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Introduction

The starting point for the discussion in this chapter is the widespread, generalized claim that today’s population of 16–24 year-olds – the most recent population to enter the labour markets of the industrialized liberal democracies – lacks a good, old-fashioned work ethic. In these discussions this generation, often referred to as Generation Y, is made knowable – at a very general level (the generalization of generations) – as a population that has a disposition to work that is characterized as being ‘street smart’, ‘lifestyle centred’, ‘independently dependent’, ‘informal’, ‘tech savvy’, ‘stimulus junkies’, ‘sceptical’, ‘impatient’ (Sheehan 2005, see also Berta 2001, Huntley 2006).

Now there is much that could be argued with in this sort of generalization. However, there is not the space here to develop a detailed critique of the concept of Generation Y. Instead, in the discussion that follows, I want to argue that rather than not having a work ethic Generation Y, if there is such a thing, is confronted by the new demands of the globalized, individualized and more precarious labour markets of the twenty-first century. These demands require new work ethics: new orientations to the conduct of a working life.

At the turn of the twentieth century, Max Weber published his provocative and highly influential work, The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism (Weber 2002). At a very general level, Weber’s purpose was to explore the particular virtues that should be seen as attaching to work, and the particular influence that certain Protestant sects had on articulating these virtues. My purpose in making reference to the understandings of the spirit of capitalism that Weber explores is to lay the ground on which I am able to identify and analyse the new work ethics that provide the motive forces for the spirit of twenty-first-century, flexible capitalism.

I will suggest that the essence of the spirit of twenty-first-century, flexible capitalism is that the cultivation of the self is the enterprise to which all efforts should be directed in the pursuit of success, measured in terms of labour market participation. A Protestant
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ethic promised heavenly salvation and a good life now as the outcome of the pursuit of
the individual’s calling. I will argue that twenty-first-century, flexible capitalism is ener­
gized by a spirit that sees in the cultivation of the self an ethically slanted maxim for the
count of a life (ibid.). This new ethic provokes a range of possibilities and limitations for
the conduct of a life by the members of Generation Y: these can only be hinted at here
and will be discussed, in closing, via the later work of Michel Foucault.

Work in flexible, globalized 24/7, twenty-first-century capitalism

If I were to commence this discussion with a claim that at the start of the twenty-first cen­
tury the nature and meaning of work has changed, I would likely provoke some argu­
ment – and some agreement. In many respects workers in the industrialized democracies
are participants in a classic capitalist exchange relation in which they sell their labour
(physical, mental, creative) in variously regulated labour markets. Those individuals and
organizations that purchase labour then have some claims – often negotiated, contested,
arbitrated – over what individuals are expected to do in terms of work processes and
practices; when and where they are expected to do work; and the manner in which they
should think, act and feel in relation to these paid work tasks and duties. Not much has
changed then since the likes of Marx and Engels, and later, Weber were formulating
frameworks for understanding capitalism and work. Yet, in many other ways, the meaning
of work, the place of work in our lives, the times and spaces and places in which work occurs
have been, and continue to be, transformed – particularly as a consequence of profound
social, cultural, economic, political and technological changes over the last three decades.
These concerns have figured prominendy in the sociology of so-called new work orders that
has emerged in the last few decades. In the context of this discussion this literature highlights
the emergence of widespread anxieties and uncertainties as individuals work away at con­
structing a coherent and continuing narrative of self, of identity, in an adult world of work
that is increasingly precarious, uncertain, flexible (Bauman 2001; 2005; Beck 2000). As
Zygmunt Bauman (2005: 27) argues, a ‘steady, durable and continuous, logically coherent
and tightly structured working career is … no longer a widely available option’. In new
work regimes, the idea and the reality of a job for life disappears to be replaced by jobs
that are ‘fixed term, until further notice and part-time’ (see also Kelly et al. 2007).
Richard Sennett’s (1998; 2006) influential metaphor of flexible capitalism is particularly
useful in exploring the issues I raise here. In The Culture of the New Capitalism (2006),
Sennett identifies three key, unfolding, processes shaping the emergence of flexible
capitalism. The changes Sennett describes are complex, contradictory and uneven.
However, his analysis enables me to discuss changes in twenty-first-century work
regimes that foreground the powerful demands for flexibility, both at the level of the
organization, and at the level of the self.

The first of the processes that Sennett (ibid.: 37–47) identifies is the ‘shift from man­
gerial to share holder power’ that has accompanied the freeing of vast amounts of capital
to find optimal returns anywhere around the globe. Takeovers, mergers, acquisitions and
buyouts have become the playthings of globalized, digitized capital. All enabled by the
frenzied activity of wealth-holders seeking wealth creation; and facilitated by the demands
for the interests of fluid, mobile, digitized capital to be accorded more currency/value
than those of more territorially fixed players such as nation-states and flesh and blood
workers (Beck 2000).
These globalized flows of often predatory capital, always on the lookout for bigger, better, faster returns on its risk activity, ushers in the second process energizing the flexibilization of capitalism. Sennett argues that ‘empowered investors’ demand short-term rather than long-term results. As Sennett indicates, there is little new in money chasing money. However, organizations have had to transform their organizational processes and structures to satisfy the fetishization of the short term by impatient capital: ‘Enormous pressure was put on companies to look beautiful in the eyes of the passing voyeur; institutional beauty consisted in demonstrating signs of internal change and flexibility, appearing to be a dynamic company, even if the once-stable company had worked perfectly well’ (2006: 40–1). In Sennett’s understanding of flexible capitalism, this is a profound and continuing driver of change: the re-engineering of the organization – and I would add, of the self – that accompanies the myriad demands for flexibility and innovation signals a highly consequential break from the steel-hard shell of the Weberian bureaucracy.

The third driver of this post-bureaucratic, flexible capitalism is, for Sennett, the information, communication and transportation revolutions of the past three decades that have transformed the nature of all productive activities – service-based, manufacturing, agricultural and mining. As a consequence, twenty-first-century work looks different, is imagined and regulated in different ways. It can be undertaken by micro processor-governed machines and hardware that displace humans on a massive scale. It can be regulated within organizational architecture that, ideally, looks less like a pyramid, is flatter with less layers; and which constantly strives for real time rather than lag time in processes of command and control, but also of innovation and development. These forces are not just felt at the organizational level. They are highly consequential for the individual, who constantly encounters these norms of economic activity, and must make choices, fashion a self, practise his/her freedom in the spaces structured by these demands and expectations: How flexible are you? How enterprising are you prepared to be/become?

New work ethics: the self as enterprise

In The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, Weber’s concern was with investigating the relationship between a Puritan/Calvinist view that hard work, done well, was its own reward, and a so-called spirit of capitalism. For Weber, the concept of the spirit of capitalism is an ideal type that is useful in trying to analyse the diverse, sometimes contradictory, motive forces of capitalist activities, and the behaviours and dispositions suited to these activities. Weber saw in the Protestant Ethic only one of the motive forces for the emergence of rationalized capitalism.

Weber provides an illustration of what he means by the spirit of capitalism via a ‘document of that “spirit” which encapsulates the essence of the matter in almost classical purity’ (2002: 8–9). What follows in The Protestant Ethic is an extended passage from the works of Benjamin Franklin (Necessary Hints to Those that Would be Rich (1736)), and Advice to a Young Tradesman (1748) – a passage that includes the following:

Remember, that time is money. He that can earn ten shillings a day by his labour, and goes abroad, or sits idle, one half of that day, though he spends but sixpence during his diversion or idleness, ought not to reckon that the only expense; he has really spent, or rather thrown away, five shillings besides.
And:

The most trifling actions that affect a man’s credit are to be regarded. The sound of your hammer at five in the morning, or eight at night, heard by a creditor, makes him easy six months longer; but if he sees you at a billiard table, or hears your voice at a tavern, when you should be at your work, he sends for his money the next day; demands it, before he can receive it, in a lump.

(Weber 2002: 9–11)

Weber makes no claims for the representativeness, even truthfulness of Franklin’s incitements and advice. They are, as he stressed, illustrative of the concept that he has a mind to describe and explore. Indeed, for Weber, there is little doubt that what he calls ‘this little sermon’ is the ‘characteristic voice’ of the ‘spirit of capitalism’, although clearly it does not contain everything that may be understood by the term. Moreover, the essence of this “philosophy of avarice” is the idea of the duty of the individual to work toward the increase of his wealth, which is assumed to be an end in itself. This spirit has, for Franklin, ‘the character of an ethically slanted maxim for the conduct of life [Lebensführung]. This is the specific sense in which we propose to use the concept of the “spirit of capitalism”’ (Weber 2002: 11, original emphasis)

A detailed critique of The Protestant Ethic is beyond the scope of this chapter. However, this methodological frame – in which Weber uses the homespun philosophy of Franklin to illustrate the ideal type of the spirit of capitalism – is generative for the work I want to do in identifying the spirit of twenty-first-century, flexible capitalism.

100 WAYS TO SUCCEED #5:
TARGET #1: ME!

Whatever. (See below.) …
Is there such a thing as ‘powerlessness’?
No! No! No!
Take charge now!
Task one: Work on ourselves.
Relentlessly!

100 WAYS TO SUCCEED #17:
WORK ON YOUR STORY!

He/she who has the best story wins!
In life!
In business!
Your career is … a story.
HE/SHE WHO HAS THE BEST STORY WINS!
SO … WORK ON YOUR STORY!

MASTER THE ART OF STORYTELLING / STORYDOING / STORY PRESENTING!

(Peters (2005) 100 ways to help you succeed/make money, pp. 8–31, original emphases and punctuation)
What we see here are exhortations, incitements, advice for self-help, self-motivation, self-management and self-transformation that can be found in many other cultural spaces (physical and virtual) in globalized, twenty-first-century, flexible capitalism. They have a certain cultural significance, as ethically slanted maxims for the conduct of life, because they have significant resonance in a globalized information-scape: a large part of which is devoted to producing and providing advice on how to be successful and make money. In this sense, it is of less concern how many people read or take up Peters’ suggestions. Although his renown and success would suggest that he has a substantial audience. Rather, the interest here is in the forms of knowledge of the self (rationalities) that frame these tips; and the techniques that are offered for working on the self, for transforming the self in the pursuit of success and wealth.

In this sense, I can argue that the essence of the spirit of twenty-first-century, flexible capitalism – expressed with passion and exuberance by Tom Peters – is that the cultivation of an entrepreneurial self is the calling to which individuals should devote themselves. That is, the self is the enterprise to which all efforts should be directed in the pursuit of wealth and success. Twenty-first-century, flexible capitalism is energized by a spirit that sees in the cultivation of the self – as an ongoing, never ending enterprise – an ethically slanted maxim for the conduct of a life. The cultivation, conduct and regulation of the self is a relentless project shaped by a variety of frameworks that promise to support, facilitate and energize this project. This spirit is analysable as an institutionally structured, individualized entrepreneurialism; a structured series of incitements to manage the lifecourse as an entrepreneurial DIY project (Beck 1992). Here, Continuous Quality Improvement migrates from organizational process to processes of self-formation.

Looking forward in closing: Foucault and the critique of new work ethics

At the start of the twenty-first century, the ways in which large numbers of us in the industrialized democracies sell our time, skills and efforts in the world of paid work are damaging for our health and well-being and our relationships. These ways of working require us to commit more to the organizations we work for, and they subject us to an intensification of the expectations related to our performance. For more and more of us, work, and the salvation that it promises, are an increasingly precarious, stressful, unhealthy experience (Bauman 2005).

Quite possibly, if the generalized characterizations of Generation Y have any purchase, young people experience this uncertainty, precariousness and demands for flexibility in different ways as they enter the globalized labour markets of twenty-first-century, flexible capitalism for the first time. There is much research to be done on the nature and consequences of this developing experience. In closing I want to sketch a framework that can shape this analysis and critique.

In his later work on the care of the self and governmentality Michel Foucault (see, for example, 1986; 1991) was largely concerned with analysing the government and regulation of freedom; and the ways in which individuals in the liberal democracies are encouraged and compelled to develop a self that is capable of practising a well-regulated autonomy. In this sense, we are understood as individuals who practise our freedom in limited fields of possibility: fields that are shaped by relations of power and forms of knowledge about the ways in which the self should understand and govern itself.
We can, in this sense imagine labour markets as fields of possibility shaped by ethically slanted maxims for the conduct of a life. New work ethics provide frameworks for coming to know and understand how one should act, behave and think in relation to specific ends, and in a particular, limited, field of possibilities. These ethics are culturally and historically located; they are produced and circulated within generalized, and more specific, configurations of time and space – such as families, relationships, schools, offices, factories, communities. These frameworks function as truths in terms of the ways in which they are translatable through time and space; in the ways in which they have, and produce, significant resonances in particular times and spaces.

Foucault's analytical framework throws into relief questions about the ways in which we practise our freedom, and are governed as subjects who are free to choose, and who must carry the consequences of the choices we make (Rose 1999). To practise one's freedom is to develop certain behaviours and dispositions in fields where others seek to manage or encourage appropriate orientations to work and its place in the conduct of a life. The research challenge here is to explore some of the emerging, and longer-term, outcomes of processes of individualization that compel members of Generation Y (and all of us who want to work and conduct a life in the liberal democracies) to be involved – relentlessly – in the forms of self-improvement demanded by globalized, flexible capitalism.

100 WAYS TO SUCCEED #23:
DESIGN MEANS YOU!

Sure, 'design' means DHL spending Gazillion$ on...YELLOW. IT'S THE NEW BROWN.
But that's not all.
I 'am' design!
It's near the Heart of the Matter in a BrandYou World.
(Hint: We live in a BrandYou World...like it or not.)
You == Desire to Survive == BrandYou == Branding Fanatic == LoveMark Fanatic == Design Fanatic.
Q.E.D. (Peters, 2005, 100 ways to help you succeed/make money, pp. 41–2)
QED, indeed.

References


