

Academic Writing

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Abstract

Facing the progressively more dynamic and ever-changing environment, the optimal organisation structure is shifting from the rigid, hierarchical models towards the network / project based, decentralised models. The process is accompanied by the emergence of new demands on optimal employee who has to be able to exist and operate in the world of projects and networks. Social sciences reflect upon the social impacts of such changes. The research done on this phenomena is situated in many particular sub-disciplines and research streams. The shift towards project oriented organisation of work is by some authors conceptualised as the New spirit of capitalism. However, there are many parallels with other research. The most general one is the social scientific inquiry of neoliberalism. In this paper, I argue that the epistemic community of French pragmatic sociology, despite a considerable criticism, is able to provide more general framework that is able to capture all the aspects of the perceived shift while also capturing some dimensions that may be missing in other subdisciplines and research streams in social sciences.

Keywords: Neoliberalism, New spirit of capitalism, French pragmatic sociology

Introduction

Context of growing dynamics of changes favours organisational structures based on projects and networks that are more efficient and always capable of adjusting to the new challenges that arise (Kristensen 2013: 207-208). This form of organisation of labour is also an instrument of the accumulation of capital in the fields where managerial practices based on hierarchy, planning, formal authority, management by objectives etc. (Boltanski et Chiapello 2005: 166, 183) fail to be effective. Ideal type of an optimal employe for such organisations is characterised by traits revolving around enthusiasm, involvement, flexibility, adaptability, versatility, autonomy etc. (Boltanski et Chiapello 2005: 112 in Ekman 2013: 296). However, some authors claim that these demands create contradictions and paradoxes in the confrontation with the managerial demands. In result, we can observe increase in both autonomy, flexibility, and in control mechanisms exerted via new information technology, group pressure, standardisation procedures etc.; hence, the managerial demand for authenticity in combination with standardisation and control creates contradictory expectations resulting in

anxiety-provoking tensions (Ekman 2013: 297, 312) and prominent conflict between self- realisation and instrumental pursuit of profit (Ibid.: 298).

Aforementioned authors position themselves in the research stream of French pragmatic sociology where this sort of changes are being described by the term *New spirit of capitalism* (Boltanski et Chiapello 2005, see also Du Gay et Morgan 2014). New spirit of capitalism is also connected to the metaphors of project and network (hence, I also use the term project capitalism). According to Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) world has become too unpredictable which renders the long term planning less effective, hence organisations (and also individuals) have to be more flexible and have to prefer the short term planning in order to manage the demands unpredictable setting. Hence, metaphors of project and network is there to provide a conceptual grasp on the unpredictable, ever-changing environment since the project are by definition short-term and flexible while the network is a perfect structure that is always able to adjust and adapt.

However, the research on the topic is much broader. Similar discussions arise in the field of organisational management under the post-bureaucracy label. Post-bureaucracy is seen as a contradiction to the bureaucratic organisations (Maravelias 2003: 548). Post-bureaucracy emancipates individuals from the

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formalistic constraints of bureaucracy, arranging them instead in organic and fluid networks (Ibid.: 547). The conflict between mainstream and critical perspective again revolves around the problem of autonomy and freedom while it is unclear whether the new conditions create more freedom or rather aspire to control individuals even in their private spheres (Maravelias 2003: 559-560) since the project and network metaphor may become a general representation of society itself (Boltanski 2010: §40).

As far as negative aspects of these changes are concerned, it is clear that there are new divisions between winners and losers in the context of requirements of mobility across economic and geographical spaces, between firms and even within networks (Kristensen 2013: 207). This might be indicated by increasing rewards in some areas while the incomes of lower middle-class families and factory workers stagnates (Ibid.: 206). Thus, another perspective is that offered by Sennett who claims that the conditions create easily exploited workforce that lacks robust moral values (Ekman 2013: 299, also see Sennett 1998).

Furthermore, research of these phenomena goes beyond sociology itself and there is a broad literature on work-related stress factors and more broadly health and well-being. Factors such as role ambiguity, lack of job security, little involvement in decision-making and office politics have been found to increase the work related stress (Johnson et al. 2005: 179) - it may be argued that these factors precisely characterise the labour conditions in project-based organisations.

As mentioned above, in the epistemic community of French pragmatic sociology all these aspects of today's reality are described as New spirit of capitalism (see Boltanski et Chiapello 2005). While facing considerable criticism revolving around methodology based upon readings of management literature, possible negligence of political development, sole focus on French empirical context and lack of methodological interplay between management texts and ethnographic data (Ekman 2013 297-298). I will argue that French pragmatic sociology may still offer fruitful insights into the dynamics of current changes of capitalism that are described under labels of *New spirit of capitalism*, *new economies* (as seen by Sennett 1998), post- bureaucracy (in organisational studies) and provides new modes of thinking about these phenomena that might be reflected in useful conceptual tools.

The broadest label that tackles every aspect afford-mentioned is neoliberalism, by extension current state of capitalism. Some authors (Du Gay et Morgan 2014) consider the commentary of New spirit of capitalism to be the same with neoliberalism, however, in this paper I argue that there may be considerable differences.

The main purpose of this theoretical paper is to review the existing perspectives on the phenomena discussed above (mainly neoliberalism), to conceptualise and define empirical findings from various epistemic communities and disciplines in social sciences, and provide the reader with theoretical arguments on what is the added value of French pragmatic sociology. Also, I seek to analyse whether the French pragmatic sociology is able to provide more general explanation and description of discussed phenomena.