

# The Ambiguous Attractiveness of Mobility

## A View from the Sociology of Critique

Presskorn-Thygesen, Thomas

*Document Version*

Final published version

*Published in:*

Ephemera: Theory & politics in organization

*Publication date:*

2015

*License*

CC BY-NC-ND

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Presskorn-Thygesen, T. (2015). The Ambiguous Attractiveness of Mobility: A View from the Sociology of Critique. *Ephemera: Theory & politics in organization*, 15(4), 725-753.

[Link to publication in CBS Research Portal](#)

**General rights**

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

**Take down policy**

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us (research.lib@cbs.dk) providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Download date: 26. Sep. 2021





# The ambiguous attractiveness of mobility: A view from the sociology of critique<sup>\*</sup>

Thomas Presskorn-Thygesen

## abstract

This article examines the forms of mobility that characterize contemporary work life. In doing so, it applies the theoretical framework associated with Luc Boltanski's *sociology of critique* (Boltanski, 2012 [1990]; Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006 [1991]) and argues that this framework offers a fruitful and important perspective in conceptualizing and understanding the forms of mobility that are becoming increasingly prevalent in today's knowledge work. The sociology of critique allows one to chart the economic and historical conditions of mobility critically, while its sociology of morals also allows us to explore the distinctly *normative* side of new forms of mobility without succumbing to a celebratory picture of work-related mobility. More specifically and in the context of the 'kinetic elite', the article explores how Boltanski and Chiapello's (2005) analysis of a 'projective order of worth' can help us understand the attractiveness of constantly being 'on the move'. Qualitative data from three exemplars of this elite group of workers is used to illustrate how the ideal of being mobile is perceived as an often problematic imperative, but also as one which is nevertheless rewarding and worth living up to.

---

\* I would like to thank Directeur d'études Laurent Thévenot (EHESS) and the participants at the 'The sociology of conventions and regimes of engagement' workshop at Copenhagen Business School in May 2014 for taking the time to carefully comment on an earlier draft of this article. Furthermore, I must thank the two anonymous reviewers and *ephemera* editor Bernadette Locker for suggesting numerous improvements to the present article.

## Introduction

In the Old Testament, two conflicting pictures of God's relation to movement are presented: According to the first, the realm of God can be expanded by building temples that define the geographical and spiritual boundary of Judaism towards an immobile point, namely God's permanent position. According to the second picture, however, the center of Judaism is not immobile; rather, God is taken to dwell directly in the Ark of Covenant. Each time the Jews move position, they move the Ark of Covenant and thereby the very presence of God. In the Exodus from Egypt, other slaves are left behind, but no territory is lost or gained; rather, the center of Judaism and divinity as such is moved. This is essentially what Deleuze (1977: 149) meant by paradoxically stating that nomads do not move: nomads seem to continually displace the center according to which their movement could be defined.

This change in conception adopted in *The Book of Exodus* seems like a perfect fable for the conception of mobility in today's tribe of urban nomads employed in creative or knowledge-intensive industries. As Bauman's (1998, 2007) studies suggest, novel forms of mobility create both an elite (including e.g. the versatile consultant, banker or designer working on geographically dispersed projects) as well as a new class of poor (i.e., low-level workers servicing the mobile or immigrant workers forced into mobility). On a global scale, the new elite of successful urban nomads may thus be surrounded by immobile 'slaves' working under less favorable conditions, but they are themselves indifferent to location as they constantly shift from one project to the next without remaining bound to any center. Urban nomads therefore seem to inhabit a perhaps poorly defined, but nevertheless attractive state of constant movement (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005).

This nomadic figure in today's capitalism has been discussed extensively by the 'mobility turn' within social theory (e.g. Adey, 2009; Büscher et al., 2010; Cresswell and Merriman, 2012; Urry, 2007) as well as by organizational studies debating work-related mobility (e.g. Costas, 2013; Garsten, 2008; Meerwarth et al., 2008; Muhr, 2012). Accordingly, it is now well-known how this nomadic figure relates to a number of changed 'features' of western working life: life-long employment is a rarity, working activities are no longer restricted to one place or specific hours, and work is increasingly being organized around short-term projects (e.g. Elliott and Urry, 2010; Sennett, 2006).

In aiming to contribute to the growing literature on work-related mobility, I address what remains a hotly debated issue, namely, the moral and normative significance of changes pertaining to work- and profession-related mobility. As

pointed out by a number of commentators (e.g. Bærenholdt, 2013; Kaplan, 1996; Sheller, 2011; Urry, 2000), research on novel forms of mobility tends to split into either celebratory accounts of mobility that privilege a nomadic or ‘cosmopolitan subjectivity’ (Beck, 2006), or pessimistic accounts that characterize mobility as ‘merely an ideological veil’ (Pellegrino, 2011: 2) that masks a renewed form of economic exploitation and various forms of inequality (Ohnmacht et al., 2009). As Ekman (2013: 294) along with Costas (2013) point out, the disagreement concerning the ‘moral content’ of mobility is also prevalent within organization studies: Has capitalism finally found a way of accommodating freedom of movement with efficient ways of organizing, as argued by optimistic strands within the management literature (e.g. Arthur and Rousseau, 1996; Kanter, 2003; Kotter, 2008)? Or are the changes rather, as argued by more critical voices, to be interpreted as a primarily economic expansion of profit maximization into the private life of employees (Smith, 2006; also cf. Grey, 1994; Thompson and Ackroyd, 1995)?

In answering calls for approaches that broaden existing theoretical repertoires and go beyond one-sided conceptions of work-related mobility (Costas, 2013), this article explores the theoretical framework developed by Boltanski’s *sociology of critique* (Boltanski, 2012 [1990]; Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006 [1991]; Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005) and argues that this framework offers a fruitful perspective. Its focus on the evolution of capitalism allows one to chart the economic and material conditions of mobility critically, while its sociology of morals also allows us to see the distinctly *normative* side of current demands for mobility without succumbing to a celebratory idea of a new moral utopia. While the controversial overall diagnosis of *The new spirit of capitalism* (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005) has received extensive attention in the literature, there is still, as argued by Boxenbaum (2014) and Pernkopf-Konhäusner (2014), something to be gained by looking more closely at its underlying theoretical framework, including the *order of worth* model developed in the earlier works of Boltanski and Thévenot (1989, 1999, 2006 [1991]). In the context of this article, I specifically focus on how this underlying framework implies going beyond the dichotomy between economic value and moral values in defining mobility while highlighting how the order of worth model bears on the investigation of the legitimacy and attractiveness of work-related mobility.

In addition, I will address the attractiveness of mobility by applying the sociology of critique perspective to the context of the ‘kinetic elite’ (Costas, 2013; Cresswell, 2006). Following Cresswell (2006), the ‘kinetic elite’ designates a group of highly versatile and often well-paid and mobile project workers employed in knowledge-intensive industries, such as diplomacy, banking (Elliot and Urry, 2010), or consultancy (Costas, 2013). Given the ambivalence of forced forms of

mobility prevalent among immigrant workers (Bauman, 1998, 2007) and temporary workers (Garsten, 1999) in particular, one should refrain from asserting mobility as universally attractive. Nevertheless, Costas (2013: 1476), following Augé (1995), has rightly noted that mobility does possess a ‘power of attraction’ in the context of creative or knowledge-intensive work. Equally, Garsten (2008: 50) points out that mobility has indeed acquired a ‘prestigious and glamorous ring’. The question explored here is *why* this is the case: Why is a highly mobile and project-oriented working life attractive in the first place? In discussing this question, I add to the mainly theoretically driven re-interpretation of work-related mobility by referring to accounts given by three exemplars of the ‘kinetic elite’: (1) a successful entrepreneur and consultant, (2) an international UN diplomat and (3) an international private banker. This allows for an exemplary illustration of the mobility experienced by the elite group of highly mobile and well-paid workers who belong to what Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) call ‘projective capitalism’. My analysis does not reveal an experience of mobility as being free of tension and ambiguity. Even in this elite group, the ideal of being mobile is often perceived as a problematic imperative, yet nevertheless rewarding and worth living up to. The empirical exemplars thus illustrate how the attractiveness of a working life ‘on the move’ is articulated in distinctively normative terms.

The article is structured as follows: First, I present the theoretical background to the sociology of critique and argue for the necessity of conceptualizing mobility beyond an opposition between economic value and moral values. Second, I lay out the conceptual architecture of Boltanski and Chiapello’s approach and contrast it with other positions in social theory to clarify its distinctive focus and ability to analyze mobility. In doing so, I focus on how mobility is implicated in Boltanski and Chiapello’s analysis of the emergence of a specific projective form of capitalism and ‘projective order of worth’ more generally. Third, I briefly introduce the method used in the analysis of the empirical material before ending with an analysis and discussion of how mobility functions as a motivating and normatively tainted category among the ‘kinetic elite’.

### **Conceptualizing mobility beyond the opposition of ‘value’ and ‘values’**

The key theoretical ambition of Boltanski and Chiapello’s *The new spirit of capitalism* (2005) and of French pragmatic sociology more generally (e.g. Boltanski and Thévenot, 1989, 2006 [1991]; Thévenot, 2006; see also Cloutier and Langley, 2013; Jagd, 2011; Stark, 2009; Wagner, 1999) is the breaking of the so-called Parsonian Pact. According to ‘Parson’s Pact’, moral values are to be studied by sociology and philosophy, while economic value is to be studied by

economics (cf. Velthuis, 1999 for a historical analysis of the emergence of the Parsonian Pact within the social sciences). Rather than accepting such a split, Boltanski and Chiapello encourage a short-circuit of the rigid distinction between a sociological concept of values and an economic concept of value. Their explicit theoretical ambition is therefore to chart the interconnections between the normative constitution of society and the productive forces of capitalism. Parson's Pact suggests that we must choose a single vantage point – either value or values, either economy or social relations (Stark, 2009). Such a forced choice, I suggest, leads to an inept way of looking at the current stress on mobility within organizations and beyond. If analyzed as a purely social phenomenon, mobility would seem like an idle cog with no real economic causality, and if looked at from an exclusively economic viewpoint, mobility would seem like a mere advertising trick for an already inexorable economic logic.

Instead, one must look at work-related mobility as a substantial moral phenomenon with real economic, social and organizational effects. Such an approach has also been put forward by many of the refined attempts to develop a non-reductive account of how moral codes and ethics function within organizations, and by attempts to chart how employees and managers constitute themselves as specifically moral subjects (e.g. Clegg et al., 2007; Ibarra-Colado et al., 2006; Loacker and Muhr, 2009; Muhr et al., 2010; Weiskopf and Willmott, 2013). This tradition of practice-based approaches to business ethics has covered a diverse range of topics (for a brief overview see Wray-Bliss, 2009), and although the sociology of critique limits its focus to the orders of worth that guide compromise and conflict, these two perspectives concur in two important ways. Firstly, they treat the practical base of morality as crucial; and secondly, they regard morality as an empirical object to be studied rather than a set of abstract, prescriptive standards. Nevertheless, what makes the detour into re-reading and engaging with Boltanski's sociology of critique worthwhile is the particular connections to the broader arrangements of capitalism and social critique that it allows one to make.

In making such connections, *The new spirit of capitalism* makes itself vulnerable to objections from several sides. Some have advanced the critique that the book is too obsessed with the inevitable economic logic of capitalist exploitation (basically, it is too Marxist), whereas others have complained that it is too idealistic and insufficiently concerned with the dynamics of financial capitalism in failing to locate its discussion of 'spirit' within political economy; in other words, it is not Marxist enough (see Parker, 2013; Willmott, 2013). In breaking Parson's Pact, Boltanski and Chiapello's aim is, however, to avoid *both* economic reductivism and naïve forms of idealism (Boltanski, 2011b). More specifically, they argue that the analysis of the qualitative changes in the modes of organizing

during recent decades cannot be described exhaustively in terms of neo-classical economy or in classical Marxist terms as a way in which firms increasingly exploit what economists would call ‘positive externalities’ (knowledge, creativity, innovation, the desires of movement and freedom, etc.). Rather, these changes must also be seen as containing a distinctively moral side – a correlative modification of the *spirit* of capitalism – which could justify changes in the first place. Likewise, the change in the conception of mobility among organizations and the labour force cannot be described merely as an empty ideological effect of a much more thorough exploitation of labour. It must also be seen as containing a genuine way of evaluating typical social situations and of justifying action.

However, Willmott (2013: 101-103) is right to point out that it is an impediment to the application of Boltanski and Chiapello’s framework that they have not been very generous in describing their method *vis-à-vis* other approaches in social theory. Accordingly, I will place the underlying framework of Boltanski and Chiapello’s analysis in relation to a series of reasonably well-known theoretical positions by addressing the question: What conceptual architecture is required for breaking the Parsonian pact and for conceptualizing work-related mobility as both a moral and economic phenomenon? I will first address the question of what norms and moral values amount to in their account and then proceed to describe the interrelations of values with the economic phenomena of today.

*Examining norms: Postmodernism or Habermas? No thanks!*

What theoretical commitments must one take on in order to engage in a serious study of the normative frameworks that are active in today’s economy? First of all, it is necessary to distance oneself from the naïve ‘brand’ of postmodernism, which postulates that the dissolution of the grand narratives of modernity leads to a condition where all normative demands cease and where all forms of justification are equally valid and therefore essentially all invalid (cf. Callinicos, 1991). In opposing such views, Boltanski and Chiapello ally with Weber (1968: 31-33) in maintaining that the foundational question of sociology does not concern which norms are theoretically valid or invalid; rather, the foundational question concerns which norms are actually in force in contemporary societies. The basic problem is not the *abstract validity* of particular norms, but rather the *actual efficacy* of societal norms. On this level, it can easily be ascertained empirically that certain norms operate in contemporary society. When considering the prevalence of values such as ‘adaptability’, ‘flexibility’ or the importance of ‘staying on the move’ in the present labour market generally, and especially among the ‘kinetic elite’ (Costas, 2013; Cresswell, 2006; Elliot and Urry, 2010), it is therefore irrelevant whether such values are theoretically valid

or whether they belong to an outdated form of modernity, for it is a matter of their actual efficacy.

Boltanski's pragmatic sociology further opposes the critique of postmodernism articulated within Habermasian sociology (cf. Habermas, 1990). The Habermasian program of universal pragmatics has also emphasized normativity as an essential feature of contemporary society, but it has conceived normative prescriptions as clustered around a single, universal and quasi-transcendental structure. In contrast, Boltanski has empirically charted a plurality of mutually irreducible moral grammars. Boltanski's earlier work with Laurent Thévenot thus aims to identify the different and actually existing moral grammars within which actions and actors are evaluated (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006 [1991]).

The emphasis on the actual rather than ideal forms of morality is important in understanding the aim of the sociology of critique and the sense in which mobility might be said to have a moral function within contemporary capitalism. The aim is not, as for Habermas and other strands of critical theory, to develop a morally informed sociology – an, as it were, *moralizing* sociology – but rather to develop a sociology of morals and critique. In that sense, the sociology of critique supplements critical sociology, which bombards practice with its own prescriptions, by marking a return to the Weberian ambition of studying actually existing forms of social morality. The guiding idea, which has also recently been called for in organization studies (Boxenbaum, 2014; Brandl et al., 2014; Cloutier and Langley, 2013; Pernkopf-Konhäusner, 2014), is that the actors themselves are competent critics. Far from being 'judgmental dopes' (to use Garfinkel's expression), actors are instead deemed capable of competently navigating different moral grammars in justifying their actions and resolving conflict. Within this investigation, morality is connected empirically to a series of *orders of worth* that each contain (1) a specification of value, (2) a definition of worthy individuals and (3) a moral grammar for the evaluation of actions.

Boltanski and Thévenot (2006 [1991]) traced six such competing orders of worth in contemporary societies: the *inspirational* regime, the *domestic* regime, the regime of *fame* or opinion, the *civic* regime, the *market* regime and the *industrial* regime. These regimes all delineate forms of relative agreement that actors utilize in identifying social situations and in justifying their position in relation to pertinent conflicts or dilemmas. In *The new spirit of capitalism*, a seventh order of worth is added in which mobility is a key element, namely the projective regime [fr. *la cité par projet*]. As Bruno Latour (2005: 23) has noted, the mere move from the assumption that agents justify actions within *one* moral frame to the assumption that several such frames may be implicated adds an impressive analytical and empirical strength to the sociology of critique. These different



regimes have incommensurable moral grammars when compared with each other, but what is common to all of these regimes or orders of worth is that they serve as forms of justification in the process of finding legitimate solutions to social conflicts. In this way, social conflicts spanning from local disputes in a nursing home over debates on research strategies to collective wage negotiations can be seen as clashes between different procedures for legitimate justification.

In the later sections focusing on the ‘kinetic elite’, I will elaborate on the sense in which mobility is implicated in moral conflicts and contributes to determining a specific sort of worthy individual. Having sketched the analytical status of societal values and having pointed to a few places in which such values and forms of moral justification impinge on the study of mobility as a distinctively moral phenomenon, I will now look at how this connects with the economic diagnosis of the present put forward in *The new spirit of capitalism*.

### *Capitalism saturated with values*

Economists and organizational theorists have spoken of the new ‘knowledge economy’, ‘experience economy’ or ‘creative economy’, but too often such changes in the conditions for value creation have been articulated as if they were not particularly connected to capitalism (Kristensen, 2008: 88). There are notable exceptions – one could mention the theory of ‘soft’ capitalism (Thrift, 1998) or ‘informational’ capitalism (Castells, 1996; Hardt and Negri, 2000) – but what is distinctive of Boltanski and Chiapello’s work is their sociological engagement with organizational phenomena and ideas.

Rather than rejecting the concept of capitalism as a leftover from the 1970s, Boltanski and Chiapello perform a nuanced critique of the Marxist concepts of ideology and false consciousness while maintaining the Marxist insight into the formal character of capitalism. This formal character is expressed by Boltanski and Chiapello’s (2005: 371) concise definition of capitalism: ‘Capitalism [is] a process striving for an ever greater accumulation of capital measured by a monetary value’. As a pure procedure for the accumulation of monetary value, capitalism is not essentially tied to any set of ethical values or even to any specific sort of political system. Boltanski and Chiapello are by no means alone in maintaining this insight. Deleuze and Guattari have similarly emphasized the formal character of capitalism by analyzing it as an ‘axiomatic’ (1987: 436), just as Slavoj Žižek (2006: 181) has pointed out that the present globalized capitalism is not tied to a particular culture or political system. Today, one can find western capitalism, fascist capitalism, arabic capitalism and even, as underlined by a recent special issue of *ephemera*, communist capitalism (Beverungen et al., 2013). Accordingly, the originality of Boltanski and Chiapello’s approach does not lie in

their formal determination of capitalism, but rather in the consequences that they draw from this insight: Capitalism is formally a value-free procedure of accumulation, but that is *exactly why* it is always saturated with norms and values. Since capitalism in its formal sense does not contain its own justification immanently, it must seek and lend itself normative support from other sources. Consequently, it is precisely because of its formal normative neutrality that capitalism is always normatively saturated and driven by a particular set of values (Presskorn-Thygesen, 2015).

When it comes to the specific content of such a set of values, capitalism is paradoxically sensitive to the forms of critique that it is subjected to. As Boltanski and Chiapello (2005: 27) write, capitalism ‘needs its enemies, people whom it outrages and who are opposed to it, to find the moral supports it lacks and to incorporate mechanisms of justice whose relevance it would otherwise have no reason to acknowledge’. For Weber (2001 [1905]), the ‘spirit’ of capitalism denoted the set of ethical motivations which, although totally foreign to the logic of capitalist accumulation itself, could support the calling of making money. Critique serves a similar purpose for Boltanski and Chiapello (2005: 20), since capitalism, faced with the need of justification, latches on to the pre-existing normative and critical positions whose legitimacy is already guaranteed. To these pre-established normative and critical positions, capitalism ‘only’ adds one distinctive twist, namely, the exigency of capital accumulation. It is the historical development and integration of such forms of critique, particularly from 1968 onwards, that is the primary empirical object of study in *The new spirit of capitalism*.

The focus on the historical development marks a departure from Boltanski’s work with Thévenot (2006 [1991]), for while the exact historical genesis of the different orders of worth tracked in the earlier work were left somewhat unclear (cf. Lepetit, 1995) *The new spirit of capitalism* can be seen as responding to that challenge by charting the genesis of the projective order of worth and insisting on its historicity. For several decades, disciplines such as business economics, sociology and the psychology of work found it sufficient to denote the historical period after 1968 with a number of negatively defined terms such as the ‘post-industrial’ society or ‘post-Tayloristic’ forms of organizing (Kristensen, 2008). Contrary to such a tendency of merely adding the prefix ‘post’, Boltanski and Chiapello supply us with a new, positively defined and historically specified diagnosis by suggesting that today’s form of capitalist organization is of a distinctively *projective* form. In the following section, I will address the characteristics of this new form of projective capitalism and then proceed to describe how it emerges as a historical response to criticism, thus adding to Boltanski and Chiapello’s analysis by focusing on mobility specifically.

*Projective capitalism, critique, and the demand for mobility*

What is distinctive about capitalism after 1968 – considered through a purely economic lens – is the degree to which knowledge, creativity and networks become increasingly important to the economic system (Moulier-Boutang, 2012). Even though classical industrial forms of production are perhaps still *quantitatively* dominant on an international scale, the new forms of projective and cognitive modes of productions are *qualitatively* dominant. In other words, the new forms of production relate to industry as industry related to agriculture in the 19<sup>th</sup> century: as the qualitatively, if not yet quantitatively, dominant mode of production.

Technically speaking, what occurs in this development is the increasing economic exploitation of the whole assemblage of ‘positive externalities’ related to human subjectivity. The effective employment of human knowledge, creativity, language and experience as productive resources is, of course, dependent upon a number of communication, digital and transport technologies that ensure that such things cannot only be stored and commodified, but also accessed and exchanged with little effort. Mobility within knowledge work is obviously contingent upon such technologies. It is, as explored by Böhm et al. (2006), contingent upon planes and high-speed trains as potential places of work, and perhaps even more decisively on the portable digital technologies that allow individuals to work and stay in touch with project partners (Dyer-Witheford et al., 2010). The thesis in *The new spirit of capitalism* is, however, that economic and technical developments are also correlative to and partly conditioned by changes in the normative values of society.

The recent change in the spirit of capitalism, as diagnosed by Boltanski and Chiapello, is the emergence of a new order of worth related to project-oriented forms of organizing. In empirically ‘tracking’ this regime, Boltanski and Chiapello focus on novel forms of government, management and leadership and accordingly combine historical analysis with a massive study and textual analysis of management literature published in-between 1960 and 1999.<sup>1</sup> The emergence

---

1 Two main methodological objections to this empirical method have been raised by organizational scholars (Willmott, 2013): Firstly, Boltanski and Chiapello’s source material is primarily of French origin: Only 18 of the 126 books analyzed are English and none are of non-Western origin. Secondly, their empirical study omits whole traditions of critical organizational research. They do not analyze works from the influential labour process theory inspired by Braverman (1998 [1974]), just as they fail to touch upon the classics of the CMS movement (e.g. Alvesson and Willmott, 1992). While of a generic kind, the first criticism hits the mark: Although the managerial and ideological scene of France is obviously not insular and relevantly similar to those of many other western countries, hasty and non-careful

of this new projective order of worth can gradually be traced until it seemingly becomes dominant in the 1990s, where it is increasingly clear that management theory and practice are orienting themselves towards a new set of values. In 1992, Peter F. Drucker, who had been hailed as a management guru since the 1946 publication of *The Concept of the Corporation*, wrote that management had experienced a 'big bang'. Following Drucker's (1992) characterization of this 'big bang' as consisting in the organization being turned 'upside down', Boltanski and Chiapello (2005: 71) describe the profound change as 'a subversion of hierarchies'. The new set of values is governed by a 'connexionist logic' that prescribes a flat, flexible and network-based organization and a group of project-minded employees who constantly form new relations and constellations. Hierarchical forms of organization are left behind as 'bureaucratic', whereas organizations characterized by fluid networks are deemed faster and more innovative. These changes are normatively justified with reference to an anti-authoritarian demand for more worker influence and values such as autonomy, flexibility and creativity (*ibid.*: 326; see also Ekman, 2013; Fleming, 2009; Murtola and Fleming, 2011).

The (in)famous biting irony of Boltanski and Chiapello's diagnosis occurs when one considers the origin of these values: They can partially be tracked back to the ideals of May 1968. These ideals were articulated precisely as the striving for increased autonomy, self-realization and creativity. Accordingly, the protester of May '68 nowadays appears like the perfect model of an employee in a modern consultancy firm. Beyond such crude irony, however, May '68 is only important as an event that epitomizes the peak of a brief and fleeting convergence of two much broader and historically diverse strands of criticism directed against capitalism, namely, the social critique and the artistic critique (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005: 169-202; Chiapello, 2013).

The *artistic critique* in its modern form begins to exert a strong influence on society and capitalism from the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the artist was no longer a mere artisan, but also a cultural figure. The artistic critique often formulated itself exactly in terms of an opposition between mobility and stability. The artist, whose paradigmatic example could be Baudelaire, is a 'nomadic' free thinker who remains detached from all earthly possessions and as such stands opposed to 'the bourgeoisie', an entity rooted in property while remaining

---

generalizations should always be avoided. The second objection has a partial rebuttal at least, since Boltanski and Chiapello's methodological selection criteria *deliberately* ignore critical studies of management (see Boltanski and Chiapello 2005: 60-63). The authors argue that the *Zeitgeist* of management is most aptly captured in its proponents, and they are thus only interested in texts that are 'practical' and 'directive' in terms of how to conduct business.

devoted to the trivialities of everyday routine (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005: 38). The *social critique* has an alternative source of indignation that stems from early French socialism and assumes its paradigmatic form in the writings of Marx. In promoting social concerns, it attacks egoism, the dominance of special interests and the divide between the active poor and the idle rich. In criticizing capitalism, it denounces poverty, inequality and hierarchy and promotes equality and dynamic forms of social organization.

Going beyond Boltanski and Chiapello's own analysis, I would add that it is worth noting that mobility also played a key historical role in the social forms of critique. As Koselleck (2002) notes, the demand for geographical mobility was a headline in the campaign for the abolition of feudalist compulsory labor during the French Revolution and more generally in Europe at the end of 18<sup>th</sup> century. After the abolition of serfdom, farmers and working men were to a greater degree free to leave the estates that employed them; but this change was initially a legal rather than real socio-economic change (*ibid.*: 158). A few decades later, when the critical agenda had moved on to social and economic conditions, mobility, now in the guise of social and class mobility, emerged as a key term. Indeed, as Koselleck notes in his *Begriffsgeschichten* (2006: 433), the emergence of the very concept of a 'middle class' in the 1830s was closely tied to that of social mobility. The important concept of middle class, which could assert its rights towards the state and private companies, only emerged on the background of an idea of social mobility and at the very moment when social mobility seemed like a real possibility.

Despite the indicated common emphasis on mobility, the artistic critique and the social critique were often mutually conflicting. Social critique frequently deplored the egoism of artists while the artistic critique often accused socialism of censoring creativity. Nevertheless, they share the common fate of having provided some of the terms that lend legitimacy to projective capitalism. Boltanski and Chiapello, for instance, meticulously analyze how the anti-state rhetoric of the 1970s changed its critical direction and was absorbed into capitalism. Taking the denouncement of the compromise between state and capitalism ('state monopoly capitalism') as its point of departure, social critique in the 1970s criticized the state as 'a monopoly of violence' and as an 'ideological bureaucracy'. This libertarian rhetoric resembled that of liberalism to the point that such criticisms became neo-liberal 'without knowing it' (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005: 202). The gradual emergence of a projective form of capitalism is, in other words, simultaneously the story of how the very terms of criticism

that were initially directed *against* capitalism grew into a normative foundation *supporting* capitalism.<sup>2</sup>

In abstract but concise terms, Boltanski and Chiapello's (2005: 53) model of critique aims at examining how capitalism ensures the motivated participation of the labour force, given that capitalism always tends towards making such participation impossible. Indeed, the key concept of a 'spirit' of capitalism is rooted in this contradiction in the sense that the spirit of capitalism aims at mobilizing the labour force by providing an ethical or normative motivation for working that capitalism cannot fully establish by itself. What was once a critique of capitalism now takes the guise of an 'ethic of work' that is genuinely motivating for the actors within capitalism. In the empirical section, I look at how this new order of worth plays out in relation to mobility in more concrete and empirical terms: Why is the nomadic life of more or less constant mobility worthwhile? What morality is detectable in this trait pertaining to at least the elite group of contemporary knowledge workers? What sense of 'worth' and 'greatness' can be detected in this form of work?

## Methodology

In order to address the questions outlined above, the paper refers to empirical material stemming from semi-structured interviews. The interviews were conducted to explore understandings, justifications and ideas concerning mobility and to exemplify how mobility is depicted within the projective order of worth. Semi-structured interviews, in contrast to rigid 'talking questionnaires' (Alvesson, 2003; Potter and Wetherell, 1987), allow for an open exploration and documentation of the respondents' experience, knowledge and ideas related to a research topic. As such, semi-structured interviews are a particularly useful tool in reflexively exploring theoretical constructs (Alvesson, 2003). In accordance with the methodological perspective set forth by the sociology of critique, the conducted interviews specifically aimed at exploring the moral evaluations and justifications of mobility in the context of the 'kinetic elite' (Cresswell, 2006). Methodologically, the empirical analysis thus wishes to make explicit how exemplars of an elite group of workers frame and understand mobility.

---

2 In explaining how such criticisms are integrated into capitalism, it is enlightening, as pointed out by Larsen (2011), to supplement Boltanski and Chiapello's argument with Foucault's idea of discourses as being 'tactically polyvalent' (Foucault, 1976: 132). For Foucault, the tactical polyvalence of discourses indicates that the direction of critical discourses is not always uniform and that critical terms are often applied contextually and tactically instead. Boltanski and Chiapello's analysis of the social and artistic critique is precisely concerned with such changes and reversals in the direction of critical discourses.

More specifically, I draw on three exemplars of the 'kinetic elite': (1) *Peter*, a Danish entrepreneur and business consultant presently involved in five geographically dispersed start-up companies in Denmark within sectors spanning from consultancy to agriculture; (2) *Mary*, a Danish UN diplomat, who has lived on four continents during the last four years taking up different diplomatic positions in New York, Kabul, Copenhagen and Addis Ababa; and (3) *Eisner*, an English and highly successful private banker working on several projects and dividing his time between London and New York. Among the respondents, a dual sense of 'mobility' is exemplified in that they undertake *shifting* projects in *geographically dispersed* settings, thus making frequent travel and movement a necessity (Cresswell, 2006). The analysis of Peter and Mary is based on qualitative semi-structured interviews I have conducted. The interviews focused upon experiences of mobility, work schedules, family issues, network activities, and roles and shifts within projects. The interviews were recorded, fully transcribed and followed up with clarificatory correspondence. The analysis of Eisner's case, however, is based on a re-interpretation of interviews and qualitative data presented in Elliott and Urry (2010). The case is used because of its highly illustrative qualities as to the 'lure of mobility' (Costas, 2013).

While caution is, of course, needed in using empirical material stemming from another study, e.g. because the full context of the data is unknown and the full transcripts cannot be checked etc., this approach also indicates the role of the empirical cases in the present article: They serve as no more, but also no less, than *illustrative exemplars* aiming to show how the present injunction to be mobile works in the context of the 'kinetic elite' (for a methodological discussion of illustrative cases see e.g. Flyvbjerg, 2006). The aim is not to establish generalizations about the perception of mobility among elite workers or other occupational groups like, for example, temporary workers (Garsten, 1999). Rather and similar to Garmann Johnsen and Meier Sørensen's (2014) analysis of elite consultants, I utilize the empirical exemplars to illustrate and explore the possibilities and explanatory power of a broader theoretical frame, namely, Boltanski's sociology of critique.

During the process of conducting and analyzing the interviews, I have focused on the ambiguities of work-related mobility and on the question of why a mobile life might seem attractive to the interviewees. The perspective from the sociology of critique makes this question pertinent since it highlights that the question cannot be answered easily by adopting what Ricoeur (1991) and Rancière (2004) have diagnosed as a problematic and suspicious paternalism towards the actors, namely that of assuming that they must suffer from some form of 'false consciousness' (Boltanski, 2012; Paulsen Hansen, 2014). On a methodological level, the sociology of critique implies that the actors' moral judgments of

attractiveness, greatness and justice cannot be dismissed as simple ideological distortions. Instead, one should devote serious attention to the type of moral vocabulary that they use in justifying their mobile way of working. In the empirical analysis, I thus pay special attention to the way in which Mary, Peter and Eisner articulate a reflexive awareness of conflicting demands of their working lives and how they justify being constantly on the move. In the subsequent discussion, I link the empirical insights to broader theoretical concerns. Specifically, I will apply the concept of a projective order of worth to discuss the morality inherent to the imperative of being mobile.

### Empirical analysis

The empirical cases Mary, Peter and Eisner, belong to different professions concomitant with different degrees of mobility. While Peter, an entrepreneur and business consultant, is usually 'on the road', Mary's work as an international diplomat takes her from continent to continent. What ties them together, however, is not only the trait typical for the elite class to which they belong – namely, the absence of a fixed workplace and their work on several projects – but also a reflexive articulation of their mobility as containing both drawbacks and an attractive side. As previously indicated, the empirical analysis of the cases of Mary, Peter and Eisner focuses on this ambiguous experience of mobility and on the question of why a constantly mobile life might seem attractive.

Peter, for instance, articulates a clear sense of the possible drawbacks and conflicting demands of his mobile life. Currently in his early 40s, Peter is hired as a business consultant at a branch of a prominent Scandinavian investment firm, but he also simultaneously devotes himself to new startup companies and business projects in various parts of Denmark. With reference to his family and his engagement in multiple geographically dispersed projects and business ventures, Peter articulates the following potential drawback:

My greatest challenge is to define when I am working and when I am not working. It is a challenge, since I can work on the train, here [at the investment firm], at the countryside or at home.

Peter is well aware of the challenges pertaining to the stressfulness of his work and the possible lines of critique that can be raised against his way of working. Nevertheless, Peter seems to incorporate this critique into an explanation of why his way of working is attractive and even worth demanding:

You need to be mobile and flexible in order to adapt to the growing amount of changes that characterize business life, but some people can't handle it. Some



people don't have flexible muscles, and so their muscles cramp. But I can handle it. And I wouldn't live without it. I consciously look for variation.

Asked about the relative job insecurity of a working life consisting of multiple projects, Peter acknowledges a certain degree of insecurity, but reverses the potential line of critique by stating that he has always regarded his wife's steady source of income as a nurse as 'much more insecure', since while she could be laid off at any moment, he will always have several projects and partners to rely on.

In a similar manner, Mary, an international diplomat in her mid-30s who is married but without children, acknowledges the ambivalences involved in moving from continent to continent for diplomatic posts at foreign embassies. She admits that other people have often found her nomadic life somewhat bizarre; nonetheless, she states that:

What above all characterizes this sort of mobile life is that the border for what is 'normal' is moved. The sort of border for what you just do without finding it weird. When I tell of my plans, other people often say: 'Alright, that sounds nuts' [laughs]. But I'll just do it. I'll just throw myself into it. Conversely, other people often have a routinized everyday life of exactly the sort that I try to avoid.

Mary, furthermore, articulates mobility as a necessity in acquiring 'the right partners' and justifies the often stressful absence of an ordinary 9 to 5 working day with reference to a mutually beneficial connection between mobility and networking:

It's just more attractive to be abroad. You get a larger network and I live off having a large network. It [work in diplomacy] is a system in which access to people and information is essential. And that's also why it is impossible to have a 9 to 5 working day. If there is a late night reception in New York with some interesting people, you show up. You have to be able to work at all times, because other people also work at all times. On the other hand, this is also the interesting thing about meeting new people. Everyone's performance is optimized by having good partners.

Like Peter, however, she also emphasizes the pressure concomitant with work-related mobility. In particular, she mentions living without the comforts of 'routine' and the safety remaining 'bound to one place'. Mary describes the characteristics of someone not fit for her job in the following way:

A person who likes routine and to stay in one place does not fit in. A person, who likes to work one case at a time. Someone who likes to have fixed goals. Persons who prefer to co-operate with a fixed set of people. That would be my personal impression of someone who would not be able to make it.

In the case of Peter and Mary, mobility is articulated as an often problematic imperative, but as one which is nevertheless rewarding and worth living up to. The ability to meet this imperative is articulated as ‘marking’ them as a particular sort of individual, and in both cases the justification in response to critique is that mobility provides flexibility and allows avoiding routine. While Peter acknowledges certain challenges of simultaneous involvements in geographically dispersed firms resulting in the fact that ‘there is no such thing as a typical working week’, he still claims to ‘thrive on complexity and chaos’. Mary goes on to praise mobility – in the dual sense of shifting tasks and frequent travels – in similar terms:

It [mobility] gives you the feeling of having challenged yourself. Of constantly gaining new insight. Of having widened your horizon. It is incredibly inspiring. Perhaps it is the experience of freedom. I don’t know. But it frees you from routines and provides new opportunities.

Such a portrayal of mobility is consistent with how mobility is presented in Elliot and Urry’s (2010) work. One of their main empirical cases, Eisner, is a successful English banker and consultant in his 40s with teenage children. He has a wide-ranging background and holds multiple positions. Currently he is hired for a project in the London branch of an investment bank. His presence at the bank’s New York branch is, however, also required several times a month, and he also travels to do consultancy work for clients he acquired in his previous jobs (*ibid.*: 70-71). Eisner sketches a normal day in the following way:

Usually, I am up at around five in morning and at the office by six thirty. I meet with clients throughout the day, which more often than not involves email and phone calls – unless I am meeting a client for lunch. I go home at about seven, have dinner and try to find some time to talk on the phone with my teenage daughter – who is at a boarding school. Then it’s back to paperwork and late night conference calls. (Elliott and Urry, 2010: 71)

As noted by Elliot and Urry, it seems that Eisner hardly experiences the physical mobility of bankers’ intercontinental travels and everyday working practices as burdensome. A lack of immediately noticing and/or experiencing travel is also reflected in an account given by Mary. Yet she acknowledges that travelling can also lead to a sense of ambivalence and confusion:

Very seldom, I get these moments of confusion where I can’t really remember what country I’m in, what the currency is and so forth. But normally, travelling is hardly experienced as anything extraordinary. It has to be more and more extreme for you to register it as ‘something’.

When Georg Simmel (1976 [1903]) wrote on the new hectic metropolitan life a century ago, travels by train or car were still experienced in ‘isolation’ as unique

events, while travelling by plane hardly stands out for Mary or Eisner (Elliott and Urry, 2010: 60). Eisner articulates mobility with reference to 'short-term projects, business on the move' and adds that he, like Mary and Peter, flourishes on 'complexity' (*ibid.*: 70). As Eisner points out, his main talent is making shifts among places and projects seem easy. Whether acting as an expert on real estate, a networker or as an invest banker, his talent is 'to make any contradictions between these roles appear untroubling' (*ibid.*: 73). Urry and Elliot note that there is an 'attractive, indeed seductive' quality to Eisner's way of working and Eisner himself confides that his lifestyle is the envy of friends and acquaintances. But, what makes such a way of working attractive and what, apart from the obvious economic benefits, would make such a mobile and fast-paced life 'high status' and worthy of both envy and desire? Mary appreciates the economic benefits of 'moving around', but simultaneously emphasizes the necessity of 'liking mobility' and finding it attractive in its own right:

It used to be economically attractive to be placed abroad as a diplomat. But it is not that advantageous any more. Now you have to do it [being mobile] because you like it. But, it *will* tend to further your career.

In the following discussion, I will apply the notion of the order of worth to the evaluations of work-related mobility evoked in the three exemplars of the 'kinetic elite'. This allows me to explore and discuss why and in what sense mobility currently appears as an attractive sign of worthiness.

## Discussion

Ibarro et al. (2006: 52) have argued that ethics and morality in organizations cannot adequately be conceptualized as something that is *controlled* by management. It must also be seen as taking the form of a demand posed to management. Following this general suggestion, it could be contended that a key to understanding mobility as incarnating a form of morality in high-end working lives would be to appreciate how mobility is not just a demand imposed on employees from management, but equally a demand posed *by* the employees. As pointed out by Costas et al. (2013: 16), the presence of such a demand can easily be missed in analyses of the many pitfalls of projective forms of organizing referring, for instance, to the issue of relative job insecurity (Hassard et al., 2012), the difficulties of maintaining a proper work-life balance (Raastrup Kristensen, 2010), or the emotional stress of being constantly on the move (Pedersen, 2008). Despite all these 'real' material problems, mobility and the constant engagement with multiple networks seem to be experienced as an attractive state (Costas, 2013; Garsten, 2008: 50).

In relating work-related mobility to economic benefits, Mary's above-quoted account seems to indicate precisely that mobility is both an attractive end in itself ('you do it because you like it') *and* a means to an end ('it *will* tend to further your career'). This duality corresponds to a point from Boltanski's pragmatic sociology that bridges the divide between economic value and moral values: Even forms of economic organization must, in order to be motivating and attractive, be able to engage its actors by convincing them that they contribute, at least potentially, to a common good (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006 [1991]). This is the basic role fulfilled by the work ethic associated with the projective order of worth (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005).

As indicated earlier, an order of worth contains a specification of value, a determination of worthy individuals and a moral grammar for the evaluation of actions. Phrased more formally, the order of worth model requires a *basic equality* among the actors, which does not exclude differences, but rather enables a meritocratic scale of *justified differences* among the actors. Specific persons cannot, a priori, be deemed worthy, but as a result of their *activity* worthy and unworthy persons can be distinguished from each other by means of various *tests*. Everyone can gain access to worthiness, in principle, but certain *investments* are required. Since such investments and efforts seemingly work towards a common good, it is not considered unjust for some people to have greater worth [*grandeur*] than others (Albertsen, 2008; Boltanski and Thévenot, 1991).

Mary, Peter and Eisner's mobility practices are conditioned by their involvement in multiple, geographically dispersed projects – and within the projective order of worth, the basic form of *activity* that differentiates worthy or great persons from those of lesser worth and greatness is precisely that of project work. Unlike other schemes of evaluation, such as those analyzed under the heading of the industrial order of worth (cf. Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006 [1991]: 118-124), this form of activity goes beyond stable waged work. The notion of a project blurs the dichotomies of stable/unstable activity, waged/non-waged work and, as pointed out in a study by Beyes and Krempf (2011), in some cases, it even transcends the opposition of work versus non-work. One could, however, argue that there are also traces of the inspirational order of worth (cf. Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006 [1991]: 83-90) in the accounts given by the three respondents. Most clearly exhibited in theological ideas of revelation, the inspirational order of worth is a moral frame of reference that places emphasis on 'imaginative' individuals who have received a kind of 'spiritual' revelation, and as such it evaluates worthiness and attractiveness in terms of achieving inspiration and insight. In Mary's account of mobility as being 'incredibly inspiring' and engendering an experience of 'gaining new insight' one can e.g. see elements of such a vocabulary in play. Nevertheless, and in contrast to the inspirational order of

worth, what is practiced and articulated in the case of Mary, Peter and Eisner is not a moral set of values aimed at a life of spiritual contemplation. On the contrary, and as exemplified by Peter's diverse portfolio of projects, activity and variation are encouraged regardless of whether it concerns waged work, unstable consultancy work, involvement in politics or charitable work. As Boltanski and Chiapello (2005: 111) note, the moral grammar of a 'project' is broad: opening a business and closing a business are equally projects. They can all be undertaken with the same sense of heroism.

Within the projective order of worth, this secures a *basic equality* among actors. If a project can be almost anything, almost everyone can engage in a project. It is, however, crucial never to stick to just one project: One must always be adaptable, versatile, mobile and engaged on multiple fronts. As pointed out by, for instance, Chertkovskaya et al. (2013), constantly shifting projects in today's knowledge work is not exclusively experienced as risk taking, but also as a way of increasing one's employability. This point is also seized by Peter who states that he regards his wife's position as a nurse as 'much more insecure' than his – while she could be laid off, he will always have several overlapping projects to rely on.

Being mobile in the sense of successfully making the passage from one project to the next is of vital importance in evaluating claims of worth within the projective order of worth. If one conceives of social organization as if it were the scene of a trial where competent actors can legitimately make claims and challenge each other (Boltanski, 2013: 46), then the insecure passage from one project to the next functions as a *test* of the actors' pretensions to greatness (cf. Boltanski, 2002: 384; de Cock and Nyberg, forthcoming). You may be able to 'talk the talk' of being mobile, but the *test* of worthiness is if you manage to successfully pass from one project to another and thus be actually and continually engaged in several projects. When trying to explicate the morality and sense of justice inherent to the projective order of worth, it is important to note that a multiplicity of engagements cannot only serve as a personal 'asset' that potentially increases employability (having a broad and flexible portfolio of activities means never having to start from scratch), but also as something that works, at least with some plausibility, towards the common good. Being engaged in multiple projects means that the benefits of one's activities are spread out: one shares information, spreads the generation of profit, inspires others and exemplifies, by these means, the importance of *investing* in networking activities. Worthy individuals are distinguished from less worthy by their investments, that is, by 'sacrifices' that are made with the aim of contributing to common benefit (Thévenot, 1984). Sacrificing, for instance, the predictable safety of a 9 to 5 working day is then again part of what justifies the relative benefits of being mobile. To apply the language of investment, the privileges of worthy individuals are 'counter-

balanced' by their burdens (cf. Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006: 142). As also indicated by Boltanski and Chiapello (2005: 115-9), the benefits are not exclusively conceived of as personal; a large network is a personal asset in terms of receiving relevant information, but also an outlet for one's activities to work towards a common good. As Mary emphasized in her explanation of the apparent necessity of attending late night receptions in New York, 'everyone's performance is optimized by having good partners', and since 'access to people and information is essential' that is 'also why it is impossible to have a 9 to 5 working day.'

As suggested by Boltanski's pragmatic sociology, the connection to a common good is the key to the meritocratic and thus *justified* greatness of professionals like Eisner, Mary and Peter. At the lower end of the meritocratic scale in the projective order of worth, we find people who are immobile in the sense of being rooted in routine and sometimes bound to one place. As Mary states, a person who 'likes routine and to stay in one place does not fit in'. This is also emphasized by Peter who argues that a person with a preference for routine would not be able 'to make it'. Here the ability to handle the pressure of being mobile seems to be articulated as a moral accomplishment that differentiates oneself from those who are 'not able to make it'; or, to put it in Peter's words, those 'without flexible muscles'.

Conversely and at the very top of the meritocratic scale, we find professionals like Eisner, who claim the ability to easily make transitions between places and contexts to be their main talent. If the description of Eisner can be taken at face value, then his qualities seem like a mirror of the 'nomadic theology' inherent to today's conception of mobility. Put differently, Eisner appears as an almost exact incarnation of the 'ideal man' of the projective order of worth:

His [the ideal man's] principal quality is his mobility, his ability to move around without letting himself be impeded by boundaries, whether geographical or derived from professional or cultural affiliations, by hierarchical distances, by differences of status, role, origin, group, and to establish personal contact with other actors, who are often far removed socially or spatially. (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005: 79)

As indicated by the framework behind the sociology of critique, the use of a meritocratic scale is, however, not merely to indicate an attractive position – it can just as easily be an instrument of critique. If certain organizational or societal structures prevent the mobility and flexibility of individuals, they thereby hinder possible ascendancy to greatness, and legitimate claims against such structures can be made. That is to say, the projective order of worth does not only serve to justify the greatness of certain individuals; it also motivates and serves as the

foundation of a *demand* for an increased mobility. While Mary and Peter do not convey the impression of a frictionless ‘cosmopolitan life’ (Beck, 2006) they, however, articulate a commitment and even a demand for the kind of flexibility that their work-related mobility implies and reflects. As a final remark, one could therefore utilize Koselleck’s (1995) vocabulary to say that the concept of mobility seems itself to have become a ‘concept of movement’ [*Bewegungsbegriffe*]; that is, a concept which offers an attractive promise to actors, thus moving and motivating them in certain ways despite their awareness that this promise might continually fail its unproblematic fulfillment.<sup>3</sup> In summary, the projective order of worth and its explication of this promise add to the clarification of how mobility functions as a motivating and normatively tainted category in today’s world of organizing. In this way, it indicates an explanation of the in itself remarkable fact that the word ‘mobilization’ has become another word for ‘motivation’ within currently prevalent discourses of management and work.

## Conclusion

In this article, I have aimed to show that the theoretical framework of Boltanski’s sociology of critique offers a fruitful perspective on work-related mobility and provides a conceptualization of mobility that allows us to indicate and analyze some of the much called for connections between mobility as a moral *and* a socio-economic phenomenon (Cresswell, 2006; Sheller, 2011). As many commentators have noticed (e.g. Bærenholdt, 2013; Sheller, 2011; Urry, 2007), the literature on mobility has often tended towards being caught in a false alternative between celebratory accounts that characterize new forms of mobility as enabling an unprecedented form of ‘nomadic freedom’, and pessimistic evaluations that characterize new forms of mobility as embodying a renewed form of exploitation. As I have argued in the theoretical exposition of Boltanski’s work with Thévenot (2006 [1991]) as well as Chiapello (2005), the sociology of critique and its breaking of ‘Parson’s Pact’ offer a perspective that goes beyond such ‘false alternatives’. On the one hand, it offers an analytical frame that allows us to historicize the conditions of mobility and to investigate its material and economic prerequisites, while on the other hand it offers an empirically sensitive framework that does not lose sight of the sense in which the ideal of mobility inherent to projective forms of work has genuine appeal to the actors engaged in it.

---

3 For Koselleck (1995), such promissory content is constitutive of the linguistic items belonging to the modern political and moral vocabulary and thus of concepts like ‘equality’ or ‘freedom’. These are concepts [*Begriffe*] which motivate and move actors [*Bewegungsbegriffe*] by being promises or pre-conceptions [*Vorgriffe*] of a desirable future, which may yet fail to realize itself and, therefore, has to be demanded.

The necessity of going beyond ‘false alternatives’ in the analysis of mobility is, furthermore, stressed by the article’s empirical illustrations of how the moral imperative of mobility works in the specific context of the ‘kinetic elite’. As noted by Costas (2013), many studies of this elite group of workers have tended towards a depiction of the group as living frictionless cosmopolitan lives. In short, they have been constructed as ‘postmodern surfers’, to use Grey’s (2002) popular metaphor. In contrast to such a one-sided depiction, the empirical cases analyzed in this article suggest a more nuanced picture in which work-related mobility emerges as a challenging and sometimes problematic imperative. Nevertheless, the empirical exemplars also present mobility as a rewarding imperative that is worth living up to. In aiming to explain this appeal of mobility, I have utilized Boltanski and Chiapello’s (2005) notion of a projective order of worth to show how the mobile lives of professionals like Mary, Peter and Eisner can be related to the norms, ideals and the sense of worth inherent to this order.

In spite of emphasizing a moral aspect integrative to the forms of mobility found in the ‘kinetic elite’, it is important to note that the perspective suggested here does not entail an appraisal of mobility. To use Boltanski’s own example, the analysis of the flexible normative foundations of capitalism ought to cure us, once and for all, from the view that the young trendy designer, who divides her time between the art galleries of Berlin, London and New York, is a sort of quasi-subversive hero undermining capitalism (Boltanski, 2004). On the contrary, and as already suggested by the fable of mobility from the *Book of Exodus* stated at the beginning of this article, the mobility of the ‘kinetic elite’ is often problematically conditioned by the immobility or forced mobility of others (Bauman, 1998, 2007).

In summary, this article has used the perspective of the sociology of critique and applied the order of worth model to argue that taking account of the moral appeal of mobility and its promises of greatness is a condition for posing the important question of the attractiveness of being mobile in the context of today’s ‘kinetic elite’. In several respects, this elite group – among others composed of mobile consultants, bankers and diplomats – seems emblematic of the qualitative transformations that characterize the knowledge-intensive sectors of the present economy. Rather than a mere idle cog or a symptom of some form of false consciousness, the moral injunction to be mobile, flexible and constantly on the move must be seen as a key driver of the qualitative transformations that characterize these sectors and contemporary capitalism more generally.



## references

- Adey, P. (2009) *Mobility*. New York: Routledge.
- Albertsen, N. (2008) 'Retfærdiggørelse, ideologi & kritik', *Dansk Sociologi*, 19(2): 66-84.
- Alvesson, M. and H. Willmott (1992) *Critical management studies*. London: Sage.
- Alvesson, M. (2003) 'Beyond neopositivists, romantics, and localists: A reflexive approach to interviews in organizational research', *The Academy of Management Review*, 28(1): 13-33.
- Arthur, M.B. and D.M. Rousseau (1996) *The boundaryless career: A new employment principle for a new organizational era*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Augé, M. (1995) *Non-places: Introduction to an anthropology of supermodernity*. London: Verso.
- Bærenholdt, J.O. (2013) 'Governmobility: The power of mobility', *Mobilities*, 8(1): 20-34.
- Bauman, Z. (1998) *Globalization: The human consequences*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Bauman, Z. (2007) *Liquid Times: Living an age of uncertainty*. London: Wiley.
- Beck, U. (2006) *The cosmopolitan vision*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Beverungen, A., A. Murtola and G. Schwartz (eds.) (2013) 'The communism of capital?', *ephemera*, 13(3): 483-495.
- Beyes, T. and S. Krempf (2011) 'Work = work = work: In defense of play', *ephemera*, 11(4): 466-81.
- Böhm, S., C. Jones, C. Land and M. Paterson (eds.) (2006) *Against automobility*. London: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Boltanski, L. (2002) 'Nécessité et justification', *Revue Économique*, 53(2): 275-315.
- Boltanski, L. (2004) 'Entretien avec Luc Boltanski: Une sociologie toujours mise à l'épreuve'. [<http://www.ethnographiques.org/2004/Blondeau,Sevin>]
- Boltanski, L. (2011a) *On critique: A sociology of emancipation*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Boltanski, L. (2011b) 'An interview with Luc Boltanski: Criticism and the expansion of knowledge', *European Journal of Social Theory* 14(3): 361-81.
- Boltanski, L. (2012 [1990]) *Love and justice as competences*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Boltanski, L. (2013) 'A journey through French-style critique', in P. du Gay and G. Morgan (eds.) *New spirits of capitalism?* Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Boltanski, L. (2014) *Mysteries and conspiracies: Detective stories, spy novels and the making of modern societies*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Boltanski, L. and E. Chiapello (1999) *Le nouvel esprit du capitalisme*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Boltanski, L. and E. Chiapello (2005) *The new spirit of capitalism*. London: Verso.

- Boltanski, L. and L. Thévenot (1989) *Justesse et justice dans le travail*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.
- Boltanski, L. and L. Thévenot (1991) *De la justification*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Boltanski, L. and L. Thévenot (1999) 'The sociology of critical capacity', *European Journal of Social Theory*, 2(3): 359-77.
- Boltanski, L. and L. Thévenot (2006 [1991]) *On justification: Economies of worth*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Boxenbaum, E. (2014) 'Toward a situated stance in organizational institutionalism: Contributions from French pragmatist sociology theory', *Journal of Management Inquiry*, 23(3): 319-23.
- Braverman, H. (1998) *Labor and monopoly capital: The degradation of work in the twentieth century*. New York: NYU Press.
- Büscher, M., J. Urry and K. Witchger (2010) *Mobile methods*. New York: Routledge.
- Callinicos, A. (1991) *Against postmodernism: A marxist critique*. New York: St. Martins Press.
- Castells, M. (1996) *The rise of the network society*. London: Blackwell.
- Chertkovskaya, E., P. Watt, S. Tramer and S. Spoelstra (2013) 'Giving notice to employability', *ephemera*, 13(4): 701-16.
- Chiapello, E. (2013) 'Capitalism and its criticisms', in P. du Gay and G. Morgan (eds.) *New spirits of capitalism?* Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Clegg, S., M. Kornberger and C. Rhodes (2007) 'Business ethics as practice', *British Journal of Management*, 18(2): 107-22.
- Cloutier, C. and A. Langley (2013) 'The logic of institutional logics: Insights from French pragmatist sociology', *Journal of Management Inquiry*, 22(4): 360-80.
- Costas, J., S. Ekman, C. Maravelias and S. Spoelstra (2013) 'Roundtable: Free work', *ephemera*, 13(1): 701-16.
- Costas, J. (2013) 'Problematizing mobility: A metaphor of stickiness, non-places and the kinetic elite', *Organization Studies*, 34(10): 1467-1485.
- Cresswell, T. (2006) *On the move: Mobility in the modern western world*. London: Routledge.
- Cresswell, T. and P. Merriman (eds.) (2012) *Geographies of mobilities: Practices, spaces, subjects*. Burlington: Ashgate.
- De Cock, C. and D. Nyberg (2014) 'The possibility of critique under a financialized capitalism: The case of private equity in the United Kingdom', *Organization*, doi: 10.1177/1350508414563526.
- Deleuze, G. (1977) 'Nomad thought', in D.B. Allison (ed.) *The new Nietzsche: Contemporary styles of interpretation*. Cambridge, MA.: MIT Press.
- Deleuze, G. and F. Guattari (1987) *A thousand plateaus: Capitalism and schizophrenia*. New York: University of Minnesota Press.
- Drucker, P. F. (1992) *Post-capitalist society*. New York: Harper.

- Dyer-Witheford, N., J. Burston and A. Hearn (2010) 'Digital labour: Workers, authors, citizens', *ephemera*, 10(3): 214-24.
- Ekman, S. (2013) 'Authenticity at work: Questioning the new spirit of capitalism from a micro-sociological perspective', in P. du Gay and G. Morgan (eds.) *New spirits of capitalism?* Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Elliott, A. and J. Urry (2010) *Mobile lives*. London: Routledge.
- Fleming, P. (2009) *Authenticity and the cultural politics of work: New forms of informal control*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Flyvbjerg, B. (2006) 'Five misunderstandings about case-study research', *Qualitative Inquiry*, 12(2): 219-45.
- Foucault, M. (1976) *Histoire de la sexualité 1: La volonté de savoir*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Garmann Johnsen, C. and B. Meier Sørensen (2014) "'It's capitalism on coke!": From temporary to permanent liminality in organization studies', *Culture and Organization*, doi: 10.1080/14759551.2014.901326.
- Garsten, C. (1999) 'Betwixt and between: Temporary employees as liminal subjects in flexible organizations', *Organization Studies*, 20(4): 601-17.
- Garsten, C. (2008) *Workplace vagabonds: Career and community in changing worlds of work*. London: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Grey, C. (1994) 'Career as a project of the self and labour process discipline', *Sociology*, 28(2): 479-97.
- Grey, C. (2002) 'The fetish of change', *Journal of Critical Postmodern Organization Science*, 2(2): 1-19.
- Habermas, J. (1990) *Der philosophische Diskurs der Moderne*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Hardt, M. and A. Negri (2000) *Empire*. New York: Harvard University Press.
- Hassard, J., J. Morris and L. McCann (2012) "'My brilliant career"? New organizational forms and changing managerial careers in Japan, the UK, and USA', *Journal of Management Studies*, 49(3): 571-99.
- Ibarro-Colado, E., S.R. Clegg, C. Rhodes and M. Kornberger (2006) 'The ethics of managerial subjectivity', *Journal of Business Ethics*, 64(1): 45-55.
- Jagd, S. (2011) 'Pragmatic sociology and competing orders of worth in organizations', *European Journal of Social Theory*, 14(3): 343-59.
- Kaplan, C. (1996) *Questions of travel: Postmodern discourses of travel*. Durham, NC: Duke University.
- Kanter, R.M. (2003) *On the frontiers of management*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business Press.
- Koselleck, R. (1995) 'The temporalisation of concepts'.  
[<http://www.jyu.fi/yhtfil/redescriptions/Yearbook%201997/Koselleck%201997.pdf>]
- Koselleck, R. (2002) *The practice of conceptual history: Timing history, spacing concepts*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

- Koselleck, R. (2006) *Begriffsgeschichten: Studien zur Semantik und Pragmatik der politischen und sozialen Sprache*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp.
- Kotter, J.P. (2008) *Corporate culture and performance*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Kristensen, J.E. (2008) 'Kapitalismens nye ånd og økonomiske hamskifte', *Dansk Sociologi*, 19(2): 87-108.
- Larsen, L.T. (2011) 'Turning critique inside out: Foucault, Boltanski and Chiapello on the tactical displacement of critique and power', *Distinktion*, 12(1): 37-55.
- Latour, B. (2005) *Reassembling the social: An introduction to actor-network-theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lepetit, B. (1995) *Les formes de l'expérience – une autre histoire sociale*. Paris: Albin Michel.
- Loacker, B. and S.L. Muhr (2009) 'How can I become a responsible subject? Towards a practice-based ethics of responsiveness', *Journal of Business Ethics*, 90(2): 265-77.
- Meerwarth, T.L., J.C. Gluesing and B. Jordan (2008) *Mobile work, mobile lives: Cultural accounts of lived experiences*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Moulier-Boutang, Y. (2012) *Cognitive capitalism*. London: Polity Press.
- Muhr, S.L., B.M. Sørensen and S. Vallentin (eds.) (2010) *Ethics and organizational practice: Questioning the moral foundations of management*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Muhr, S.L. (2012) 'Strangers in familiar places – using generic spaces in cross-cultural identity work', *Culture and Organization*, 18(1): 51-68.
- Murtola, A. and P. Fleming (2011) 'The business of truth: Authenticity, capitalism and the crisis of the everyday', *ephemera*, 11(1): 1-5.
- Ohnmacht, T., H. Maksim and M.M. Bergman (eds.) (2009) *Mobilities and inequality*. Farnham: Ashgate Publishing.
- Parker, M. (2013) 'Beyond justification: Dietrologic and the sociology of critique', in P. du Gay and G. Morgan (eds.) *New spirits of capitalism?* Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Paulsen Hansen, M. (2014), 'Non-normative critique: Foucault and pragmatic sociology as tactical re-politicization', *European Journal of Social Theory*, doi: 10.1177/1368431014562705.
- Pedersen, M. (2008) 'Tune in, break down, and reboot – new machines for coping with the stress of commitment', *Culture and Organization*, 14(2): 171-85.
- Pellegrino, G. (2011) *The politics of proximity: Mobility and immobility in practice*. London: Ashgate Publishing.
- Pernkopf-Konhäuser, K. (2014) 'The competent actor: Bridging institutional logics and French pragmatist sociology', *Journal of Management Inquiry*, 23(3): 333-37.
- Potter, J. and M. Wetherell (1987) *Discourse and Social Psychology*. London: Sage.

- Presskorn-Thygesen, T. (2015) 'How do we recognize neo-liberalism?', *Oxford Left Review*, 14: 11-20.
- Raastrup Kristensen, A. (2010) *Metaphysical labour: Flexibility, performance and commitment in work-life management*. Frederiksberg: Samfundslitteratur.
- Rancière, J. (2004) *The philosopher and his poor*. New York: Duke University Press.
- Ricoeur, P. (1991) 'Science and ideology', in *From text to action: Essays in hermeneutics II*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Sennett, R. (2006) *The culture of the new capitalism*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Sheller, M. (2011) 'Mobility'. [<http://www.sagepub.net/isa/resources/pdf/mobility.pdf>]
- Simmel, G. (1976 [1903]) *The metropolis and mental Life*. New York: Free Press.
- Smith, C. (2006) 'The double indeterminacy of labour: Labour effort and labour Mobility', *Work, Employment and Society*, 20(2): 389-402.
- Stark, D. (2009) *The sense of dissonance: Accounts of worth in economic life*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Thévenot, L. (1984) 'Rules and implements: Investment in forms', *Social Science Information*, 23(1): 1-45.
- Thévenot, L. (2006) *L'action au pluriel: Sociologie des régimes d'engagement*. Paris: Éditions de La Découverte.
- Thévenot, L. (2014), 'Enlarging conceptions of testing moments and critical theory', in S. Susen and B. Turner (eds.) *The spirit of Luc Boltanski*. London: Anthem Press.
- Thompson, P. and S. Ackroyd (1995) 'All quiet on the workplace front? A critique of recent trends in British industrial sociology', *Sociology*, 29(4): 615-33.
- Thrift, N. (1998) *The rise of soft capitalism*. London: Routledge.
- Urry, J. (2007) *Mobilities*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Velthuis, O. (1999) 'The changing relationship between economic sociology and institutional economics: From Talcott Parsons to Mark Granovetter', *American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, 58(4): 629-49.
- Wagner, P. (1999) 'After justification: Repertoires of evaluation and the sociology of modernity', *European Journal of Social Theory*, 2(3): 341-57.
- Weber, M. (1968) *Economy and society*. London: Bedminster Press.
- Weber, M. (2001 [1905]) *The protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism*. London: Fitzroy Dearborn.
- Weiskopf, R. and H. Willmott (2013) 'Ethics as critical practice: The "Pentagon Papers", deciding responsibly, truth-telling, and the unsettling of organizational morality', *Organization Studies*, 34(4): 469-93.
- Willmott, H. (2013) 'Spirited away: When political economy becomes culturalized...', in P. du Gay and G. Morgan (eds.) *New spirits of capitalism?* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Wray-Bliss (2009) 'Ethics: Critique, ambivalence and infinite responsibilities', in M. Alvesson, T. Bridgman and H. Willmott (eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of Critical Management Studies*. Oxford: Oxford University.

Žižek, S. (2006). *The parallax view*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

### **the author**

Thomas Presskorn-Thygesen is a PhD fellow at the Department of Management, Politics and Philosophy at Copenhagen Business School. His PhD dissertation on *Normativity and the market of values* and his current research focus on various models of normativity within social theory and trace, in particular, the convergences of Boltanski and Foucault. Email: tpt.mpp@cbs.dk