

Paradoxes of Capitalism

Martin Hartmann and Axel Honneth

In the last 150 years it has become natural to analyze the development of capitalist societies by means of a schema in which a positively construed process of rationalization or emancipation runs again and again into contradiction with the delaying, blocking, or even colonizing structural relations of the economy. In the course of time the shape of what is meant by processes of rationalization or emancipation has indeed been progressively enriched; at the same time, however, the idea of a structural restriction by the capitalist system is always retained. Even if one counts on the internal logic of the communicative rationalization of the lifeworld, the leading developmental schema is still growing opposition to the world of economic functional laws that take on a life of their own. Anyone who sets out to investigate the new transformations of Western capitalist societies today will quickly run up against the deficits of this long-serving model. Not only can the borders between culture and the economy, lifeworld and system, no longer be unambiguously determined; today what counts as progress is more contested than ever before. What is confusing – indeed, perplexing – about the contemporary situation may be that, while the normative principles of past decades still possess a performative currency, beneath the surface they seem to have lost their emancipatory meaning or been transformed; in many instances they have become mere legitimating concepts for a new level of capitalist expansion. In the following we seek to pursue this transformed, opaque form of capitalist “modernization” by replacing the old schema of contradiction with that of paradoxical development. By this we have in mind the peculiar fact that today much of the normative progress of the last decades has been turned into its opposite, a culture that decreases solidarity and independence, and, under the pressure of a neoliberal de-domestication of capitalism, has become a mechanism of social integration.

I. Normative Potentials of Capitalist Societies

The starting point of our analysis is the historical period twenty years after the end of the Second World War in which a state-regulated capitalism emerged in the developed countries of the West that, owing to its counter-cyclical social and economic policies, was able to create a welfare-state arrangement. In this phase, which bore the marks of a social-democratic regime even where Social Democratic parties did not attain a governing majority,¹ not only were the

conditions for effective forms of equal opportunity significantly improved in the realms of education, social policy, and labor policy; in all key areas the normative integration of capitalist societies showed moral progress far beyond what had previously been taken to be compatible with the basic requirements of capitalism. To get an overview of these developmental processes, it makes sense first of all to enumerate the central spheres that together from the beginning brought about the normative integration of capitalism. Here we loosely follow Parsons' picture of the evolution of modern societies, but give his impressive sketch a recognition-theoretical interpretation in order to do justice to the interactive and justificatory character of the normative spheres.² With Parsons it can be said that in modern societies the establishment of a capitalist economic system only succeeded because the following principles were simultaneously institutionalized: (1) "individualism" as a leading personal idea; (2) an egalitarian conception of justice as a legal form of government; and (3) the idea of achievement as the basis for assigning status. We supplement these assumptions by further supposing that (4) with the romantic idea of love a utopian vanishing point emerged that allowed members of society increasingly subject to economic pressures to preserve the vision of an emotional transcendence of day-to-day instrumentalism.³

Now, each of the spheres – which naturally should not be thought of as spatially demarcated areas but as social forms of moral knowledge⁴ – possesses a normative potential, since the idea that underlies them always contains more legitimizable claims and obligations than are realized in the facticity of social reality. It is true that Parsons only worked out this tension between reality and the normative idea, between facts and norms, for the two dimensions of modern law and the achievement principle, but it can likewise call our attention to the modern principles of individualism and love. Accordingly, Western capitalist society should be understood as a highly dynamic social order whose capacity for self-transformation arises not only out of the imperatives of the constant realization of capital, but also from the institutionalized normative surplus that stems from its new, emerging spheres of recognition. By calling upon the moral ideals that constitutively underlie them, members of society can always assert and prosecute legitimizable claims that point beyond the established social order. In particular, this means that subjects can:

1. assert the normative promise of institutionalized individualism by experimentally referring to aspects of their autonomy or facets of their authenticity that have not so far found appropriate recognition in the social culture;
2. enforce the modern legal order's idea of equality by pointing to their membership or structural aspects of their life circumstances in order to be treated as equals among equals;
3. assert the normative implications of the modern achievement principle by referring to the actual value of their labor for social reproduction in order to attain greater social esteem and the material compensation connected to it; and finally,

4. enforce the moral promise of romantic love by calling attention to needs or wishes that the institutionalized practice of intimate relationships has hitherto failed to meet with appropriate sensitivity and responsiveness.

Parsons already showed that in modern society the normative surplus of such institutionalized norms of justice possesses a transformative potential above all because they make the given reality appear as a moral situation of discrimination that cannot be legitimized.⁵ From this we can gather that there are at least four spheres of recognition in which subjects can experience social relations as morally unjustified discrimination or exclusion. Now, the margin that exists for articulating the normative surplus is determined by the political extent to which capitalist imperatives are neutralized: the more the state is in a position to check the accumulation tendencies of capital by means of regulatory social and economic policy, the greater the opportunity for members of society to assert, and sometimes institutionally implement, the moral potentials in the four spheres. It therefore seems to us justified to understand the “social-democratic” era as a phase in the development of capitalist societies marked by an exceptional degree of normative progress. In all four spheres moral developments emerged that pointed toward an expansion of the respective recognition norms.

II. Moral Progress in the “Social-Democratic” Era

It is not difficult to cite evidence of moral progress in the four spheres during this period. The social-democratic arrangement established in nearly all capitalist countries since the late 1960s allowed either the increase or the generalization of norms that had been institutionalized in the culture of capitalism with a corresponding normative surplus.

1. Under the combined influence of socio-economic and cultural transformations, in the social-democratic era institutionalized individualism grew into the idea of experimental self-realization, at the center of which is the idea of a lifelong testing of new forms of existence understood as authentic. The disproportional growth of incomes and free time on the one hand, and the rapid spread of romantic life-ideals on the other, allow a growing part of the population to interpret their lives no longer as fixed and linear processes of sequentially assuming professional and familial roles, but as opportunities for the experimental realization of their own personalities.⁶ If “individualism” had until then been an ideal of leading an autonomous life largely reserved for the upper classes, now, in the new, augmented version of the ideal of authenticity, it took hold of the majority of the population.
2. In no other domain was moral progress clearer in the twenty years of the social-democratic era than in the sphere of the modern legal order. Not only, under pressure from those affected, were forms of legal discrimination that

had prohibited, sanctioned, or made taboo the practices of cultural or sexual minorities abolished; in many areas, new freedoms and social rights (labor, criminal, and family law) were created that enhanced the economic and social preconditions for the development of individual autonomy. Parallel to the expansion of subjective rights, there was also a generalization of legal equality; for the first time, either previously excluded groups (foreigners) came to enjoy citizen rights or cultural minorities obtained new special rights (cultural rights). All in all, it can probably be said that in this phase the legal autonomy of all members of society was better protected than in all previous periods of capitalism.

3. Moral progress also took place in this period with reference to the modern achievement principle, as the women's movement succeeded in calling its masculine-industrial construction into question on a large scale. Even if these protests and claims did not lead directly to institutional success, tendencies nevertheless emerged to thematize child-rearing as well as housework as valuable contributions to social reproduction that should be valued as "achievements" and find corresponding material recognition. In the same period, however, there were also various educational reforms that shared the aim of improving the conditions for equal social opportunity. With the attempt to increase the permeability of educational institutions and dismantle barriers based on origins, individuals' possibilities to successfully take part in the competition for achievement grew.
4. Finally, in this phase intimate relationships were freed from the last vestiges of external social or economic steering. Not least connected to the general rise of incomes, subjects could be left completely to their own feelings in their search for a partner. With this establishment of "pure relationships,"⁷ not only did social mobility in marriage increase, so did the deinstitutionalization of the nuclear family. Intimate relationships were entered into for their emotional value, and no longer for lifelong security or progeny.

III. The Neoliberal Revolution

Having portrayed the normative achievements of the "social-democratic" era, we must now address the economic developments that, particularly since the beginning of the 1980s, contributed to delegitimizing state-regulated capitalism in its different integrative functions. We collect these developments under the heading "neoliberal revolution." With this term we aim, first, at a transformation of economic processes themselves, often confirmed by industrial sociology, but also at the increasing expansion of evaluative standards, tied to "new" economic organizational structures, into spheres of action that, in the "social-democratic era," could still restrict or at least channel unmediated economic pressures in light of the normative principles discussed above. From this double perspective, capitalism can be described, on the one hand, as an economic system that follows its own laws of motion and, as Parsons always emphasized,⁸ is in its own way

normatively integrated; but also, on the other hand, as a social system that continually forces social-political institutions to adapt to transformed economic structures. Here we use the concept of the neoliberal revolution to describe all the processes that (1) so weaken (welfare-) state steering activities that safeguards can no longer be guaranteed at postwar levels. Especially in connection with globalization research, the factors are now analyzed that lead to the weakening of welfare regimes guaranteed by the nation-state (even if the concept of “globalization” is not uncontested⁹). Terminologically, in this context one occasionally speaks of “disorganized capitalism,” often blamed especially on the growing power of global firms, the internationalization of financial flows, and the fading of class-cultural ties, which have weakened the social-democratic model of political organization.¹⁰ From a firm-internal perspective, the neoliberal revolution can be described (2) by the spread of shareholder-oriented management, where the influence of shareholders on firms grows to precisely the extent that that of other groups with a stake in the firm dwindles: “The share price reflects the firm’s value through the lenses of the shareholders and is blind to firm’s value for all other groups involved: for workers, banks, the region, the state, suppliers, purchasers, and consumers.”¹¹ This has been called “shareholder capitalism.” For our purposes, what is particularly central is the transformation of contemporary capitalism (3) that concerns what Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello, with reference to Max Weber, call the “spirit” of capitalism. The starting point of these reflections is the assumption that capitalist practices require justification, that they cannot mobilize sufficient motivational resources by themselves. Following Boltanski and Chiapello’s analysis, while between 1930 and 1960 the large company offered its employees long-term career opportunities and under some circumstances even a protected social environment by means of worker apartments, holiday centers, and training structures, contemporary capitalism can be described as “project-oriented.” In the framework of a project-oriented “order of justification” (*cité par projets*), the more valuable people are those who can engage in new projects with great personal application and flexibility, who possess good networking skills and act autonomously as well as faithfully.¹² Terminologically, in this context one speaks of “new” or “flexible” capitalism. The most important criterion for describing this new capitalism is no longer the ability to efficiently fulfill hierarchically determined parameters within a large enterprise; it is the readiness to self-responsibly bring one’s own abilities and emotional resources to bear in the service of individualized projects. In this way, the worker becomes an “entployee” or himself an entrepreneur; no longer induced to participate in capitalist practices by external compulsion or incentives, he is in a sense self-motivated.¹³ It is above all this “network capitalism” and its inherent principles that are responsible for the trends we will discuss in section five under the heading of desolidarization.

Now, our thesis is that this “new,” “disorganized,” shareholder value-oriented capitalism affects in one way or another the normatively structured spheres of

action distinguished above, bringing about developments that lead to the reversal of these institutionalized normative achievements. What is essential for the influence of contemporary capitalism on these spheres is in our view that this influence cannot be understood as a colonizing attack of capitalist imperatives on the action model of the lifeworld. As is well known, the description of economic action as a merely instrumentally-oriented activity has been repeatedly criticized for neglecting its internal normative moments. However, apart from this systematic point, our sketch of contemporary capitalism shows the continuing validity of the statement that “capitalist societies were always dependent on cultural boundary conditions that they could not reproduce themselves.”¹⁴ When Jürgen Habermas formulated this sentence in his study of the “legitimation problems of late capitalism” at the beginning of the 1970s, it was connected to the diagnostic thesis that the traditional motivational resources of capitalist action (“citizen” and “familial-professional privatism”) would be eroded by the attainments of the welfare state, so that the contradiction between capital and labor that continued to pervade late capitalist societies would be robbed of its legitimating costume in the light of a morality critically oriented by increasingly universalistic criteria. On this interpretation, late capitalist society is contradictory both in terms of “latent” class antagonisms¹⁵ as well as a logic of development that leads the detraditionalizing tendencies of welfare-state capitalism to self-destructively expose the inequalities and injustices typical of this stage of capitalism.

Now, it is not difficult to suspect, so the hypothesis put forth here, that contemporary capitalism has succeeded in mobilizing new motivational resources – indeed, both on the basis of the critique made by welfare-state agents themselves and with reference to the critical objections to Taylorist or Fordist work structures. In other words, the “new” capitalism can only be so successful and cancel the political neutralization of the imperatives connected with it because, from the perspective of influential interest groups, it at least appears as an integrative model in its own right that contributes to maintaining some of the institutionalized achievements of the social-democratic era under changed socio-economic conditions, or recasting them in a modernized form. It is precisely this tendency toward a normatively charged economization of social contexts that produces some of the paradoxical effects treated in the fifth section, since they are now as it were encouraged or legitimized in the name of normative principles fundamental to the Western self-understanding. Behind these reflections is the assumption that the contradictions and insecurities of the “new” capitalism map onto spheres of action that are removed from capitalist imperatives or structured by solidarity. Thus, in an often complicated and, as we want to say, paradoxical way, they contribute to the erosion of the emancipatory norms and values articulated and institutionalized in these spheres. These contradictions – and this may already be a central paradox of the current period – are of course often no longer even perceived as those of capitalism as such, since subjects have “learned” in their role as entrepreneurs to assume responsibility for their fates.

IV. On the Concept of Paradox¹⁶

Here it will be helpful to delimit more precisely the concept of paradox. It should have emerged from what has been said so far that we are not introducing the concept of paradox in opposition to that of contradiction, but rather as an explication of a *specific* structure of contradiction. Many experiential situations now described as contradictory have their starting point in the practical conversion of normative intentions. A contradiction is paradoxical when, precisely through the attempt to realize such an intention, the probability of realizing it is decreased.¹⁷ In especially striking cases, the attempt to realize an intention creates conditions that run counter to it. In order to be able to confirm such paradoxical effects, on this thesis, we must draw on a normative vocabulary by means of which these effects can be referred to particular “original” intentions. In the context of our reflections, this function is fulfilled by the four normative spheres mentioned above, which must of course be interpreted as the always open-ended results of social struggles within whose framework subjects seek the recognition or appreciation of their personal characteristics, rights, achievements, or emotional needs. However, these struggles for recognition or appreciation do not of themselves or necessarily produce paradoxical effects. Rather, all the transformative processes collected here under the term “neoliberal revolution” serve as a structural condition of these struggles and thereby modify their form as well as their consequences. Under the growing pressure of capitalist imperatives, on this assumption, the institutionalized interpretive models of individualism, law, achievement, and love are transformed in what can only be called a paradoxical way.

There are three points connected with a transformation of the “classical” concept of contradiction into the concept of “paradoxical” contradiction.

- (a) First, talk of paradoxical contradictions must do without a clear juxtaposition of progressive and regressive elements of social development. Paradoxical effects are distinguished precisely by the fact that within them positive and negative moments are mixed, that in complex ways improvements of a situation go along with deteriorations. Some of the contradictions we thematize have precisely this structure: under the influence of expanding capitalism, elements of an emancipatory vocabulary or a transformation of social institutions undertaken with emancipatory intent lose their original content and thus in complex ways promote precisely the utility-based logics of action they were meant to contain. Here it is not a matter of denying the diagnosability of pathological or negative social conditions; it is rather that the description or deciphering of these conditions cannot do without reference to concepts that originally had an emancipatory content.
- (b) Beyond this, talk of “paradoxical” contradictions must get by without the model of *self-destructive* economic processes characteristic of descriptions of “late capitalist” social formations. The assumption that, under the influence

of a universalistic morality and a welfare-state-induced erosion of traditional justifications of inequality, the inequalities connected to capitalist models would lose legitimacy implies, as indicated, the assumption that capitalism would not be able to recruit new legitimations for inequality. Talk of the “paradoxical” contradictions of capitalism, in contrast, implies the image of an “ethicized” capitalism that has managed, with reference to an available vocabulary of normative self-description, to formulate new justifications for social inequality, injustice, or discrimination.

- (c) The model of “paradoxical” contradictions finally does without a class-theoretical reconstruction of social conflicts. This is in no way to deny the possibility of identifying some of the class- or milieu-specific negative consequences of the “new” capitalism. But this identification is, on the one hand, made more difficult by the fact that many modes of experiencing capitalism typically described as paradoxical affect higher-level employees; while, on the other hand, we have already indicated the extent, paradoxical in itself, to which subjects are now ready or required, despite growing social interdependence, to perceive their behavior as individualized. Both factors rob theories of contradiction that juxtapose collective subjects of their empirical reference point and thereby make it more difficult to identify progressive and “reactionary” subjects.

This general talk of the paradoxical contradictions of capitalism must now be filled in and expanded in many places in order to claim greater plausibility. Thus, the capitalist “pressure” described has different effects on different spheres of action. But what may be central here is that the structure of the “new” capitalism is already contradictory in itself and that these contradictions are carried into non-economic spheres of action. Paradoxical effects then result precisely when subjects in these spheres continue to see themselves in light of their characteristic norms (and this as it were with assent to a capitalism that is also normatively flexibilized). But this need not be the structure that characterizes all the relevant paradoxical contradictions. How exactly a paradoxical contradiction can be reconstructed must in a certain way be investigated from case to case. The thesis put forth here is only that the structure of contemporary capitalism produces paradoxical contradictions to a significant extent, so that the concept is a suitable instrument of general explanation.

V. Paradoxes of Capitalist Modernization

As mentioned, our general thesis is that the neoliberal restructuring of the capitalist economic system exerts a pressure to adapt that does not undo the previously enumerated progressive processes, but durably transforms them in their function or significance. Within the framework of the new organizational form of capitalism, what could previously be analyzed as an unambiguous rise in the sphere of

individual autonomy assumes the shape of unreasonable demands, discipline, or insecurity, which, taken together, have the effect of social desolidarization. What this means specifically will be elucidated in conclusion by means of the differentiated spheres of action.

1. The normative progress signified by the social generalization of romantically charged individualism in the social-democratic era, which led to an increase of biographical freedom, has in a peculiar way turned into its opposite under the pressure of the neoliberal restructuring of capitalism. It is not that the new interpretive model has simply lost its power in the lifeworld, let alone been dissolved with regard to increased demands for flexibility; rather, it still possesses an undamped significance that shapes the self-understandings of many members of society. But in the last twenty years its meaning has imperceptibly changed; it has crept into economic processes as a professional and behavioral requirement. Today, the appeal to the idea that subjects understand their occupations not as fulfilling social duties but rather as revisable steps in their experimental self-realization justifies dismantling the privilege of membership in a firm, dissolving legal status guarantees, and expecting increased flexibility. Moreover, to a growing extent the qualifications for well-paid jobs in the manufacturing and service sectors incorporate extra-functional demands for creative and biographical indeterminacy. This normative interpretive transformation of romantic individualism, which is starting to become an ideology and a productive factor of the new capitalism, goes along with desolidarizing tendencies insofar as employees are less and less in a position to develop longer-term connections with firms or colleagues. Furthermore, the changed demands require one to remain so open with regard to choice of location, use of time, and type of activity that friendships, love relationships, and even families are exposed to a high degree of pressure. In any case, network capitalism is characterized by tendencies toward an unlimited demand for subjective action capacities that blur the borders between the private and the professional-public sphere. 'Entrepreneurs' are expected not only to dutifully fulfill externally given production quotas, but also to bring communicative and emotional skills and resources to bear in order to meet project goals they are more or less responsible for setting. This debordering of work-related efforts entails softening the separation of private and professional spheres of action¹⁸ and, relatedly, mobilizes informal, "lifeworld" skills for professional goals (economic rationality, it could be said, is now being "colonized" by the lifeworld).¹⁹ Beyond this, network capitalism is colonizing spheres of action that were previously distant from utility, thereby introducing the principles of achievement and exchange into the field of asymmetrical reciprocity structured by solidarity. The consequences of this informalization of the economic and economization of the informal are multifarious and cannot be discussed in detail here. However, three phenomena can be briefly enumerated:

- When informal, emotional skills are included in utility-based work processes and economic imperatives intrude into informal relations, it becomes increasingly difficult for subjects to distinguish clearly between instrumental and non-instrumental aspects of intersubjective relationships. In other words, in network capitalism friendship-like relations are established also

with a view to instrumental interests, while instrumental relationships are repeatedly transformed into friendship-like relations. In this respect, unclear intermediate forms of friendships/instrumental relationships are common. These are felt as ambiguous by subjects themselves, since the “true” intentions with which others encounter us can scarcely be discerned.

- In addition, subjects in network capitalism are in a certain way called upon to pursue their “authentic” interests more in professional contexts. At the same time, however, project-based workplaces reward “flat” personalities that can respond flexibly to new challenges. Here, too, we consequently find a field in which the originally emancipatory significance of the ideal of authenticity has been transformed into an instrument for legitimizing capitalist arrangements. As an example of the difficulty of recognizing the particular contributions of employees within the firm we can call upon the fact that project-based work situations have hardly any memory of individual work achievements (we assume here without further discussion that demands for authenticity as a rule can only unfold when they are recognized). Employees’ contributions are accordingly decreasingly appreciated in their individual aspects:

In flexible organizations the memory for past services is very short, which leads to a thoroughly predictable instability of hierarchies: the person is no longer appreciated as such, but rather with a view to her skills here and now. Correspondingly, in these organizations there is no longer any place for the specific obligations that, for example, arise from the appreciation of [an employee’s] past achievements, be it only via the detour of age or length of service.²⁰

- Finally, the blending of private and public, informal and formal, skills and resources reduces the value of the more or less objective criteria by means of which subjects could measure the value of their qualifications and contributions. The ability, for example, to build and stabilize relationships can only with difficulty be cast in the form of a reference or a degree. Moreover, networks tend to create local reputations whose value is hard to assess outside the network.²¹ It may be this uncertainty about the social value of some qualifications and abilities, which will be thematized again below, that increasingly leads subjects to seek recognition of their ostensibly distinctive achievements and attributes in struggles for attention outside the real professional sphere (and thus, for example, on innumerable exhibitionistic television talkshows).²²
2. The attainments of the social-democratic era cited above consisted in the ongoing establishment and expansion of civil liberties and political participation rights. With these measures the realm of individual autonomy was on the one hand enlarged (for example beyond contractual freedom), while at the same time prohibitions on discrimination were to avoid cases of unequal treatment, which are still entirely possible on the basis of bourgeois civil rights. Political participation rights finally served to prevent illegitimate domination and, in T.H. Marshall’s view, provided the precondition for the de facto realization of bourgeois civil liberties in the first place. Now,

especially important for our reflections is the category of social status rights, which in Marshall's famous essay on "Citizenship and Social Class" make up citizen status in combination with bourgeois civil rights and political participation rights. The welfare state's institutionalization of social status rights serves at the same time as a confession that political rights, but also other rights of social participation, can only be realized in fact under conditions of minimal material provision. In Marshall's essay it was thus precisely social status rights that created "a universal right to real income which is not proportionate to the market value of the claimant."²³ Only when subjects had at their disposal a measure of material provision independent of their achievement were they put in a position to participate in basic social institutions and practices in a more or less equal way. In this context, two aspects should be emphasized: for one thing, the insight into the conditionality of rights connected to citizen status.²⁴ Civil and political participation rights, the assumption is, can only be realized if subjects have disposal over a certain standard of living they cannot always establish by themselves. For another thing, and relatedly, social status to a certain extent frees subjects from having to assume sole responsibility for their life situations. The institutionalization of welfare-state support goes along with the acknowledgement that in complex societies social inequalities are connected to different starting conditions, the precise character of which is hardly under subjects' control. In this sense, social rights have an empowering and an unburdening status.

Looking at contemporary society, erosive tendencies can now be seen in both respects. In the course of the transformation of welfare-state agencies, in part social rights are massively cut, but in part they are also transformed into economized social services on which claims are again dependent on the material resources of the clientele. Likewise, within this transformation we can discern a remoralization of entitlements and a paternalization of welfare-state provisions. Those who want to enjoy welfare-state benefits must do something in return – for instance, in the case of unemployment, be prepared to take any job they are offered – that only then qualifies them as justified claimants. There is a threat of paternalism wherever eligibility in principle for social services, and consequently the ability to claim benefits, is systematically undermined by a discourse of responsibility. The less possible it is to perceive welfare-state benefits as rights claims, the greater the danger that these benefits will be handed over to the arbitrariness of an unburdened bureaucracy or the unpredictable ability of civil society organizations to call sufficient public attention and generosity to their plight.²⁵ Primarily, however, the discourse of self-responsibility tends to remove attention from welfare-state agencies altogether. As Klaus Günther has shown, this discourse then disregards the extent to which the ascription of individual responsibility depends upon internal and external preconditions

that must be given for subjects to be justifiably treated as responsible for their deeds or omissions.²⁶ If responsibility is assigned without considering these preconditions, it is transformed into an “imperative” that takes on paradoxical features precisely when, in an increasingly complex society, subjects can hardly any longer assume responsibility in the full sense of the word for many aspects of their existence.²⁷ The imperative character of assigned responsibility is thus reinforced to the extent that individuals must assume responsibility for states of affairs for which they are not in fact responsible. This paradox is heightened by the fact that the conception of responsibility originally possessed thoroughly emancipatory features. For it was the critique of an impersonal welfare bureaucracy that led to the demand for provision that was nearer to its clients, thereby creating a domain in which subjects no longer needed to be seen only as the passive recipients of social transfers. Even before a serious discussion of the appropriate balance between the preconditions of responsible action and the scope of meaningful initiative could get under way, however, a vehement discourse of responsibility broke into public debate, suggesting that the extent of personal responsibility for the social circumstances of one’s actions was greater than had previously been assumed.

What emerges here is a disruption, which accompanies the spread of network capitalist structures, of the uncommonly socio-politically effective picture of a community of responsibility – mostly constituted by the nation-state – which makes it possible to make greater redistributive sacrifices generally reasonable by appeal to membership in a political or cultural community. Now, to the extent that the image of a society pervaded by networks takes hold as a fundamental means of societal self-description, other images of the social whole lose influence. Like all models of social solidarity, however, a framework is required “in which a relationship between the misfortune of those who suffer and the good fortune of the prosperous can be established.”²⁸ In network capitalism, on this thesis, citizens tend to perceive their efforts, successes, and failures as individualized, so that a reference to the greater whole scarcely seems possible any longer. The consequences for subjects can on the one hand be designated by the paradoxical concept of the compulsion to responsibility; on the other hand they can be grasped in psychological terms: the greater the responsibility individuals must assume for their life situations, the greater the danger the demands will be excessive. Alain Ehrenberg has accordingly put forth the thesis that the number of depressive illnesses increases with feelings of dissatisfaction resulting from greater demands for responsibility. “Le déprimé,” writes Ehrenberg, “est un homme en panne” – the depressive is a person who believes that he or she has failed, not one who has broken the rules or been cheated out of an existing legal benefit.²⁹

3. While in feudal or premodern societies status was distributed above all according to ascriptive features (birth, origin), modern industrial societies can be characterized by the decomposition of the ascriptive assignment of status in favor of universalistic criteria. Parsons in particular showed that with the increasing professionalization of social status politics, an achievement principle gained importance which is in principle universalistically structured, since no one could be excluded from the efforts connected to this principle on the basis of birth or origin alone.³⁰ It is not difficult to recognize that the achievement principle therefore possessed an emancipatory content: the larger the realm in which subjects can succeed on the basis of their efforts alone, the greater the realm of equal opportunity of participation in social status positions. Looking at the economy, for instance, processes like the “differentiation between households and employing organizations” typical of modern industrial society, as well as the “progressive attenuation of owners’ control of economic organizations” to the benefit of a growing class of salaried employees, can be identified as phases of a systematic spread of achievement-based fields of activity.³¹ The pushing back of the familial form of management that had long distinguished smaller businesses by modern management methods (and the corresponding educated manager class) also contributed to replacing the model of personal dependency predominant in family businesses with more impersonal and thus less arbitrary or paternalistic relations.³² Now, there can be absolutely no doubt that the achievement principle cursorily sketched here was already the object of serious social-scientific critique. Parsons himself pointed out that the central assumption in early capitalism – that the individual could enter as an equal into the system of market competition on the basis of his innate abilities alone – quickly proved to be illusory. With the spread of educational institutions after the Second World War came the insight that abilities relevant for participation in the market could only be “mediated through a complex series of stages in the socialization process.”³³ Of course, this interpretation only points to preconditions, recognized in the social-democratic era, for equal participation in achievement-oriented market competition. More important are all the forms of criticism that suspected the status of the achievement principle as a general social ordering principle of being an ideology, since it tends systematically and with reference to a normative argumentative arsenal to justify inequalities and thereby to disavow “alternative models of social production and distribution,” for instance those that avoid reference to the achievement principle.³⁴ Beyond this, to this day there are good empirical arguments that especially in the realm of senior management, origin or class-specific habitus trump the characteristics that depend upon achievement, so that we can by no means speak of a full overcoming of ascriptive status distributions.³⁵ These critical models did not, however, undermine the legitimating power of the achievement principle. To the contrary, recent research shows that the achievement principle continues to exert consciousness-shaping influence

as a normative expectation and thus to serve as an evaluative standard for the judgment of structures of social distribution and reward.³⁶ Of course, part of the critique of the achievement principle can also be interpreted as evidence of an unsatisfactory or too restrictive translation of the universalistic criteria connected with it. In other words, the emancipatory content of the achievement principle is usually adhered to precisely when it is criticized.

Along with the consistently positive role the achievement principle thus continues to play as a general idea of social ordering, there is another political and economic discourse within whose framework the semantic of achievement attains increasing prominence (“Achievement should pay again”). Now, taken together, the two states of affairs could, on this thesis, then assume paradoxical features if it could be shown that the achievement principle loses its last remnants of reality precisely in the economic realm as a whole. There are various circumstances that in this context involve what should here be characterized as “achievement insecurity.” For one thing, tendencies can already be identified in the empirical rise of achievement justice as a phenomenon to allow market success as the sole criterion for rewarding achievement. In other words, only those who deploy their labor power for the production of products or services that can be sold on the market earn their keep in the literal sense. From this perspective, the market appears as an “unavoidable authority for evaluating achievement.”³⁷ All achievements that cannot be converted into profits in the way described must then be uncertain. The thesis that the achievement principle *marketizes* itself in this way has been the basis of social-theoretical diagnoses of the present independent of particular empirical judgments. Sighard Neckel and Kai Dröge, for instance, assume that markets in themselves are exclusively interested in economic results that remain “at the same time ‘blind’ and neutral” with respect to the way they come about.³⁸ To the extent, then, that societies are “marketized,” factors like accident, inheritance, or luck come into question as legitimate criteria for the distribution of material or symbolic goods. It is certainly still too early to conclusively judge whether the “marketization” of evaluative criteria observable in particular fields will stabilize more broadly as a normative framework of expectations, which may also entail that factors like accident, luck, or inheritance are not meaningfully included in a generally acceptable structure for justifying social inequality. But there undoubtedly seems to be a general insecurity about the value and status of one’s own achievements that is reinforced by the already enumerated characteristics of project-oriented capitalism. Thus, it is frequently unclear, to mention again the important point here, whether a working relationship is initiated on the basis of objective criteria or personal inclination; this is connected to the general difficulty of objectifying the competencies that are decisive for network capitalism (for instance the ability to build relationships, to generate trust, flexibility, etc.). Finally, the gains for

one's reputation connected with the pursuit of a project hardly correspond to the "national equivalents" of a reference or a diploma and thus remain in a certain sense internal to the project.³⁹ Taking these factors together, it quickly becomes clear why contemporary subjects only with difficulty attain certainty about the "true" value of their contributions and achievements. But if the practical content of the achievement principle changes in this way, prevailing contemporary political and economic discussions about achievement are transformed from a means of potential emancipation into a tool that, like the discourse of responsibility, serves to undermine aspects of social welfare freed from achievement, as well as to suggest the possibility of partaking of status where it in fact does not exist.

4. The idea that arose on the threshold of the nineteenth century, opposing romantic love to the instrumental world of exchange relations, was probably always a typical product of bourgeois illusion.⁴⁰ Indeed, at the historical moment when the first signs of the beginnings of secularization seemed to multiply, couple relationships were affectively experienced as outfitted with all the experiential qualities that had previously been reserved for the transgressive experience of the "saint." Early on, however, a sober sense for social advantage surreptitiously intruded into the counter-world of the symbiotic union of man and wife, ensuring that longer-term relationships or marriages usually occurred only between members of the same social class. But its delimitation from the "cold" sphere of economic relations only finally collapsed when, with the social spread of the romantic love ideal, social practices arose that made the initiation and maintenance of couple relationships increasingly dependent on consumption. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, as Eva Illouz has convincingly showed, love was increasingly "reified" and commercialized as subjects used consumer items and luxury goods to give their affective relationships symbolic expression and to ritually mark themselves off from the social environment.⁴¹ Nevertheless, in these processes of increasing commercialization, as Illouz also observes, subjects preserved, despite their ensnarement in economic practices, the ability to keep their feelings free from strategic utility considerations. With almost virtuosic skill they rather seemed able to employ the consumption of goods to protect "pure" relationships still based only on emotional inclination from quickly deteriorating and, at least for a certain time, to make them last. To this extent, the provisional obligations that entered into intimate relationships as a recognition norm with the rise of the romantic love ideal remain peculiarly in force with the economization of love practices. Indeed, we are convinced that, under pressure from the women's movement in the social-democratic era, they ensured that couple relationships took on more the character of a partnership and that the unequal distribution of housework and childcare was increasingly perceived as a moral challenge on the masculine side as well.

In the last two decades, however, tendencies have emerged that threaten to dissolve this precarious integration of consumption and feeling within the couple by giving rise to a new form of consumer rationality in love. For one thing, under the pressure of the unlimited work typical of the network structure of the new capitalism, longer-term love and intimate relationships are exposed to considerably more pressure; today the growing demands on time resources, the much increased mobility demands, and the constant expectation of greater responsibility and emotional engagement at work make it more and more difficult to bring into the private domain that creative virtuosity that is necessary to maintain “pure” relationships founded on inclination alone. However, it is not only these structural pressures that are to blame for the tendential erosion of the consumption-saturated practice of romantic love. Rather, the new “spirit” of capitalism, which transfers the entrepreneurial idea of calculative action to subjects’ self-relations, penetrates into the capillaries of intimate relationships, so that the model of utility-oriented calculation begins to predominate. This means less that today intimate relationships are increasingly taken up after sober calculation of their utility in terms of pleasure and enjoyment; what rather seems to be emerging as a new model of behavior is the tendency to calculate the long-term chances of such love relationships according their compatibility with the future mobility demands of a career path that can only be planned in the short term. If so, today something would be achieving dominance in the innermost core of love that had indeed already long been included in the form of consumer practices but had never come into its own against the power of feelings: economic rationality, which until now partners took into account together to make their precarious relationships last, would be becoming a tool they apply to evaluate one another.

(Translated by James Ingram)

NOTES

These reflections further specify a research program that is to serve as a theoretical framework for empirical projects at the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research. The first outlines of this research project are to be found in Axel Honneth, ed., *Befreiung aus der Mündigkeit. Paradoxien des gegenwärtigen Kapitalismus* (Frankfurt/Main: Campus, 2002). This paper was first published as “Paradoxien des Kapitalismus,” *Berliner Debatte Initial* 15, no. 1 (2004).

1. Ralf Dahrendorf, “Das 20. Jahrhundert – Bilanz und Hoffnung,” in Dieter Wild, ed., *Spiegel des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Hamburg: Hoffmann & Campe, 1999), 18.

2. Talcott Parsons, *The System of Modern Societies* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1971), chs. 5 and 6.

3. Eva Illouz, *Consuming the Romantic Utopia: Love and the Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

4. Axel Honneth, “Redistribution as Recognition: A Response to Nancy Fraser,” in Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition? A Political-Philosophical Exchange* (London & New York: Verso, 2004).

5. Parsons, *The System of Modern Societies*, 80.

6. Axel Honneth, "Organized Self-Realization: Some Paradoxes of Individualization," *European Journal of Social Theory* 7, no. 4 (2004); Charles Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity* (Toronto: Anansi, 1995).
7. Anthony Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy: Love, Sexuality and Eroticism in Modern Societies* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), ch. 4.
8. Parsons, "The Motivation of Economic Activities," *Essays in Sociological Theory* (Glencoe: Free Press, 1954).
9. See Michael Zürn, *Regieren jenseits des Nationalstaates* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1998), 64ff.
10. Scott Lash and John Urry, *The End of Organized Capitalism* (Oxford: Polity, 1987), ch. 7.
11. Martin Höppner, *Wer beherrscht die Unternehmen? Shareholder Value, Managerherrschaft und Mitbestimmung in Deutschland* (Frankfurt/Main: Campus, 2003), 15.
12. Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (London & New York: Verso, 2005).
13. See Hans J. Pongratz and G. Günter Voß, *Arbeitskraftunternehmer. Erwerbsorientierung in entgrenzten Arbeitsformen* (Berlin: edition sigma, 2003). [Tr.: The authors suggest the term 'entployee' in a short English summary of their argument: *Concepts and Transformation* 8, no. 3 (2003): 239–54.]
14. Jürgen Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis*, tr. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon, 1975 (1973)), 76.
15. *Ibid.*, 93–94.
16. See also Martin Hartmann, "Widersprüche, Ambivalenzen, Paradoxien. Begriffliche Wandlungen in der neueren Gesellschaftstheorie," in Honneth, ed., *Befreiung aus der Mündigkeit*.
17. Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration* (Cambridge: Polity, 1984), 313.
18. Arlie Russell Hochschild, *The Time Bind: When Work Becomes Home and Home Becomes Work* (New York: Henry Holt, 1997).
19. See Nick Kratzer, *Arbeitskraft in Entgrenzung. Grenzenlose Anforderungen, erweiterte Spielräume, begrenzte Ressourcen* (Berlin: edition sigma, 2003), 236–9. Kratzer writes in this context of a "weak" side of post-Taylorist rationalization (236).
20. Nicolas Dodier, *Les hommes et les machines. La conscience collective dans les sociétés technicisées* (Paris: Métailié, 1995), 341–2. See also Kai Dröge and Irene Somm, "Spurlose Leistung. Zeit, Status und Reziprozität im flexiblen Kapitalismus," ms, Frankfurt Institute for Social Research, 2003.
21. Boltanski and Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, 430.
22. Alain Ehrenberg, *L'individu incertain* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1995), 175ff.
23. T.H. Marshall, "Citizenship and Social Class," in Marshall and Tom Bottomore, *Citizenship and Social Class* (London: Pluto, 1992 (1950)), 28.
24. See Georg Vobruba, "Freiheit: Autonomiegewinne der Leute im Wohlfahrtsstaat," in Stephan Lessenich, ed., *Wohlfahrtsstaatliche Grundbegriffe. Historische und aktuelle Diskurse* (Frankfurt/Main: Campus, 2003), 141.
25. Nikolas Rose uses the concept "remoralization" above all with a view to the benefits given by civil associations operating beyond the state and the market, since these help only certain personality profiles. Rose, *Powers of Freedom: Reframing Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 265.
26. Klaus Günther, "Zwischen Ermächtigung und Disziplinierung. Verantwortung im gegenwärtigen Kapitalismus," in Honneth, ed., *Befreiung aus der Mündigkeit*, 117–39.
27. *Ibid.*, 128.
28. Boltanski and Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, 379.
29. Alain Ehrenberg, *La Fatigue d'être soi. Dépression et société* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 1999), 16.
30. Parsons, *System of Modern Societies*, 110.
31. *Ibid.*, 108, 106.
32. Boltanski and Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, 17.
33. Parsons, *System of Modern Societies*, 97.

34. Claus Offe, *Leistungsprinzip und industrielle Arbeit. Mechanismen der Statusverteilung in Arbeitsorganisationen der industriellen Leistungsgesellschaft* (Frankfurt/Main and Köln: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1970), 9.

35. Michael Hartmann, *Der Mythos von den Leistungseliten. Spitzenkarrieren und soziale Herkunft in Wirtschaft, Politik, Justiz und Wissenschaft* (Frankfurt/Main: Campus, 2002).

36. Sighard Neckel, Kai Dröge, and Irene Somm, "Welche Leistung, welche Leistungsgerechtigkeit? Soziologische Konzepte, normative Fragen und einige empirische Befunde," in Peter A. Berger and Volker H. Schmidt, eds., *Welche Gleichheit, welche Ungleichheit? Grundlagen der Ungleichheitsforschung* (Wiesbaden: VS, 2004).

37. Ibid.

38. Sighard Neckel and Kai Dröge, "Die Verdienste und ihr Preis: Leistung in der Marktgeseellschaft," in Honneth, ed., *Befreiung aus der Mündigkeit*, 105.

39. Boltanski and Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, 430.

40. Niklas Luhmann, *Love as Passion: The Codification of Intimacy* (Cambridge: Polity, 1986).

41. Illouz, *Consuming the Romantic Utopia*.

Martin Hartmann is Assistant Professor of Philosophy and Assistant at the Institute for Social Research at J.W. Goethe University, Frankfurt. He is the author of *Die Kreativität der Gewohnheit. Grundzüge einer pragmatistischen Demokratietheorie* (2003) and co-editor of *Vertrauen* (2001).

Axel Honneth is Professor of Philosophy and Director of the Institute for Social Research at J.W. Goethe University, Frankfurt. His most recent books in English are *Suffering from Indeterminacy: An Attempt at a Reactualization of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* (2000) and *Redistribution or Recognition? A Political-Philosophical Exchange*, with Nancy Fraser (2003).