



Work = work ≠ work: In defence of play

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abstract

Our paper adopts a paradoxical mode of analysis in order to reconstruct the inherently paradoxical constitution and conceptualisation of work as function and/or meaning in itself. The effects of this dichotomisation of work also underlie the current debate on so-called social and artistic critiques of capitalism, to echo Boltanski and Chiapello's distinction in *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, and the diagnosis of how artistic practices and claims are subsumed under the logic of capitalist organization. It is here that we situate the thesis of play's incorporation into capitalist development. Unfolding an understanding of work that acknowledges and keeps open the play of paradoxes that produces 'work', we problematize the diagnosis of the unavoidable incorporation of play. The insolubility of paradox and the paradoxical constitution of work reopen rather than foreclose the question of play and thus the possibilities and capacities of artistic critique.

From my close contact with artists and chess players I have come to the personal conclusion that while not all artists are chess players, all chess players are artists. (Marcel Duchamp, handwritten note, reprinted in Fuchs and Strouhal, 2010: 144)

Introduction

In contemporary organizational life, it seems that play can no longer be seen as an other to work. As Höpfl succinctly sums it up in a blurb on the back cover of *The Management of Everyday Life* (Hancock and Tyler, 2009), '[f]or the past thirty years the distinction between work and non-work has been blurring and has now all but dissolved'. According to Boltanski and Chiapello (2005: 155), a focus on activity tends to replace the conventional work ethic, making 'personal or even leisure activity' indistinguishable from 'professional activity'. What appears to disappear, then, is the boundary between work and play: '[D]ue to radical changes in organizational conditions' (...) play has exploded (...) in private, public and voluntary organizations' (Andersen, 2009: 9). From a critical perspective, it seems there is nothing to celebrate here. If play is swallowed up by current mechanisms and modalities of workplace control, if 'the 'unreality of games' is fully incorporated within the reality of organizations', then 'play no longer holds the promise of life after capitalism', as the editorial for this special issue mournfully proclaims (329).

As Fleming (2005: 288) has indicated with regard to 'fun programmes' in organizations, however, enlisting humour for 'sober corporate motives' appears

paradoxical. Apart from the fact that non-playful forms of primitive accumulation are terribly alive and kicking (De Angelis, 2007; Retort, 2005), postulating the collapse of play into work provokes the necessity to look into the notions of both work and play and the paradox that seems to be at issue here. For '[m]inimally defined, play is an activity that has no end other than itself, that does not intend to gain any effective power over things or persons'; the freedom of play is thus opposed to the servitude of work (Rancière, 2009b: 31). If this is so, then how can work become play (and cease to be work) or play become work (and cease to be play)? On the basis of these questions, the aim of our paper is to complexify the critical analysis of contemporary work relations through developing a paradoxical notion of work.

This approach requires us to take a step back and engage with philosophical concepts of work, mainly Hegelian and Marxian, which are inherently paradoxical. Working implies a contradictory relation of causality. In Hegelese: The moment a working subject experiences its powers of self-assertion and freedom, it is confronted with its dependency and limits. In Marxian parlance, the emancipatory character of work already entails the foundation of its estrangement. In the history of thought, the paradoxical dichotomisation of work as function and as meaning in itself (and the attempts to 'hide' the paradox by prioritising one side over the other) can be traced up to the current debate on so-called social and artistic critiques of capitalism, to echo Boltanski and Chiapello's influential distinction in *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (2005). It is here that we situate the diagnosis of play's corruption into capitalist development.

Play's 'dysfunctionality' or 'inoperability' has been conceived as paradigmatic for artistic practice, the potential of the aesthetic and political emancipation (Marcuse, 1980; Schiller, 2004; Rancière, 2009b; Strouhal, 2010). The fiction – the *as if* – of play is disinterested in the profane reality of everyday life, enabling its transgression (Pfaller, 2010). But if playful activity merges with professional activity, then the potential of artistic critique becomes a function of work and new forms of exploitation (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005). Is 'aesthetic play' therefore easily subsumed under the logic of late capitalism? Through the paradoxical lens, we engage with and challenge this critique of artistic critique as a forceful, albeit melancholic, line of argument. Boltanski and Chiapello's claim hinges on and perpetuates the assumption of a non-contradictory constitution of work, whereby playful activity is translated into an instrumental postulate of work as meaning in itself. Offering a more complex notion of work, we contend that the insolubility of paradox and the paradoxical constitution of work reopen rather than foreclose the question of play and thus the possibilities and capacities of artistic critique (Beyes and Steyaert, 2011).

We proceed as follows. First, we briefly outline what we call a paradoxical mode of analysis. Second, we discuss important philosophical conceptions of work – as developed by Aristotle, Hegel and Marx – to demonstrate how notions of work are inherently paradoxical. Third, we look at Boltanski and Chiapello's distinction between social critique and artistic critique as a pre-eminent frame for claiming that play has become part of capitalist labour relations. However, this distinction reproduces the dichotomisation of work and the 'hiding' of its paradoxical constitution. In what is less a conclusion than an opening, we finally offer an aesthetico-political perspective that

acknowledges the play of paradoxes that produces ‘work’ – and that keeps open the possibilities of play.

Thinking paradoxically

To claim that work’s paradoxical constitution reopens rather than forecloses the question of play and thus the possibilities of artistic critique requires a look at the concept of paradox. It offers a non-dichotomist perspective on the phenomenon of work, its conditions and contradictions. Such a non-dichotomist perspective, we argue, resists collapsing play into work (or work into play) because it allows to think of work as being in irresolvable tension between both fulfilment of a function and meaning in itself.

According to Kant (1977), paradox can be defined as a tautological assertion. It consists of claiming that something is identical with something else. However, this holds only at first glance; from a causal-logical perspective, the effect is not identical with the cause. The paradox – and in a sense every tautology that is not meaningless – contains a differentiation and allows its components to be related to each other in a causal relation.

To clarify the tautological paradox, consider the example of Epimenides who as a Cretan said that all Cretans are liars. That which is to be verified, i.e. that all Cretans lie, is put into doubt as the statement comes from the mouth of a Cretan. The structure ‘works’ through its undecidability; therefore, a circular paradoxical reasoning is at hand. While one can surmise that the Cretans eventually avail of a claim to truth, this seems to be equivalent to its opposite. In formulaic terms: lie = lie ≠ lie. The equal sign of the tautology of cause and effect identifies something that contradicts itself both structurally as well as functionally. The equal sign can therefore be translated with ‘*is confused with*’ (Spencer-Brown, 1969).

Such a paradoxical equalization of difference allows for an explanation of the paradox: The factor on the one side of the equal sign must be understood as being the predicate of the factor on the other side, and the equal sign marks a difference that annuls the equality (Kant, 1977). The equal sign brings forth the distinction; it is the connecting element *and* the expression of the changed reference at the same time. It is – paradox: The equal sign, as it sets an equality, is constitutive of the differentiation of its elements and suggests an identity that can only be thought in the form of difference. Each equalization is based on a distinction and every explanation has a tautology at its start since we can only justify and give reason for that which we can explain (Bateson, 1979).

According to Hegel (1988: 182), this form of explanation can be defined as the ‘*Unterscheiden des Ununterschiedenen*’ (‘distinguishing that which contains no difference’) that allows for the (re)inscription of a difference. An explanation consists of inscribing a difference within a phenomena that is regarded as being an identity. This, then, is what thinking paradoxically means: In every assumed identity and in each equalization there is a difference that can become analytically productive. On these grounds, we will argue that work is conceptually – and independently of capitalist

appropriation – structured in a paradoxical manner. Moreover, if the contradictions inherent in notions of work are not understood as antitheses (work as either function or meaning in itself) but as constituting a paradox (both/and), then play cannot be fully subsumed into work.

Finally, thinking paradoxically has consequences for the self-image and the role of the researcher that we can only hint at here. Identifying paradoxes without being able to solve them – or even wish to solve them – is not viewed with much favour in both social theory (Luhmann, 2005) and organization studies (Czarniawska, 2001). ‘People refusing to [resolve paradoxes] may do it under one of two special licenses’, writes Czarniawska (2001: 13): ‘either they are mad, or else they are artists’. That said, we believe that developing a paradoxical notion of work will enable a more careful and nuanced analysis of the transformation of work relations and the assumed concurrence of play and work. As Jones and ten Bos (2007) have argued, philosophical thinking has much more to do with acknowledging aporias, paradoxes and undecidability than with seeking certainty and ‘policing’ organization theory. In our case, this implies a rejection of sweeping statements on the state of work within late capitalism or the incorporation of play and artistic strategies. Moreover, it also calls for the awareness that one’s own work on work is invariably intertwined in the paradoxical constitution of work.

The paradox of work

Even a brief overview of the history of the concept of work, which we sketch in the following by way of Aristotle, Hegel and Marx, leads to the uncovering of elementary paradoxes in work (Krempl, 2011). Work can be understood as a contradictory relationship of meaning and function from the moment it stopped being postulated a forced necessity and came to be seen as a potentially satisfying mode of fulfilment. A definition of work that does not go beyond the insistence on its instrumentally rational character has since then been afflicted with conceptual difficulties. For work can also denote meaning-making: It does not only wear itself out in a material, physical and commensurable satisfaction of needs; the activity itself has gained an additional value. Consider a worker who takes care of his or her family economically and, knowing this, finds some kind of fulfilment through and due to their work. The typical gainful employment does not necessarily exhaust itself exclusively in its narrow instrumental character. Or consider the image of the artist as enacting a kind of ‘self-realization’ through his or her work, overcoming ‘mere’ necessity and thus expressing a form of freedom. A conceptual tension emerges: Precisely because an instrumental rationale applies, the experience of meaning is enabled; as the labour of art keeps a function-related productive character, it can display free and autotelic traits. Both examples of work, loaded with aspects of meaning, mark two dichotomic points of a change in the definition of work. The historical development towards work as meaning provokes a hermeneutic problem of work: it attains a decisive worth which neither exhausts itself in the mere fulfilment of duties nor creates conditions worth living in after the job has been done.

The dichotomy of function and meaning of work

The emergence of a dichotomic, contradictory definition of work can be traced back to the Aristotelian differentiation of *praxis*, denoting self-referential conduct, and *poiesis*, denoting a function-oriented, productive action. This understanding of work is based on the separation of leisure, the *scholè*, and ‘non-leisureness’ or ‘un-leisure’, the *ascholia* (sc. Aristotle, 1995: 1133b, 1). All that we do is judged by the enabling relationship that work has to other, self-referential, self-worth actions. From this we can develop the distinction between necessary, function-related and self-worth actions and, correspondingly, the classification of work: work is valuable if it can serve the function of an intrinsic self-value (sc. Aristotle, 1998: 1177b, 5-6); it only has meaning if it is aligned and in tune with the possibility of allowing free actions. The teleological opposition places itself between the production paradigm of necessary, function-related actions (*poiesis*), within which one can subsume work, and the paradigm of freely chosen, meaningful activities (*praxis*). The latter realm is not analogous to but is conceptually related to leisure, which is seen as the basic stipulation for the meaning of life (Dummer, 2001: 73). Apparently, however, the Greeks of Athenian democracy did not engage with tensions emerging from this dichotomy, since each activity is allocated to a given sphere in the polis and a commingling of actions is prevented through rigid social layers (Snell, 1975).

Nevertheless, there is a structural similarity to current discussions on the organization and worth of work: function orientation and meaning creation, the purpose and significance of activities are the poles of the conception and evaluation of work in the Greek classical period as they are today. However, only since work has become a significant component of the Christian moral code and thus a moral self-calling can one identify its contradictory as well as paradoxical elements. Luther, with his invention of the *Beruf* (occupation), declared work to be valid as a moral duty (Luther, 1996: 23).

This way, a turn has been taken in the conception of work: It has transformed into a self-calling, and it will be Max Weber who will bring the Protestant ethic to the definition of its transcendental rationale (Weber, 2004). It is not any longer (only) a simple fulfilment of duties, a means of receiving reward, a chance to step up the social ladder, contractually regulated occupational work or brute force. Work is now also endowed with an intrinsic value, which will not disappear with European secularization and the profanation of life and society. In a nutshell, in modern times the conceptual and social inconsistencies of work are no longer exempted through conceptual and social separation and placed outside of praxeological significance. Hereinafter, its contradictions are immanently internalized and work is therefore given a practical identity *formation* character: it becomes *the* socializing and meaning-generating activity.

The paradox of function and meaning of work: Marx and Hegel

The contradiction of function and meaning of and within work asserts itself perhaps most strikingly in Hegel’s anthropology and phenomenology of work and in the Marxist teachings on the value of work as a dialectic structural feature of modern social development (Marx, 1962). As we will show, Marx relates to Hegel’s ambivalent

concept of work in order to stress, on the one hand, the freedom-related and, on the other hand, the forced character of work and to formulate his critique of political economy on this basis. Work, for Marx, is the deficit-related form of human praxis until it has overcome its alienated character (Marx, 2005). In principle, this opens up the option of a non-alienated praxis that just as in philosophy – in the sense of the Feuerbach theses – is practically applicable and not only just ‘scholastic’ (Marx, 1978: 5); however, only if work, like philosophy, has a revolutionary function. Only *this* praxis has socially constitutive power, as the overcoming of the contradiction is its incessant condition: The state of alienated work must be overcome. Suffice it to say that, first, if the natural hold of work is its eternal characteristic, then it is questionable if the danger of alienation can ever be averted; and second, that the transition from alienated to non-alienated labour has to be achieved through a non-alienated praxis (Arndt and Lefèvre, 1983: 24) – which, for the time being, reiterates the contradictory constitution of work.

It seems reasonable, then, to view this conflicting relationship – especially under the perspective of today’s work relations – in another manner. That does not mean that one has to deny the Marxist difference between alienated and non-alienated labour. It also does not mean repudiating the difference between the use-value and exchange-value of work. Rather, it means that this dichotomy should be understood as inherently paradoxical. For it is this view that allows us to understand Marx’s insistence on the contradiction between the use-value and exchange-value of work. The latter comes about through, on the one hand, the monetary valuation and, on the other hand, the ability of money to produce an added value without needing a use-value. If meaning-creation becomes a *telos* of work, then it does not only produce an exploitable monetary added value, but also brings forth another added value: meaning. Furthermore, the use-value of work can always be used in a manner other than for direct usage or consumption; therefore it has the possibility to be *misused* for other purposes as well. The exchange value of work, that which gives my product an equivalent, but externally applied value, is – within a strictly materialistic understanding – the only ‘legitimate’ form of corruption of the use-value of work. Capital is the decisive economic factor that corrupts work as it relativizes the value equivalency relation. But the corruptibility or the misuse of the use-value of work lies within the ‘essence’ of work itself, as its value attribution is not fixed but variable. The use-value is at the mercy of both ‘right’ as well as ‘wrong’ uses from the very start and one can only hope that one does not lose everything in the ‘market of equivalencies’:

This is not simply a bad thing, even if the use-value is always *at risk* of losing its soul in the commodity. The commodity is a *born* ‘cynic’ because it effaces differences, but although it is congenitally leveling (...) this original cynicism *was already being prepared* in use-value (...). (Derrida, 1994: 162, orig. emphasis)

There is thus an indivisibility of economy and subject constitution in dealing with the contradiction of work. The contradiction cannot be simply chopped up into its individual parts and the tension in which the subject is situated cannot simply be removed. Marx makes work’s double relation and the corresponding alienation into a criterion of illegitimacy and finds the reason for the necessary overcoming of the paradox therein. But when we consider how this ambivalence comes about, a field opens up in which alienation cannot be overcome; instead, it has to be grasped as the

necessarily ambivalent prerequisite for the development of organized exchange. It is but a small step between the dichotomic and the paradox view on the contradiction of work: The paradox perception of contradiction sees alienation as a necessary component of work and also as a necessary component of the production of meaning. It is here, faced with a paradoxical notion of work, that we turn (back) to Hegel.

Work is for Hegel (1988; see also Hegel, 1975, 1976) both a technical instrument *and* a social medium. It is the activity that is constitutive of the reflexive creation of a subject's self-understanding and the means by which a subject is able to follow a purpose. The possibility of experiencing oneself as an active being therefore depends upon establishing a fundamental relation of reference. This relation is what Hegel defines as work. Work, here, is the result of a purpose-setting. Thereby the working person reaches a result; he or she personally experiences their active role and their self as a reflexive, relational being. Work, for Hegel, is a means of changing one's condition *and* one's self-image. It is exactly here that we find the emancipatory character of work that Marx discusses in his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, which he however only deals with as a contradiction that has to be overcome (Marx, 2005). Work is therefore mainly formed and shaped by its dual character: the moment a working subject experiences its powers of self-assertion and freedom, it is confronted with its dependency and limits. If one goes along with this version of things, it is not the capitalist organization of work that produces this paradox; it lies within the nature of work itself.

The paradoxical structure of work

The paradox shows itself in a tautological movement: Work consists of completing tasks for the function of producing goods and services, thereby being constantly forced into repetition. It implies performing activities in order to produce outcomes whilst simultaneously forcing the working subject into constant reiteration. As a German proverb has it: *Arbeit macht Arbeit* ('work effects work'). The means of coping with or doing away with something produces (more of) that which has been coped with or done away with. That which *should* be accomplished brings forth that which *must* be undertaken in order to accomplish it. To put it formulaically: work = work (cf. Baecker 2001; 2002).

However, this is a conflicting relationship: Cause and effect are equalled on a circular basis in that, within the individual work process, the effect of the activity in turn creates its prerequisite. Whereas the sequence of handling work is on the one hand infinite, it is at the same time dependent on termination. This turns the tautology into a paradox. Work is not just based on a purely circular self-reference: Within the work process, changes take place. The factors involved with work, its social embedding and the workers themselves are subject to permanent spatial and time-related change processes, so that the formula 'work = work' is just as valid as 'work ≠ work'. Work is structurally paradoxical. In order to be work, therefore, it has to be able to differentiate itself from itself. Work on the one side of the equal sign means something which it does not mean on the other side. Work on the one side means production, finalization – on the other side it means repetition, infinity; on the one side an activity, on the other side a product; on the one side the passive connotation of toil, coercion, necessity and fulfilling a

function, on the other side its identical-not-identical opposition of self-fulfilment, liberation and meaning in itself.

Not only is 'work = work' valid, then, but also 'work ≠ work'. Within this discrepancy we can find the roots of the Marxist teachings on the value of work: work is not identical with its value. Work is work through work, but thereby one work is not and does not remain the other. That means, first, that work is conditioned on its productivity; second, that the productivity in return is conditioned on the preliminary nature of its worth and is thereby dependent upon its productive repetition. Therefore the paradox can be summed up as: 'work = work ≠ work = work' *ad infinitum*. Work is identical to work but only as long as it is not done. Work is a dichotomic paradox that iterates itself paradoxically.

The corruption of play? Social critique, artistic critique and the paradox of work

On the basis of our brief tour through philosophical conceptions of work and its paradoxical constitution, we now turn to contemporary critical positions that inform the diagnosis of play's incorporation into late capitalist work relations. It is not our intent to retrace the manifold and multifaceted debates on the present and the future of work here; suffice it to say that both societal changes and the paradoxical structure of work will surely provoke more 'work on work' (*Arbeit an der Arbeit* [Priddat, 2000]).

Specifically, we engage with Boltanski and Chiapello's influential analysis in *The New Spirit of Capitalism*. This book offers a compelling argument about how artistic practices and claims have been 'devoured' by late capitalism. As will become apparent, this contemporary form of the inherently paradoxical dichotomisation of work – alongside many others – stays rather close to Marxian (and thereby Hegelian) parlance and thinking. After discussing what Boltanski and Chiapello call the social and artistic critiques, we question whether this sociological distinction is able to do justice to the paradoxical constitution of work. Moreover, if work infinitely and paradoxically effects work ('work = work ≠ work'), it is structurally unable to fully integrate play into its logic.

The social critique and its contradictions

Many analyses of the development of work are grounded in the awareness of its alienated character. These studies – that according to Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) belong to or form a perspective of social critique – engage with the transformation of work, its conditions and its organization. What becomes apparent here is a certain consensus, a linearity of argument in the tradition of the 'one-dimensional man' (Marcuse, 1964) and the 'corrosion of character' (Sennett, 1998) in the era of the 'consumer society' (e.g. Arendt, 1958). The social critique follows the dichotomic constitution of work and implicitly corresponds to the paradox outlined above: Work is supposed to resolve that which it simultaneously causes. This position is based on the contradictory entanglement of work in the dilemma of its own (postulated) value and

instrumental functionality. In Marxian terms: It is based on the contradiction between exchange-value and use-value of work.

Under these circumstances, the social identity of the individual, which is based on work, becomes contingent as it is determined by economic criteria, which only allow for a decision-making between the poles of production and consumption (Laclau, 1990; du Gay, 1996). The resulting economic upheavals and the becoming-precarious of employees (Schultheis and Schulz, 2005) correspond to a transformation of organizational structures; consider the frequently invoked switch from long-term occupations to short-term projects and to an 'entrepreneurial labourer' (Voß and Pongratz, 1998). As Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) point out, these changes bear witness to and are part of the growing importance of individualization. Here we can once again detect work's immanent contradiction: What it can potentially bring forth turns into its prerequisite. With the individualization of work on one side of the form arise new dependencies on the other side, namely excessive demands made of workers' flexibility.

The social critique raises objections against the development of an individualistic paradigm of meaning and the corresponding potential of meaning-creation through work as far as this is accompanied by the loss of solidary, collective practices of organizing labour. The contradiction that results from the implementation of self-responsibility within the individual, argue Boltanski and Chiapello in their analyses of management literature published in the 1990s, is justified and given moral legitimacy by the argument of new possibilities for social integration via new forms of labour organization, which produce 'a new system of value (...) on which people can rely to make judgements' (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005: 105). Work thus functions as a generator of synthesis of function and meaning, object and subject of work. In this sense, we are dealing with a new form of 'objectivation' of work, the consequences of which not only extend to new labour-political conflicts but also to the questioning of the understanding of 'subjectivity' that is prevalent in modern societies (Böhle, 2003: 116).

For the definition of work, then, a new dilemma arises: If the adjustment of one's abilities to market-driven requirements goes along with the continuous adjustment of one's self-image, then the difference between work and non-work might indeed become porous. Weber's ideal-type of purposive-rational action gains another quality as autonomous actions also become invested with a functional character:

We cannot ignore those features of current forms of capitalism that tend to restrict and, to a certain extent, recuperate autonomy, which is not only presented as a possibility or right, but is as it were *demande*d of people, whose status is increasingly frequently assessed according to their capacity for self-fulfillment (...). (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005: 429; orig. emphasis)

The social critique sees such work-related changes in processes of subjectification as new objectifications. The subject is robbed of its potential power if it has to take on all responsibilities, duties and risks that self-employed work brings with it and if alternative forms of organizing work are not available. The individual subject becomes the sole bearer of economic processes in and through the 'third spirit of capitalism', which is shaped by short-term labour conditions. 'Flexibility' and 'self-fulfilment' have

become the buzzwords of the ‘new spirit’ as they most strikingly illustrate the dilemma of work as a ‘subjectivizing’ mechanism of objectification in the ‘project-based polis’.

The artistic critique and its contradictions

The other form of critique of (industrial) capitalism identified by Boltanski and Chiapello (2005), the so-called artistic critique, attends to the dark consequences of having to work in the ‘iron cage’ of bureaucratic normalization and its technocratic, disciplinary and dehumanizing mechanisms of alienation and suppression. For Boltanski and Chiapello, the student protests of May ‘68 and its aftermath epitomize this kind of emancipatory critique, which denounces and fights paternalistic structures of authority and Taylorist forms of production, and which seeks to recover individual autonomy, authenticity and creativity. However, according to Boltanski and Chiapello demands for more creative freedom and autonomy – for more playfulness and less hierarchical control – have helped to re-develop capitalistic processes of organizing. Capitalism’s adaptation and incorporation of artistic-critical demands would therefore once again necessarily become – in an almost dialectic dualism of both forms of critique – a subject-matter of social critique, as it would contribute to the inequalities at hand. Social critique, with its maxims of equality and justice, is defined as a force of resistance. Its demands are partially adapted by capitalism because the intensity of resistance is too strong to be blocked off. The creation of the second spirit of capitalism – as it played out in a social market economy with a stronger emphasis on social welfare – can therefore be interpreted as the reaction to a criticism that denounced the exploitation of the working class (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005: 201). In contrast, artistic critique prefers subjectivist rejection to collective resistance. It therefore makes theorems available to the third spirit of capitalism which are translated into the subjectification of the organization of labour:

[T]he new spirit of capitalism is distancing itself from social capitalism under state planning and control, which is viewed as being old school, too narrow and too stifling, and bases itself much more on the artistic critique (authenticity and creativity). [...] The new spirit is turning away from the social demands being made [...] and is opening itself to a critique that denounces the mechanization of the world and the destruction of life forms that help to promote the actual human potentials and especially creativity. (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005: 201)

Artistic critique, opposing aesthetic play to the servitude of formal work relations, thus seems to have become both helpmate and think-tank of a new formation of capitalism that goes hand-in-hand with the project-related particularization and fragmentation of society for the sake of making profit:

By adapting these sets of demands to the description of a new, liberated, and even libertarian way of making profit – which was also said to allow for realization of the self and its most personal aspirations – the new spirit could be conceived in the initial stages of its formulation as transcending capitalism, thereby transcending anti-capitalism as well. (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005: 201)

With this diagnosis, Boltanski and Chiapello deliver the blueprint for the thesis that play has become the match-ball of capitalist utilization processes and thus an integral part of current organizational control mechanisms. Artistic critique understands alienation not as being an indispensable consequence of, or equal to, objectification; rather, it ascribes

to the subject a usurping stance vis-à-vis the possible conditions of objectification. Close to the early Marxist argumentative position on the emancipatory character of work, it perpetuates the notion of freeing oneself from (a certain kind of) work not *through* but *in* work. Contrary to this, the social critique – in continuation of the economic-theoretical Marxist position – conceives of capitalist socioeconomic conditions as the cause of the prevention of a liberation from work through *and* in work.

On not accommodating paradox

Against the backdrop of our discussion of the paradoxical constitution of work, it can now be shown how *both* forms of critique deal with, and are haunted by, the paradox of work.

Social critique sticks to the dichotomic scheme of the transformation of labour conditions from the working subject to the subjectivized object of work; its conceptual force rests on (and is legitimized by) the reiteration of this dualism. Against the processes of capitalist subjectivization, it postulates an antithetical objectivization; the dilemma can only be resolved – hypothetically – by overcoming it.

Artistic critique wants to overcome the contradiction of work through a particular way of exercising it. It attempts to postulate a liberation of work *in* work – a move that reproduces the paradox of work by translating meaning-in-itself into an instrumental, functional paradigm, but that thereby cannot but contradict its presuppositions. In this case, however, the ‘dysfunctionality’, ‘inoperability’ or disinterestedness of aesthetic play cannot be absorbed by work. The difference between artistic and social critique not only resides in the observation that the topoi of artistic critique can more easily be claimed by a capitalist logic of exploitation due to their individualized character. The salience of this difference lies in the fact that the artistico-critical topoi – in contradiction to the ones of social critique – are ‘alienated’ in terms of their enrolment into an economic logic: The dictum of subjective autonomy and the interest of the social individual appears as self-responsibility in economized and marketized form; what cropped up as subjective freedom becomes a straightjacket of self-fulfilment, with the need for meaning displacing ‘conventional’ function-orientation as *telos*.

Both critiques, then, constitute attempts to disavow the paradox of work. To put it differently, what Boltanski and Chiapello’s analysis seems to lack is a sufficiently complex notion of work. Two contradictory forms of critique are expounded which, although acknowledged to be intertwined, are presented in the form of an antagonistic relation. In the end, what remains for the authors is to place their hopes on a regaining of strength of the social critique as well as, albeit more reservedly, on the future significance of the artistic critique (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005: 529 et seq.). But can the dichotomy itself be maintained?

It has been noted that, *first*, the juxtaposition of artistic and social critique – so convincing on first sight – rests upon shaky ground:

[T]here is a world of difference between the discourses for managerial seminars that supply [*The New Spirit of Capitalism*] with its material and the reality of contemporary forms of capitalist

domination. (...) The opposition between the artistic critique and the social critique is not based on any analysis of historical forms of protest. (Rancière, 2009a: 34 et seq.)

Rancière is particularly dismissive of Boltanski and Chiapello's reading of May '68 as supposedly prioritizing the themes of artistic critique, which would then have been incorporated by contemporary capitalism.

As it happens, concern for creativity at work was foreign to the slogans of the 1968 movement. Quite the reverse, it campaigned against the theme of 'participation' and the invitation to educated, generous youth to participate in a modernized and humanized capitalism (...). (Rancière 2009a, p. 34 et seq.)

Second, the distinction of artistic and social critique perhaps too willingly subscribes to the continuation of the classic (class) differentiation between the collective workers' struggle against exploitation and the individualistic bourgeois striving for autonomous creativity (Rancière, 2009a). At least with regard to contemporary, hybrid and sometimes collective forms of artistic endeavours, this clear-cut division is questionable (e.g. Beyes, et al., 2009). As Lazzarato (2008) comments: 'To interpret the deep transformation in artistic and cultural practices (...) in order to condemn it for anti-proletarian elitism, like Boltanski and Chiapello (...), is a testament to the impotence of critical thought'. What for Rancière becomes no more than a comfortable reproduction of the 'melancholic discourse of the left', and what Lazzarato dismisses as 'reactionary', is the double denunciation engendered by the differentiation of social and artistic critique: One is directed at the workings of the capitalist monster, while the other views any possibility of change as illusory. Beyond this double denunciation, there is – nothing; Rancière and Lazzarato therefore hold this 'simple' classification of the social world to be anti-emancipatory and an implicit continuation of the status quo.

Third, these assessments can be related to the absence of a paradoxical notion of work: If one perpetuates the dichotomy of function and meaning, then no understanding of work is available that would allow one to think together the tensions of objectification and subjectification, of work as the fulfilment of a function *and* as a self-referential relation. What remains, in other words, is merely the scholarly 'work' of mourning, for instance with regard to the instrumentalization of aesthetic play. The dilemma has only been translated: From the diagnosis of 'objective' alienation of workers as cogs in the industrial machine into the diagnosis of objectification through subjectification in the new spirit of capitalism. This way, the demands of social critique are not only in opposition to the interests of capitalist forms of organizing, they also remain antithetical to the thoughts and ideas and different forms of artistic critique (Krempl, 2009).

Less a conclusion than an opening: In defence of play

Is there a way of contemplating work that does not rely on the playing-off of object reference against meaning reference, objectification against subjectification, and that therefore does not try to make the paradox disappear? Departing from a paradoxical understanding of work as outlined above, such considerations would entail a changed view of the dichotomy, as they would refrain from hegemonic prioritisation of one of the contradictory elements. It would need to be acknowledged that the transformation of

labour relations invariably corresponds to a transformation of the social significance and localization of work and that its critique should shy away from dichotomic radicalization. Such critique would not a priori hold artistic-critical ideals and those of social critique to be necessarily antagonistic. In a way, such an approach would attempt to make the ‘old’ social critique a part of the ‘new’ artistic critique, or the ‘new’ social critique a part of the ‘old’ artistic critique. It would not treat function and meaning of work as antitheses, which means that it would not let either work disappear in play or let play disappear in work. Instead, it would need to hold on to and keep open the tension-filled relations between these poles. It would thus be wary of overtly grand generalizations and search for ruptures and re-orderings of these relations.

Thus, in problematizing the dichotomization of social and artistic critique, this perspective would let go of the peculiarly artificial division between social transformation and aesthetic processes. This division usually entails viewing the latter as ‘victim’, as an instrument of superordinate mechanisms – be it through the supposedly playful aestheticisation of the economy, or be it through the economization of aesthetics (Beyes, 2008; Krempl, 2009). We think there are good reasons for abstinence here:

[T]he collective struggle for working-class emancipation has never been separate from a new experience of individual existence and capacities (...). Social emancipation was simultaneously an aesthetic emancipation, a break with the ways of feeling, seeing and saying that characterized working-class identity in the old hierarchical order. (Rancière, 2009a: 35).

It is Schiller’s play that is invoked here from a critical-emancipative viewpoint. For Schiller, play constitutes the mediating interface between social classes, the latter being interpreted as a representation of the disparate separation of sense and sensuousness.

Accordingly, beauty (...) is rather the common object of both impulses, that is, of the play instinct. The use of language completely justifies this name, as it is wont to qualify with the word play what is neither subjectively nor objectively accidental, and yet does not impose necessity either externally or internally. (...) For, to speak out once for all, man only plays when in the full meaning of the word he is a man, and *he is only completely a man when he plays*. (Schiller, 2004: 30-35, orig. emphasis).

It is therefore play, with its potential moments of freedom and equality, that enables the construction of new forms of collective organization. ‘What aesthetic free appearance and free play challenge is the distribution of the sensible that sees in the order of domination a difference of two humanities’ (Rancière, 2009b: 32). Therefore, *in defence of play*: When the potential of play is discarded, then the possibility for other organizational forms of working together is dismissed, too. What then remains is the mourning of the situation and the mutual reassurance of the belief that things will not change in any case.

We thus suggest dealing with the lack of a paradoxical notion of work as a theoretical gap into which an aesthetic perspective can be inscribed. Work, then, is understood in a reflexive manner and becomes a producer of paradoxes (that it always has been). The non-utilizing reflexivity of aesthetics is added to the ‘conventional’ utilizing reflexivity of work (e.g. Guillet de Monthoux, 2004). Thereby this ‘model’ resorts to the tautological structure of work discussed above: Ascribing to work the function of

accomplishing references of function is relativized, while at the same time work is given the function to provide self-reference. This way, aesthetic processes must structurally be put on a par with economic activities and their functional character ('work ≠ work') without annulling the difference ('work = work ≠ work').

For sure, this is no guarantee for a critical organizational theory of work. We think, however, that herewith a sufficiently complex conceptualization of work is at hand in order to research the development of organized labour without denying the possibilities of play. It remains paradoxical: If we cannot reduce the paradox of work into oppositions without contradicting ourselves, and if we cannot resolve the contradictions to arrive at non-alienated labour, then we cannot exclude play's corruption into work, either. But then again, we would also need to accept the following: that the paradox of work, at the very least, leaves room for play.

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