Capitalism and the Spirit of Critique: Activism and Professional Fate in a Contemporary Social Movement/NGO

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Abstract
Luc Boltanski’s and Ève Chiapello’s recent work on the ‘new’ spirit of capitalism has attracted considerable attention. This article seeks to (1) examine contemporary social movement organization (SMO)/NGO activity in the light of their analysis; (2) ask whether this ‘spirit’ is a return to the original and ‘authentic’ ‘economic cosmos’ that Weber described in The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism. Attac is taken as the indicative case, and our analysis is based upon research into one of its national groupings, namely Attac-Austria. The paper focuses upon the relationship of professional fate (Berufsschicksal) and extra-professional activity, in this case political activism; a focus which has to be complemented by the conceptual tools of Weber’s analyses of individual professions. The latter supplements the abstraction of ‘spirit’ by relating it to the ineluctable tension between exceptional and ordinary professional action. How, in this context, is political activity shaped by the actual or anticipated project-based professional activities of the current cohort of the politically active?

Keywords: Attac, Boltanski and Chiapello, NGOs, professional fate, social movements, spirit of capitalism.

1. Introduction
In good time for the centenary of The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism (hereafter PESC), Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello (1999 and 2002) have offered us an account of capitalism’s putative new spirit. In many respects the picture they draw of modern capitalism is a highly familiar one within contemporary social theory and sociology; one repeated by proponents and critics of ‘neo-liberalism’ and ‘globalization’ alike, and popularized by Richard Sennett in his best-selling The Corrosion of Character. But what is distinctive about Boltanski’s and Chiapello’s analysis—even in comparison to Sennett’s—is the prominence given to changes in the conduct of life associated with this new spirit. It is this, rather than the shared term ‘spirit’ alone, that
invites a comparison between their analysis and that offered by Weber at the turn of an earlier fin de siècle.

Wilhelm Hennis has long argued that a—perhaps the—key concept in Weber’s science of ‘man’ (‘Menschentum’) is Lebensführung, the conduct of life. And so it is Hennis (2000a: 27) who draws our attention to the following passage:

*We want to investigate, on the one hand, the types of ‘selection processes’ that large-scale industry carries out—according to its immanent requirements—on that part of the population bound to it via its professional fate; on the other hand, the type of ‘adaptation’ of ‘manual’ or ‘mental’ labour in large-scale industry to the life conditions that this industry offers them. In this way, the question should gradually be addressed: what kind of man (‘Mensch’)

1 does modern large-scale industry, by virtue of its immanent characteristics, fashion (‘prägen’), and what professional (and thus, indirectly also extra-professional) fate does it hold in store for him? (Weber 1908: 37, emphasis as in original).

By replacing ‘large-scale industry’ with ‘project-oriented regime’ we get a strikingly close approximation to Boltanski’s and Chiapello’s research problem. Similarly, if we accept Hennis’ view that Weber’s central problem is ‘the “cultural meaning” of the economic form which has come to dominate modernity’ (2000a: 164), then the parallels become even more apparent. On this account, the starting point—the given—is the life orders and the powers associated with them; each with their ‘given regularity’ and ‘organized form of rationality’: ‘each of these orders makes a demand, forms, characterizes a variety of “impositions” or perhaps opens up possibilities for future conduct, involves a formative tendency for the “personality”’

1 (Hennis 2000b: 65). Hennis goes on to ask: ‘what becomes of the person who enters such an order, or is caught in the “power” of one…?’ Under capitalism—the modern economic form—this question becomes translated into one of Berufsschicksal (professional fate), which is so central to the above Weber quotation, and indeed to the whole essay from which it comes. Also striking in this quotation is the hint that professional fate indirectly shapes the fate of the whole person. What for Georg Simmel (1990 [1900]) is the central promise of (capitalist) negative freedom—that the whole person is not affected by the labour relation—is, by implication at least, for Weber empty, or at least merely formal. Our personal fate cannot—or can no longer—be disentangled from our professional fate.

1. ‘Mensch’ is gender neutral, except in a strictly grammatical sense. Hennis’ translator, Keith Tribe, gives good reasons why the term has to be translated as ‘man’, despite the latter’s gendered connotations (Tribe 2000: 207-208).
In this paper we want to take up the claim—common to Weber and Boltanski and Chiapello—that professional fate spills over into extra-professional activities, shaping those activities because it has shaped those engaged in them. This is an argument that might be made with respect to, for example, family life, but our example comes from the SMO/NGO sector: in what ways do the activities of activists adumbrate contemporary professional fate? The case study upon which we draw is part of a research project that has one national branch of one contemporary SMO/NGO as its focus. Our research can at least illustrate some of the complexities of the relationship between professional life and voluntary activities, and how they mutually shape each other. The cohort of activists involved in our study are caught in orders and powers of professional life that affect their non-professional engagement, and the question ‘what kind of Mensch?’ is fashioned by the modern economic form is as central here as it was for Weber in 1908. This research does not, however, allow us to specify the differences between, or assess the relative merits of, these ‘old’ and ‘new’ accounts of the spirit of capitalism. However, we conclude that in order to do the empirical case full justice the ‘spirit’ of capitalism (whether old or new) needs to be supplemented by an analysis of professions. Only in this way can we establish the link between a general ‘diagnosis of our times’ and everyday practices.

We take Attac (Association pour une Taxation des Transactions financières pour l’Aide aux Citoyens) as our example. This globalization-critical SMO was founded after the publication of an article, written as an immediate response to the Asian crisis, by Ignacio Ramonet in Le Monde diplomatique (December 1997) entitled ‘Désarmer le marchés’ (disarming the markets). This piece unleashed an unexpectedly wide public response. Attac grew out of that response with great rapidity in terms of both membership and geographical spread, and is today the most resonant single organizational label of the European globalization-critical scene.2 Our analysis is based upon ethnographic and action research into, and in co-operation with, one national Attac group: Attac-Austria.3 We shall use Boltanski’s and Chiapello’s framework in setting out the case study and return to

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2. See Cassen 2003 for an insider’s account of Attac in France and its early spread. For a first-rate analysis of Attac’s emergence in Germany (and particularly its relation to the media), see Kolb 2004.

3. See Pasqualoni and Treichl 2004 for a more detailed account of both the case and the research.
Weber’s analysis of capitalism’s original ‘spirit’ towards the end in such a way as to at least pose the question: ‘what is new?’ in the ‘new’ spirit.

2. Capitalism’s new spirit

For Boltanski and Chiapello, as for Weber, capitalism is more than a mode of production: it is a form of life; a set of value orientations: ‘the spirit of capitalism, far from being a simple adornment or “superstructure” (as Marxist ideology would have it), is central to the process of capitalistic accumulation that it serves, in that it applies constraints to this process’ (Boltanski and Chiapello 2002: 3). Specifically, the economic order must justify itself so as to maintain its legitimacy in the face of criticism, and it is in addressing its critics that it finds its renewal, its redemption. On their account, capitalism’s new spirit emerges as a response to, indeed partial absorption of, the capitalism critique of the 1960s, particularly as it had been articulated—and performed—by artists. This response is highly selective, retaining the emphasis on personal freedom, self-determination and authenticity, but marginalizing the social aspects of the 60s’ critique: its demands for equality, social justice and solidarity. While the economic justification of capitalism—as articulated in economic theory—remains stable over time, its social justification—which must demonstrate capitalism’s ‘excitement,’ ‘security’, and ‘fairness’—is in occasional need of renewal. Taken together, the economic/theoretical and the social forms of legitimation constitute capitalism’s ‘justificatory regime’ or ‘order of worth’ (cité). The concept of cité refers to the way in which philosophical notions of justice find their way into common sense and are echoed in everyday discourse and practice, thus acquiring ‘validity’ and providing legitimation for a variety of social (sub-) systems (see Boltanski and Thévenot 1991 and 1999). As for Weber’s early Protestants, an intrinsically meaningless activity—work—which had previously been a means towards an end under the ‘old economy’, has become an end in itself, and thus has had to acquire meaning. However, whereas the famous conclusion to PESC suggests that this original meaning can fall away once this form of life—this ‘coat’—has institutionalized itself into a ‘steel-hard casing’ (2002: 123), for Boltanski and Chiapello institutionalization is not enough: work has to acquire a new meaning and a new significance once its previous legitimation has exhausted itself and been challenged. Habitualized patterns and/or external compulsion are not enough.
Work, where it has become our life, not only has to have, it also has to give meaning; something Weber argued all the way through PESC, perhaps only to ditch the argument at the very end. Whereas for Weber, rationalization processes take over where Protestant values leave off, for Boltanski and Chiapello, who reject the rationalization thesis, capitalism has to constantly renew itself, it has to periodically change its (moral) coat.

Although Boltanski and Chiapello are careful to note that their analysis of capitalism—developed on the basis of a broad and in-depth reading of managerial literature—may in some respects be specifically French, the picture they draw is familiar enough from other national contexts, perhaps unsurprisingly so given that a goodly proportion of that literature is French translations of English-language (particularly North American) texts. In contrast to many other accounts of contemporary capitalism—notably, of course, Castells’ (2004)—their argument is not that networks, network organizations, project work, temporary contracts, and the rest are either qualitatively new or are replacing older forms, but rather that these already present aspects of capitalist production have recently (i.e. since the 1980s) taken on a central legitimizing function. In some fields they have at least supplemented, if not replaced, the ‘industrial’ justificatory regime with its emphasis on scale, stability, predictability, career, and so forth. The new ‘project-orientated’ cité exists alongside other forms, just as it had long done as a peripheral part of the dual labour market at a time in which the industrial regime played this, largely unchallenged, central justificatory role. But now it has come to compete with the industrial regime:

Networks, however large, are not any newer than the market was when Adam Smith wrote Wealth of Nations. But, it seems that it was not until the last third of the 20th century that mediating—the art of connecting and making use of the most diverse and furthest ties—became autonomous, set apart from other activities behind which it had until then been hidden, and was identified and valued in itself. This process, we believe, is what constitutes an important novelty (Boltanski and Chiapello 2002: 9).

Justificatory regimes on this account are distinguished by a number of features. For our purposes, the most important are: (1) the criteria of success and failure (or ‘greatness’ and ‘smallness’ as Boltanski and Chiapello put it) that are applied, and (2) the kinds of test that individuals face in their work-related activities. For the project subject, old-fashioned qualities of reliability (finishing the job), stability, and solidity give way to activity, process, and future orientation. Agents
are led into an action trap in which they are propelled, or dragged, into an infinite, though poorly defined, future:

In the project-oriented cité, a ‘great one’ must be adaptable and flexible. He or she is polyvalent, able to move from one activity, or the tool, to another. A ‘great one’ is also active and autonomous. He or she will take risks, make contact with new people, open up new possibilities, seek out useful sources of information, and, thus, avoid repetition (Boltanski and Chiapello 2002: 10).

The emphasis upon risk taking, interpersonal skills and trust building, and networking abilities, plus the capacity to move between—and act effectively within—a variety of contexts or subsystems is central to their account. In return for success, the project subject must be willing to make an investment that may entail sacrificing ‘all that could curtail one’s availability, giving up lifelong plans’ (2002: 9). The ethic of the project regime is the precise opposite of Martin Luther’s famous ‘Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me.’

Project workers and their managers have to develop a set of complementary skills quite different from those of, say, the traditional bureaucratic subject. A spirit of public or organizational service is replaced by a ‘just do it’ culture in which due process is subordinated to outcome, and results trump correctness (cf. du Gay 2000). The successful actor—unlike his or her bureaucratic predecessor—is no longer rewarded with a stable career, but with an increase in employability (see Voß and Pongratz 1998, and Pongratz and Voß 2003 for detailed analysis). They will have proven themselves, and on that basis are in a better position to garner future contracts. Entrepreneurialism comes to replace loyalty as the personal quality that is recognized and rewarded (see Scott 1996), and, to switch back to Weber’s language, selected for.

3. Membership, activism, and personal engagement in a SMO/NGO

Boltanski und Chiapello describe capitalism as a normative system that, due to its permeability and capacity to absorb criticism directed against it, repeatedly succeeds in coming away with renewed and strengthened legitimacy. Earlier social movements are said to have contributed to the renewal process in a number of ways. As already mentioned, the ‘cultural criticism’ of the 68 movement is partly realized in the project-oriented regime, while its social criticism has largely been ignored. The oft-proclaimed ‘march through the institutions’ has made a significant contribution to capitalism’s contemporary form. In
the project-oriented regime, this march is transformed from a collective effort of (at least one influential wing of) the movement to capture key social positions synchronically (via a division of labour) with subversive intent, into a private undertaking in which individuals sequentially progress through a number of institutions in the course of their individual careers.

How much of this picture is supported by our case? Our example is taken from outside the world of waged work, but if Weber’s original observation that extra-professional life is indirectly shaped by professional fate were true, we would expect to see similar patterns, and similar orientations.

In the sections that follow we will give an account of the workings of Attac, both at the organizational (§3.1) and the political level (§3.2). Resulting questions for the personal identity of its activists (§3.3) depend on the form and notion of work, all the more so at a time when Berufe, previously intrinsically linked to waged work, are both eroding and less available (see Baetge 1988; Willke 1999; Keupp et al. 1999: 111-29). With Boltanski and Chiapello, we could relate recognition in all these interrelated spheres to various efforts to achieve employability. To what extent is this the case for the activists in our study? Do they too embody capitalism’s new forms and patterns of legitimation? For a movement like Attac, which reconnects with the political strand of earlier social critique, an unambiguous answer seems inappropriate: not only can ‘a part of the unexpected political acceptability of renewed mass unemployment […] be plausibly attributed to the wide diffusion of the notion of the individual as enterprise’ (Gordon 1991: 46), but also this development is exactly what Attac claims to be fighting against.

3.1. The workings of a new organization in a pre-existing field

Against the background of the shift Boltanski and Chiapello ascribe in an ideal-typical fashion to the intellectual/spiritual consequences of capitalism, Attac appears as an exemplary form of contemporary protest. It differs from the classical Weber-Michels model of the political party or movement as disciplined hierarchy insofar as its organizational form approximates that of a ‘network of networks’ (Gerhards and Rucht 1992); a ‘light’ organization of an almost ‘franchising’ character. This light network structure is facilitated by new media and communication technologies (Castells 2001 and 2004 [1997], Scott and Street 2000). In these respects, Attac appears very close to the resource mobilization theory model of a movement acting within a movement.
sector much like a firm acting within its business sector—for example, through product diversification, tailoring to local markets, and so on. More specifically, Attac has something of the character of a franchise operation in which the branches bear the name, and must to a degree conform to the ethos of the parent, but otherwise enjoy a high degree of autonomy, encouraging diversity and the development of strategies sensitive to local customs, issues, and problems.

The question of (ideological) belonging that is posed within traditional agencies is replaced by questions of common (project-like) activity in spasmodic events. It is thus ‘not easy to distinguish between “inside” and “out” ’ (Boltanski and Chiapello 1999: 434). Almost all are welcomed by Attac. Some initiatives, however, are regularly outsourced to so-called ‘thematic groups’ (‘Inhaltsgruppen’), which can gain importance or maintain their peripheral role and position depending on the political opportunities that arise. Effort is directed at providing an organizational point of entry into, and place within, the organization for as many as possible. As in the case of Social Forums, the aim is ‘not the lowest common denominator but the greatest common variety’. This is captured in a phrase very telling for the purposes of Attac-Austria: ‘Mit Widersprüchen arbeiten!’ (‘working [constructively] with contradictions’). In reacting against its previous form, the new spirit of capitalism appears to have brought diverse forms of protest and new (diversity) management models within firms and organizations closer together. Protest itself is currently organized in the form of projects in order to calculate and combine resources, as well as to reach its target audiences. In this way, despite its very different political aim and location, in its networking and networked structure its efforts to maximize participation, and its focus on change rather than stability, on inclusion rather than exclusion, its protest form displays more than a vague resemblance to the modern capitalist enterprise as Boltanski and Chiapello characterize it.

Nevertheless, we should be somewhat cautious in applying such analysis one-to-one to the Attac case. A number of political sociologists and analysts of social movements have noted, and frequently been critical of, the increasing professionalization of collective action, or, perhaps more accurately, of the move from collective action to lobbying and think tank strategies. Theda Skocpol sees this as a fundamental shift from associations acting (in the way Durkheim hoped) as inclusive opportunities for citizens to participate in public affairs towards ‘civic entrepreneurialism’; a doing-for rather than with in which (top-down) management replaces membership (Skocpol 2003).
While Attac-Austria does display some of these characteristics (e.g. in its aspiration towards professionalism), at the organizational level it appears too diverse to allow an unqualified judgment. Forms of political organization with a tendency towards an exclusive character (formally as well as informally), or with a homogenous composition (on the basis of their avant-garde self-understanding: ‘like with like’), have been displaced by a more egalitarian form; one highlighting—both managing and main-streaming—diversity (‘opposites attract’). Currently, this is the case at least for the successful initiatives within the wide spectrum of globalization critique. In contrast to traditional organizations that are denounced by contemporary social movements as totalitarian in their demand for ideological homogeneity (see Boltanski and Chiapello 1999: 434), these movements demand of themselves respect for the heterogeneity and diversity of engagement and motivation. What Adorno once characterized as the autonomous choice of one’s own heteronomy (Adorno 1976), is retained in an exemplary fashion at both an individual and collective level. This is all the more so as original strategies and solutions tailored to, and culturally suitable for, local conditions, themes, and problems are not only permitted but encouraged, supported, and even required.

3.2. The corrosion of political character?
For Boltanski and Chiapello ‘la relance de la critique’ in the 1990s was associated with a development in which activists in the mid-80s became increasingly occupied with humanitarian help. This reorientation brought with it the accusation that they were apolitical, opportunistic, and conformed to the system. However, the milieu that emerged out of this ‘depoliticization’ is ‘widely spread—even heterogeneous—and manages to form an even network in which contacts can be established that enable occasional actions within particular areas to take place’ (Boltanski and Chiapello 1999: 432).

Attac-Austria characterized itself as such a network, even as a networker (which might claim to be ‘great’ in Boltanski’s and Chiapello’s sense) for both national and international campaigns. In that Attac places the redistribution of resources—once more raised at the end of the 1990s after a decade of cryogenic sleep—on the political agenda, it reconnects with the political strand of earlier social critique. However, the controversial discussion focuses on the question whether Attac should act, and understand itself, as a SMO or as an NGO. The extent and implications of alternative answers to this question are clearly acknowledged during periodic self-reflection events (Selbstverständ-
nisprozess) that are built into Attac’s activities as a form of feedback in order to maintain and acquire orientation, and facilitate discussions and the exchanges of views among activists concerning their own role within the complex political environment in which they operate (see Pasqualoni and Treichl 2004). A recurrent theme of such discussions is precisely this strategic question, the—currently suspended—answer to which appears to be decisive for the very identity of Attac and its activists: social movement or NGO?

While a social movement is characterized by forms of political action (via mobilization), and is thus on a collision course with established political forces, NGOs seek to become co-drivers and to participate in governance. It is precisely this latter solution that is central in ‘civil society’ discourse of the kind associated with authors such as John Keane (2003) or Michael Edwards (2003). If we ‘view organizations as arranging relatively durable compromises between different worlds’—compromises that ‘differ with respect to the kinds of worlds they largely rely on, and the kind of compromises which support them’ (Boltanski and Thévenot 1999: 376)—we can more closely examine the question of the political role and nature of Attac-Austria. The expertise that exists (or can be called upon) within Attac is increasingly offered to public institutions, suggesting that it is already on the way to becoming an NGO. Within a few years of its foundation in 2001, Attac-Austria had to prove itself—as ‘neue Selbständige der Politik’4 (Heins 2002: 9)—within a market for which political acceptability (as entry ticket) is a decisive criterion of selection. Attac-Austria has however shown some resistance to the soft pressure placed upon successful agents to move from SMO to NGO, with all the shifts in and constraints on action repertoire that this entails. An oppositional role remains attractive to most activists who continue to demand and defend it. This demonstrates reservations vis-à-vis the ‘natural’ extension of successful activities into the orbit of meetings, consultations and negotiations; reservations that are reinforced by the stories, told by delegates of more established NGOs, of the ‘unacceptable conditions’ at various occasions in which ‘consultation’ takes place, and where actors are played off against each other.

In a functionalist description of the dynamic of this process social movement actors find themselves in the role of the assigned council—or even of the ‘police’—of ‘civil society’ who acquire their legitimacy

4. *Neue Selbständige* (new self-employed) refers to the growing number of those, mostly young, earning their living in temporary and insecure contracts.
from the fact that they are on the side of those affected. We can formulate the resulting division of labour in terms of a common metaphor: part of the globalization-critical movement plays bad cop threatening the ‘accused’ (WTO, IMF, World Bank, multinational concerns, EU, etc.), and seeking to force concessions with both unconventional and controversial means. Another part of the movement plays good cop by signalling willingness to negotiate, and by making constructive suggestions. At the same time the latter acquires a reputation for itself via intimate knowledge of the territory occupied by the ‘enemy’, and via their subtly close relationship to the ‘culprit’s’ ‘psyche’. In Attac, this is associated with a fascination with the skills of the pioneers of neo-liberalism who, using think tanks as their base camp, were able to create and push through a hegemonic societal concept. Attac’s aim is to learn from these strategies and thereby enrich its action repertoire with the aim of developing a counter-hegemony.

However, the option of an unambiguously professional strategy may already be losing ground in the face of more recent changes in political opportunity structures. What Colin Crouch (2004) has characterized as ‘post-democratic’ practices (i.e. the inclination of an increasingly disembedded political elite to bypass formally democratic institutions and manage public opinion) renders both traditional collective action repertoires (e.g. the mass demonstration) and more recent professional strategies of lobbying/think tank activity problematic. This is experienced by Attac as a practical dilemma: its influence on political discourse (e.g. in the further demonization of ‘neo-liberalism’) is not matched by an impact on ‘real’ politics, or can easily be incorporated or mimicked by more mainstream political actors (e.g. the German SPD’s rather desperate attempts to mobilize globalization-critical sentiments in response to their current unpopularity). The highly effective, and no less controversial, mobilization by Attac-France for the No-vote on the proposed EU constitution, and its linking the referendum Non to its own political message in an effort to grasp and define the political agenda, may be understood in this context. Elections and referenda present residual opportunities to mobilize dissatisfaction with national political elites (sometimes on issues — such as the EU — where that national political elite is itself sending out mixed signals) and thus present tempting occasions for oppositional action, especially where other options appear limited. As Attac-Austria did not find itself in the position to impose its version of the events within the Austrian (or other European) media or political landscape, and because the danger of guilt by association in
sharing a cause with the far right is an even more sensitive issue in Austria than in France, Attac-Austria—like most other European Attac-groups—supported the French campaign, and thus piggy-backed on the latter’s ‘success’. Resulting, on the one hand, from an intensified international cooperation and, on the other, from a conflict with one of its own subgroups, which was working on the European Constitution and demanding a referendum in Austria, this low-cost and relatively low-risk strategy had considerable media impact, not least in allowing Attac to publicly depict what a specifically European counter-hegemony might look like.

So, rather than see Attac as an instance of the shift from ‘membership to management’ (Skocpol 2003), it might be more helpful to view it as appearing in a variety of roles and guises: it responds as an NGO when appropriate—namely, when that promises success—and as part of a larger social movement when (and where) protest is on the agenda. In this respect, Attac stands for the globalization-critical movement as a whole without monopolizing the field. For the SMO/NGO dilemma, the expression ‘We let some believe one thing, and others another’ (‘Wir lassen die einen das eine glauben und die anderen das andere’), which went unchallenged at Attac-Austria’s Summer Academy in 2003, is very telling.5 This answer points to a major discrepancy between the functioning—which can be well caught in analogies with the ‘phantom firm’ (Klein 2000, see also Crouch 2004)—and the political character of Attac. While its modus operandi bears some similarities to the phantom firm (e.g. Attac as logo), its political aim diverges from that model in at least two respects: (1) in its insistence on rather ‘anachronistic’ (in the best sense of the term) political traditions and claims, which relate it to a completely different set of political predecessors than those to which firms do (or even could) refer, and (2) in its intermediate position in the space between state and market (a relation itself in need of renewal), which allows it to proclaim as well as to selectively incorporate the antagonism between the two major players of modern capitalist world. Positioning itself between state(s) and market(s), it can neither be reduced to a

5. According to Myra Marx Ferree und Beth Hess (1985), a division of roles between good (reformist) and bad (radical change) cops can be an effective means to strengthen a movement. A strict differentiation and division of these fractions usually means the continuation of the status quo as it facilitates the assimilation of the good cops, and encourages a politics of divide and rule in which the emancipatory potential of the movements is lost (see also Holland-Cunz 2003: 80).
mere repetitive comeback of its political predecessors among (leftish) social movements, nor to a simple copy of (or even an exemplary model for) the phantom firm. Attac seems equally inclined to retain a movement orientation even when on the road to becoming an NGO. The options it tentatively takes and rejects as a new political actor in a pre-existing political environment can not be understood without taking into account the post-industrial background against which this tentative positioning is taking place.

3.3. *What kind of Mensch?*

In addressing the Weberian question ‘what kind of *Mensch*?’ we need to link the abstraction—the idea or ‘spirit’ of capitalism (whether old or new)—to routine practice by drawing from a further element of Weber’s work: his analysis of diverse professions (never systemized into a theory of professions as such). This supplementary perspective not only allows us to grasp some aspects of the case in question that we would otherwise miss, or, alternatively, be inclined to ignore or to explain away, but also to pay due respect to the Kantian element in Weber: his acknowledgement of the infinitely manifold character of history. In Weber, the link between spirit and the conduct of life is in part provided by a sociological and historical analysis that emphasizes both the affinity between specific professions (with their calling) and conduct of life, on the one hand, and their historical roots in charisma and charismatic action on the other. The point has been well made by Constance Seyfarth (1989) who argues that for Weber all professions can be characterized in terms of the basic tensions in which they are caught; these tensions differing from case to case:

> With the progress of disenchantment, intellectualization, and rationalization, the elemental tension between the exceptional and the ordinary (‘Außeralltäglichkeit und Alltag’) becomes transformed and differentiated without ever vanishing[...]. Formal and substantive rationality is especially important for lawyers; the tension between an ethic of responsibility and of conviction for the politician; one of irrationality and rationality—in countless variations—for science; the tension between personal and impersonal factors is particularly evident in his occasional observations on nurses. The distinction between the exceptional and the ordinary forms the common frame for all these differentiating tensions (Seyfarth 1989: 394).

None of these predicaments can be simply overcome in theory; rather, ‘they must be dealt with constantly, and in ever new ways, within practical professional action. Due to the irrational conditions for, and the provisional nature of, each solution, the practical coping (‘Bewältigung—
ung’) drives (clearly not as the only factor!) the development onwards’ (Seyfarth 1989: 394). Seyfarth traces the origins of these solutions to the charismatic interventions of exceptional individuals, the routinization (‘Veralltäglichung’) of which constitutes professional-ization: ‘professional action is characterized by a continuous practice of “substantive” or “internal” routinization of exceptional achievements (‘Leistungen’)’ (393).6

That SMOs, NGOs and new(ish) political parties face similar predicaments, and that they too must seek provisional solutions, is made clear by Joachim Raschke, one of the most influential social movement analysts in Germany, in an observation on the German Greens. While the latter liked to characterize themselves as a ‘movement party’, Raschke brands them ‘party against their own will’:

The Greens have a basic problem: they fail to unify legitimacy and efficiency. Other parties have to struggle with the same problem, but in the case of the Greens the chasm is enormous: what is legitimate is not efficient; what is efficient is not legitimate (Raschke 1993: 33).

In the case of Attac, the tension between legitimacy and effective action takes the form of the social movement versus NGO dilemma (the option of becoming a party is off the agenda, not least in the light of the Greens’ example). This quandary might be said to parallel those Weber identifies in other ‘professions’. It is a tension that both movements and activists must deal with on a routine basis. Here again we find an ambivalent response. Typically, campaign methods are chosen less according to a single ideological criterion than because they appear likely to succeed (or at least have impact), and campaign themes are chosen that have not been claimed by other NGOs with a specific profile and expertise in the field. Instrumentally rational—in a particular relation to affective—action acquires significance within the project-oriented regime. In terms of Weber’s classical typology (1972: 12-13), such orientations take priority over traditional action and the value-rational aspects of Attac’s protest repertoire. As in the project polity, the strength of weak ties (Granovetter 1973) is elevated into a principle; something echoed in the ubiquitous network metaphor.

6. This bears more than a casual resemblance to Aristotle’s argument in the Nicomachaean Ethics where he conceptualized virtues by opposing them to their vicious counterpart and to other complementary virtues. Between these virtues one has to achieve and maintain a certain balance, otherwise one risks that a single virtue, isolated from its complementary twin, may slip into its vicious counterpart (negation).
However, while the focus of mainstream political actors points to an imperative of impact, Attac’s political role and significance lies in effectively questioning the latter’s legitimacy, both raising and confronting them with questions of social justice and tentative solutions for such ‘another world’. It is here that Attac retains its value-rational elements. At the same time the organization is dependent upon the willingness of its members to put in time on a voluntary basis. The relationship between organization and membership is not of the more-or-less exclusively commercial kind found within Greenpeace, for example. In this sense Attac is little more than the sum of its parts, and is thus dependent upon its members whose morale and motivation must be maintained. Thus, rather than interpret Attac as an unambiguous example of the shift from membership to management, it is probably more useful to see it as dealing on a day-to-day basis with the issue of legitimacy and efficiency with their persisting and perceived tensions: between internal participation and external political impact; between value-rational orientation and instrumentality. To resolve this dilemma definitively would entail a shift of identity and — on a Weberian view — merely generate another tension to take its place.

But let us return to the question of the fate underlying, or even organizing, the activities of Attac members. Within the project-orientated polity, an agent’s value is measured in terms of his/her degree of activity, their ability to adapt, and their flexibility and mobility. The inability to network, or to co-operate across a broader spectrum of social subsystems, is a sign of weakness. Projects are limited; they are medium-term solutions within an increasingly insecure and unpredictable life course. On Sennett’s account, such work forms are incompatible, or at least very difficult to square, with ethical orientations geared towards longer (potentially life-long) projects (Sennett 1998). Likewise, on versions of social capital theory that verge on rational choice theory (e.g. Lin 2001), participation in collective life is motivated by the desire to access community resources out of essentially self-regarding considerations. Neither view is particularly helpful in understanding the motivations of those who involve themselves in organizations such as Attac. Sennett’s view simply renders such engagement mysterious, while Lin’s analysis (even if we were to accept its well worked out premises) is problematic because, should these generally well-educated and competent individuals choose to pursue their self-interest via publicly spirited engagement, on rational grounds we might expect them to opt for more (instrumentally) promising areas of activity.
Nevertheless, there does appear to be a close affinity between the forms of work typical among the most active Attac members and the way the movement itself operates. Employment is typically characterized by project work carried out with self-evident professionalism. New work forms—particularly among students and recent graduates (who constitute a significant proportion of Attac-Austria’s activists)—affect the organization of their voluntary work, and vice versa. Thus, the political self-understanding in projects is operationalized in the form of campaigns that are planned and carried through. Activists shift, or at least expect to shift, from activism to jobs, and back again; and again to the next job and to the next form of activism, without this work form losing its relevance. Two things above all characterize the jobs that have greatest affinity with Attac activism: unrestricted access to the Internet, and spare time for activism and/or sporadic help, service, or support. Although this appears as a limit to mobilization (despite Attac’s emphasis upon a broad appeal), office jobs, or study, or part-time or self-employment, or even retirement, or temporary unemployment have the attributes that are not merely sought but also presupposed within Attac. These not only give access to information (capital), they also provide the opportunity to deploy (or ‘simulate’, Boltanski and Chiapello 1999: 434) engagement. Time sacrificed in this way represents a constant simulation of, or even ‘genuine’, engagement at a time in which, given demands for flexibility and mobility, constant commitment is difficult to sustain over an extended period.

For recognition within Attac, work continues to play a role in a double sense: work as work for Attac, and as a (even former or potential) job or career that presupposes particular skills or qualifications (which are valued beyond the Attac context), plus providing access to networks and information. It is perhaps this project-based form of activism that at least reduces the time demands placed upon activists, and enables them to opt in and out, and modulate their degree of commitment over time. Unlike many single-ideology movements of the past, Attac does not make claims on the whole person either in terms of time or belief. We see here a degree of compatibility between project orientations in the sphere of work and activism: strong commitment, but within defined and limited time frames.

7. Thus, for example, Attac receives considerable support from those working in the public sector who regularly act as bearers of its message.
In sum, a dose of sociological ambivalence is useful in understanding both the organizational form and the modus operandi of this type of (relatively new) SMO/NGO. Less ambivalent approaches (the incompatibility of contemporary work forms and ethical conviction; the shift from membership to management, etc.) tend to miss some persistent characteristics. Ambivalence in some respect characterized Attac (as it does other social movements, as long as they remain social movements). Rather than rely on a general and unilinear diagnosis of our times, we have stressed — via a Weberian emphasis upon professional activity as dealing with contradictory demands — the complexities of strategy of and the relationship between occupational and voluntary activity.

4. Conclusion: The spirit of capitalism old and new

In the time frame with which Boltanski and Chiapello are concerned, it is reasonable to argue that this spirit of capitalism is new and renewing. In one respect at least, the conduct of life associated with the project-oriented cité appears very different from that of Weber’s Puritans: it is not based upon a calling in the sense of a life-project (‘daemon’) with a sustained and methodical character. It is ‘beruflos’ — ‘without a calling’ — in terms of his characterization of the Protestant ethic (2002: 108). However, Weber identifies a further aspect of that ethic beyond the notion of a calling, namely ‘economic profitability for the individual’ (109). Thus, he notes that ‘just as the endowment of the stable vocational calling with ascetic significance sheds an ethical glorification around the modern specialized expert, the providential interpretation of one’s chances for profit glorified the businessperson’ (109). So we have not one but two types or manifestations of worldly asceticism: work within a calling, and business. One way of interpreting the contemporary spirit of capitalism would be to argue that the ‘full beam of ethical approval’ now shines more on the latter; that

8. Perhaps this is not the right place to raise an issue of translation, but the standard translation of Weber’s Dämon is ‘demon’ rather than daemon (alternative spellings: daemon or daimon). While these words have been used interchangeably, ‘demon’ has long had connotations of evil (possessed by evil spirits etc.) while daemon in Greek thought was more neutral: a spirit or genius, either good or bad. Since the latter is clearly what Weber had in mind, as the final sentence from ‘Science as a Vocation’ makes clear, daemon is probably preferable. Our thanks to Hugh Rorrison (and possibly much of the St Andrews German Department) for clarification.

9. Protestantism ‘shines a full beam of ethical approval upon the dispassionate, “self-made man” of the middle class’ (109).
only one form of worldly asceticism is fully acknowledged, with the specialized expert, lacking the required qualities of flexibility and adaptability, in danger of joining the poor among the damned. On such an interpretation, the project worker inherits the mantle of the nineteenth-century ‘self-made man’ and employability (rather than profitability alone) becomes the central notion within the ‘providential interpretation of the economic cosmos’ (106).10

But in what respects can those modern subjects ‘without a calling’ still be said to be locked into this-worldly asceticism? PESC offers a complex picture of the moral economy of Protestantism; one which pays due attention to the differences between Lutheranism, Calvinism, Pietism, Methodism, and so on. Here we reduce this complexity to those characteristics that crystallize out of these strands. These are:

1. **Self-monitoring and self-discipline** — i.e. an ‘alert, conscious, and self-aware life’ (72): the ‘Puritan Christian perpetually monitored his state of grace’ and ‘“felt his own” pulse’ (76).
2. **Self-perfection**: ‘striving to attain this consciousness of perfection marks the true convert’ (90).
3. **Anxiety**: ‘Am I among the saved or among the damned?’ (69).
4. **Restlessness** — i.e. ‘restless work in a vocational calling’ (66): ‘only through a fundamental transformation of the meanings of one’s life — in every hour and every action — could the effect of grace[…] be testified through action’ (71).

These characteristics are not so far removed from the account of the project-oriented cité offered by Boltanski and Chiapello, or from the orientations of our Attac activists.11 But perhaps we should not be too surprised by apparent similarities between the ‘economic cosmos’ of contemporary subjects and those anxious self-monitoring Protestants.

10. Business itself might be said to be a calling. Weber’s discussion — in drawing the distinction — seems to suggest otherwise. Business is certainly a conduct or organization of life, but, unlike a calling, it is not necessarily devoted to a single substantial content, but is drawn to where profit can be made. The distinction seems appropriate in Attac’s case insofar as its pluralism — e.g. its willingness to shift strategies and themes according to pragmatic considerations — brings it closer to the business models as Weber characterizes it.

11. While the other points clearly resonate in the account we gave of the Selbstverständnisprozess, the view that activists should be striving for self-perfection may need some further clarification. In the PESC Weber describes the typical division of labour within the bourgeois family: while the husband conducts business, the wife concerns herself with ‘good works’. Employed work — often in an academic or political profes-
Weber’s concern is not exclusively with the soul of man under capitalism, but also with the soul of capitalism itself. In some respects the promise of contemporary work forms echoes that of early capitalism: to free those in ‘unfree’ non-wage labour (e.g. Instleute, Weber 1989: 102-105) from personal domination. Critics of organized capitalism share Weber’s fear that elements of a pre-capitalist ‘moral organization of life’ will be/have been reinstituted, but in a more highly rationalized—and thus all the more constricting—form.12 ‘Rationally devised regulation’, Weber noted, ‘stands in the closest relation to the development of modern capitalism’ (1918: 147). What particularly perturbed Weber about welfare measures, for example, was that this form of rationally devised regulation re-established the personal relations of domination from which capitalism had freed the individual, thus binding personal and professional fate once more formally together. This view is shared by those who seek to restore a moral organization of life that accords with capitalism’s original, and ‘authentic’, spirit. The anti-bureaucratic and anti-state measures of the last twenty or so years can thus be viewed as a reaction against the tendencies that Weber was already sketching in broad outline during and shortly after World War I. The managerial texts that Boltanski and Chiapello analyze are, after all, merely the populist—the propaganda—tip of an anti-statist iceberg.

Whereas the older Weber was fretting about the re-establishment of elements of pre-capitalist personal domination, his younger counterpart had posed this question about the transition to capitalism in rural Prussia:

the labourer seeks money wages, which free him from the dependence and good will of the landlord despite the economic decline that is a result. Just as money rent appeared to the medieval peasant as the most important sign of his personal freedom, so does money wage appear to today’s worker. The rural worker forsakes positions that are often more...
favourable, always more secure, in a search for personal freedom (Weber 1989 [1894/1924]: 172).

Weber is deeply puzzled as to why the employment contract, which is both less secure and installs a system of exploitation more rigorous than Feudalism, should come to be subjectively associated with personal freedom. This question too has regained some of its relevance in the context of the kinds of insecure project work that Boltanski and Chiapello describe. As they rightly argue, an answer couched exclusively in terms of coercion (or indeed ‘false consciousness’) is insufficient. The idea of the project and of the freedoms that it brings has a subjective reach, and is bound up with the self-legitimation of capitalism in its post-Keynesian, post-social democratic mode. These have worked their way into the political rhetoric and everyday language of their supporters and critics alike. We are dealing here with the kind of ahistorical, ideal-typical logic discussed by Albert Hirschman, to whom Le nouvel esprit du capitalisme is dedicated, in which a social order emerges as a reaction against the previous one, and seeks to construct itself around a new order imagined as the diametrical opposite of its predecessor (Hirschman 1982). This is a logic in which the lesson of the past is to forget past lessons and, in line with the future-orientation of the project-oriented cité, to fall forward into an unknown future. But if our professional and personal fates are as closely drawn together as Weber, Boltanski and Chiapello assume, then this flight towards personal freedom may be as problematic as its precursor. The fate that Boltanski and Chiapello ascribe to the critique of capitalism — namely that it is always in danger of reviving the system that it seeks to undermine — may be manifesting itself in a combination of individualization and supervision via audit (Power 1998). However, as our case illustrates, in contrast to the individualization thesis in its teleological form, this is not in such a way as to permanently hinder sociation and collective action, but rather to change their form. Under these changing circumstances, collective action cannot take its traditional shape because the surrounding and supporting conditions are no longer available, not least those related to the employment contract. The practices that we have briefly sketched here display awareness of the dilemmas and of the potential new restraints that have been imposed, and that result in new challenges to those intending to intervene in these processes. The forms of activism that we have discussed are at one and the same time manifestations of, and reactions against, these tendencies.
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