

On Wellness Syndrome and Management Discourse

Ioan Tudor

tudor.ioan@ugal.ro

Dunarea de Jos University of Galati, Romania

Is there a link between new management practices, the growth of the service sector and the scale of the well-being culture? Do self-help practices adjust an emotional precariousness generated by reshaping the work and the skills of the worker in the framework of an experience economy? This article aims to analyze the connection between the philosophy and practices of self-help, self-enhancement, self-improvement (fitness, nutrition), self-monitoring and new management strategies. The management of the activity in companies and multinationals uses an intensive and unstable work format and rhythm, requiring adaptability, flexibility, and exuberance.

Keywords: management theory, management discourse, well-being industry, wellness culture

1. Introduction

In my conducting of the analysis, I integrate the study of French sociologists Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello on the management discourses of the 1990s in France. I consider relevant their book *The New Spirit of Capitalism* which builds an image of the new spirit of capitalism starting from textual sources on the theorizing of new discourses about management⁵. I will also refer to the book *The Wellness Syndrome* (Carl Cederstrom, Andre Spicer) which supports the hypothesis of a link between the new spirit of late capitalism and the extent of the wellness syndrome⁶. Moreover, in order to offer a complex image of the connection between the turbo rhythm and the predatory character of capitalism, I will appeal to authors who bring into question: the dissolution of the border between the professional and personal sphere, between work and leisure, between day and night⁷, capitalization of the affective system⁸. Finally, I will turn to a text about the plasticity of the brain and ways to resist the socio-political system⁹.

Luc Boltanski and Eve Chapelle undertake a complex study, analyzing and bringing to the fore two types of discourses: about the management strategies of the '60s and about those of the '90s¹⁰. Through this enterprise, the authors outline the features of the new spirit of capitalism. Therefore, management theories aim at managing the activity in a company, as well as employment (engagement), employee mobilization and management. Studies have confirmed that employees cannot be thoroughly involved in their work for fear of losing their job or earning a monthly income¹¹. Therefore, in order to stimulate productivity, the discourses about management strategies are reconfigured, assimilating the criticisms brought previously¹². In short, the current type of management based on outsourcing activities, working on the project, sometimes with a team whose members come from different geographical and cultural areas and whose composition changes is sometimes critically related

⁵ Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, London, Verso, 2007.

⁶ Carl Cederstrom, Andre Spicer, *The Wellness Syndrome*, Oxford, Polity, 2015.

⁷ Jonathan Crary, *24/7 Late Capitalism and the End of Sleep*, London, Verso, 2014.

⁸ Arlie Russell, *The Managed Heart*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2012.

⁹ Catherine Malabou, *What Should We Do With Our Brains*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2004.

¹⁰ Luc Boltanski, Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, London, Verso, 2007, p. 57.

¹¹ Ibidem, p. 35.

¹² Ibidem, p. 58.

to the old type¹³. In the 1960s, a form of management emerged that criticized the old paternalistic management. It opposed the favoritism of nepotism, belonging to a certain class, evaluation on subjective criteria, the promotion of professional training, meritocracy and goal-based management that underpins both the autonomy of managers and their evaluation¹⁴.

So, if in the '60s the lack of autonomy and objectivity in the criteria for career advancement of future managers was criticized, in the '90s the critical focus is also on the status of employees¹⁵. Not only managers had to be stimulated, mobilized, but the entire staff¹⁶. Thus, discourses about management propose a freedom in carrying out tasks. Also, a system is implemented based on the internalization of control, on the promotion of trust. The tasks are performed because responsibility is placed on the individual. He is aware that failure to perform tasks leads to a loss of trust and reputation. And in a system that works on projects, efficiency and productivity, involvement, adaptation without problems are clues that recommend the employee for a future project. Repeated poor performance leads to a loss of reputation and future employment difficulties¹⁷.

Much of the management discourses presented by the two authors have become a reality today. There is a range of temporary jobs in the project format. Job announcements include descriptions of an employee who must be flexible, adaptable, creative, and proactive. Also these qualities are in contradiction with the requirements needed, namely efficiency, productivity, concentration and intensive performance¹⁸.

2. When personal becomes professional

Moreover, if in the 60's personal life was strictly delimited by the professional one, now there is an instrumentalization and capitalization of employees' emotions. Happy people are more productive, so managers need to use and control their emotions. Also, positive emotional dispositions generate a more enjoyable experience for the customer, maximizing profit¹⁹. In her book, *The Managed Heart*, Arlie Russell discusses the monetization of the affections of some service workers. How the requirements to display a positive emotional state regardless of personal experiences or conflicting interactions with employees alienate individuals from their own emotional system, producing depression, neurosis, anxiety²⁰.

As Hohschild observes, from cognitive reactions to external stimuli, limited to personal life, emotions become a commodity at the time of market exposure.²¹ So the scale of the service sector comes with rules for feeling/ displaying your emotions. Positive emotions are encouraged regardless of their veracity and naturalness, being part of management strategies to attract and retain customers, ultimately to make a profit. Martha Rosler discusses this strangely familiar aspect of communication in an essay entitled "Why everyone is so nice" about standardized interaction practices in various fields, including culture²².

If reconfiguring work in conjunction with redefining the worker's skills leads to intensive performance requirements, to the development of an ideal employee²³ (exuberant, flexible, proactive, adaptable) then an association that the authors of *The Wellness Syndrome* make between the new spirit of capitalism and the scope of self-help practices is valid²⁴. In

¹³ Ibidem, p. 71.

¹⁴ Ibidem, pp. 64, 65.

¹⁵ Ibidem, p. 68.

¹⁶ Ibidem, p. 62.

¹⁷ Ibidem, pp. 75, 76, 77, 78.

¹⁸ Ibidem, pp. 79, 80.

¹⁹ Arlie Russell, *The Managed Heart*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2012, pp. 8, 9.

²⁰ Arlie Russell, *The Managed Heart*, p. 16.

²¹ Ibidem, p. 11.

²² Martha Rosler, „Why Are People Being so Nice”, in *What's Love (or Care, Intimacy, Warmth, Affection Got to Do with It?*, Berlin, Stenberg Press, 2017, pp. 35-36.

²³ Carl Cederstrom, Andre Spicer, *The Wellness Syndrome*, Oxford, Polity, 2015, p.8.

²⁴ Carl Cederstrom, Andre Spicer, *The Wellness Syndrome*, p. 10.

order to adhere to the characteristics of the ideal employee, the individual must overcome his bodily limitations (fatigue, need for sleep).

The book *The Wellness Syndrome* discusses the practices of self-help, self-enhancement, self-tracking, connecting them to the new spirit of capitalism in the West where people both modern and contemporary confirm the interest in the human flesh as Liviu Nedelcu has discussed in his article „Considerations on the Human Body in European Art from Ancient Times to Present Day,”²⁵. Carl Cederstrom and Andre Spicer develop the following ideas: the instrumentalization of self-help techniques by management strategies in order to achieve high productivity and efficiency and by government policies in order to avoid the implementation of real solutions to a number of deep problems²⁶. At the base of the self-help and self-enhancement ideology is the individual in his capacity as an autonomous agent, free and exclusively responsible for the self-management of emotions, body, well-being. Accompanied by self-help devices and engaged in positive thinking, it overcomes moments of emotional precariousness (depression, anxiety, neurosis) both physical and financial. The main ally is always one's own body, and the strategy is limited to self-orientation, to the truth and potential discovered within the self.

Thus, the symptoms of wellness syndrome appear: guilt, anxiety generated by the terror of choice²⁷. From positive thinking to positive psychology the only person responsible for happiness, success, a certain configuration of existence is exclusively the individual. External circumstances and conditions are ignored. Moreover, the individual is advised to detach himself from the external reality, an unstable source of happiness. Left alone with a relentless superego, the individual is engaged in a compulsive search for pleasure, a better variant of his own self²⁸. It crosses states of passive nihilism²⁹ (detachment from the outside world), overwhelming feelings of guilt and anxiety in case of failures or results that contradict some illusory expectations.

3. Tools for efficiency

In the introduction we talked about the appeal of individuals in their personal lives to these practices as methods of managing physiological and mental precariousness in order to obtain a better version of the self for the labor market³⁰. When we talk about self-help and self-enhancement tools (mindfulness, fitness, diets) we consider both their establishment in corporations by managers, and the appeal of individuals in their personal lives to these practices. Managers opt for these tools to support the intensive, flexible performance of its employees. Mindfulness, fitness and nutrition sessions aim to improve employee efficiency³¹. Relaxation, exercise and healthy eating contribute to building an ideal worker: energetic, exuberant, creative. A number of companies have introduced in the work schedule either a healthy meal or devices that integrate physical activity into the work schedule (skate rink, bicycle)³². Others have changed the format of meetings and sessions. They left their office space behind and took a walk, believing that this step would increase efficiency and creativity³³.

This strategy of introducing well-being practices in the lives of employees can be based on various motivations. From increasing efficiency, creativity, to an adherence to the image of

²⁵Liviu Nedelcu, „Considerations on the Human Body in European Art from Ancient Times to Present Day”, Anastasis, Volume 6, Issue 1, May 2019

²⁶ Ibidem, p. 60.

²⁷ Ibidem, p. 30.

²⁸ Ibidem, p. 27.

²⁹ Ibidem, p. 70.

³⁰ Ibidem, p. 90.

³¹ Ibidem, pp. 64, 65.

³² Ibidem, pp. 30-33.

³³ Carl Cederstrom, Andre Spicer, *The Wellness Syndrome*, p. 35.

the ideal worker and an exercise by the individual of his role as sole agent responsible for his happiness, health and well-being. With the reconfiguration of the way and the rhythm of work, the type of the ideal worker was redefined. Flexibility, adaptability and creativity have become key features of management strategies. Consequently, the worker's image incorporated the following characteristics: energetic, active, exuberant, spontaneous, multitasking, easily integrable. Dissolving the boundary between work and leisure, lack of physical activity and intensive activity produce an emotional and physical condition that employers try to improve by simulating a sense of care for their employees. In exchange for finding problems, often obvious, managers resort to mindfulness sessions, yoga, fitness classes. This stimulates productivity, creativity and efficiency.

This job insecurity triggered by temporary jobs has also generated a number of popular discourses about self-marketing techniques. Self-representation materials have an increasing echo in the digital sphere (e.g. motivational speeches on Ted Talk). The publishing area also gains ground by publishing best sellers about strategies for building a mindset/ mindsight useful in managing and adapting to new situations. A whole literature that has as subject techniques of more efficient self-sale, of negotiation in order to obtain a profitable result, of obtaining a state of perpetual euphoria emerges. Norman V. Peale in "Power of Positive Thinking" employs alongside the orientation towards one's abilities and positive sides the Bible's psalms, Christian prayers in order to achieve a peaceful mindset to allow you to be powerful and successful to regain the confidence in oneself and to overcome the inferiority syndrome.³⁴

But let's return for a while to the digital realm and talk about The Ted Talks channel which hosts a popular speech by Amy Cuddy, a professor and researcher at Harvard Business School, about body language, its meanings and effects. Amy Cuddy's speech is emblematic of the self-enhancement pills available online. Amy Cuddy talks about body positions that can determine how you handle stressful situations (a business meeting, an interview or a test for a new job, an exam). This reveals the link between body postures and an increase or decrease in testosterone or cortisol levels. Thus, practicing for a while a certain body position that usually denotes safety, confidence, power, can change the way you perform in a given situation and, obviously and effectively, the results. In the meantime, in visual arts the representation and presentation of the body takes a different turn. Far from being radiant, it is involved in contexts which pushes its limits to extreme, pinpointing to socio-economic context underlying its physical and emotional precariousness³⁵. In other times, even the body of the artwork disappears completely in order to make space for theoretical elements to come to the fore³⁶.

In the first part, we talked about the appeal of individuals in their personal lives to these practices as methods of managing physiological precariousness. Later I added the idea that happiness and a good mood become an instrumentalized affect for its correlation: productivity. So, on the one hand the self-help and self-enhancement tools are used by managers to stimulate a physical and psychological well-being, to perform intensively, creatively, on the other hand they are used by employees or the unemployed to manage emotional states, but also to look inward. The two authors of the book *The Wellness Syndrome* discuss this status as a source of truth of the inner self, for crisis management, but also for releasing an extraordinary inner potential.

4. Perpetual Euphoria

Next, I would like to discuss another perspective on these infallible recipes for obtaining happiness, using a philosophical, poetic theory on this responsibility and moral

³⁴ Norman V. Peale, *The Power of Positive Thinking*, Prentice Hall, New Jersey, 2003, pp. 2, 4.

³⁵ Liviu Nedelcu, "Performance Art after the 1990s", *Colocvii teatrale*, Issue 29, 2020, Editura ARTES.

³⁶ Liviu Nedelcu, "Conceptual Art or The Last Avant-Garde of the Xxth Century", *Revart*, No. 33, 2019.

obligations to be happy. Pascal Bruckner brings a broader perspective on this phenomenon, which he calls perpetual euphoria. The philosopher, novelist and essayist Pascal Bruckner treats this syndrome from a philosophical-historical perspective. It identifies the root and the deformations that occurred during this concept, which was based on improving the life of the individual. On the other hand, the book has a slight romantic tone. This state of happiness after which contemporary man flees is not true happiness, as this feeling is temporary, intense, lightning, impossible to realize at the moment³⁷. The perception of happiness is equal to its end. A variety of affections, including pain, suffering, mourning, illness lead to a complex and healthy emotional life. Sanitizing suffering, avoiding mourning and lamentation can cause mental imbalances.

In arguing the secular origin of the concept of happiness, Bruckner starts from the context of the Middle Ages, goes through the modern period, and then lingers in contemporaneity. Therefore, in the Middle Ages, in Christian theology, happiness did not find its place in the profane world, it was designed as an experience in a space lacking coordinates and clear qualities, of course, for an individual with exemplary behavior³⁸. A pious life, in which the profane man refused temptations, adopting austerity and moral purity, was a way of access, however uncertain, to a happy, eternal life, for the result of the judgment to which he was to be subjected was not clearer either. So profane existence was a challenge, a distraction from the divine world that man had to overcome, and death had the status of a liberation³⁹.

From the Catholic theological doctrine, we move to the Protestant ethics that proposed a constant fierce self-analysis, and the meaning of life was given by the intensive practice of work, which came with the possibility of salvation⁴⁰. Therefore, if until modernity, the purpose of life was to build a relationship with the divinity, mediated by ecclesiastical institutions and characters, then the Enlightenment brings a series of democratic values. Optimizing life (in order to live well in the present, here and now), scientific progress (paired with education⁴¹), technological, a liberation from ecclesiastical authority, from that of authoritarian political figures through intellectuals in public speeches (articles, books, speeches). In his essay entitled "What is Enlightenment", Kant discusses the cultivation of the individual, the exercise of critical, autonomous thinking, the liberation from the state of minority and the achievement of adulthood⁴². The only person responsible for his emancipation is the individual through the use of his intellectual resources.

An example that Bruckner uses to build the secular origin of the concept of happiness is the United States Declaration of Independence, in which the right to happiness is mentioned alongside the right to life and liberty⁴³. After the American Revolution, the next important moment was represented by other movements of the twentieth century such as May 68 in France. This episode of protest targeted outdated traditional values, conventions, taboos. He militated against capitalist abuses, on the one hand and for sexual liberation and the destigmatization of pleasure, on the other hand; he promoted a culture of intensity⁴⁴, of an authentic self, free to engage in a multitude of experiences that enrich one's existence.

All these claimed values and freedoms were subsequently exploited. The new discourse on management was built on them, a consumerist culture was developed that is based on this

³⁷ Bruckner, Pascal, *Perpetual Euphoria: On the Duty to be Happy*, p. 77.

³⁸ Ibidem, pp. 2,3.

³⁹ Ibidem, pp. 12-13.

⁴⁰ Carl Cederstrom, Andre Spicer, , *The Wellness Syndrome*, p. 64.

⁴¹ Raducan, M., Vrabie, T., Colan, A., Colan, G., Cristache, N., & Cristia, V. (2020). The Influence of Management Style and Socio-Cultural Factors on the Education System in the European Union Countries. *Annals of Dunarea de Jos University of Galati: Fascicle: I, Economics & Applied Informatics*, 26(1).

⁴² Immanuel Kant, "What Is Enlightenment?", <http://www.columbia.edu>.

⁴³ Bruckner, Pascal, *Perpetual Euphoria: On the Duty to be Happy*, p. 35.

⁴⁴ Ibidem, p. 5.

false idea of acquiring goods and experiences in order to obtain a sense of fulfillment, a social status, an intense life, full of meaning.

The artist's way of life has become a pattern for today's creative workers who draws on surrealist strategies in their brainstorming processes and not only.⁴⁵ Temporary projects, a flexible work schedule, an intensive rhythm, constant creativity, mobility, flexibility and perpetual adaptability. In many countries, including England, the initiative of start-ups, the assumption of the role of entrepreneur has been stimulated at the level of government policies. All these policies have drastic consequences in the well-being of the individual's life. Florian Cramer mentions in his article entitled "Depression: Post-Melancholia, Post-Fluxus, Post-Communist, Post-Capitalist, Post-Digital, Post-Prozac" the high level of antidepressant drugs in recent years⁴⁶.

5. Conclusion

Therefore, the work format, the cultural approaches of neoliberalism, the emotional and physical precariousness of individuals seeking self-management tools raise a significant question. What methods of resistance do we create? What strategies had we woven to make us aware of the situation we are in and to reshape it? How do we manage self-help and self-enhancement practices in order to free ourselves from their instrumentalization? How we resort to diets and fitness out of a personal desire, without blame or rebuke of conscience when we give up, and do not train at the thought of ticking standards: productivity, rules of beauty. How do we orient ourselves towards ourselves without losing sight of the family, the community and fundamental values: care, attention, support? How can we perform mindfulness and yoga sessions not to stimulate concentration and intensive activity, but to focus only on moments of inactivity and connection with our own body, environment or to have a spiritual experience? I end with Catherine Malabou's question about brain plasticity. It is a question valid for the individual in any sphere of his daily life. How can we take shape and resist at the same time?

References

1. Berardi, Franco, „Cognitarian Subjectivation”, *e-flux.com*
2. Boltanski, Luc, Chiapello, Eve, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, London, Verso, 2007
3. Cederstrom, Carl, Spicer, Andre, *The Wellness Syndrome*, Oxford, Polity, 2015
4. Bruckner, Pascal, *Perpetual Euphoria: On the Duty to be Happy*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2011
5. Cramer, Florian, „Post-Melancholia, Post-Fluxus, Post-Communist, Post-Capitalist, Post-Digital, Post-Prozac” in Tounta, Maya (ed) *A Solid Injury to the Knees*, Rupert, 2016
6. Crary, Jonathan, *24/7 Late Capitalism and the End of Sleep*, London, Verso, 2014
7. Lasch, Christopher, *The Culture of Narcissism*, W. W. Norton & Company Publisher, 1979
8. Malabou, Catherine, *What Should We Do With Our Brains*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2004
9. Manson, Mark, *Arta subtilă a nepăsării. O metodă nonconformistă pentru o viață mai bună*. București, Editura Trei, 2017
10. O'Connor, Joseph, *Manual de NLP – ghid practic pentru obținerea rezultatelor pe care le dorești*, București, Cartea Veche, 2012
11. Nedelcu, Liviu, „Performance Art after the 1990s”, *Colocvii teatrale*, Issue 29, 2020, Editura ARTES.

⁴⁵ Liviu Nedelcu, Ioan Tudor, „Educational Projects in the Management of an Art Gallery”, *Annals of "Dunarea de Jos"*, Years XXVI – no 1/2020.

⁴⁶ Florian Cramer, „Post-Melancholia, Post-Fluxus, Post-Communist, Post-Capitalist, Post-Digital, Post-Prozac” in Tounta, Maya (ed) *A Solid Injury to the Knees*, Rupert, 2016, p. 67.

12. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/341656421_Performance_Art_After_The_1990s
13. <https://www.cceol.com/search/article-detail?id=850473>
14. Nedelcu, Liviu,, „Considerations on the Human Body in European Art from Ancient Times to Present Day”, *Anastasis, Volume 6, Issue 1, May 2019*
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/334488168_Considerations_on_the_Human_Body_in_European_Art_from_Ancient_Times_to_Present_Day
15. http://anastasis-review.ro/wp-content/uploads/ARMCA-2019-VI-1-11_Liviu-Nedelcu.pdf
16. <https://anastasis-review.ro/index.php/liviu-nedelcu/>
17. [file:///C:/Users/Viorica/Downloads/Anastasis,%20Vol.%20VI.%20No%201%20_%20May%202019%20%E2%80%93%20\(1\).pdf](file:///C:/Users/Viorica/Downloads/Anastasis,%20Vol.%20VI.%20No%201%20_%20May%202019%20%E2%80%93%20(1).pdf)
18. <http://anastasis-review.ro/index.php/liviu-nedelcu/>
19. <https://anastasis-review.ro/index.php/authors/>
20. Nedelcu, Liviu, „Conceptual Art or The Last Avant-Garde of the Xth Century”, *Revart*, No. 33, 2019.
21. Nedelcu, Liviu, Tudor, Ioan, „Educational Projects in the Management of an Art Gallery”, *Annals of “Dunarea de Jos”, Years XXVI–no 1/2020*.
<https://web.b.ebscohost.com/abstract?direct=true&profile=ehost&scope=site&authtype=crawler&jrnl=15840409&AN=143882001&b=qHCZbEND0NfGjoRSnyX71ccYGqZ6LG4jGurvQxAzN8jZk%20friLNet4%209S%20lxSjG8zd%20bZTUTchD2wxGzPXuuSVg%3d%3d&crl=f&resultNs=AdminWebAuth&resultLocal=ErrCrlNotAuth&crlhashurl=login.aspx%3fdirect%3dtrue%26profile%3dehost%26scope%3dsite%26authtype%3dcrawler%26jrnl%3d15840409%26AN%3d143882001>
22. Peale, Norman Vincent, *The Power of Positive Thinking*, Prentice Hall, New Jersey, 2003
23. Raducan, M., Vrabie, T., Colan, A., Colan, G., Cristache, N., & Cristia, V. (2020). *The Influence of Management Style and Socio-Cultural Factors on the Education System in the European Union Countries*. *Annals of Dunarea de Jos University of Galati: Fascicle: I, Economics & Applied Informatics*, 26(1)
24. Russell, Arlie, *The Managed Heart*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2012
25. Rosler, Martha, „Why Are People Being so Nice”, in *What’s Love (or Care, Intimacy, Warmth, Affection Got to Do with It?*, Berlin, Stenberg Press, 2017
26. Salecl, Renata, *The Tyranny of Choice*, London, Profile Books, 2014
27. Salecl, Renata, *On Anxiety*, London, Routledge, 2004
28. Seligman, Martin, *Authentic Happiness*, New York, Atria Books, 2004