The good old days yet to come: Nostalgia and postalgia in reviving the spirit of capitalism

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Introduction: The old and new spirits of capitalism

The notion that capitalism has, or that its conduct is affected by, a ‘spirit’ has been with us for more than a century now. Weber’s (1930[1904]) thesis retains a place as one of the most controversial theories in social science; his account of the first spirit of capitalism as founded on a ‘Protestant ethic’ has become part of the everyday language we use to account for individual or collective orientations to work. The idea of a spirit of capitalism has re-appeared most recently in sociological analysis thanks to Boltanski and Chiapello’s monumental 2005 book The New Spirit of Capitalism (first published in French in 1999; the arguments are summarised in Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005b). They pay homage to Weber’s approach to understanding economy from the title onwards, always assuming that capitalism must be inflected by a spirit (or *Geist*[[1]](#footnote-1)) to explain why people participate in an economic system that has no inherent logic of its own. Boltanski and Chiapello argue that the best explanation for our continuing, expanding, engagement with an economic system that exploits and damages us is due to our absorption of habits and behaviours founded on an ethos developed ‘outside’ capitalism. Because of this, we are said to be enacting a morality for a political economy that lacks an ethic of its own, to give meaning to our engagement with that system where it would otherwise be absent.

In this paper we explore the historicizing narrative of a progressive series of spirits of capitalism through a close reading of these arguments in relation to an event we suggest exemplifies both the productive potential and limitations of it as an analytical approach. We begin by discussing Boltanski and Chiapello’s thesis through examination of more contemporary contestations of capitalism and its spirit. Boltanski and Chiapello focussed their analysis on the published corpus of managerial writings from the 1990s, which articulated in a well formed and relatively stable discourse ideas that had emerged in response to demands made by counter-cultural new social movements of the 1960s. However even as Boltanski and Chiapello were writing in the 1990s there were even newer demands being made by ‘even newer social movements’ (Crossley 2003), unleashing a new round of anti-capitalist dissent centred on environmentalism, debt, poverty, global justice and a developing critique of consumerism. To analyse how the spirit of capitalism has been reframed in response to these challenges, we analyse an event that is prominent in the construction of a new form of discursive entrepreneurship. The event is loosely modelled on the globally successful ‘Technology, Entertainment, Design’ talks, and is entitled the ‘Do Lectures’. It is held on a Welsh hillside either annually or biannually, and broadcast via the internet to a global audience as well as the much smaller audience of attendees. As we develop our analysis we also suggest that there are indications here and elsewhere of the articulation of an ‘even newer’ spirit of capitalism, a fourth, built around the features we observed and embodied at the event.

Within this, however, we also want to problematize the linear narrative of a progressive series of spirits of capitalism. An analysis of the content of the spirit being articulated at the Do Lectures suggests a more complex conception of temporality, more akin to Gibson Burrell’s image of time as a spiral (Burrell 1992), or Frederick Jameson’s suggestion that postmodernism had flattened the logic of historical narrative into a bricolage of past, present, future, fact and fiction (Jameson 1991: 96). Drawing upon the closely related concepts of nostalgia and postalgia, we argue that the ‘even newer spirit of capitalism’ we suggest is being articulated at the Do Lectures is less of a progressive development of previous spirits and more of a ‘mashup[[2]](#footnote-2)’, combining romantic nostalgia for a lost past in which life and work were integrated into a meaningful whole through a ‘craft’ identity, located in authentic relationships of *Gemeinschaft* or community, with a techno-utopian postalgic (Ybema, 2004) discourse of emancipation to be achieved through technological development and mediated community.

In the first part of the paper we set out the central arguments that have developed around Weber’s notion of the spirit of capitalism, and map out the current challenges to the reigning ‘new spirit’ from the even newer social movements (Crossley 2003). In the second part of the paper we outline our methodology and choice of the Do Lectures as a site to study the emergence of an even newer spirit of capitalism. We then provide a narrative account of our ethnographic research at the Do Lectures, attending to the material aesthetics of the event as well as drawing out key discursive anchor points drawn upon and developed through the lectures themselves. These are then further analysed through the lenses of nostalgia and postalgia; following this we bring together our arguments in the discussion to consider its implications for understanding the past, present, and future in the ceaselessly changing spirits of capitalism.

From Spectre to Spirit: Materialities and cultures of capitalism

When Marx and Engels (2008[1848]) wrote that there was a ‘spectre’ (*Gespenst*) haunting Europe, they were referring to the spirit of communism as a political shadow cast by a capitalism that they predicted would produce its own gravediggers. Writing just over fifty years later, Weber chose the term *Geist* rather than *Gespenst* to try to conceptualise the cultural and political conditions of capitalism. Whilst both terms can be translated into English as ‘ghost’, they have very different functions and implications. Weber took issue with the materialism of Marx’s analysis of capitalism, suggesting that this particular political and economic formation was shaped by religious and cultural values as much as material conditions. For Weber, the values explained not only the specific social and economic formations of capitalist organization but also the concrete rationalities motivating engagement in an economic system that, at root, has no internal logic other than accumulation for its own sake.

Contrasting ‘natural’ pre-modern market economic relations in which activities are oriented toward the satisfaction of material wants, Weber suggests that the open, endless drive toward accumulation without enjoyment - the maximisation of income and wealth for its own sake – associated with modern capitalism was a culturally specific, Protestant achievement. The subordination of life to work, through a secularised notion of ‘calling’ and the construction of a moral equivalence between wealth and godliness, was a reversal of the ‘natural’ subordination of work to life. There has to be a spirit that animates and motivates such capitalist activity, without which an exclusively materialist analysis, which presupposes the drive to endless accumulation as an end in itself, misses a crucial sociological dimension.

This same problematic of the relationship between material, cultural, and economic was addressed almost 100 years later by Boltanski and Chiapello (2005). Starting with a ‘minimal definition’ of capitalism as ‘an imperative to unlimited accumulation of capital by formally peaceful means’ (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005: 4), these authors draw from Weber ‘the idea that people need powerful moral reasons for rallying to capitalism’ (2005: 9). They suggest workers, managers or capital holders alike need a justification and legitimating ideology for engaging with capitalism precisely because, as a bare economic system, it has no inherent value rationality of its own. As such, they agree that capitalism needs a spirit, which they also define minimally as ‘the set of beliefs associated with the capitalist order that helps to justify this order and, by legitimating them, to sustain the forms of action and predispositions compatible with it’ (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005: 10). Extending Weber’s empirical observations, Boltanski and Chiapello trace the development of this spirit from its early Protestant variant through an incarnation as an industrial spirit epitomised by the ‘organization man’ of the 1950s, to the ‘new spirit’ growing on the back of the 1960s counter culture that would emerge fully formed in the popular managerial literature of the 1990s.

Boltanski and Chiapello also depart from the Weberian track, most clearly in their suggestion that the new spirit of capitalism developed in response to antagonistic discourses that are articulated from a position of dissatisfaction with the status quo, leading to a crisis of legitimacy and thence a reformation of the guiding spirit and its ‘regime of justification’ (Boltanski & Chiapello 2006): 163). Invoking the experiences of 1968 in France when students and workers took to the streets in protest and the ideological foundations of capitalism were explicitly challenged, this argument focuses first and foremost upon the discourses ‘addressed to the cadres’ (2005: 14), the managerial classes that are reproduced through the French higher education system. According to this analysis, the root of capitalism’s crisis in 1968 is found in the disengagement of this class from the logic of capitalist production/consumption. Whilst ‘blue collar’ workers can be pressured into work through poverty and the withdrawal of social security, a more active engagement than mere compliance is required of the managerial classes. In this narrative, there is a need for a post-68 formation of a ‘new spirit of capitalism’ to re-engage students (the future managerial cadre) with a meaningful working life in management. The generation of students coming through the universities in the late 1960s was not attracted by the image of the stable, safe, grey-suited, career bureaucrat that dominated the imaginary of the business world. Influenced by the emerging ‘artistic critique’ of capitalism, this generation wanted excitement and authenticity rather than security, and could not identify with the overarching values that justified engagement on grounds of efficiency or market success. The anti-capitalism of the 1960s thus:

...first emerged in small artistic and intellectual circles, and stresses other characteristics of capitalism. In a capitalist world, it criticises oppression (market domination, factory discipline), the massification of society, standardisation, and pervasive commodification. It vindicates an ideal of liberation and/or of individual autonomy, singularity, and authenticity.

(Boltanski & Chiapello, 2006: 176)

This ‘artistic critique’ is proposed as a means of articulating a rejection of capitalist alienation, oppression and the dysfunctions of mass consumer society. To re-engage people, a new spirit of capitalism thus had to be formed that would speak to these demands for ‘autonomy, singularity, and authenticity’, articulating the value of capitalist management in these terms. In their detailed analysis of the populist managerial corpus of 1990s books, this is exactly the discourse that Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) find, with writers like Tom Peters decrying bureaucracy as a force that crushes individualism and creativity and leads to dull (and uncompetitive) conformity.

This argument is driven conceptually by three main elements that are identified in the regime of justification articulated by any spirit of capitalism (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005: 16; 2006: 164). First, what is exciting about engagement with capitalism? How does it generate enthusiasm and what forms of liberation does it offer? Second, what stability and security does it promise, for both current and future generations? Third, how is capitalism justified in relation to the common good? In answering these questions, a spirit can emphasise one aspect more than others – for example, until the 1960s the main emphasis lay on material security and well-being. In response to the artistic critique, the new spirit of capitalism signalled a shift of emphasis away from these concerns towards ‘excitement’ and ‘liberation’. The other face of this shift is, of course, an erosion of employment and economic security and an increasing precariousness in work and organization (cf. Doogan 2009).

Boltanski and Chiapello’s analysis concentrates on how critiques of capitalism, as absorbed and articulated in changing spirits, are transformed into ideological rhetoric to provide a moral foundation and justification for the maintenance of organization and economy. The artistic critique, informed by a moral theology that draws on New Age spiritualities rather than Protestantism, has suffered this fate since its initial flowering in the1960s. It is easy to find consumerist commodifications of the spirit that underpinned the artistic critique: feng shui office space consultancies, spiritual management development programmes, aromatherapy candles to soothe away work-related stress, and yoga positions that enable creativity and innovation have all become part of our working landscape. In a more secular form, the positive focus of this critique on creativity, innovation, excitement, fun, non-alienated, fully human activity and the integration of ‘work’ and ‘life’ are reflected in any number of team building away days, corporate culture initiatives (Fleming, 2005), or the architecture and design of iconic corporate headquarters like the Googleplex.

Alongside this we can also see one of the contours of an ‘even newer’ spirit constructed in response to a second line of critique that emerged at the same time in the 1960s: environmentalism. Overshadowed for a time by the dominance, and recuperation, of the creativity-focussed artistic critique, environmentalism emerged as a powerful global imaginary for resistance in the 1990s, coupled with an explicitly anti-capitalist, anti-globalisation ideology framed in terms of ‘global justice’. These ‘even newer social movements’ (Crossley 2003) shifted the emphasis from the first ‘excitement’ component of the spirit of capitalism to the third, suggesting that ‘justice’ could be articulated in demands for the eradication of third world debt, for example, indigenous land rights, or in corporate accountability for environmental degradation.

Our argument here is that this ‘even newer’ critique, embodied in the on-going protest movement that started with the ‘battle of Seattle’ in the 1990s and more recently in the form of ‘Occupy Wall Street’ (Maeckelbergh 2009; Graeber 2013) and associated groups, is in the process of generating an ‘even newer spirit of capitalism’ in response to its demands. New consumption communities and organizations promoting ethical production/consumption both aspire to address exactly the problem Weber predicted would be inevitable as the Protestant-inspired first spirit of capitalism progressed – that unbounded accumulation and consumption would only ultimately be challenged by lack of fossil fuel. This issue is perhaps the most pressing that contemporary producers and consumers face now, and therefore it is this that the ‘even newer’ spirit of capitalism claims to address, presenting arguments for production and consumption that take account of the reduction in natural resources that the first and second spirits of capitalism (and their associated critiques) largely ignored. Given that this spirit is emergent, and the critique still contested, studying its formation in action requires a distinct methodology from the text based analyses of Weber and Boltanski and Chiapello. The following section therefore explains our methodological approach: a visual ethnography of discourse in action, undertaken at the Do Lectures, a quasi-public forum in which new ideas of what capitalism is, or what forms it might take, are articulated, discussed, and performed.

A Methodology for Studying the Doing of a Spirit

Our analysis of this emerging spirit is based on fieldwork centred on a five day event held at a campsite in in west Wales, the ‘Do Lectures’ (‘Talks that inspire action’ because ‘Ideas change everything’, according to the organizers - <http://dolectures.com/>). These annual events are a perfect manifestation of what Boltanski and Chiapello (2005b: 162) call the ‘intellectual avant-garde’ of the changing spirit of capitalism. These are the people who claim to be the first practitioners of the new spirit, which they then lecture and write about, so that others can be inspired to follow. As such, their cultural influence is disproportionate to their economic wealth.

To study the Do Lectures we undertook a short but intensive period of ethnography (Crang & Cook 2007) participating in the lectures as attendees. We made fieldnotes from the moment we applied to be admitted to the event, through receiving confirmation that we had been accepted, traveling to the site, participating in the lectures, dinners, campfire conversations, cold nights in tents, shower queues in the mornings, and evening social activities. As the campsite event is only one part of the Do Lectures, we surround it with a variant of virtual ethnography (Hine 2000) before and after the event, reviewing the lectures as they were posted on the internet for wider consumption, following up discussions arising from the lectures, and keeping notes on the regular communications coming in from the organizers, primarily though a series of email newsletters entitled ‘Kindling: Ideas to fire you up’. Our fieldnotes are roughly split into description of key events or communiques supplemented with drawings, for example to capture the layout of physical spaces, and more analytical reflections on the event in the moment and subsequently. Whilst this is clearly an artificial division of the objective and subjective (Crang & Cook 2007), it helped us to maintain a focus on describing who said what, when, where and why, as well as thinking about how we felt and why. As middle class professionals with a genuine concern for the problems of contemporary capitalism, we fitted the profile of the core target audience for the lectures, so our responses were likely to resonate with those of other attendees.

As noted above, our aim was to capture a moment in the discursive formation of a new spirit of capitalism. This meant observing the processes of articulation, recognition, contestation, investment and disengagement that frame the formation. Not all of this process is linguistic. From earlier research into social movement organizations (Sutherland et al, forthcoming; Land, 2009) and companies promoting ‘alternative’ lifestyles (Land & Taylor, 2010), we were prepared to find specific material and performative aesthetics. From first browsing the website of the Do Lectures it was apparent that not only were there aesthetic elements similar to more radical movements or attitudes characterising the event, but also that the culture of the lectures was a very visual one. In the booklet sent out to newly registered attendees, for example, there was relatively little text, and much of the content was given over to drawings and photographs. In seeking to capture this aesthetic dimension of the ‘even newer spirit’, and to understand better the visual culture within which it was being articulated, we therefore incorporated elements from visual ethnography along with our more conventional fieldnote strategies (Pink 2007). In practical terms, this meant using our own cameras to capture elements of the event, but also to discuss photographs with others who were taking them, as a way to understand what they saw as significant and worthy of documenting. Given that there were several professional photographers documenting the event, with still photographs and fixed video cameras set up to capture the lectures themselves, this provided an rich and detailed aspect of the data set.

In the next section we give an overview of the event, providing an overall narrative and drawing out specific moments and themes in more detail for subsequent analysis. The themes that we present here came out as we wrote up our fieldnotes, inserted photographs, and exchanged, compared and discussed our individual interpretations. Guiding the narrative and selection of events presented here are the twin themes of nostalgia and postalgia, as prospective and retrospective temporalities were interwoven in the constitution of the ideology or spirit that sought to capture the imaginary of the present. Our analysis suggests that this is not a pure example of backward looking nostalgia, or a purely future-orientated revolutionary break with past. Rather what we found in the lectures was a more spiral temporality, in which the past holds the key to a better future, with its true potential only becoming possible through ICT and other new technologies, which promise authenticity, belonging, the realisation of human potential, and social and environmental justice, without the constrictions imposed by tradition and the past.

Doing ‘Do’

Our first real encounter with the Do Lectures started a month or so before the lectures, when the first ‘stuff’ came through the door via a traditional post-out with a real stamp (i.e. not a business frank). The address was faintly printed on the front, suggesting a depleted ink cartridge. The ‘Do lecture’ logo and address - ‘The Chicken Shed’ - were properly printed on the bottom of the envelope, slightly to the left, so the poor address print quality appeared rather ‘quaint’. The overall effect was one of a slightly amateurish, fanzine aesthetic from the 1980s/90s, even in the A5 size of the envelope. Inside, the letter was very informal, opening with a ‘Hi there’, and signing off with a ‘Can’t wait’ from the designated ‘Chief of Stuff’. The letter was decorated by simple cartoons of a bicycle and a hot-air balloon, images of old technologies of travel, relatively environmentally friendly and connected to nature and the elements: technologies that conjured up simplicity, humility, and enthusiastic amateurishness, as well as the recent past. This theme was carried over into the ‘Attendee’s Guide’, which included ‘Travel Information’ pages featuring images such as a boat, double-decker bus, hot-air balloon, bicycle, propeller biplane, and tractor - all rendered in an amateur, slightly childish style, for example with wheels that were not round. The overall effect was strikingly similar to imagery used by activist organizations involved in campaigning on environmental and transport issues (Land, 2009).

Against this lo-tech imagery, epitomized by the potato-stamp appearance of the main ‘Do’ logo on the front, the final page of the attendee guide contained the following:

**Before you go...**

Discover and connect with fellow attendees through the 2011 Do Lectures Lanyard. The Twitter powered conference directory. Visit the link below.

lanyard.com/2011/the-do-lectures/

The links to Lanyard/Twitter fulfilled two main functions. First it opens a space for participation, suggesting that attendees should become actively involved, and echoing the statement from the founder of the lectures, on the first page, that “We know it isn’t just the speakers that make this event, but those who attend it too”. Second, this participation was elicited using the latest social networking technologies, so that attendees’ first engagement with an event that promised a kind of ‘time out’ to return to nature in the bucolic idyll of the Welsh hills was via their smartphones and laptops. This clashing of past and future, tradition and technology, was repeated throughout the event.

Arriving at the event (guided by a combination of hand painted ‘This way’ signs, map, and a GPS app on one of our iPhones), we parked our very conventional hire car and walked onto the main site. The venue is next to a nature reserve, just outside the small town of Cardigan; it combines a small kitchen garden growing organic produce, with a campsite offering a range of high-end options, up to geodesic domes with wood-burning stoves and proper beds. Our own accommodation was in a large tent, shared by eight people and gender segregated. The tent was a traditional, quite square, canvas structure of the type associated with Scout or Guide camping in the 1970s, its roof supported by a roughly hewn wooden post. It was a far cry from the lightweight, synthetic tents with carbon-fibre poles that are more common today. This aesthetic was carried over into the reindeer skin sleeping mat that we were each provided with. This was placed on top of a high-tech, arctic quality, self-inflating sleeping mat made entirely of synthetic materials. To help keep us warm we were also loaned a four/five season sleeping bag from a high-end Finnish manufacturer.

The conjunction of high and low tech was carried over into the main conference venue, which comprised a pair of large, conjoined, canvas teepees. At one end, next to the entrance, was a sound mixing desk and lighting control desk, surrounded by hay bales. In the middle, rows of mis-matched folding chairs were laid out, all facing the main stage. To the sides were two high-quality video cameras, set up to capture the lectures. Behind the stage was a projector screen, and slightly to left of centre was a tree stump, beautifully cleaned, leveled, and shaped, and with two small microphones protruding from its top like antennae. The stump operated in exactly the same way as a more conventional steel/glass lectern (or simply masks one? We weren’t able to check as the stage was open only to organizers and lecturers), while simultaneously expressing very clearly that those materials are unacceptable in this context. If we must engage with the norms of contemporary technology, then we should do so in a way that upsets the conventions by pretending that they can be made of wood or more obviously natural materials.

This combination of natural materials, a homely domestic object, and very contemporary technology exemplifies the key way in which materiality was articulated at Do through a nostalgic lens. The arrival car park contained several very well maintained classic vehicles – a vintage Land Rover and a Type 2 Volkswagen camper van, for example. These practical long-lasting vehicles suggest a desire to be living in the 1960s, perhaps for aesthetic reasons based on appreciation of innovative classic designs, but also perhaps to express a wish for an ostensibly simpler life that is now read as containing fewer demands on time, location, or selfhood. Clothing also reflected this philosophy. Most people attending, ourselves included, brought a bag filled with a clashing mixture of cotton, lycra, natural dyes, and neon. We noticed some very careful dressing, dependent on activity, temperature, and social context. Early morning yoga, canoeing, and running all saw a preponderance of man-made fibres; attending the Lectures brought more classic design clothing in natural fibres, the sartorial equivalent of the vintage Land Rover; while relaxing in the evening around the campfire or in the little stone-built pub saw us dressed in a mixture of the two, especially when the temperature dropped near to freezing and we put on everything we had brought.

This aesthetic and its cultural associations extended throughout the camp and the Lectures. Speakers referred again and again to moments in time or places in which life was apparently simpler, more rewarding existentially, more sensitive to the natural environment, and more ethical. The lecturers consistently promoted an image of a simpler, more authentic mode of existence, integrating work and life. For example, a workshop on improvisational theatre and creativity, run by a management consultant who also teaches at Said Business School, was held in a traditional woodworking workshop out in the woods, surrounded by handsaws, axes and woodcarving equipment. In this environment we were encouraged to physically reconnect with ourselves and interact, to unblock our natural creativity. In another talk, we were told a story of how the speaker, disillusioned with his career, had set off around the UK on a bicycle to meet and interview a range of traditional craftspeople. He showed us a short video he had made from still photographs put to a voice recording of a traditional walking-stick maker, who learned to make sticks from his father, and still did, using traditional methods, in his shed.

The built environment of the Do Lectures, and members of the communities organizing the event, was given great prominence. The entire site was presented as an example of preservation and re-use, alongside low impact construction with that could be removed leaving no trace. Only in such a setting, the implication was made, could people flourish as individuals and in communities. We were continually reminded of the buildings, the natural context, and how they fitted together, each supporting the other. The vehicles, buildings and clothes were supported aesthetically by a more ephemeral material, the food and drinks. A list of collaborating companies provides a strong sense of the food available (if you are a middle class British consumer with an interest in food and an ethical orientation): Innocent, Yeo Valley, Rude Health, Cafe Direct, Tea Pigs, and Adnams. Each of these companies has a reputation for production of high quality, taste oriented, expensive, carefully packaged ethical food and drink. The fresh food served at lunch and dinner extended this feeling. All of it was made from scratch on site by a small group of mostly women, so that we ate extremely well of fresh handmade bread, sweet and savoury tarts encased with excellent pastry, and casseroles or large pot meals made up of fresh vegetables, freshly ground spices, and locally sourced meat. The long communal tables allowed/forced people to sit with strangers, sharing food, drinks, and life stories.

The important food and fresh ingredients took a strong form in the many references to breadmaking. This seemed to be a masculine activity; it was certainly celebrated more by men during the event. Particular cachet attached to making sourdough bread using a natural yeast starter, following the first method developed to make leavened bread and emphasising the craft nature of the process. The domesticity implied in making bread in the home was echoed in references to children – again, this was a gendered dynamic in which men made many more prominent comments about their offspring. We interpreted these rhetorical markers as a means of claiming a presence in domestic life, in contrast to the typically absent father-figure in the high modern era of the 20th century ‘organization man’. Many of the male lecturers showed photographs of their children, or told stories of amusing thought-provoking things their (small) children had said/done. Referencing family and especially children in this way provided a way of showing work/life balance, even if regrets had to be expressed about not seeing enough of the family because of pressures of work. Discursively, including family in this way also enabled lecturers to speak to a more innocent, happier, and more insightful personal past, constructing children as wise and childhood as a time of naïve creativity unfettered by organizations or societal norms. For prominent ‘Do-er’s making bread and being a family presence were vital identity markers, again illustrating a nostalgic sensibility framed by a more contemporary approach to work/life.

Through a return to nature, the family, and traditional crafts like bread making, the dominant ideology of the Do Lectures promises to heal the wounds of 20th century capitalist civilisation, reintegrating work and life, economy and community. Community was as powerful a theme in the lectures as family. This was particularly clear in the first talk, which spoke directly to the isolation and solitude of contemporary existence and opened the Do camp with a discussion of other camps - Foo Camps - organized via the internet and social media, to bring together people with a common set of interests or concerns in a temporary community, much like the Do camp itself. Another talk focused on co-working spaces, where independent freelancers and the self-employed can rent desk space and a computer with wifi by the hour, day, week or month, easing the isolation and solitude of home-working by sharing space with others in a similar situation. In both lectures, new technology was held out as promising a return to a lost form of convivial community, even though these same technologies have, in many ways, contributed to the patterns of working that have broken down industrial workplace communities and led to widespread, isolated home working (Gregg 2011).

This conjunction of technology and tradition was also apparent in the underlying ideal of ‘craft’ that promised to return meaning to work. Whilst the walking stick maker worked with very basic, traditional hand tools, the speaker’s ‘craft’ was documenting these traditional crafts with digital photography and interviews to create a website and modern book, more reminiscent of the high-tech, media focussed, creative economy than traditional craft manufacturing. In a similar way, this ethic, and perhaps aesthetic, of craft was presented in relation to 3D printing. Whilst at first appearance, the image of younger people playing with laptops and 3D printers could not be further from that of an old man hand carving sticks in his garden shed, both images came together in a celebration of physically making things, of tinkering, and of an amateurish ideal of passionate commitment to a craft, sharing knowledge and skills in a community. With the 3D printers, for example, the real craft was is the making of these machines and the programming, very clearly reflecting Richard Sennett’s (2009) analysis of open source software programming in craft terms.

This bifurcated temporality also surfaced in relation to nature and the environment. Ecology was evoked as something sacred and almost, or potentially, lost. In the immediate here and now, a key focus of several talks and workshops was reconnection with nature, by surfing, canoeing, doing yoga at dawn, or reconnecting through simple food and camping. Such activities were presented as a way to reconnect to something ‘primordial’ (as the camp organizer put it) and basic in human nature, taking us back to our roots and something fundamental lost in the progress of modernity. In a very toned down form, this could be seen as reflecting elements of the critique of civilisation prevalent in much more radical social movements organised around eco-activism and with an ideological orientation toward anarcho-primitivism (Zerzan, 1996), for example Earth First! or the Climate Camp movement in the early 2000s. In the Do Lectures, however, attempts to re-sacralise nature run hand in hand with commerce and technological progress. For example, one of the main organizers of the event also runs an outdoor activities company, offering large corporates management development workshops outdoors and promising to build team spirit through reconnection with nature.

This theme, and the tension it embodies, came to the fore in an episode that took place on the first morning of the lectures. After arriving the previous afternoon, we had been told that each morning there would be yoga classes held on the veranda and, starting at 5am, a canoe trip down a nearby river. Although this had been talked about a lot over dinner and drinks the evening before, with eloquent accounts of how the mist rises from the surface of the water in the early morning sun, connecting the paddler to nature, over the course of the day a range of ever more hilarious and elaborated accounts of the farce of ‘geeks trying to commune with nature’ (as one of the more cynical attendees put it) came out, once accompanied by a rendition of ‘Duelling Banjos’ - the theme from the film *Deliverance* - played on an acoustic guitar. Apparently some of the canoes had capsized, soaking occupants to the skin; when they finally swam to shore, dragging the canoe with them, someone stepped into a nest of bees, so several people were stung by the irate insects, eventually returning to camp closer to nature but cold, wet, sore and thoroughly irritable.

Looking back to the future: Constructing the past, constraining the future

The notion of nostalgia has been most fully developed in relations to organization and work in the work of Strangleman (1999, 2012). Over a long period of time Strangleman has developed Davis’ (1979) initial framing of nostalgia as a sociological category, noting in particular the interesting distinction between simple, reflexive, and interpretive forms of nostalgia, and the different degrees of critical reflection implied in each. Nostalgia is itself usually most simply defined as an attachment to the past. In organization studies it was initially framed as an emotion or sentiment (Gabriel, 1993), based on personal experience and preferably memories of embodied events. From these feelings employees are said to derive ontological security, particularly when threatened by economic or managerial changes. However, as Strangleman (1999) prefers to emphasise, nostalgia has considerable managerial potential as a means of striving for control of the ideological construction of the present and future. This argument implies in turn that nostalgia is less rooted in emotion or sentiment, less based on direct experience, and more fungible in popular discourse or political action. History is not a series of events or facts, but a resource that is mobilised and therefore contested to support or challenge preferred ways of framing what can and will happen.

It is interesting to note that contestations of the past in Strangleman’s empirical context, the British railway system, suggest a high degree of ‘nostophobia’, often closely linked to managerial desires to change culture. In the railway industry nostophobic managers sought to ‘free’ the industry from (what they framed as) unhealthy links to the past by changing outward symbolic manifestations of culture and identity, and ultimately by encouraging older employees to retire, thus severing the embodied histories of the organization. Rebranding, however, often looked further into the past to re-construct a historically meaningful identity, suggesting a break with recent history but embracing a more distant past. Above all, as Strangleman (1999: 742) emphasises, this is always an ‘active recasting of the past’, a ‘process of selection and rejection of particular historical interpretations and the context in which these occur’. This is especially important to our analysis, as it allows for the construction of futures that can legitimately reference the past, as long as it is a past that has not been experienced by anyone involved in the organization.

Finally, Strangleman’s (2012) discussion of the complexities of nostalgia intersects with our experience of the Do Lectures in its exploration of how the past can be evoked to lament or attempt to rebuild a sustainable moral order at work. Strangleman describes these Durkheimian moral orders as professional codes in a broad sense; they resemble du Gay’s Weberian bureaucratic ethic (2000) and Sennett’s more individualised notion of character (1998). Most importantly for us, Strangleman’s analysis emphasises how changes to the socio-political conditions of work must in turn effect both the moral order in place and how it is constructed.

It is however crucial to emphasise that nostalgia can also enable a series of constructions that many see as positive. As both production and service provision have become increasingly globalized, distantiated in time and space as processes, nostalgia has become prominent as a means of remembering or reviving specific aspects of social life. Cutcher (2008), for example, examines an Australian bank’s reconstruction of community (with the local bank at its centre, of course) as a means of suggesting belonging to a moral community (led by the bank and its employees, of course). Notions of home, morality, simplicity, and social relations all feature in this carefully managed process, as attempts to counter the nothing-ness that characterises contemporary Western economies. However, as our analysis now demonstrates, the nostalgia we found at the centre of the Do Lectures is much more than a backward-looking romantic construction of pre-modern economy and social life. Instead, it can be read as a ‘postalgic’ (Ybema, 2004) exercise in the construction of a heavenly future. This future is still dependent on a nostalgic vision of the pre-industrial past, but it is also embedded in both high modernity and an ideal of what might follow.

[why this constrains what can be said, thought, imagined, done]

Discussion and conclusion

It is intriguing that nostalgia is often founded on responding to a sense of loss (Cutcher, 2008) in an attempt to construct a happier, gentler future. The nostalgia that we observed being mobilised at the Do Lectures turned away from loss, towards two of its antonyms – gain and profit. Many of the lectures proposed engaging with carefully selected aspects of the past to gain advantage of some kind. Most obviously, this is manifest in competitive advantage for the business owner or shareholder; it could also be seen in the personal gain of a happier domestic life or even a pastoral view from the office to replace concrete and transportation systems.

More significantly, we also observed a strong sense of nostalgia being invoked to construct a postalgic ideal of future gain in terms of financial profit. This suffused the event itself in an auction designed to benefit the organizers of the lectures, but it also ran through many of the lectures. It varied from highly implicit to rather more explicit; many lecturers, for example, referred in passing to the comfortable income as independent consultants or small business owners, while others spoke directly of their involvement in venture capitalism, for example. The continuous exhortation to ‘Do’ something came to feel like an encouragement to ‘Do’ capitalism.

This is a much less civic-minded engagement with the past than that observed by Cutcher (2008); it also lacks the reflexive element Strangleman (2004) argues to be present in British railway workers accounts of the past and present in their workplaces. There is little sense of trying to re-enchant work, organization, or consumption, and only a very limited acknowledgement of the importance of meaning. It could be described as profit-oriented nostalgia, or profitable postalgia (cf. Ybema, 2004). In this respect, it exemplifies something very simple – an attempt to commodify an idealised past and an ideal future. However, it also suggests a significant and interesting way of thinking about organizing and producing time.

Ybeam (2004) extends the idea of nostalgia that has helped greatly to understand of the mobilisation of the past by managerial, employee, and consumer groups as they engage with the past and present of organizations. Postalgia, Ybema’s neologism to indicate the construction of a ‘paradise yet to come’ (2004: 826), is presented as an emotional anxiety-reducing approach controlled by managers to legitimise change. This is contrasted with nostalgia, which Ybema argues tends to form part of resistance to planned change, as those managed try to retain organizational spaces that are unmanaged.

This extremely fruitful way of thinking about time in organization focuses exclusively on positioning the past, present and future within organizations. As our description and analysis above indicates, nostalgia and postalgia are also present in arenas where the notion of enterprise is more prominent. The content, form, and materiality of the Do Lectures are clearly temporally framed by visions of the past and desires for the future. There is a strong fascination with the new, manifest in engagement with technologies such as social media, 3-D printing, and environmental innovations. However, the presence of the future is firmly rooted in continuity with the past. This can be seen in some lectures which explicitly argue for a return to, for example, community values said to have been lost; it is also manifest in elegiac accounts of pre-or early modern craft in the construction of walking sticks or giving birth.

Hence the forms of nostalgia and postalgia that we observed in the material setting of the Do Lectures, the lectures themselves, and the presentation of self that participants engaged in suggest that there will not be a discursive break with past or present – and that the future will be a very particular variety of utopia. This might be read as a failure of imagination, an inability to break free from the everyday economic or political realities of past and present (De Cock, 2009). The lack of political lecturing and conversation was noted by participants at the event, especially after a number of lectures had been given (and we began to ask other attendees what they thought about the silence). Politics weren’t, however, entirely absent; on the first evening a well-known comedian did a short gig. The show was very funny, at times very sweary, and clearly set out to mock the whole idea and ethos of the Do Lectures from a more traditional, working class, leftist position. This included the aesthetic aspects of the event, for example when she drew a comparison with US far-right survivalists, noting the pseudo primitivism of the rough hewn, tree-stump lectern, with a high-tech laptop perched on it. She also introduced sex and sexuality, another notable absence from the event, making innuendos in relation to ‘do’ and ‘doing it’, with particular reference to ‘The Path of a Doer’ booklet written by one of the organizers and given out in the welcome pack.

Conclusion: The constraints of looking back to the future

This leaves us with a puzzle – the twin ideas of nostalgia and postalgia have been defined and researched as emotions, discursive resources available to managers and managed, and a means of sustaining values and norms that humanize work and workplaces. The uncertainty, as we interpret our experience at this event and the data we collected there, lies in the ‘moral order’ (Strangleman, 2012) that is articulated through the lectures, the temporary community, the material conditions of the event, and the ideals proposed. The perspective on past, present and future (in other words, how change and continuity are realised in a temporal sense) does not resemble anything else we have seen. It is perhaps closest to the notion of organizational spiral time that Burrell (1992) develops…

Based on this data, and our long-standing interest in ostensibly radical businesses that purport to be following a different economic ethos (Land & Taylor, 2010, 2011), our analysis explores the tropes that frame what we think is yet another iteration of the spirit of capitalism with significant implications. We focus on the temporal direction that this spirit looks to, in its retrospect and prospect. The retrospective thematics of community, belonging and craft, are coupled with prospective themes of eco-tech, environmental change, and economic improvement, as mechanisms for enabling social, economic, or metaphysical autonomy, combining to reframe the ideological justification of capitalism’s effects and processes. These themes, we argue, are intriguing because they suggest that spirits of capitalism circulate rather than develop in a linear way, combining elements of a nostalgically viewed, golden past age when human society and relations with nature were simpler and more authentic, with a postalgic faith in the promise that technological and economic progress will again bring us to this golden age.

[Gane on Weber and contemporary capitalism – the need for heuristic and ideal-typical concepts to understand e.g. computerized or knowing capitalism, especially to think about what constitutes capitalism as cultural logic. This sits alongside political, economic, rational methods of understanding capitalism. Pointing to need for more conceptual work (which we will do next!)]

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1. The German term Geist is variously translated into English as ghost, spectre, mind, drive, moral, spirit-mind, and spirit. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This term is used mostly to describe music which creatively combines two different existing instrumental or vocal tracks to construct a (relatively) original third piece. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)