disci- pline, when they were to adapt to the rhythms of the machines. Later writers have put more emphasis on the different behavioural skills that were demanded of the ﬁrst generations of workers. Before turning to the prisons, Foucault ([1977](#_bookmark1)) drew the lines connecting the learn- ing of discipline in the schools, the military camps, and the factories, with sanctions for all kinds of minor rule-breaking – inattention, delays, disturbance, impoliteness, etc. The ﬁrst

generations of factory workers had not yet learnt to organize their time according to the clock and were not used to restrictions on their behaviour at the work-place (Frykman and Löfgren [1979](#_bookmark1)).

Elias’s ([1978](#_bookmark1)) history of the civilization of manners is also a history of people gaining personal skills that became important in the work life of early capitalism, ﬁrst and foremost perhaps the ability to exercise emotional self-control. Elias drew on Freud’s ([1961](#_bookmark1)) opposi- tion between nature and culture, between satisfaction of desires and the sublimation of them needed for civilization, thus the ability to defer satisfaction. Another development of Freud’s claim about the high emotional prize to pay for civilization was made by the Frank- furter school, among them Marcuse ([1955](#_bookmark1), [1964](#_bookmark1)), who criticized the consumer-oriented capitalism that had developed after World War II for corrupting workers into political pas- sivity, demanding docility in exchange for consumer goods. He named the process a repres- sive de-sublimation, as only manipulated desires were freed. The capacity for resistance was reserved to the marginalized, the unemployed and unemployable.

Summing up, one might argue that social and economic changes in the mode of capi- talist production has gradually reoriented labour market demands from a focus primarily on physical labour power towards an interest in technical and technological competences. Par- allel to these processes has been a problematic of disciplining labour in terms of efﬁciency, punctuality, etc., as well as some level of emotional control. Nowhere, however, in analyses of early industrial capitalism do we see a preoccupation with personal skills, traits, and characteristics corresponding to the one we can witness on current, highly developed capi- talist labour markets. Feudal relationships were personal but in a very different sense than implied in the current labour market interest in personal traits, skills, and characteristics. They relied on personal relations, on honour, loyalty, the symbolic power of the Lords, etc., but the personal was not subject to an evaluation of monetary labour market value. In other words, the personal was not commodiﬁed.

It is, however, our claim that the new demands towards the personal, which are different from both feudal and early capitalist demands, do not in any simple way replace demands of technical or technological skills. Instead they overlie and supplement them, whereby the relative weight of the more traditional demands is reduced.

Theoretical explorations of highly developed capitalism

With the brief history of labour market demands presented above, we wanted to point out that contemporary labour market demands regarding personal skills, traits, and character- istics mark something qualitatively new. Our next step is to outline two paradigmatic and societal changes in highly developed capitalist societies which we consider central to explaining the new demands: on the one hand, neoliberalization, implying the recasting of states, recommodiﬁcation of labour, and individualization; and on the other hand, the advent of logics of postindustrialization implying the emergence of a new form of capital- ism which is simultaneously cognitive, connexionist, and emotional.

*Neoliberalization: active states, individualization, and the recommodiﬁcation of labour*

Neoliberalism and neoliberalization has been the centre of intense and prolonged academic debate (Bourdieu [1999](#_bookmark0); Harvey [2005](#_bookmark1); Hagen [2006](#_bookmark1); Zizek [2008](#_bookmark2); Wacquant [2010](#_bookmark2), [2012](#_bookmark2); Hall, Massey, and Rustin [2013](#_bookmark1); Wade [2013](#_bookmark2); Dean [2014](#_bookmark1)). The term neoliberalism refers sometimes to a political ideology, sometimes to a theoretical paradigm, while the term

neoliberalization refers to a social process, where the most important features would be the application of market logics to new ﬁelds as well as a recasting of the state (Dean [2014](#_bookmark1); Wacquant [2010](#_bookmark2), [2012](#_bookmark2)). We will take the changed relation between state, market, and citizen as our point of departure.

Broadly speaking, neoliberalization concerns processes of social change that put greater reliance on capitalistic markets. It implies the application of market logics to ﬁelds where these were hitherto deemed irrelevant. The state is thus made to conform to the logics and demands of the market. Neoliberalization does not necessarily, however, lead to a smaller or less active state. On the contrary, the neoliberal state is often quite active (Hall, Massey, and Rustin [2013](#_bookmark1); Dean [2014](#_bookmark1)). In the words of Dean, neoliberalization’s ‘historical roots and practical consequences are linked to the action of a strong state to secure the imagined con- ditions of an idealized market’ (Dean [2014](#_bookmark1), 160; see also Holden [2003](#_bookmark1); Wacquant [2010](#_bookmark2), [2012](#_bookmark2)). Neoliberalization does, however, induce a reconﬁguration of the state (Wacquant [2010](#_bookmark2), [2012](#_bookmark2)). Following Wacquant, it can thus be argued that neoliberalization implies not a *de*regulation of the relation between state and citizen, but rather a *re*regulation (Wac- quant [2012](#_bookmark2)). The relation between state, market, and citizen is thus *re*regulated and trans- formed as the state is reconﬁgured in order to meet, maintain, and cater for capitalist markets. According to Wacquant, the state ‘actively fabricates the subjectivities, social relations and collective representations suited to making the ﬁction of markets real and con- sequential’ (Wacquant [2012](#_bookmark2), 68). The neoliberal state regulates and intervenes in societies and in the life of human beings in at least three different ways:

*Firstly*, by creating and maintaining markets. It is thus, as Polanyi ([1957](#_bookmark2)) has pointed out, a misunderstanding that the market is a natural social arrangement which exists prior to the state. ‘In fact, it is, and [has] only been political intervention that historically constructed versions of “free” markets as national projects’ (Papadopoulos [2005](#_bookmark2), 9)

*Secondly*, the neoliberal state interferes in the lives of social agents by attempting to create a speciﬁc form of subjectivity. The rational agent in the narrow economic sense is not a universal ahistorical human essence, but rather a speciﬁc historical form of subjectiv- ity (Polanyi [1957](#_bookmark2); Bourdieu [2000](#_bookmark0); Hall, Massey, and Rustin [2013](#_bookmark1)).

*Thirdly*, the neoliberal state intervenes in the lives of human beings in order to make them valuable by the standards of the market, most overtly in the lives of those who are perceived as having little market value – the neoliberal state deploys disciplining and ped- agogical techniques that may provide them with the marketable skills, traits, and character- istics they are considered to be missing.

Historically, liberal welfare states have often attempted to let the market clear mis- matches between supply and demand for labour, through for instance low-paid entrance- level jobs thereby allowing a high number of working poor. Social democratic welfare states – with a different history of state intervention – have been more likely to attempt to imbue the unemployed with labour market value. The situation today in a social demo- cratic welfare state like the Danish differs, however, from traditional social democracy as it

(1) puts less emphasis on Keynesian attempts at stimulating the demand for labour, and (2) works from a logic in which a socially decontextualized individual is the site of interven- tion. The focus on personal skills, traits, and characteristics in training the unemployed can thus be interpreted as an attempt by a speciﬁc type of neoliberal state to imbue social agents with characteristics that they are considered to be lacking, in order to make them attractive to labour markets. At the same time training of the broad population of children and young people is meant to assure that the future labour force acquires characteristics expected to be important at the future labour markets (Pedersen [2011](#_bookmark2)). ‘Soft’ techniques related to personal

skills, traits, and characteristics are therefore closely allied with the economic and strategic rationales of neoliberalism (Brinkmann [2008](#_bookmark0), 189).

Neoliberalization and the recrafting of states towards an accommodation to the market leads to what Cerny ([1990](#_bookmark1)) has coined as a shift from a *welfare state* to a *competition state* (see also Holden [2003](#_bookmark1); Pedersen [2011](#_bookmark2)). With speciﬁc focus on the Danish welfare society, Pedersen has argued that whereas the role of the former welfare state was to shield citizens from impacts of economic conjunctures, the role of today’s competition state is to *enable individuals to compete on a market, whereby the nation as a whole becomes more competi- tive*. A central concept for understanding the traditional role of the state in (particularly Scandinavian) welfare societies is decommodiﬁcation, a concept ﬁrst coined by Offe ([1984](#_bookmark2)) and then popularized by Esping-Andersen in the seminal *Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism* ([1990](#_bookmark1), see also Esping-Andersen [1985](#_bookmark1); for a genealogy see Papadopoulos [2005](#_bookmark2)). Esping-Andersen deﬁned decommodiﬁcation as ‘the extent to which individuals and families can maintain a normal and socially acceptable standard of living regardless of their market performance’ (Esping-Andersen [1987](#_bookmark1), 86) and as the capacity of social policy ‘to endow individuals with a relative independence of the cash nexus and the work compulsion’ ([1990](#_bookmark1), 224). The concept thus denoted that the well-being of people *as citizens with rights and protected by the state* was relatively independent of their labour market performance. Neoliberalization reverses this arrangement and is thus charac- terized by a process of *re*commodiﬁcation (Breen [1997](#_bookmark0); Pierson [2001](#_bookmark2); Holden [2003](#_bookmark1); Papa- dopoulos [2005](#_bookmark2)). Recommodiﬁcation denotes that the well-being of human beings is once again made dependent on their labour market competitiveness – it depends on their success on the labour market which again depends on their individual market value.

Neoliberalization therefore entails a form of *individualization*. Here it is perhaps necess- ary to distinguish between sometimes somewhat celebratory theories of reﬂexive modern- ization in all their variants (Giddens, Beck, etc.), and a more critical view on the relation between neoliberal ideology and individualization (what Dawson, [2012](#_bookmark1), calls embedded individualization). Theories of reﬂexive individualization generally claim that the impor- tance of structural forms of social differentiation such as class, ethnicity, gender, and race has lessened (for critiques see Prieur [2002](#_bookmark2); Skeggs [2004](#_bookmark2)). Circumventing this discus- sion it is possible to speak of individualization in a much narrower sense, meaning simply that the well-being of human beings has become dependent on their performance on the labour market *as individuals*. Individuals are viewed less as a part of a broader social context (such as for instance economic conjunctures) and more as socially decontextualized individuals whose fate depends solely on the market value of their individual skills, traits, and characteristics. Consequently, commonly shared understandings of why some are unemployed accentuate less the failing demand for labour caused by macro-economic con- junctures and more the lacking marketable and competitive traits or characteristics of the individuals concerned. The neoliberal ideology brings about the conception that individual traits, characteristics, choices, and efforts determine individuals’ success. Individualization is therefore ‘neo-liberalism in action’ (Lazzarato [2009](#_bookmark1)). It follows from this logic that those who ‘fail’ ought to be imbued with skills, traits, and characteristics that have market value. This far we have considered the impact of neoliberalization. We have argued that neo- liberalization represents a turn towards market logics including a recommodiﬁcation of labour, and also entails an individualization whereby a socially decontextualized individual becomes the prime site of evaluation and intervention. We have also argued that neoliberal states actively attempt to form, shape, and mould subjects that have market value. This analysis allows us to grasp recommodiﬁcation, individualization, and the role of the state. It does not, however, explain why precisely social and communicative skills have

become central to the marketability of subjects. To develop our theoretical understanding further, we will now address that contemporary highly developed capitalist societies are not only under the impact of neoliberalization, but are simultaneously characterized by what may be termed logics of postindustrialization.

*Logics of postindustrialization: contours of cognitive, connexionist, and emotional capitalism*

The advent of logics of postindustrialization should not be taken to mean that a postindus- trial era has surpassed or replaced an earlier phase of industrialism, but rather that qualitat- ively new logics are added to the logics of industrialism. Hence new demands to labour are added to – rather than replacing – old demands.

The logics of postindustrialization have been analysed by a broad range of authors ranging from Daniel Bell’s work on *postindustrial society* ([1974](#_bookmark0)), over Manuel Castells’s work on *network capitalism* ([1996](#_bookmark1)), to Richard Sennett’s work on *the corrosion of charac- ter* ([1998](#_bookmark2), see also Sennett [2006](#_bookmark2)), and Nigel Thrift’s work on *soft capitalism* ([2005](#_bookmark2)) – to mention a few – joined together in a body of literature that Doogan somewhat sceptically refers to as ‘the idea of a “new capitalism”’ ([2009](#_bookmark1), 2). Our argument furthermore touches upon the analyses of scholars who have argued that contemporary capitalism has developed a keen interest in the personal and the subjective. Rose ([1999](#_bookmark2)), for instance, has argued that the psychology and the subjectivity of workers has been a focus of interest in capitalist core countries like the UK and the USA at least since the beginning of the twentieth century, and also that the contemporary productive subject is envisioned to possess a number of informal personal traits, such as motivation, ﬂexibility, involvement, and creativity, and is expected to be involved in a project of self-actualization through work. In a somewhat similar vein, Fleming has argued that some sectors of contemporary highly developed capitalism encou- rage workers to ‘just be themselves’ and have fun; although this corporate striving towards diversity, the personal, and the authentic upon closer scrutiny turns out to rest upon a rather narrow conception of appropriate marketable selves (Fleming [2009](#_bookmark1); Fleming and Sturdy [2009](#_bookmark1)).

Without disregarding these works, we have chosen to draw on three theoretical strands which we consider central to understanding the new demands towards personal traits and characteristics, in particular the demands for social and communicative skills. These three theoretical strands allow us to grasp that current capitalism is simultaneously connex- ionist, emotional, and cognitive.

The ﬁrst, ‘connexionist’, strand of theory is drawn from Boltanski and Chiapello’s work on *the new spirit of capitalism* ([1999] [2005](#_bookmark0)). Herein, Boltanski and Chiapello argue that capitalism has historically been subject to a number of criticisms. One criticism of particular importance has been the artistic criticism, raised at least since the late 1960s and arguing that the capitalist mode of production caused alienation and standardization, lacked authen- ticity, and was a hindrance to human self-realization. Capitalism would lose legitimacy if this criticism was ignored. But capitalism was renewed through an incorporation of the cri- ticism, with the development of what Boltanski and Chiapello conceptualize as *the new spirit of capitalism* with a new justiﬁcatory regime: the project-oriented *cité*. This new regime ties capitalist production and accumulation of capital to self-realization, thereby incorporating the artistic criticism’s demand for autonomy, participation, self-development, and authenticity in work life. It might be argued that the transformation of the justiﬁcation of capitalism – and therefore also the transformation of capitalism as such – is the result of the success of the left’s critique of the dreary, uniform, alienating work, which was at the

heart of industrial production. The new spirit of capitalism thus represents a break with the disciplining and standardizing logics of Fordism and Taylorism that prevailed in industrial capitalism. The new capitalism *at the same time* opens a space for *and* demands ﬂexibility, creativity, teamwork, the ability to network, etc. As an organizational form, contemporary projects become widespread, and the ability to make new connections becomes a central qualiﬁcation of labour. Whereas the industrial regime valued technical competences and efﬁciency, the new projects-oriented *cité* values and demands personal skills, traits, and characteristics that under industrialism were considered irrelevant to the sphere of pro- duction, i.e. the ability to be mobile, ﬂexible, creative, and to engage in networking activi- ties in a connexionist world. Boltanski and Chiapello conceptualize this new form of capitalism as connexionist as they argue that ‘the art of connecting and making use of the most diverse and furthest ties’ has become valued in itself ([2005](#_bookmark0), 168).

Boltanski and Chiapello do not in a strict sense claim to *explain* the transformation of capitalism, although they argue that the criticism of capitalism could not be ignored and that criticism as well as the incorporation of it is central to understanding the dynamics and developments of capitalism. In that sense the artistic criticism has facilitated and promoted a change within capitalism (Boltanski and Chiapello [2005](#_bookmark0), 163; L.T. Larsen [2011](#_bookmark1)). Bol- tanski and Chiapello thus employ an understanding of the transformation of capitalism that focuses on cultural normativity and legitimacy rather than on technological, structural, or material change.[5](#_bookmark0) In that sense they provide an understanding of the ‘ideological plat- form’ of the recent transformation of capitalism and labour (Kemple [2007](#_bookmark1), 151; Doogan [2009](#_bookmark1)).

Another strand of theory that also focuses on ideas and understandings behind contem- porary work relations is Eva Illouz’s work on *emotional capitalism* ([2007](#_bookmark1), [2008](#_bookmark1)). Illouz deﬁnes emotional capitalism as follows:

Emotional capitalism is a culture in which emotional and economic discourses and practices mutually shape each other, thus producing what I view as a broad, sweeping movement in which affect is made an essential aspect of human behavior and in which emotional life [ … ] follows the logic of economic relations and exchange. (Illouz [2007](#_bookmark1), 5)

This means that individuals’ emotional and personal lives are subject to processes of rationalization and commodiﬁcation in a quite novel way. Illouz traces this development back to the emergence and success of a speciﬁc ‘therapeutic style’– grounded in psychol- ogy and psychoanalysis – that has been successful, not only in the realms of therapy and self-help, but also in the corporate realm of production. The ability to perform and commu- nicate emotions has thus become a central asset on labour markets. This tendency is – and here Illouz has some afﬁnity with the work of Boltanski and Chiapello to whom she brieﬂy refers (Illouz [2007](#_bookmark1), 67) – related to the necessity of co-operation and networking. The ability to read the emotions of others as well as to engage in communication as a means to establish connections and networks is brought to the fore.

Consequently, Illouz argues that the ability to form social relationships becomes ‘synonymous with professional competence’ ([2007](#_bookmark1), 22). Illouz ([2008](#_bookmark1)) thus speaks of *homo communicans* as the new valued form of personhood in the culture of emotional capit- alism, where it has replaced the *homo economicus*. Thereby, the individual’s ‘emotional competences’ have become assets convertible in market relations, or a form of capital in Bourdieu’s sense of the term, referring to the least reﬂexive parts of a habitus or the most embodied form of cultural capital. Certain emotional styles are more valued and there- fore more convertible than others. The ideal human beings are ‘in touch with their

emotions’, but control them enough to not become ‘emotional’, at least not at the work- place. While the ideal emotional style still has some feminine connotations, Illouz high- lights its classed character, showing how a traditional working-class form of masculinity becomes marginalized.

Because of these cultural shifts labour is today ascribed value based on its ability to master – that is to decode and perform but also instrumentally to use – emotions. The result is that emotions and emotional life are commodiﬁed. Illouz claims a sort of ‘emotion work’ has become a central component of ‘social competence writ large’ ([2008](#_bookmark1), 83). In a sense then Illouz analyses the spread, diffusion, and generalization of the demand for emotional labour that Arlie Hochschild more than two decades earlier loca- lized within a limited number of professions (Hochschild [1979](#_bookmark1), [1983](#_bookmark1)).

Illouz may complement Boltanski and Chiapello when it comes to understanding the origin of the ‘ideological platform’ of the recent transformation of capitalism, although her *explanans* is not a speciﬁc form of criticism but rather the diffusion of an emotional and therapeutic style. However, when it comes to *explanans*, the work of Boltanski and Chiapello as well as the work of Illouz can be contrasted – and complemented – by the rather less well known thesis on cognitive capitalism (Azaïs, Corsani, and Dieuaide [2001](#_bookmark0); Moulier-Boutang [2011](#_bookmark2); for an overview of related theories see Jeon [2010](#_bookmark1)). This thesis attributes structural, technological developments, primarily the revolutionary devel- opment of ICT, a central role in the transformation of contemporary capitalism (Kristensen [2008](#_bookmark1)). According to Moulier-Boutang, a new form of capitalism has developed as capital- ism has been ‘forced to mutate in order to survive’ ([2011](#_bookmark2), 36). With explicit reference to the work of Polanyi ([1957](#_bookmark2)), this is claimed to be the second great transformation of capitalism. Whereas the ﬁrst great transformation transformed capitalism from mercantilism to indus- trialism, the current transformation transforms the accumulative and economic logics of capitalism towards a *cognitive* capitalism.

This new form of capitalism does not replace earlier logics, but it does imply that a new regime of accumulation and exploitation has become hegemonic. In this regime the co- operation of human beings has become central to exploitation of labour and accumulation of value. Whereas industrial capitalism produced material, tangible products, through a pro- duction process that demanded standardization, rationalization, and efﬁciency, cognitive capitalism produces value from cognitive and immaterial work, which demands creativity and co-operation. In a somewhat similar vein, Virno has argued that in the post-Fordist era cognitive and communicative skills have become constituent elements in the processes of labour and production ([2004](#_bookmark2)). Hence the accumulation regime of cognitive capitalism is oriented towards subtracting value from features that hitherto were considered irrelevant to the sphere of production – at least for the vast majority of workers – but now are con- sidered positive externalities that can be capitalized on: personal skills, traits, and charac- teristics such as creativity, informal skills, inventiveness etc. In the words of Jeon, the thesis of cognitive capitalism thus implies that ‘cognitive labour, deﬁned as labour that pro- duces knowledge, cooperation and communication, is becoming the hegemonic form of labour’ ([2010](#_bookmark1), 90), not because industrial or material labour per se ceases to exist, but because it no longer deﬁnes the social logics of contemporary capitalism.

Cognitive capitalism derives its value from what Moulier-Boutang, drawing on Marx, refers to as ‘living labour’ ([2011](#_bookmark2); see also Virno [2004](#_bookmark2)). In Marxist terms, living labour denotes the labour of human beings in a non-reductionist sense. However, living labour is, during industrial capitalism, reduced and transformed to abstract labour, since what is relevant to industrial capitalism is only the ability to produce (raw labour power) and the commodities that are produced, not the personality or the subjectivity of the worker

(Marx [1867](#_bookmark2)). Cognitive capitalism, on the contrary, extracts value from the whole human being as such and all his or her potentials – i.e. from the living labour. As Moulier-Boutang argues:

If it is the living activity of human brains and their cooperative interconnection that is turning out to be the major source of valorisation, then the canonical separation of the labour-power from the person doing the work and from his or her affects becomes a ‘ﬁction’… (Moulier- Boutang [2011](#_bookmark2), 117)

In continuation of this argument Moulier-Boutang stresses that cognitive capitalism implies ‘exploitation at degree 2′, as it exploits not only a limited part of the person, or a limited amount of his or her time, but the whole personhood and his or her entire life. In that sense cognitive capitalism has a predatory relation to positive externalities. Cognitive capitalism is thus characterized by an omnipresence of exploitation, which is not necess- arily always experienced as such, however, since ‘work comes to dress itself in the clothes of the artist or the university’ (Moulier-Boutang [2011](#_bookmark2), 88).

A central prerequisite for cognitive capitalism is co-operation. In a sense networks, alli- ances, and connectedness *are* the products and the sources of value. Moulier-Boutang thus employs the metaphor of *the pollen society*: bees produce honey that has a certain economic value. Economic calculations have shown, however, that the value of the bees’ pollination exceeds the value of the honey manifold. Translated to the logic of accumulation in cogni- tive capitalism it is the multiple connections – the countless interactions of human beings sharing knowledge – that produce value, not the sum of each individual’s material product. Boltanski and Chiapello, Illouz, and Moulier-Boutang make different claims about the origins of the current transformation of capitalism: Boltanski and Chiapello focus on the transformation as an effect of critique; Illouz focuses on the diffusion and dispersal of a speciﬁc ‘therapeutic style’ – albeit older than the logics of postindustrialization; while the cognitive capitalism thesis argues that structural, material, and technological changes have caused a transformation of current capitalism. The different analyses may, however, complement each other with regard to *explanans*: the artistic criticism, emphasized by Bol- tanski and Chiapello, might not have fallen on fertile ground if it had not converged with structural and technological developments that facilitated and necessitated corporation and communication. Quite similarly, the emotional labour that Illouz highlights has become increasingly central, because we are living in an era where humans beings communicate and co-operate in the production of immaterial value – as the cognitive capitalism thesis claims. The three theoretical strands might also be said to complement each other on a different level: Boltanski and Chiapello demonstrate empirically that the ability to connect is considered central to marketability on contemporary labour markets; Illouz pro- vides a detailed and in-depth analytic description of the skills and competences needed in order to connect (i.e. communicative and emotional skills); whereas the cognitive capital- ism thesis renders it plausible – through the pollination metaphor – that co-operation may actually produce economic value. Thereby the insights of these theories can be combined to

a fruitful theoretical synthesis.

Across differences in emphasis the three theoretical strands thus share a common analytical implication: the logics of postindustrialization imply a shift away from Taylorism and Fordism and a lessening of the relative value of technical or technological skills. Labour markets inﬂuenced or dominated by the logics of highly developed capitalism thus value skills, traits, and characteristics that were hitherto considered externalities irrelevant to the sphere of production, such as emotions, creativity, social relations, etc. (S.N. Larsen

[2014](#_bookmark1)). Such skills, traits, and characteristics are now commodiﬁed, reiﬁed, and made into market assets. Postindustrial capitalism can thus be argued to be simultaneously cognitive, emotional, and connexionist, and this implies a qualitative shift in the social logic of capit- alism *as subjectivity itself increasingly becomes the means of production*, in the Marxist deﬁnition of that term (Marx [1867](#_bookmark2)). Subjectivity comes to be seen as the source of value. It is the whole subject, including its ability to co-operate and connect with other sub- jects, that is commodiﬁed and exploited.

Reservations can be made against such an argument. Let us mention two: (1) Large parts of the world are not characterized by logics of postindustrialization, but seem rather to be caught between underdevelopment and traditional industrial modernization. This is why we have limited our analysis to highly developed capitalist societies. Further- more, production is, even in highly developed capitalist countries, to a large extent still industrial material production (Jeon [2010](#_bookmark1), 91). One should therefore be wary not to univer- salize experiences shared only by (fractions of) the middle class of highly developed capi- talist societies. (2) It can be questioned whether subjectivity can in the last instance be the source of value and whether value can be entirely immaterial (see Jeon [2010](#_bookmark1); Wright [2005](#_bookmark2) for Marxist critiques).

An answer to these reservations could be that the analysis of current highly developed capitalism presented above might be seen as an illustration of a *zeitgeist*, which is hegemo- nic and at least partly ideological (Chiapello [2003](#_bookmark1); Doogan [2009](#_bookmark1)), rather than mirroring the real economy in a strict sense. Such a view seems to have gained cultural hegemony – meaning that it has become a ‘dominant value system’ (Boltanski and Chiapello [2005](#_bookmark0),

162) – and regardless of what the ‘objective’ economic realities might be, the consequences, at least in the short term, remain the same: the commodiﬁcation of personal skills, traits, and characteristics.

Conclusion and further perspectives

Let us now join together what we have presented above as parallel theoretical explorations of neoliberalization and of postindustrialization. After all, these societal changes are closely linked, overlapping, and might make up mutually constituting social currents.

Neoliberalization entails individualization and recommodiﬁcation. It thus brings to the fore the labour market value of individuals in the narrowest sense of that term, i.e. as socially decontextualized individuals whose fortune depends on their individual skills, traits, and characteristics. Neoliberal states intervene in the lives of human beings in order to form and shape their future competiveness, thereby also the competiveness of the entire nation. Neoliberal states thus strive to form and shape valuable – i.e. marketable – subjects. An analysis of the logics of neoliberalization gets us some way towards understanding the recent state interest in personal skills, traits, and characteristics considered to have labour market value*.* However, it does not explain why social skills – the ability of the subject to co-operate and connect with other subjects – are considered important for the competitiveness of individuals. Here an analysis of the logics of postin- dustrialization provides an important contribution. This analysis points to the emergence of a new capitalism, which is simultaneously cognitive, emotional, and connexionist and where skills, traits, and characteristics hitherto considered irrelevant to the sphere of production, like co-operative skills and a subdued handling of emotions, become central to the production of value and are thus commodiﬁed. The combined effect of neo- liberal and postindustrial logics is an individualized competition on the basis of subjective, postmaterial, personal characteristics. *The personal is commodi*ﬁ*ed and transformed into a*

*competitive asset*. It is thus entirely within the combined logic of cognitive, connexionist, and emotional capitalism that individuals failing in this competition should be imbued with marketable personal skills, traits, and characteristics so that they, too, can become competitive.

There is, however, an apparent contradiction between the neoliberal ideal of the human being, who is self-interested and detached from social relations, and the postin- dustrial ideal of the co-operative, communicating, and empathizing subject. If Illouz is right, the contradiction is only apparent: ‘The emotionalization of economic conduct and the rationalization of intimate relations have given rise to a form of selfhood in which strategic self-interest and emotional reﬂexivity are seamlessly interconnected’ (Illouz [2008](#_bookmark1), 239). Adopting a modern therapeutic language implies a *strategic* use of emotions and emotional control, where co-operation and competition go hand in hand, and where the ideal human being is not only empathetic, but also assertive and instrumental. According to the therapeutic ethos ‘the fully mature adult prefers to react strategically and defend his interests rather than his honor. People who are likely to prefer their honor over their interests are deemed “emotionally incompetent” (Illouz [2008](#_bookmark1), 84). The individual who puts honour over self-interest truly belongs to a more traditional society.

Two further points may be added: (1) In a sense it is an understatement to argue, as we do above, that we are witnessing a *re*commodiﬁcation. The current tendency towards the commodiﬁcation of the personal goes further than simply rolling back the decommodiﬁca- tion of the social democratic welfare states. To the extent that it is the entire personality which is commodiﬁed, and evaluated in terms of its marketability, it might be more precise to speak of *hyper*commodiﬁcation. (2) While the new cognitive, connexionist, and emotional capitalism may imply new forms of disciplining, exploitation, and margin- alization (cf. S.N. Larsen [2014](#_bookmark1)), the new working conditions may be experienced as far more meaningful and fulﬁlling than the prior, at least by the fraction of the work-force who to some degree is set free from the logics of industrialism.

For these reasons, the analysis advanced above implies a call for further research. We need to understand how programmes that aim at imbuing subjects with personal skills, traits, and characteristics considered valuable are carried out and, perhaps more importantly, how they are experienced. We also need to understand how the recent labour market demands towards such skills, traits, and characteristics might alter patterns of social margin- alization. This raises the question of how the described currents relate to forms of power and social differentiation such as class, gender, and ethnicity. Which patterns of social exclusion will a cognitive, connexionist, and emotional capitalism produce? Illouz argues that the logics of emotional capitalism privilege the middle class, and in particular marginalizes working-class men ([2007](#_bookmark1), [2008](#_bookmark1)). This, however, remains a working hypothesis which can only be qualiﬁed through further research.

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Notes

1. We speak of ‘highly developed capitalist societies’ to delimit the subject of our discussion. We are aware that such a term is not unproblematic as it might risk reproducing an ethnocentric divide between the more and the less developed. We ﬁnd it important, however, to signal that our analysis is not universally generalizable, which we discuss brieﬂy prior to the conclusion.
2. In this article we do not distinguish between social skills, social competences, and other related and overlapping concepts. We acknowledge that such a distinction is common in psychometric literature; however, we do not consider it relevant for our purposes.
3. Carried out 6 May 2015.
4. Carried out 6 May 2015.
5. This argument has been criticized by Willmott who argues that Boltanski and Chiapello cultur- alize political economy and that the turn towards project-oriented organization of labour might equally well be understood as an attempt to ‘raise the productivity of labour without signiﬁcantly increasing the cost’ (Willmott [2013](#_bookmark2), 113).

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