Le capitalisme et ses critiques

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L’engouement des entreprises pour la RSE comme le conflit d’idées qui l’accompagne montre que cette évolution ne se fait pas sans mal et sans résistance. Il s’agit selon nous d’un signe parmi d’autres de l’entrée du capitalisme dans un nouveau cycle de récupération de sa critique qui prend au sérieux la critique écologique. Nous assistons en fait depuis le début des années 2000 à la reconstitution d’une nébuleuse réformatrice telle que le capitalisme a pu en connaître à la fin du XIXe siècle, dans les années 1930 et 1970. À chaque fois, il est sorti de ces moments d’intense réflexion réformatrice des changements notables du régime capitaliste. Cet article présente une histoire des relations entre le capitalisme et ses critiques et tente à partir de cette histoire de comprendre la période actuelle et le débat d’idée actuel sur la réforme du capitalisme.

Mots clés : Histoire du Capitalisme, Critique du Capitalisme, Réformisme

This craze for CSR, and the conflict of ideas that goes with it, shows that the change has not come about without some pain and resistance. It is one sign among others that capitalism is embarking on a new cycle of recuperation, during which criticisms will be assimilated and which is taking seriously the ecological criticism.

We are observing since the beginning of the 2000s the reconstitution of a new “reforming nebula”, such as what has occurred at the end of the XIXth cy, in the 1930s and the 1970s. Each time, important changes in the capitalist regime can be seen as a result of the intensity of the reforming imagination. This article presents an history of the relationships between capitalism and its criticisms and try to understand the current period through this approach.

Key Words: History of Capitalism, Criticism of capitalism, Reformism

A strange epidemic is sweeping through the major global companies: progressively since the late 1990s they have all begun to talk about Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). One of the most significant measures was the launch in 1999 of the Global Compact initiative at the World Economic Forum in Davos by the Secretary General of the United Nations, Kofi Annan. Today, close to 5,000 corporate participants and stakeholders from more than 120 countries are engaged in the Global Compact, working to advance ten universal principles in the areas of human rights, labour standards, the environment and anti-corruption action.

Regarding Human Rights, members of the Global Compact sign a declaration stating as follows: (Principle 1) Businesses should support and respect the protection of internationally proclaimed human rights and (Principle 2) make sure that they are not complicit in human rights abuses. Regarding labour, the declaration says: (Principle 3) Businesses should uphold the freedom of association and the effective recognition of the rights to collective bargaining, (Principle 4) the elimination of all forms of forced labour and compulsory labour, (Principle 5) the effective abolition of child labour, and (Principle 6) the elimination of discrimination in respect of employment and occupation. As for the environmental question, the same declaration states that: Businesses should support a precautionary approach to environmental challenges (Principle 7), undertake initiatives to promote greater environmental responsibility (Principle 8), and encourage the development and diffusion of environmentally friendly technologies (Principle 9). Principle 10 is devoted to the fight against corruption: Businesses should work against all forms of corruption, including extortion and bribery.

The Global Compact website1 explains that “Joining the Global Compact is a widely visible commitment to the ten principles. A company that signs on to the Global Compact specifically commits itself to: 1) set in motion changes to business operations so that the Global Compact and its principles

1 www.unglobalcompact.org
become part of management, strategy, culture, and day-to-day operations; 2) publish in its annual report or similar public corporate report (e.g. sustainability report) a description of the ways in which it is supporting the Global Compact and its principles (Communication on Progress), and 3) publicly advocate the Global Compact and its principles via communications vehicles such as press releases, speeches, etc.”

It is thus a voluntary commitment, the only constraint being that the organisation can publish an annual blacklist of companies that have signed up to the Global Compact but failed to report to the public on the various points required. Another concern is that information disclosures can give pressure groups ammunition for analyses and lead them to demand greater efforts or better results. Nonetheless, as the number of Global Compact participants grows, it is becoming very hard not to join the signatories and move towards broader communication on the four dimensions. This phenomenon of institutional pressure [Di Maggio, Powell, 1983] may explain why, according to a recent poll commissioned by “The Economist” (Nov/Dec 2007), corporate responsibility is rising sharply in global executives’ priorities. It is also observable that business schools are adding courses and specialized departments in the subject. Rankings and ratings are being developed to put pressure on companies over their non-financial performance, and on business schools for their coverage of these issues in their teaching programmes. An expanding number of NGOs are ready to do battle with multinational companies if they misbehave.

However, this general trend does not meet with approval from all quarters. The very economically liberal journal The Economist, for instance, acknowledges “with regret, that the CSR movement [has] won the battle of ideas” and lists the criticisms that can be made of these practices.

1) “it should be the job of elected government, not of profit-maximizing companies” to help to prevent oil spills, or protect human rights abroad”; 2) “there is nothing wrong with making money. The welfare [the companies] create in the form of jobs, products and innovation dwarfs anything firms are likely to do explicitly in the name of CSR”; 3) “what the executives spend on it is other people’s – i.e. shareholders- money. (…) Their job is to make money for shareholders. It is irresponsible for them to sacrifice the profits in the (sometimes vain) pursuit of goodness².

This craze for CSR, and the conflict of ideas that goes with it, shows that the change has not come about without some pain and resistance. I see it as one sign among others that capitalism is embarking on a new cycle of recuperation, during which a criticism will be assimilated. In the book I wrote with Luc Boltanski [Boltanski, Chiapello, 2005a], we were concerned by a movement whereby 1970s protests were being appropriated for incorporation into capitalist systems. I am convinced that we are now seeing the beginning of a new cycle of appropriation, which is taking seriously a criticism we did not discuss in the book: the ecological criticism. This was very much present in the 1970s unrest, but not to a point where it could reorient capitalism. Of course, the rise of questions related to the dual issue of global warming and exhaustion of fossil fuel resources, which are the two ecological issues that most preoccupy business managers, and also the best documented, to the extent that they have become impossible to ignore, is an essential factor. Yet I think the movement is more general.

Broadening the analytical framework, it can be considered that the large companies’ initiatives are part of what I call the “new reforming nebula”, that is a renewed desire to change the world from the bottom up, by creating alternative economic practices here and now. These range from light reforms (in multinational companies like the ones mentioned above) to subscription to alternative organisational principles (as in the cooperative and voluntary sectors), or creation of new types of business. This is typical of what is known as “social entrepreneurship”: combining professional management practices and a spirit of enterprise, even with a view to making profit, with social or environmental objectives. This hybrid mixture of capitalism and a desire to change the world has given birth for example to a new generation of entrepreneurs in fair trade. Meanwhile, the traditional social economy (mutual companies, cooperatives, non-profit associations) which survived on the margins of capitalist development without providing a really credible alternative, overshadowed as it was by the alternative of real

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socialist countries, appears to be waking up, questioning its practices that have moved closer and closer to imitations of capitalist practices, and regaining some dynamism. The calls for responsible consumerism, which may go as far as slogans such as “Shop, don’t vote” [Hertz, 2001] or take the form of partnerships between critical NGOs and private businesses that would have been unthinkable on such a large scale just 20 years ago, are two other striking phenomena of the current transformation. The historical frontiers between public and private/profitable and non-profitable are being blurred, potentially leading to a major reconfiguration of our economic system.

The proliferation of these initiatives and the profusion of uncoordinated ideas is reminiscent of similar phenomena of what Topalov calls “reforming nebula” seen in the late 19th century [Topalov, 1999], the 1930s [Kuisel, 1981; Boltanski, 1987] and the 1970s [Boltanski, Chiapello, 2005a]. An intense collective work is going on, involving political and administrative personnel, trades unions, think tanks, intellectuals, schools, NGOs, consultants, managers and managers’ groups, and more. This is largely happening due to pressure from the critical movements, some of which can be very radical in order to identify what should be changed in capitalism and how those changes should be achieved. Identification of problems is principally left to the critics, but the responses are constructed collectively by the various actors. One of the results is the construction of compromises between the capitalist logic (profit) and the amendments proposed by the criticism, not all of which are adopted.

The questions I am considering today, and which guide this article are the following: How should this nebula be understood? What new types of compromise are being forged between capitalism and its criticisms? Which criticisms are concerned, and what will be incorporated/left out? Why is a particular criticism previously considered impossible to heed more influential today? What makes it acceptable today? Some criticisms are ultimately heard and take on a role in history, some disappear, are reconfigured or merge, and others are reborn from their own ashes. There are also periods, like the 1980s, when our societies undergo a crisis of criticism, not without a certain depression. Does the theory of cognitive capitalism in particular throw any light on this question of the dynamics specific to the criticism and its current interaction with capitalism? What are the differences between this cycle of recuperation and its predecessors?

To answer these questions, I will first give a more detailed presentation of the framework I intend to use for analysis of the changes in capitalism.

The framework of analysis

The theoretical framework used as a basis here was initially developed to propose an interpretation of changes in business management methods and the accompanying ideologies over a period prior to that concerned by this article [Boltanski, Chiapello, 2005a]. The aim was to understand the shift in France from the post-May 1968 years, with their loudly asserted criticism of capitalism, to the 1980s, when criticism fell silent and the organisational forms on which capitalism’s operation depended underwent profound change, up to the hesitant search for new critical bases in the second half of the 1990s. However, the model goes beyond the merely descriptive, as we also intended to propose a more general theoretical model through this historical example.

One major characteristic of the model of change developed in this way is the role it attributes to the criticism of capitalism in the change in corporate practices and the related ideologies.

This criticism is produced by social reformers and the social networks they belong to. Their output is of course theoretical, aiming to diagnose problems, draw attention to situations considered negative, propose modifications, etc, but also practical, with the implementation of various campaigns belonging to what Tilly [1986] calls the "repertoires of collective action" (propaganda, training courses, demonstrations, strikes, boycotts, etc).

Criticism of capitalism is as old as capitalism itself. We focused in Boltanski & Chiapello [2005a] on two types of criticism that have developed since the 19th century, the social criticism and the artistic criticism, which were both very active in the 1970s. This article also looks at two other types of criticism: the conservative criticism and the ecological criticism.
According to this framework, the forms in which capital accumulation exists at a given time greatly depend on the type and virulence of the criticism levelled at it.

Some of the transformations undergone by capitalism since May 1968 can thus be analysed as a clever integration of the "artistic critique" and its demands for autonomy, creativity, more authentic interpersonal relationships, etc. Similarly, the book suggests that the transformations in progress over the period covered by this article result partly from the integration and adaptation of a certain number of proposals originally formulated in the "social criticism".

The interaction between capitalism on one side and criticisms of capitalism on the other side gives rise to the spirit of capitalism of a given period. The spirit of capitalism is an ideological configuration situated in space and time, which provides:

- a stylistic description of certain features of business operations at a given time (for instance, today we talk of cognitive or informational, international, flexible, connexionist or financial capitalism as opposed to Taylorian, industrial, hierarchical or national capitalism),
- and a normative indication of the right way to behave in order to succeed in this world, explaining how this is fitting, fair and legitimate. In cognitive capitalism, supposed to be highly knowledge-intensive, workers are considered not only highly-qualified but also capable of learning all their lives, working in a network with very different people and renewing their skills regularly to keep up with the pace of innovation. They are symbolic analysts [Reich, 1992], nomads able to catch the spirit of the age and regularly propose new ideas. Creation of value is supposed to have shifted away from the world of industrial production towards qualified, innovative design.

The spirit of capitalism operates both as a source of understanding and legitimisation of capitalism, and an active constraint on capitalism, as legitimisation can only work as long as the reality is not too far from the ideal model. This is where criticism has a role to play: its accusations force capitalism to mend or justify its ways. Failure to do either could cost its legitimacy, and ultimately its operative capacity. Clear-sightedness and dynamism are required if a criticism is to achieve the following: first, narrow the gap between the wonderful world of the spirit of capitalism and the real world, and second, incorporate new constraints into capitalist systems, to compensate for various problems pointed out and monitored by the criticism.

This framework gives criticism a partly functional role in relation to capitalism. Being blind to all the forms of disaster it generates, capitalism benefits from the monitoring and inventions of the critical movements. As long as its profit-based dynamic can continue to operate, it can integrate various constraints and try out a range of systems. This capacity for assimilation is one of the reasons for the impressive longevity of this economic system, which Marx considered doomed to a rapid demise.

But although this role for criticism in the dynamics of capitalism is striking, it is not the only one. Regardless of whether or not it is appropriated/Taken over by capitalism, criticism plays several roles in the change process. This is why, more generally, the forms in which capital accumulation exists at a given time greatly depend on the type and virulence of the criticism levelled at it.

First, criticism produces ungovernability, a situation which naturally encourages changes of method, particularly by business managers, in order to regain the capacity to govern. It can itself produce a crisis, as occurred at the end of the 1960s (the governability crisis came before the economic crisis, which only happened in 1973). Criticism is a reason for change.

It also produces ideas, with the essential part of the reforming vision probably concentrating on the problematic aspects revealed. Some of these ideas will be taken on board and integrated into management practices, maybe because while satisfying the criticism they also serve profit, or because they provide a means of motivating people in a change process (even if the change is desired for reasons other than the pressure exerted by the critics), or even because integration is the only way to silence persistent, inventive criticism whose virulence is beginning to undermine employee motivation and cause disorganisation in the enterprise. It can thus be said that a successful criticism is fated to be taken over and adapted. This, strictly speaking, is the recuperation process.
Criticism also contributes to construction of the normativity that accompanies capitalism, and consequently justifies it while placing constraints on it, making capitalism incorporate the values which just a short while before served to criticise it. Through this shift, capitalism incorporates its enemy’s value system to survive, making a compromise between its tendency to accumulation and the necessity of being able to commit enough people to function and thus respond satisfactorily to criticism. This is another aspect of the appropriation process.

Criticism has another, very different role as a source of “displacement”, motivating capitalism to "escape" to another method or location. If the cost of responding to criticism is considered too high, and if capitalism can find another way of making money, organizing production and managing its workforce, it will do so (without assimilating any of the criticism). Relocating manufacturing to countries with lower wages and social security costs (the French call this “delocalisation”) is a typical example of such displacement.

Criticism can even provide a justification for this displacement process. Because capitalism faces more than one stream of criticism, it can escape from certain criticisms in a move which provides a satisfactory response to another kind of criticism. This is exactly what has happened in France with the change in capitalism over the last 20 years. Capitalism has undergone certain displacements, conducting a revolution in its organization and thus “escaping” social criticism. But it has achieved this with the help of the artistic criticism, which provided the meaning and the grounds for change, guaranteeing widespread commitment to the change process.

In more concrete terms, analysis of the interactions between capitalism and its criticisms takes place at the level of firms, particularly large – multinational – firms that have a major impact on the organisation of our economic system in developed countries, and also on trade flows and international distribution of labour at global level. These firms' organisational practices have a very strong conformation effect on the economic system. The discourses produced by their managers, the people who control them (financial institutions) and the people who assist them (various types of consultant, producers of managerial knowledge) are major sources of ideology, and their influence is amplified by the sheer scale of the economic resources involved and the associated power for influence and action.

A firm-centred analysis of “capitalism”

In Boltanski & Chiapello [2005a], we use a very classical definition of capitalism combining an orientation towards unlimited accumulation3, competition4 and wage-earning5. Today, I prefer to reunite these descriptive elements and stress that when we speak of capitalism, we are placing business enterprises and their operation (not markets) at the heart of our analysis. The enterprise is an abstract economic entity, separate from the individuals who own it or work in it. It is an entity endowed by law with a legal personality, able to sign contracts and manage funds, and its success is measured by the generation of a surplus (profit). According to this definition, a capitalist system is an economic system where more and more social functions are carried out by enterprises.

The enterprise is the location of capital accumulation, the place where profit is created. This is made possible by transfers of ownership to the enterprise by the persons who contribute resources (financial, human or natural) to it. The most fiercely debated transfer in the critical literature on capitalism, because it is the source of exploitation, is the transfer of ownership of work output accepted by the employee when s/he agrees to sell his labour. The enterprise form is therefore inseparable from wage-based employment, which is in fact only one specific form of the firm's general organisation, in which the firm receives resources in exchange for money (or free of charge for certain natural resources), and combines those resources in order to create a product or service which belongs entirely to the firm and can therefore be sold by the firm at a profit kept by the firm. Competition is mainly

3 Capital is cut off from material forms of wealth and can only be increased through continuous reinvestment and circulation. This endows it with a clearly abstract quality that contributes to the perpetuation of the accumulation process.
4 Each capitalistic entity is constantly being threatened by the actions of competing entities. Such dynamics create a perpetual state of concern. Competition does not mean a market with pure and perfect competition. According to Braudel [1981], capitalism does not necessarily require a pure market form: all it needs is the existence of transactions between buyers and sellers.
5 Many of those who hold little or no capital make money from the sale of their labour rather than from the sale of the fruit of their labour. They own no means of production, and therefore depend upon the decisions of those who do own them.
between enterprises, whether they are competing for consumers (on product markets), workers (on the labour market) or financial resources (on the financial markets).

The profit is greater when resources are purchased at low cost and combined in the most economical and ingenious way, and the final product is sold at a good margin, although the enterprise cannot decide on prices independently, being restricted by competition and the power struggles on its various markets. Because it exceeds the capacity of the individual entrepreneur in its ability to attract large amounts of funds and take the risk of combining them into gigantic investments, the enterprise has made large-scale industrialisation possible. Ultimately, profit is monopolised by the deemed owners of the enterprise, who agreed to invest in it without any pre-established contractual remuneration. This possibility of “getting rich quick” when business is good means that new capital willing to bear the risk of the enterprise flocks to the economic world. This drives entrepreneurial creativity and the creeping commodification of our society, for any activity that can be managed in such a way as to obtain income that exceeds the cost of the resources to be combined can take the form of an enterprise. Whenever profit is possible, an entrepreneur may step in.

This definition of capitalism explains how we can describe the spirit of capitalism of a period by analysis of the normative management literature produced by large consulting firms, employers' think tanks, and business school teachers when they are writing for big business. It also explains how the current craze for CSR can be interpreted as a shift in the spirit of capitalism caused by the criticisms made of capitalism. Cognitive capitalism has not escaped criticism from the academic world [Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005a; Moulier-Boutang, 2007; Aglietta & Reberioux, 2004] nor from civil society. The social question has re-emerged with a new relevance as economic inequalities are accentuated and the disadvantaged population is growing in our rich societies, and the recombination of capitalism seen in recent years (described as connexionist, informational, cognitive, etc) has certainly contributed to this. However, another viewpoint is that one critical party involved in the current transformation of the spirit of capitalism has only slight links to the recent recombination of capitalism: the ecological criticism, whose arguments have been more or less unchanged since the 1970s, but only very recently succeeded in inspiring genuine managerial change. For a more intelligible view of the joint dynamics of capitalism (its profit production modes and justifications) and its criticisms, we propose to extend the historical framework of our analysis to incorporate the four major criticisms of capitalism identified.

To answer these questions, I will first give a more detailed presentation of the framework I intend to use for analysis of the changes in capitalism.

**Criticisms of capitalism**

These are strictly speaking criticisms of the enterprise and, more broadly, criticisms of the effects caused by this organisation of economic life.

While labour organisation methods, the techniques used, the products and services manufactured and sold, the quality of the resources used, and the legal constraints surrounding entrepreneurial organisation have changed considerably over time and still display wide variations between locations, the general logic of the enterprise as described above has remained unchanged. It is perfectly clear that we are still in a capitalist regime, despite the variety of different capitalisms. This explains why, despite significant variations over time in the forms of historical capitalism, the major themes for criticism of this economic system were identified long ago. The history of the criticism of capitalism can thus be seen as the history of recombinations of historical criticisms of capitalism, and their translation into terms appropriate for each period.

In France, the capitalist regime could only develop fully after the French revolution that guaranteed free enterprise (allowing anyone to set up an enterprise and make it prosper, subject to no constraint other than his talent and the capital invested) and freedom of labour (allowing anyone to hire as much labour as he wished and could find, or to sell his labour to anyone). Technical advances, particularly in energy production, did the rest, and large-scale industry became possible. In the mid-19th century, after the political and industrial revolutions, all observers agreed that a radically new world had emerged,
bringing with it hopes and disasters [Nisbet, 1966]. The first criticisms of capitalism appeared in the same period.

Three criticisms appeared in the mid-19th century: we called them the conservative criticism, the social criticism and the artistic criticism. The very concept of capitalism in fact derived from criticism’s efforts to understand the logic of this new world, and the devices by which it created the problems identified by its critics [Chiapello, 2006]. These first criticisms were joined in the 20th century by a fourth, the ecological criticism. The book with Luc Boltanski only examined the social and artistic criticisms, in their specific incarnations of the 1970s.

I believe this initial matrix includes most criticisms of capitalism, which have since been constantly reformulated in response to capitalism’s new incarnations in history. I have therefore sought to identify the main types of criticisms of capitalism, using Max Weber’s ideal-types method. Based on those types, we can then examine the combinations and recombinations seen in history. It is also possible to track forms of assimilation of criticism into the capitalist process, and identify which of the critics’ demands are the most easily appropriated.

The ideal-type approach initiated by Weber is particularly appropriate for work on the history of ideas which are attributed a historical role. As he expresses “those "ideas" which govern the behaviour of the population of a certain epoch i.e., which are concretely influential in determining their conduct, can, if a somewhat complicated construct is involved, be formulated precisely only in the form of an ideal type, since empirically it exists in the minds of an indefinite and constantly changing mass of individuals and assumes in their minds the most multifarious nuances of form and content, clarity and meaning.” [Weber, 1965 p. 179-180, emphasis in the original text].

Constructing an ideal-type is a distinctive theoretical operation of particular value to the historian, consisting of establishing a thought construct setting out a number of key characteristics which enable the researcher to capture the phenomenon under examination: “An ideal type is formed by the one-sided accentuation of one or more points of view and by the synthesis of a great many diffuse, discrete, more or less present and occasionally absent concrete individual phenomena, which are arranged according to those one-sidedly emphasized viewpoints into a unified thought construct. In its conceptual purity, this mental construct cannot be found empirically anywhere in reality. It is a utopia. Historical research faces the task of determining in each individual case, the extent to which this ideal-construct approximates to or diverges from reality [Weber, 1965, p. 172].

“It is a conceptual construct which is neither historical reality nor even the "true" reality. It is even less fitted to serve as a schema under which a real situation or action is to be subsumed as one instance. It has the significance of a purely ideal limiting concept with which the real situation or action is compared and surveyed for the explication of certain of its significant components. Such concepts are constructs in terms of which we formulate relationships by the application of the category of objective possibility. By means of this category, the adequacy of our imagination, oriented and disciplined by reality, is judged.” [Weber, 1965, p. 176]. The concept of capitalism we use in this paper is itself an ideal-type, which serves to recount the history of the past two centuries in the form of a narrative. “The abstraction of the ideal-type transforms empirical diversity into differences and similarities which make sense: it brings out both the specific and the general” [Prost, 1996, p. 134, our translation].

The classification of criticisms of capitalism proposed in this work was based on two major criteria:

− What phenomena attributed to capitalism does the criticism aim to denounce? These are what we call the “causes of indignation”: not only are these factors judged negative, they are also considered as the consequences of the capitalist economic system, although the label “capitalist” is not necessarily used by the principal authors. Our own analysis of the aspects of the economic system challenged, and the observation that the organisational form of the enterprise is central in this analysis, is what leads us to consider that a criticism that does not openly declare itself anticapitalist is nevertheless a criticism of capitalism. The causes of indignation are not always rooted in concrete descriptions intended to arouse indignation, but are themselves often theoretically
constructed and expressed in the form of mega-concepts such as the class struggle or alienation. This is why identification of what arouses the indignation of the critical authors cannot be separated from identification of their conceptual universe.

− What are the underlying values in the name of which the criticism is operating? These are not always easily identifiable, and are often deduced from analysing the objects of the authors’ indignation and what they appear to be proposing instead. Careful analysis is often necessary to bring out the underlying values. Boltanski [2008] has shown that not all critical arguments are constructed in the same way. Some, which he calls immanent criticisms, do not need to be founded on an explicit description of the world as it should be. Regarding our own concerns, this is the case for some of the writings in the social criticism and the ecological criticism, which portray a social world on the path to destruction solely by virtue of its endogenous dynamics, which the criticism sets out to describe in simple terms.

The typification process is based on examination of a certain number of writings by critical authors of the 19th and 20th centuries, analysed through standard questions in order to identify their similarities and differences, but also their singularity (this is made possible by the ideal-type method)#. Table 1 gives a brief overview of the various criticisms. Analysis has also shown that there would be a greater number of criticisms if I had decided to classify them based on the solutions they recommend, the alternative models they put forward and the stages necessary to attain them. The social criticism, for instance, could be subdivided into a large number of currents, each at war with the others, with a particular gulf between anarchists and Marxist-Leninists. Additionally, certain criticisms do not propose or consider any alternative, and are content simply to “scream” as Holloway [2005] explains so well: “In the beginning is the scream. We scream. (…) Our scream is a refusal to accept (…) We live in an unjust society but we wish it were not so: the two parts of the sentence are inseparable and exist in constant tension with each other. The scream does not require to be justified by the fulfilment of what might be: it is simply the recognition of the dual dimension of reality. The second part of the sentence (we wish it were not so) is no less real than the first. It is the tension between the two parts of the sentence that gives meaning to the scream. If the second part of the sentence (the subjunctive wish) is seen as being less real than the first, then the scream too is disqualified.” [extracts from chapter 1, Holloway, 2005].

The lack of prospects of change, the conviction that there is one system applicable to all, whose functional, determinist workings destroy part of what we believe and hold dear, and a certain form of fatalism are to be found regularly in the critical writings, which draw some of their force from the very oppressive determinism they present.

# The main questions applied to the texts were: 1) What is criticised in the author’s contemporary economic world? and in the enterprise? 2) What economic and social systems are described? What causes are stated? 3) What arouses the greatest indignation in the author? Are there any typical examples? 4) What values inspire the author’s criticism? Are they explicitly stated? 5) What position is taken in respect of liberty, equality, solidarity, social hierarchy, the State, private property, religion, the family, work, nature, etc? 6) Does the author also criticise other criticisms? Which ones? From what point of view? 7) What alternative “solution(s)” or countermodels does the author propose? Does he propose any? 8) What positive examples are discussed and presented? 9) What is the relationship with action? Is it possible to act? By doing what? Are there choices to be made? Risks to avoid? The authors of the writings subject to this systematic analysis include: Frédéric Le Play, certain encyclicals of the Catholic church, Karl Marx, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, Charles Baudelaire, Charles Gide, François Perroux, Gandhi, André Gorz, Ivan Illich, Herbert Marcuse, Edmond Maire, Arne Naess, Toni Negri and Michael Hardt, John Holloway, Jeremy Rifkin, Naomi Klein, Ulrich Beck, Miguel Benassayag, Noreena Hertz, the collective book published by the association ATTAC, and J.L. Lavi lle. This fragmentary work was enhanced by examination of works presenting the history of social doctrines, anarchism, Marxism, cooperatism and political ecology.
We now turn to a more detailed analysis of these criticisms. One relatively simple way to start is to position them in relation to the values of liberty and equality of individuals constructed by the Enlightenment and conveyed through the French Revolution, which we shall take as a mark of modernity.

The four criticisms in their relationship with modernity.

The "conservative criticism" associates criticism of the wage-earning condition and capitalist modes of management with criticism of the French Revolution and the individualistic values of liberty and equality. The supporters of this current often reminisce about the old society of law and order. They view social hierarchy as important, and are against the idea of equality which they consider an illusion, but wish to associate inequality with solidarity and the mutual duties between people with different status, both within the family and local community, and within the enterprise. They are nostalgic for the guilds which brought together owners and workers in a single organization, and view the class struggle as destructive. The conservative criticism thus expresses its criticism from the standpoint of a bygone world, a past that is no more. However, this does not mean it longs for a return to that past, rather that the past inspires its proposals for change.

The artistic and social criticisms, in contrast, are profoundly attached to Enlightenment values and in different ways both celebrate modernity. Their criticisms are expressed from within modernity, emphasising that the promises of individual liberty, equality and fraternity (i.e. solidarity between free, equal individuals) are not being kept in capitalist society. They base their arguments on the political contradictions of the new liberal world which gave birth to both democracy and capitalism. The social criticism is primarily concerned by the non-fulfilment of the promise of equality, associated to varying degrees by different currents with the false freedom promised to workers. It has its roots in early socialism, which considers that the main problem is the extreme poverty of the workers and the gradual division of society into two antagonistic groups, capitalists and workers. The social criticism denounces private ownership and profit.

The artistic criticism focuses on the question of individual freedom. It was initially developed by artists and writers who criticized the prevailing materialism, utilitarianism and rationalism. They dreamt of an oppression-free lifestyle and praised the virtues of imagination and creativity. Through bohemianism or dandyism, they led alternative lives characterized by a refusal to consider money the most important thing in life. They mocked the narrow-mindedness and meanness of the bourgeois lifestyles. However, despite its name, the artistic criticism is not characteristic of all artists, nor only of artists.
The ecological criticism can be considered post-modern. It rejects the aim of unlimited personal fulfilment as a dream, and re-emphasises human beings’ absolute interdependence at a given moment and in intergenerational form, and more generally the interdependence of all species. Each human being is part of a greater whole from which he cannot dissociate himself. His freedom must be re-examined in this light, and the list of beings to be taken into account as limits on his own will is infinitely longer than for modern man. The holistic aspect of the ecological criticism makes it a potential ally of the conservative criticism.

Coming after almost three centuries of technophilia, the ecological criticism took root in a pessimistic approach to technology, whose unfettered development has endangered humanity on an unprecedented scale [Bourg, 1997]. As a social force, the ecological criticism started to emerge in the mid-1970s, particularly through antinuclear rallies, and has been growing ever since. The ecological criticism usually goes hand-in-hand with one of the three former criticisms, but must be considered as a separate criticism since its main objects of indignation are radically new. It does not simply deplore the destruction of landscapes, the lack of hygiene in new population centres or the ugliness of the industrial world, which was already denounced in the 19th century but seemed in the past to be “reparable” by suitable policies. The ecological criticism is more alarmist: it stresses both the irreversibly detrimental effects of man’s activity for the earth, its genetic inheritance and its ecosystem, and the impossibility of continuing to extend the Western model of capitalist development to the rest of the world.

Each of the four criticisms has played a central role in the various reforming nebulas.

The four criticisms and the different cycles of recuperation

The conservative criticism was the principal source of inspiration in the late 19th/early 20th century reforming nebula, although its success was at least partly linked to the increasingly threatening organisation of the social criticism during the same period. In particular, the threats positioned by the social criticism over the legitimacy of private ownership certainly stimulated social reformism that could take into consideration what at the time was known as the social question (marked by the poverty and insecure positions of the wage-earners, i.e. people who willingly or unwillingly left traditional rural ways of life to be hired by capitalist businesses) without challenging private ownership or the command of capital. Companies’ paternalistic arrangements, and benefit schemes partly financed by employers and managed by the nation’s elites were at the heart of this reforming movement.

The social criticism drew on the economic crisis of the 1930s and the construction of the planning alternative in the USSR to enrich the reforming nebula of the 1930s, by proposing a new form of capitalism directed by the State and corporations, in a compromise with the conservative criticism. Against the inexorable rise of the unions, the conservative criticism reinvented itself in the 1930s, acknowledging the construction of an organised representation of the two classes (employers and workers) whose separation it had unsuccessfully attempted to check a few decades earlier. The new harmony was to come into being through constructive dialogue between the two parties, under the supervision of the State [Perroux, 1937]. The social criticism’s contribution to this edifice was its plan to control the market economy through planning and a State that would guarantee equity between the social classes [for further details on this history, see Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005b; Berland & Chiapello, forthcoming].

The artistic criticism attained a historical role for the first time in the 1970s nebula, but its nuisance power was at the time combined with a renewal of the hardline social criticism. This is the story told in The New Spirit of Capitalism [Boltanski, Chiapello, 2005a].

In the new nebula currently in action, the ecological criticism is clearly at the forefront of discussions, and appears to be reviving and leading to reinterpretation of the three other criticisms. The conservative criticism in particular, which had totally disappeared from the scene, is now in reconfiguration. The artistic criticism and the social criticism, which had been weakened by the last cycle of appropriation as seen, are again producing interpretations and experiments.

We now look at each of these criticisms in more detail, studying their historical developments in order to understand the way they are at work today in the current reforming nebula.
The social criticism

It is the only criticism that really takes the issue of the enterprise as its starting point. We actually owe the concept of capitalism to the social criticism, and that is why no critical movement of capitalism can really afford to ignore this criticism.

Its principal concern is the way an economy built on enterprises operating on markets works, procuring resources, particularly labour, through their capacity to advance money (their capital) and paying out before they see any returns (selling). More precisely, what interests the social criticism is what this economic organisation imposes on the people whose labour it uses: they are reduced to production components in the economic machinery, and lose all value if they cannot find employment. With the social criticism, labour takes on a glorious status and is celebrated as the creative activity par excellence, and the source of the value of things. The essence of man is labour. Man’s history is the history of his self-production via his creative activity. Consequently, any examination of “real” labour and the conditions of the workers who in fact embody the greatness of man reveals several scandals that the social criticism constantly exposes. Not only do the people who are the source of all value draw no benefit from it, being confined to unbearable poverty with no power to decide what they should do (heteronomy at work), while others who do no work but simply own the capital become richer and have the power to command the workers; in addition, the work the workers are asked to do uses only a tiny part of their creative potential, and mistreats or permanently cripples what forms the very core of their humanity. The social criticism cannot be dissociated from a profound Labour philosophy.

This rooting in the question of labour goes hand-in-hand with the central importance for this criticism of the question of exploitation. Exploitation is the schema that can connect the poverty of poor workers and the wealth of the idle rich: under this analysis, revenues from capital are “in fact” produced by labour which is not remunerated on a level commensurate with the full value it produces, since some is taken up by the capital. The Labour philosophy of the social criticism explains why the most recent attempts at reformulation have strived to extend the notion of labour to situations other than that of wage labour. This is the case for Negri & Hardt [2000], who explain that what is being exploited is now social labour as a whole, and therefore the activity of human beings in its entirety; and Holloway [2006], who bases part of his book on the distinction between “doing” and “done”, a direct reference to the traditional distinction between labour (doing) and the product of labour (done). Moulier-Boutang [2007] is also faced with this difficulty, and identifies a new type of exploitation, “degree 2 exploitation”, in which it is no longer the labour force that is being exploited but the “invention force”. What is subject to exploitation is thus the availability in people of the knowledge, skills and capacities for invention accumulated within them (and thus not directly appropriable), which can be profitable for those who buy their labour, but more importantly lie at the source of many “positive externalities”. The cognitive worker is in fact producing something for which he is not being paid.

The social criticism reached an unprecedented scale with the works and militant positions of Karl Marx, forcing everyone to take a position. Through their scope and depth, Marx’s analyses remain a central reference for the social criticism, whatever the element focused on, and however it is attempted to update and adapt them to a changing economic world. Part of the history of the social criticism is thus the history of the study of Marx and the reworking of his ideas in hybrid form with new theoretical frameworks.

The indignation that runs through the social criticism in response to the real situation of labour in the capitalist world (exploitation, which explains the inequality between the working poor and the non-working rich, domination at work, and alienation) lies at the heart of its eventful history and highlights why the social criticism is multi-faceted, with sub-groups fighting tooth and nail over questions such as the role and relevance of the State, trades-unions, the general strike, revolution or reform and the necessary degree of liberty as a principle of social organization.

There are two major groups within the social criticism.

– The first made the exploitation issue its main battleground. Its supporters thought that collectivisation of production means and elimination of market mechanisms would put an end to exploitation by abolishing private monopolization of the surplus and price-setting determined by competition. This
was the path chosen by socialist countries that were unable to abolish either wage labour and work subject to command, or the bureaucratic and hierarchical form of the enterprise, and could only distribute economic flows differently.

In these analyses, economic inequality is the mother of all evils, and should therefore be the first target for action if we are to put an end to domination and alienation. It is because capital is initially unequally distributed that some people must work to live while others can use their capital to buy machines, resources and labour, and combine them to make products that will then be sold at a profit on the market. People endowed with capital can make investments, and have the time to wait for returns on their investments. This initial inequality in ownership is also the source of the domination of capital: because it pays, it can command labour and make it undertake tasks that cripple creative capacities (alienation).

– The second considered that the most urgent need was to release labour from the oppression it suffered, and fought all forms of heteronomy affecting the worker, who never chooses what s/he will do or how s/he will do it but must always obey; obey his/her employer at work, obey the State outside work. For this libertarian type of social criticism, collectivisation without elimination of heteronomy is simply a continuation of oppression by other means. The state planning that replaced market forces in fact increased this oppression. Clearly, after the failed experiments of the socialist countries that not only abolished exploitation at the price of intolerable oppression but also – and this must have been a particularly bitter lesson for the most fervent believers – managed to stifle their country’s whole wealth creation process, the social criticism of today finds itself forced to incorporate a large share of anarchy-inspired propositions in order to retain its credibility. This is broadly the case of the “autonomous movements” that have found various modes of expression in South America and today form a very interesting fringe of the social criticism’s intellectual production, as illustrated by the success of Empire by Negri & Hardt [2000].

It is interesting to note that the State-control type of social criticism which believed that the State could be relied on to solve the social question did not only give rise to the experiments of the socialist countries. It also inspired a formidable wave of adoption of its proposals for assimilation into capitalism, and construction of what is now known as “social democracy”. Thus social criticism also encompasses non-Marxists, the most famous of whom historically are the social technocrats: in the 19th century they were Saint-Simonist, they became planists in the 1930s, then Keynesians after the Second World War; they believed that only technological and economic progress would bring social progress, and that the State and its engineers can and must intervene in the economy to rationalize it and prevent it from producing social disasters. What the economists called Fordism can also be seen as incorporation into capitalism of planning processes, of a range of social protection measures that socialism also promised. The reformers of capitalism who constructed Fordism after the Second World War also sought to abolish exploitation by influencing the distribution processes for the wealth created by enterprises’ economic activities [Berland & Chiapello, forthcoming].

The success of the statist social criticism in both capitalist and communist countries can be credited with pushing aside the libertarian social criticism, which was also savagely repressed on both sides, making its current renaissance partly attributable to the crisis in the statist solution, not only in communist countries but also in capitalist countries.

**The social criticism today**

The current ideological situation is one of mistrust towards all forms of State regulation, which are under attack from all sides: from proponents of free market economics, who consider that the State should not obstruct the workings of the market and free competition between economic agents, seen as the only sources of innovation and performance; from critics (on both the right and the left) of the experiments of the State socialism countries, accused of creating a new totalitarianism, who believe the State can only ever be oppressive; and finally from analysts of contemporary States, who note that these states are in any case incapable of regulating capitalism, which is totally beyond their control and shows no respect for national frontiers. These analysts attribute the crisis in Nation States’ regulation capacity to globalisation (which also results from the firms’ progressive release from their legal and political shackles).
This loss of credibility for the State control approach has nonetheless arisen concomitantly with a renewal in the social question in the most traditional sense of the term. Although globalisation made possible a worldwide recovery for growth and a renewal of entrepreneurial activity, it has ultimately led to an unprecedented return of the most traditional forms of exploitation. The capacity for monopolization of wealth associated with control of capital (I am thinking of actors on the financial markets, or the business management elites) and possession of capital is once again at a high point in its history, breathing new life into the old criticism of exploitation that social democracy thought for a while it could hold in check. In many countries, globalisation has not fulfilled its promises: “labour and environmental conditions deteriorated, the number of people living in extreme poverty failed to decline, and inequality increased. Global awareness of such imbalances and regulatory deficits, and of the need for institutional reform, was reinforced through a series of UN summits and commissions, as well as through the ‘anti-globalisation’ movement” [Utting, 2005, p. 377]. This spurs the social criticism into action, although it is put in an awkward position by the loss of legitimacy of the statist solution. Of course, the statist social criticism has found new reason to act in this situation and is lobbying for the construction of a supranational government. The plan to construct a more unified Europe is a vehicle for a great many hopes. Some would also like the United Nations institutions to be able to create “hard law”. However, the partisans of such solutions are having trouble making themselves heard and have to propose more “transparent”, “participatory”, and “accountable” arrangements than the public solutions of the Fordist age. Libertarian proposals, meanwhile, although seductive to small groups on the margins of the globalised economy and a source of inspiration for new utopian practices (such as the voluntary simplicity movement), are not considered capable of supporting societies as intensive as our own in financial, technological and human capital.

Between anarchist-type movements that want to do away with the State and construct a self-managed society in which market exchanges are re-embedded in interpersonal relationships (a model enjoying a certain degree of success in South America), and neoFordists who think that regulation of capitalism can be reconstructed at supranational level, a new third way appears to be emerging in an attempt to respond to the new social question created by liberal globalisation, without withdrawing from capitalism or constructing a dominant world State which is as undesirable as it is unachievable.

This new “third way”, so named for its similarities with the corporatist, planist projects of the 1930s which helped to invent the post-world war II planned market economy [Kuisel, 1981] and sought to avoid both the excesses of economic liberalism and the State socialism of communist countries, appears to be the unifying aim of the current reforming nebula. Most of the initiatives described in the introduction tend to give large multinational companies a role in society that they had not previously sought. The title of a recent book published in 2007 to mark the 25th anniversary of a group of socially committed French companies (IMS Entreprendre pour la cité) is significant in this respect: “Society – it is the firm’s business?”7. The aim is to campaign for businesses to be socially committed, and some companies were already engaged in this orientation before there were any threats from social movements. The determination to construct more responsible firms without State-imposed obligation has also been taken up by some large international NGOs, which long ago abandoned a mere posture of criticism to help firms change and incorporate more responsible practices into their management (for example, Unicef, WWF, FIDH). In many respects, “the CSR agenda, based as it is on voluntary approaches and a critique of government regulation, is often perceived as an alternative to law. A series of recent proposal are attempting to construct a ‘post-voluntarist’ agenda in which CSR is articulated with (a) complaints procedures associated with a variety of regulatory institutions, and (b) ‘soft’ and ‘hard’ law, which lays down obligations, international standards, rewards, and penalties in relation to corporate transparency, accountability, and performance” [Utting; 2005, p. 384].

The specificity of the social criticism is that it goes straight to the heart of the wealth production process, which it dissects to explain what it does to man as worker, producer of his own survival through labour. It is what capitalism does to labour, and therefore to humanity, that concerns the social

7 La société, une affaire d’entreprise ?
criticism. Based on this premise, a reasonable response to the social criticism would appear to be adaptation of the treatment of the labour force and companies’ relationships with territories through their employees. It is therefore possible to see the CSR movement as a form of response to the new social criticism which does not seek to abolish wage labour or withdraw from capitalism, in a world in which States are considered powerless and perceived as illegitimate, leaving the obligation of constructing new regulations up to the companies themselves.

The conservative criticism

The conservative criticism, like the social criticism, is preoccupied with the social question, but in contrast to the social criticism associates these concerns closely with the question of moral order. This heterogeneous current includes, in particular, social Catholics and 1930s corporatists, some of whose ideas were put into practice under the Vichy government, and part of the cooperative movement. The works of Frédéric Le Play are a good example of this criticism. For conservatives, labour is precious because it contributes to moral education and provides a path to a virtuous life, not because, as in social criticism, it is through labour that man expresses his humanity. This leads to criticism of the idle lifestyle of the rich, who have time to develop animal passions and sensual appetites. Wealth creates bad morals. The lack of work for the poor, who depend on the rich for their work, is also the source of moral disorder. Conservative thought is organic and functionalist. The classes are interdependent, parts of a whole which are naturally differentiated; they experience unequal conditions, but all have equal dignity. A man’s dignity depends on his morals, his virtues, and his merits, which are accessible to all, rich or poor. And the virtue of the rich is to understand that it is their duty to look after those who are poorer.

Consequently, the solutions put forward by the conservative criticism are very different from those of the social criticism. It argues that a spirit of duty should be restored to the governing classes. One of the economic reforms demanded by Le Play was a return to the possibility of leaving unequal shares to one’s heirs (which is prohibited by French law): the people who inherit family firms should be the most virtuous and hard-working family members, so that they can continue to manage the firm to the benefit of the broad community they are responsible for. This makes it necessary to fight to prevent inheritance by the least virtuous, who will use the wealth generated for their own selfish benefit and will squander resources needed by the community for survival. In day-to-day business management, development of personal connections and affection towards personnel is recommended, and the firm owner should have a duty to live on the same territory as his workers, so that he will retain a permanent concern for their living conditions and safety. In particular, it is desirable that a worker should have a small plot of land to cultivate, giving him a guaranteed food supply independent of the wage relationship, through work of his own that no-one can take from him. Finally, various measures should be taken for the education and moral edification of workers.

Like the social criticism, the conservative criticism produced reforms of capitalism. Notably, it partly underlay the development of corporate paternalism and many charities which, while they may not have challenged the way the economy worked, did at least take an interest in those who could not succeed or were the least well-placed to take advantage of the system. Moreover, at least as far as France is concerned, it is impossible to understand the invention of post-war Fordism without this highly specific mixture of social criticism and conservative criticism in the renewal of the economy.

The conservative criticism today

Its conception of an elite whose domination is counterbalanced by duties to the less fortunate and an obligation to construct a fairer world is still with us today. The modern incantations calling for “responsible” or “moral” capitalism are one of its current incarnations. The conservative criticism is still
active today, and as in the 19th century continues to be linked to the religious question. Employers and executives with no publicly declared Christian faith but whose actions are nonetheless inspired by religious commitments are often at the forefront in promotion of more “responsible” practices or campaigning for a new corporate philanthropy. In the United States, many support services for the unemployed are connected with churches. The religious factor thus remains an important factor in the elite’s commitment to reforming practices, and the conservative criticism has the advantage of involving them without challenging the legitimacy of their command.

Being closely related to the protestant work ethic Max Weber (1992) considered to have encouraged the development of a disposition favourable to capitalism, the conservative criticism cannot be a channel for criticism of capitalism’s underlying dynamics. In particular, it does not criticise the right to private ownership, which, in contrast, is seen as the instrument of appropriation of surplus and lies at the core of the social criticism. Nor does it criticise the command of capital, so long as it is moral. For the conservative criticism, it is normal for positions in society to be unequal: what is important is to entrust government to the best. Provided a society is able to put the most worthy and most humane people in positions of power, nothing needs to change structurally in the current economic system. The subordinate levels of society must also learn that what is essential in life is not personal fulfilment and the extension of personal freedom, but a moral life “with meaning”, which relates back to an ascetic ethic of work and a frugal life; poor people’s aspirations to consumerism are unanimously denounced. Thus, what the conservative criticism calls into question is not the enterprise or its operation, only the morals of the people. Although not a radical criticism of capitalism, it remains very powerful and useful for involving the dominant classes in cycles of reform. It can be considered to have been at work in each cycle of recuperation of criticism by capitalism.

The artistic criticism

In contrast to the previous two criticisms, the artistic criticism shows very little concern for the social question or the workers’ lot. Its main concern is the transformation of lifestyles in a capitalist society. The whole life of a human being finds itself shaped by capitalist processes: not only his working life but even his consumption patterns and education. Everyday life is taken over by the capitalist machine. Life has lost all authenticity, depth, unexpectedness. The useful and the functional reign supreme. This is recognisable as a criticism of mass society, the consumer society [Baudrillard, 1970], the self-perpetuating growth of the technical [Ellul, 1964], societies of control and discipline [Deleuze, 1990; Foucault, 1975] submission to the logic of the tool [Illich, 1973], learned needs and indoctrination [Marcuse, 1964].

The artistic criticism is a criticism of alienation, making it an ally of the social criticism which points a finger at alienation in work, but here the accent is on general, widespread alienation, the imprisonment of the human being in a world of commodities. This is an awkward critical position, as it requires the critic to look down from above on the general conditioning. The critic has come out of his cavern and is no longer like his fellow men. This is an aristocratic position [Chiapello, 1998]. It knows that a more refined culture exists and that it is possible to gain access to authentic pleasures that have not been manufactured by the mass society. The artistic criticism will push for elitist cultural policies that do not depend on industries, and school curricula focusing on education of taste and artistic practices. It takes action through creative hijacking of advertising messages, festive occupation of the symbols of modern society [Klein, 2000], a refusal to consume the products of capitalism (particularly television) and possibly modern education and health services [Illich, 1973], a call to self-sufficiency, a position of withdrawal from the world, and occasionally the construction of another world built on self-government. But despite all this potential for action, the artistic criticism is often associated simply with a disillusioned view of the world as it stands, considered as inescapable. The artistic criticism is one of the possible fates of the libertarian social criticism when it extends its criticism of domination to the whole of society [Walzer, 1988], such that the hybrid combination of the two criticisms initiated by the Frankfurt School is now a standard position. This specific hybrid formed with the social criticism is recognisable when the liberation of labour and workers is given centre stage, as in the criticism directed at Taylorism or the authoritarianism of small employers, or in promotion of works councils.
While the first two criticisms inspired the whole reformist effort up to the 1960s, the artistic criticism— which argued more for withdrawing from the world than for reforming action—only became a real threat for capitalism in the 1970s, attacking simultaneously on the fronts of labour (with the development of a refusal to take orders, and also to give them) and consumption (rejection of standardised products). As analysed in *The New Spirit of Capitalism* [Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005a], this sudden movement inspired relatively large-scale transformations in behaviours, the organization of work, and product design. The last cycle of appropriation by capitalism fed on the anti-authoritarian mood to construct a more flexible world in which life was organized by projects, bringing about more individualised, creative and fulfilling careers, with employers no longer telling workers what to do but stimulating their energies.

Unfortunately, these transformations came about at the cost of much lower job security, as all projects come to an end one day. The hoped-for liberation of labour was only partial, and only concerned those who were best-endowed with the skills prized by capitalism. In consumption, a marketing movement began for systematic adoption of challenges and creative hijacking [Klein, 2000]. Everything could be marketed, and some market study bureaus spent their time scrutinising the smallest avant-garde inventions, the latest youth protest movement, the clothes and music found in trouble-spot neighbourhoods, and more. Enterprises, too, sought to offer consumers something different, more attention, a personal relationship, authenticity—a tall order when the aim is for constant quality at reasonable cost (which tends to be achieved through standardisation). These transformations fostered development of lifestyles since denigrated as “bourgeois-bohemian” [Brooks, 2000], in which money makes it possible to buy a certain quantity of authentic, unique products which can never become accessible to all consumers.

**The artistic criticism today**

Despite the efforts made in recent decades to incorporate more authenticity into labour and consumption, it seems that, as analysed in Boltanski & Chiapello [2005] the task is unending, because the very instrumentalisation of the desire for authenticity in managerial practices causes an act to lose its authenticity. Conversely, any attempt to invent cultural forms that are divorced from merchandise is quickly hijacked by marketing, and does not remain long outside the sphere of merchandise [Klein, 2000]. The cycle of recuperation has become both very short and rapidly inefficient.

It also appears that after a period of expansion and autonomy at work, since 2000 we have been witnessing a reinforcement of corporate control, which is by no means unconnected to the digital and internet revolution. The forms of control have changed profoundly, shifting from hierarchical supervision towards a combination of a self-produced visibility (that is a source of auto-control) and more systematic market relationships. The ongoing search for organisational coordination and control of labour collectives, in order to direct them towards objectives selected by a dominant minority, is inextricably linked with the enterprise’s organisational form. The importance of control in organisational design is accentuated by increases in the firm’s size, geographical dispersion [Beniger, 1986] and differentiation [Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967]. Once again, it is apparently awkward for business managers to increase autonomy at work without simultaneously increasing control, which is a negation of autonomy. The extreme forms of freedom at work, epitomised by the autonomous artist, are only comparable with capitalism on a superficial level. For either the artist makes a living from his integration into the system, and is therefore bound by a purchase-sale relationship (and thus ultimately in a position of heteronomy, with job insecurity to boot) or he makes a living from something else, and therefore is only participating in the capitalist sphere in a very indirect way. The forms of autonomy and control change over time, under the pressure of the demands of the artistic criticism and due to the opportunities opened up by new technologies, but the core demands of the artistic criticism appear in the end to be impossible for capitalism to incorporate.

The specific hybrid of self-management with the social criticism that was at the top of the agenda of part of the social movement in France in the 1970s has thus never succeeded in transforming the capitalist world. To succeed, a radical transformation in domination relationships at work would have
been required, and such a change is contrary to the capitalist logic of command entrusted to capital or its representatives.

The self-management ideal is back in fashion today among proponents of a solidarity-based economy (which is different from a social economy in that it is rooted in an aim to transform society*), but they are more interested in constructing another economy alongside the capitalist economy than in achieving change from within [Mauss, 2003]. We know that competition from a different form of economic organisation can be an incentive for capitalist enterprises to change, as demonstrated by the years when the communist bloc countries presented a potentially attractive model, and this is the approach currently favoured by some of the critical movements. The renewed interest in old organisational forms such as cooperatives or mutual societies covered by the current nebula should, in my opinion, be seen as related to the vivacity of the artistic criticism, due to the inability of capitalist forms of organisation to deliver what they want, and to the social criticism’s search for non-state controlled alternatives. These alternatives, in actuality, seem so far to have posed no challenge to large companies, which are even developing a certain interest in cooperative forms with a view to accelerating organisation in developing countries where they wish to set up establishments. Some, for instance, intend to promote supplier groupings in the form of cooperatives (in the absence of capitalists able to construct large groups by takeovers) in order to have local partners of suitable size and conquer new markets.

It might be considered that the capacity of this “alternative economy” to threaten capitalism lies either in its large-scale development and competition, or in harder-line movements starting with expropriation to take possession of properties (freeing them from the tutelage of a few major owners to hand them over to the greater number, with different management rules). That competition can arouse concern was observed in the late 19th and early 20th centuries when buyers’ cooperatives and cooperative bakeries won large market shares in certain areas. These forms spread so widely that some commentators, such as the economist Charles Gide in France (who even occupied a Chair of Social Economy at the Collège de France) were able to interpret the expansion of buyers’ cooperatives as heralding the advent of a new society. The traditional economy’s response consisted of tradesmen setting up business cooperatives and central buying offices. Also in France, mutual insurance (from the establishment of the MAIF by the teachers’ body in the early 20th century to the bikers’ *Mutuelle des motards* in the late 20th century) was developed from the outset with a view to reducing market prices for insurance, which were considered unacceptable for future members; these entities were therefore in head-on competition with capitalist insurance. The second type of concern had been aroused by the solidarity-based economic movements in South America, particularly the Brazilian Landless Workers movement.

Another hybridization of the artistic criticism, with the ecological criticism, is also fairly advanced today, but this time the emphasis is on the capacity to avoid the products of industry and live totally organically, in harmony with nature. This is another ideal whose compatibility with the capitalist sphere is low, because it requires withdrawal from industrial society, mass production and intensive use of technology.

**The ecological criticism**

This criticism, which in my opinion lies at the heart of the new cycle of appropriation we have now entered, puts the question in yet another way. Quite simply, it challenges the ability of the capitalist system to guarantee the future of mankind, beginning with its reproducibility. The focus is no longer on indignation at the worker’s lot, the destructive selfishness of the dominant classes or the disciplinary nature of society. Capitalism, by its very operation, is leading directly to destruction of our civilisation.

On two points, the analysis structures are reminiscent of those developed a century earlier by the social criticism: 1) Capitalism can only operate because it procures resources for which it pays less than the true value. This is the case for most natural resources, whose finite nature is never taken into

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* See the writings of Paul Singer in Brazil, who can be considered as an ideologist of solidarity-based economy (see for example: *Introdução à Economia Solidária*, São Paulo: Editora Fundação Perseu Abramo, 2002).
account, but also applies to damage that is never repaired or paid for by enterprises. All that is needed is to extend the theme of exploitation. 2) Internal contradictions are so intense and systemic that capitalism will self-destruct. Much more worrying than this, however, is the nature of the coming cataclysm, as no radiant future is predicted to follow. All the talk is of wars, famine, epidemics and a return to medieval lifestyles. At least in the social criticism, the advent of communism was only seen as a cataclysm by a fraction of the population. If criticism must use apocalyptic language to make itself heard, then the ecological criticism is off to a good start.

The ecological criticism, like the original Marxist social criticism, takes a determinedly materialistic approach in its demonstration methods, and this certainly has its advantages. As long as it can rely on highlighting insurmountable contradictions, it has no need to brandish values in the name of which capitalism is criticised. All that is needed to convince its audience is to patiently describe the workings of the economic machine and scientifically demonstrate their consequences. The critic is no longer a person who tries to impose his values; he is simply a well-informed observer warning you of the risks you run. On this point, the artistic criticism and the conservative criticism with their clearly visible values are more problematic than the social criticism, which uses economic discourse, or the ecological criticism, which uses the discourse of the life sciences.

One specificity of the ecological criticism in the strictest sense is that it appears to have no preference for any particular political model. It is possible, for instance, to be anti-democracy and pro-ecology. Some even think that only a strong, authoritarian State will be capable of preventing the disaster and accumulated effects of individual selfishness [Jonas, 1984]. Individual liberty can be a bad counsellor, and in deep ecology, equality is to be shared with all living species, who have an equal claim to life. Will men be capable of such sharing without being constrained to do so? In contrast, there are many ecologists who combine their criticism with the libertarian social criticism and promote the opposite political model [Naess, 1989]. These ecologists consider that the problem lies in large-scale industrialisation and the mass society, which can only be effectively fought by fighting the hierarchical and technocratic political model that makes them function.

The fact remains that the lack of any embedded political model makes the ecological criticism highly unusual, and adaptable to all regimes and all types of labour management. Since capitalism depends on a lack of democracy in working life, and therefore has categorically no need for political democracy, there is a definite risk that assimilation of the ecological criticism will continue to erode current liberties. The “risk society” focuses on a lost security to be regained and feeds on fear, which rarely goes well with political freedom [Beck, 1992].

The ecological criticism is also divided between advocates of a return to the organization models of traditional societies that use fewer resources and are more respectful of nature with their modestly-sized self-governing communities (a utopian idea attractive to both the conservative criticism and the artistic criticism, as well as certain libertarian sections of the social criticism), and modernists who believe that only technical progress can help us to save the planet through renewable energies, advances in genetic engineering and agronomy, and information technologies (this option is more compatible with capitalism and the social criticism’s faith in progress). And both these models are gaining ground: on one hand, social self-government, seen as a remedy for the capitalism practised by large businesses that are rejecting more and more workers and making all life artificial, and on the other hand, colossal technical investments to cope with the issues, without bringing about any change in the basic rules of the economic system.

The ecological criticism today

The rise of the ecological criticism, given a considerable boost by the dual scientific discourse on global warming and exhaustion of fossil fuels, appears to be stimulating the other three criticisms, which have all attached their traditional preoccupations to it, and are proposing their own utopias to replace capitalism. In other words, it is not unusual to find an ecological discourse hybridized with other preoccupations.

A part of the ecological current brought up on the technophobic work of the artistic criticism sees natural disasters purely as one more consequence of modern civilisation, and argues for alternative,
more convivial, less industrial lifestyles [Illich, 1973]. The celebration of the wisdom of traditional societies and their homeostasis bears some relation to the conservative dreams. The social criticism also sees this as a new opportunity to promote cooperativist organization of labour, in which labour is released from State control and the dictat of capital, decisions are collective and mutual assistance the rule. These modes of non-capitalist development are considered the only possible solution for poor countries. All-out social experimentation appears to have been reborn in more intense form, and more and more citizens of rich countries (named “cultural creatives” by certain sociologists, see also the movement for voluntary simplicity) are trying to change the ways they live and consume.

In the enterprises, some anxiety is emerging. Some are trying to gain a position on the new emerging markets, and design new ranges of services. Rather than a technophobic retreat, priority is being given to the search for alternative technologies and financial investment in research. As enterprises begin to prepare for a world in which they will have to be more economical, production methods are slowly changing. Businesses are calling for worldwide governance that can level the field for competition and avoid their competitiveness being eroded by environmental obligations that are not compulsory for all. The major focus today is on environmental issues, leaving the related social problems identified by other criticisms of capitalism in the shade.

**Conclusion**

The future will show whether capitalism has once more managed to get out of the tight spot it put itself into, once again at the price of a large-scale transformation in its internal operation and game rules. This is why the term “recuperation”, which we use for convenience, cannot be considered totally satisfactory. Once the transformations are complete we are faced with a capitalism that is no longer quite the same, meaning that the criticism must constantly adjust its position and rework its ideas.

My objectives in this article have been the following:

1) to identify the various ideal-types of criticism of capitalism put forward at different points in history, with a clear statement of their specificity. These clarifications are analytically very useful in examining the history of critical doctrines and making history understandable.

2) to retrace the history of these criticisms through the periods in which they influence capitalism and force it to change, sometimes by assimilating part of the criticism; each one has had its hour of glory, and the history of capitalism can be read as the history of its interactions with its criticism. My aim has thus been to extend the model of change in *The New Spirit of Capitalism* beyond the period it was originally designed for.

3) to understand the specific combination in the current revival of the criticism of capitalism in France, bearing in mind that it relates to the visible problems of the new capitalism, but also to the history of its critical currents. Some options pushed aside for almost 70 years – such as reliance on non-profit making small self-governing production units – may resurface as confidence wanes in the state-controlled solutions that dominated 20th century reforms. The ecological criticism that wants to see production and consumption processes that use less transport and are therefore built on local networks and small-scale production finds itself here in alliance with the libertarian plans to involve every member of small-scale units in decision-making. The conservatives, who advocate solidarity-based capitalism with a human face, rather than anonymous gigantism that discourages individual responsibility, may also find this period favourable.

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20