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► **To cite this version:**

Hugo Letiche. L'éthique des affaires en tant qu'idéologie. Revue interdisciplinaire droit et organisations, 2023, 5, pp.101-114. 10.34699/rido.2023.26 . hal-04190190

HAL Id: hal-04190190

<https://normandie-univ.hal.science/hal-04190190v1>

Submitted on 29 Aug 2023

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Business Ethics as Ideology

Abstract: In *The Ungovernable Society; A Genealogy of Authoritarian Liberalism* (2021) [*La société ingouvernable* (2018)] Grégoire Chamayou makes the claim that business ethics has served as an ideological smoke screen for globalized hyper-capitalism. Business ethics has fostered 'knowledge' in the service of power and supported generalized obedience to managerial prerogatives. Instead of applying moral philosophy to business, it has created an ideology of entrepreneurship, TINA profit maximization and share-holder value. Academics, and business supported thinktanks, paved the way for neo-liberal hegemony. Chamayou claims that his study is a genealogy in Foucault's tradition. First, I will summarize his position; and second, I will contest his methodological claim. Whatever the merit of his attack on business ethics, Chamayou I will argue, has not produced a genealogical text, nor are his claims to be defended from a Foucaultian position. Chamayou calls out 'fire' in the theater of business ethics; but his own text is methodologically just as mythic and ideological (i.e. tendentious) as the texts he attacks.

Keywords: Grégoire Chamayou, Foucaultian genealogy, CMS, Business Ethics, Neo-con ideology.

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Résumé : Dans *La société ingouvernable* (2018), Grégoire Chamayou affirme que l'éthique des affaires a servi d'écran de fumée idéologique à l'hyper-capitalisme mondialisé. L'éthique des affaires a favorisé le « savoir » au service du pouvoir et soutenu l'obéissance généralisée aux prérogatives managériales. Au lieu d'appliquer la philosophie morale aux entreprises, elle a créé une idéologie de l'esprit d'entreprise, de la maximisation des profits TINA et de la valeur pour les actionnaires. Les universitaires et les groupes de réflexion soutenus par les entreprises ont ouvert la voie à l'hégémonie néolibérale. Chamayou affirme que son étude est une généalogie dans la tradition de Foucault. Dans un premier temps, sa position sera résumée et, dans un second temps, son affirmation méthodologique est contestée. Quel que soit le mérite de son attaque contre l'éthique des affaires, Chamayou, selon nous, n'a pas produit de texte généalogique et ses affirmations ne peuvent être défendues à partir d'une position foucauldienne. Chamayou crie « au feu » dans le théâtre de l'éthique des affaires, mais son propre texte est

méthodologiquement tout aussi mythique et idéologique (c'est-à-dire tendancieux) que les textes qu'il attaque.

Mots clés : Grégoire Chamayou ; généalogie foucauldienne ; CMS ; éthique des affaires ; idéologie néo-conservatrice

Introduction

Chamayou's *The Ungovernable Society; A Genealogy of Authoritarian Liberalism* (2021) [*La société ingouvernable; une généalogie du libéralisme autoritaire* (2018)] claims in its subtitle to be a 'genealogy' of 'authoritarian liberalism'; that is, to be a critical contemporary contextualization of the political ideology of Friedrich von Hayek, Milton Friedman, et al.. The study is an ideological 'genealogy' (really 'archeology'); where underlying social-economic factors are not explored. Chamayou situates the contemporary politics of 'authoritarian liberalism' as a result of the ideological struggles of the 1970's. But why the 1970's? If the Keynesian post-WWII great social-economic compromise had then reached its limits; how and why was this so? The explicit target of the book is "authoritarian liberalism" or what other authors (Bickerton & Accenti, 2021) have called "technopopulism". Ideological labor, starting in the 1970's, it is claimed, has facilitated the dominance of the economically powerful and strengthened the ever more precarious position of the economically weak. But economic privilege, supposedly, no longer needs the camouflage of CSR or Business Ethics. Business now feels free to rid itself of any such critical or even oppositional voices. And indeed we see that business ethics has come and is gone from the MBA curricula.

Business funded thinktanks did produce the rhetoric that some (often wealthy) sources wanted to hear; but did the rhetoric really have an effect on the economic and political development? What evidence is there that the link between rhetoric and social change is now tighter than it was in the 1960's or indeed in the 1920's? Has ideology really become more powerful; has thinktank inspired 'managerialism' really thereby triumphed?

1. Chamayou: the Triumph of Ideology

There has been a development of pro-business rhetoric from the 1970's onward that responded to sentiments in the circles of business ownership of frustration and fear of lessening control. Ideas were launched that were meant to reduce labor's, government's and managers' power. Chamayou seems to assume the ultimate dominance of 'capital'; even though his hypothesis appears to be that capital saw itself as weak, and in need of shoring-up. Supposedly capital, in the 1970's, had partially lost control of social economic developments; labor was increasingly making 'too many demands', democracy 'threatened to become a game-changer calling for participation and autogestion'. But could industry funded think tanks really produce ideas that would re seize the initiative? Were the capitalist business interests really endangered or all along actually all-powerful? Is Chamayou really claiming that with a few clever ideas, and some ideological input that business reconquered a lost power position? Or had business and/or

capital never really lost their dominant position? Was the crisis of capital's control serious or not so? Chamayou posits that there was a real crisis so that the work of the rightwing thinktanks can be considered to have really been important. Was there an inevitability that managerial and pro-business ideas would carry the day? But all sorts of repressive and anti-democratic ideas have been developed throughout history. But a great variety of socialist and pro-democratic ideas have also been developed. Why did some ideas prevail and others did not?

Was there really a change in episteme --- did the way business was appreciated and understood actually change? Did, how business is done, change in a fundamental way in regards to its understanding of labor and capital, inputs and outputs, and shareholders in comparison to stakeholders? Chamayou asserts that the dominance of the shareholder perspective effectively shutout all other stakeholders. But is that a change in epistemes? The assertion is that business turned on democracy, because it feared that democracy would lead to social-economic claims by the greatest number of people that it did want to honor. True democracy could potentially lead to the population demanding and gaining provision of housing, healthcare, education and social security; things that the economic and business elite did not want to have to pay for. But is a 'zero sum game' of welfare for all, or wealth only for some, a new episteme?

Chamayou's book is an interesting study, principally of American business rhetoric and propaganda. But though published in 2018, there are no references to Trump, Bolsonaro, Erdogan or Putin. While the ideological sources to 'free market' governance may be accurately identified by Chamayou, the contemporary contexts of the USA, Brazil, Turkey and Russia are most certainly not examined. There is a potential mismatch here between mainly American conservative thought and international events. Is 'new (or renewed) anti-democratic authoritarianism' really a product of American corporate ideology? Major American corporations and hyper-rich CEOs contributed to Trump's campaign and were rewarded with lower corporate taxation. However characteristic we may find 'reward the powerful and punish the weak' of contemporary post-Nietzschean philosophy, there is nothing very new about it. Indeed we can argue that there is a powerful historical link between 'slave' societies, where slavery/serfdom have for centuries played a crucial social-economic role, such as in Brazil, the Ottoman Empire, Russia and the United States; and the current emergence of authoritarian (neo-)conservative rule. Such an assertion claims that current neo-authoritarianism is a product of long term social historical and political patterns, and is not really 'new' at all. Chamayou defends the thesis that contemporary rhetorical ideology has made a fundamental causal difference, but does the claim holdup?

Chamayou's analysis centers the re-definition(s) of the corporation. He argues that in the 1970's, the corporation became a source of social-economic instability, as basic definitions of corporate governance became unstable, paradoxical and self-contradictory. In the post-WWII period of (re-)construction, the (post-)Keynesian compromise between the state, capital and labor prevailed. In the European perspective, this entailed full employment and the provision of healthcare, education, housing and welfare benefits. According to Chamayou, the economic demands on the private sector to support all these forms of provision became in the 1970's an economic burden that the 'free sector' no longer was willing to support. Corporate America felt

herself threatened and framed welfare demands as an attack on private property; and, in effect, on capital. There were two crises. The first was a crisis of democracy. If majority rule prevailed, what was to stop the majority from making increasingly more social and economic demands? The majority after all could vote in wage and benefit provision to the detriment of corporate self-interest. The economic elite saw democracy as a threat to its position. The second threat came from the relationship between owners and managers. In the 19th century the owner/manager was mainly a single role, but by mid-twentieth century the two had separated. What was to stop management from championing its own self-interest to the disadvantage of owners? Why wouldn't management be more interested in continuity, quality of products and services, research and development, than in the immediate self-interest of shareholders? The first 'threat' was framed as the danger of 'socialism' (or even 'communism'), and the second was framed as the sociological issue of the role and identity of 'the new class'. With 'stagflation' in the 1970's, increased productivity linked to economic growth ceased to neutralized the democratic (socialist) and managerial (new class) threats. Pro-business groups framed the situation as a crisis in legitimacy, where they saw a threat to their power. Government policy then produced unemployment and the fear of unemployment, reducing mass democratic pressure on business. But the risk of de-legitimization was not hereby reduced. A fear-based strategy would not reduce popular anti-business opposition.

Chamayou argues that an appropriate ideology was needed to legitimize the primacy of business, which was created around the theme of 'freedom'. Opposition to business interests in general, and leftist politics and labor unions in particular, were ideologically defined as 'anti-freedom'. It was claimed that measures against capital destroyed 'choice' and imprisoned the individual in bureaucracy. Politics of leveling social-economic differences were attacked as state intervention and government repression. Corporate power was championed as 'free' and government measures as 'repressive'. 'Freedom' was identified with corporate or private property rights; which were defined in opposition to government action.

The ideological refutation of the politics of social justice, did not solve the management problem. Managers had to be made subservient to capital. This was achieved by means of the ideology and practices of shareholder primacy. Actually, companies gain capital injections when they make a share offerings. When their shares are traded thereafter, the transaction is (normally) not actually with the company at all. To illustrate the issue: when one buys a car with a loan, one does not expect the bank to say where you should drive; or when you buy a house with a mortgage, you do not expect to be told how to furnish it. It is pure ideology that shareholders should have more to say about corporate behavior and governance, than managers, employees, customers and suppliers. But the idea has taken hold; in part, by linking senior managerial pay to stock prices. In effect, management was bought off to focus more on capital's immediate self-interest than on the long-term interest of the corporation.

Shareholder theory has legitimized profit maximization, and defined investors and senior management as the only players that count. But the legitimization of corporate dominance as such remains a problem. CSR made it possible to claim that business was an ethical 'good', where corporations were defined as ethical subjects, capable of doing 'good'. But the old boogiemer hereby reappeared of mass demands, or even worse, assertions of 'human rights', for instance to benefits. CSR is not acceptable for business as a line of corporate self-defense.

Stakeholder theory came to the rescue as it proposed an ideology of 'dialogue' that could be used to endlessly postponed reform or change. A regime of divide and rule, that played moderates off against radicals, developed. Corporate interests could make use of ethics as an ideological source of legitimization, as long as it did not lead to much immediate action. But prioritization of moral philosophy would never really be accepted, as it would reduce corporate prerogatives.

Ultimately, the primacy of 'private property', as the only possible guarantee of efficiency, became the sole ideological fundament of neo-conservative rule. Privatization is an operationalization of that position. Many state-owned organizations were indeed inefficient. For instance, the Dutch PTT was incapable of getting telecommunications to the populace efficiently and cost-effectively; and after (semi-)privatization, service provision and cost-effectiveness took off. However, the privatization, for instance of British Rail, has been fairly disastrous. A basic political strategy of downsizing government and weakening democratic power has, in general, prevailed. If government cannot make a difference any more, the threat to capital of the popular will, is significantly abrogated.

But the society is hereby made democratically ungovernable – there is no way left for the popular will to actually have much of any influence on the social-economic reality. The economic corporate elite have become all-powerful, with no counter-powers of any significance left. This has led to two complementary, destabilizing effects. On the one hand, governance loses its legitimacy. Nothing and no one can keep social demands, needs and necessities in balance with corporate self-interest. Politics is progressively rejected as insignificant and corrupt by much of the populace. Only power and violence then count as 'politics'; politics has migrated to the streets as semi-violent eruptions of revolt. Political rulers have responded by becoming increasingly authoritarian; they can only rule as a semi-military force. Authoritarianism and popular revolt strengthen one another. Conflict and not legitimacy predominate. Neither corporations nor the state retain their legitimacy. The identity or 'being' of the firm becomes once again a contested terrain. Are corporations merely tools of economic exploitation and sources of popular mass repression? Stakeholder theory may assert that corporations are essentially communal property and are socially legitimate. But in neo-con ideology, there is no such broad or potentially popular justification of corporate power.

In Chamayou's analysis, the turn to (business) ethics is crucial to the ideological history of the contemporary corporation. He sees ethics as a rather desperate effort to provide some sort of legitimacy to what is essentially an increasingly illegitimate corporate order. Neo-con shareholder ideology has led to corporate de-responsibilization. Corporate thinktanks and academic opinion leaders, allied with corporate interests, have produced a fairly successful ideology enabling global hyper-capitalism to prevail. Paradoxically, neo-con ideological social control, coupled to corporate power, ultimately seems to lead to a radical loss of legitimacy and thereby of control, manifest as governmental powerlessness and violence in the streets.

Chamayou argues that the ideological superstructure of neo-conservatism has been crucial to the growth of financialization and of globalization. The logic of shareholder value has pushed stakeholder concerns aside. The ideology of 'creative destruction' has brushed aside all and any opposition. 'Entrepreneurship' as the individualization of power in the hands of business leadership has become a dominant idea. The 'independent contractors' are rendered as so-called 'free', as permanent jobs have disappeared. Share buy-backs however have been defined as 'good practice', though they lead to under investment and hyped bonuses. A rhetoric of profit maximization and social disengagement has prevailed. It is a rhetoric claiming that social responsibility and engagement or democratic norms, have little or no purchase. If cornered for neglecting their social responsibility, the corporations prefer self-policing and business ethics to legal control. But 'soft' themes of well-being, quality-of-life issues, or motivation, have been subordinated to 'hard' business truths. The 'economic man' and the ontology of calculating rational choice, is assumed to be self-evidently true. The individualizing of responsibility has led to a massive de-responsibilization of the corporation for working conditions and circumstances of welfare.

Business ethics with no real concern for Other, lacking resonance, affect or acknowledgement, is an ideological substitute or pacifier for genuine concern or action.

2. The Method: Chamayou, Foucault and Archeology

As declared in the book's title, we are supposedly dealing here with a genealogy, a method pioneered by Michel Foucault. Very recently (May, 2023) Foucault's *Le Discours Philosophique*, written in 1966, has appeared for the first time. The book balances between Foucault's archeology and genealogy periods. Chamayou's positioning of business ethics as a discourse of self-interested and repressive corporate power falls, I will argue, more in the archeology project than in that of the genealogy. Chamayou has researched and characterized a particular discourse insisting upon its power effects. He pays no attention to how business ethics produces a certain sort of subject; who, for instance, can take on a metaphysical cloak of virtue, goodness and self-confidence. Business ethics as an identity source liberates the self from guilt, doubt, and fear of reprisal. One is supposedly moral, just, and acting in the interest of the 'good'. Whether any corporate leaders really have internalized business ethics as part of their self-

identity we do not know, nor does Chamayou say anything about this. We need thus to divide business ethics into its archeological identity --- or a discourse of self-interestedness created by thinktanks and academics working to provide businesses with their needed ideological identities; and its genealogical identity, where it is a source of self-identity and a supplier of individual confidence, righteousness and empowers business leaders. Chamayou's book analyses the archeological discourse of business ethics, without attending to its genealogical role.

Thus, what sort of discourse is 'business ethics'? In following of Foucault's *Le discours philosophique*, is Chamayou's an archeology of a philosophical, literary or scientific discourse? Foucault argues that there are three sorts of discourses, to be understood in terms of their differing structures of: *Je – Ici – À Présent (I – Here – Now)* (2023). These are: (i) science, (ii) literature and (iii) philosophy. Business ethics would qualify as 'literature' and not 'philosophy'.

Foucault's categorization is made in terms of the I – Here – Now triad. In science there is no 'I' --- the 'truth' is independent from any source or personality. Foucault's example, 'inertia', supposedly exists no matter which scientist or author speaks. Inertia has no specific here or now; it just is, everywhere and at all times. The crux to science, or to its 'objectivity, is that its statements transcend the I – Here – Now structure. Contrastingly, discourses of literature are situated in specific ways. There is an authorial 'I'. It is an I that speaks, claims and asserts. It is not the same as the 'I' of any particular person; such as that of the author(s). It is a simulacrum. Actual living persons are never exactly the same as the voice of a persona in a text. For instance, the man Sigmund Freud was not the same as the voice of the therapist in his case studies; there are always differences and incompletions between the authorial voice and the living person. The 'here' of literature is a creation within a text. It is never a 'real' here, including all the complexity, contradictions and unknowns of lived circumstance. The author creates the here of her (his) text --- it is an artefact of a discourse. It is a place that exists, or is made to seem to appear, within a text; but it is never exactly the same as what is outside of the text. Likewise, the now of literature is very different from the time of human experience. There are at least two now's. There is the now that is created inside the text, where for instance one event succeeds upon another. This is a now of literary construction, created by the author within which her (his) account functions. One thing succeeds upon another; often causality is laid out via the time frame. And there is a second now --- that of the reader. The reader reads the text at some time and place in her (his) own existence. That time and place of reading defines the second level of situatedness.

Lastly, Foucault argues that philosophy possesses a different I – Here – Now from literature. It is an I of philosophy. For business ethics to be philosophy, its I would have to be that of ethics and moral philosophy. Philosophy is all about the nature of truth, being and the existence of the world. It is not to be defined in terms of individual biography or lived immediate experience. Its I is entirely absorbed in its problematic(s). Thus, for instance, biographies of philosophers are in effect literature and not philosophy. Philosophy can try to define what the self or I is or is not; but as philosophy it never thereby can become the actual self or I of any particular person. Philosophy's time is that of the shared present of its thought and awareness. Philosophy, unlike science, is in time; current philosophy is very different from that of the pre-

Socratics or the Enlightenment. Philosophy has a relation to the now; it is historically grounded and operates within changing *zeitgeists*. Philosophy's here is that of the 'I think' embedded in the assumption that there is and can be thought. Thus philosophy's here is that of thought, and its now is that of its historical presences. Science is liberated from the here and now; philosophy exists with its here and now; and literature operates within simulacres of the here and now.

Applying this analysis to Business ethics leads me to maintain that business ethics has operated as a simulacra of philosophy; that is, as a very particular sort of literature. Foucault defines the modern 'now' of philosophy in terms of three stages: that of Descartes, Kant and Nietzsche, with the emphasis very much on the first and third stage. The claim is that with Descartes the metaphysics of God, Soul and the World, collapsed. There was no longer an accepted self-evident metaphysical truth that supported thought, existence and ethics. Nothing anymore was assured or, of itself, certain, determined and endowed with permanence. Thought became just or merely itself, instead of being underpinned by Truth external to itself. And with Nietzsche, even the identity of thought, lost its central place, role or sense of inevitability. No longer was the theme of philosophy that there was no certainty to what could be thought. It had become uncertain if thought outside of delusion, falsity and lies, could actually exist. In the realm of Descartes, human thought was identified with the pursuit of truth and it was assumed that thought could be identified with some sort of 'good'; but with Nietzsche, the ethical value of thought crumbled. Human thought may well not be at all for the good. In the metaphysics of God, Soul and World, time was irrelevant; as Truth was timeless. In Descartes' philosophy, Truth, Mind and Objectivity replaced the old categories, but retained strong echoes of the metaphysical episteme. But with Nietzsche, the metaphysical layer really got cut away, and fundamental uncertainty was propagated confronted.

Chamayou's claim is that the project of business ethics has been to define 'free market' corporate action as an ethical 'good'. Here Foucault and Chamayou would be in total agreement that no such definition is philosophically possible; or if you wish, business ethics is literature pretending to be philosophy, and thereby is a manipulative lie. Business ethics claims a condition of possibility that does not and cannot really exist. This deeply negative appraisal of business ethics has been empirically investigated; something Chamayou failed to do. Chamayou records how the thought of Friedrich Hayak, Milton Freedman, et cetera has underpinned business self-interest and how these sources (and that of their popularizers) has been financed by corporations in their own self-interest. Chamayou with his history of the creation of corporate ideology asserts that ideas were developed to answer to crises in the legitimacy of the corporations, which preceded to further the corporate achievement of hegemony. However, the causal link between the development of ideology and the growth of corporate hegemony is asserted but not evidenced. The critique of business ethics, as an ideological tool that corporate interests need when under attack, but which they can do away with once they felt themselves ideologically stronger; is a startling, and significant challenge, but one which Chamayou does not really give evidence for. But others have done so.

3. Business ethics as ideology

Thomas Klikauer (2017, 2019) has researched business ethics as ideology; that is as a didactic fiction meant to support corporate hegemony. Business ethics he asserts is ‘knowledge in service of power.’ Its function is to camouflage contradictions, support domination and prevent emancipation’ (2017, p 85). It is not philosophy, because it is not thought for thought’s sake; but a simulacrum of thought created to defend and further corporate economic success. Klikauer accepts Foucault’s fundamental assertion that what distinguishes philosophy from other forms of thought and writing is that it is a form of thought dedicated to the understanding of thought itself. Thus it is a self-reflective, meta-level activity that exists only for itself. Contrastingly, ideologies exist with specific purposes; for instance to further some form of self-interest, strengthen the power of a faction, or provide legitimacy to some designated institutions. Ideologies authorize, sustain and help to reproduce groups and/or organizations. According to Klikauer, echoing Chamayou, business ethics has functioned to fulfill ideological goals.

Klikauer has supported his claim by performing archeological research of business ethics text books (2017, 2019). He has discovered that these text books have presented ethical issues in business terms: e.g. whistle-blowing, corruption, child labor, unsafe work conditions, are described as disconnected from ethics or moral philosophy. Fraud, cheating and dishonesty are portrayed as individual faults committed by ‘rotten apples’ and not as the results of systemic factors. Business is presented as if managerial and non-managerial staff are equal; i.e. without the management-worker division. While business organization is assumed to be dedicated to the achievement of competitive advantage, this supposedly does not inevitably produce ethically undesirable behavior. Ethics is thematized as having to do with ‘the greatest good for the greatest numbers’ but without distinguishing between workers, bosses and owners. The needs of business seem to be prioritized with ‘the business of business being business’. Corporate interests are portrayed as predominating over all other claims; with managerial domination just assumed to be just and necessary. Functioning under the pressures of competition is portrayed as difficult, demanding, and deserving of our sympathy. Business leadership and entrepreneurship are championed whereby what is ‘good’ actually is hierarchized and individualized. Obedience to corporate leadership is at least implicitly identified with what is assumed to be ethical. The world is not viewed through the perspective of democracy, but instead as in need of being managerially controlled and grounded in a leader > follower dictotomy (Klikauer, 2019).

Social responsibility is often reduced to merely obeying the law, with profit maximization as an *a priori* goal. An anthropology that assumes that ‘greed is part of human nature’ and is crucial to business success; is commonly ascribed to. An ideological position of free enterprise and entrepreneurial activity is embraced, accompanied by an individualizing morality. The text books produce ‘business as ethics’; wherein humans as ends in themselves, in the tradition of Kant, are short-shrifted. Virtue ethics as relational affect or interactive resonance, or the

necessary openness to the (gaze of) the Other, are not even considered. The Other is merely a resource to be managed. The mindset is presented as if it always has existed and is not historically relative. Ultimately, business ethics is portrayed in the most commonly used text books, as “using ethics to increase profits”.

4. The 1970's or Chamayou's “now”

Chamayou claims that the end of the Keynesian compromise in the 1970's, whereby capital and labor ceased to be mutually supportive as they had been during the so-called ‘trente glorieuses’ of economic reconstruction after WWII and the creation of a consumer society, is the key to the crisis in corporate legitimacy creating the need for ideology to mask the economic reality. But again, the substantiating underpinning is scant. For instance, Bickerton and Accetti in *Technopopulism* (2012) propose a far more phenomenological description of these issues.

Following Bickerton and Accetti, it is broadly accepted that in the 1970's the great post WWII Keynesian compromise started to break down. Political parties that were bound to particular social groups, such as the working class, the educated middle class, or the business elite, lost their anchors. A *zeitgeist* of individualization and atomization, coupled to processes of social-economic change, disrupted the old points of identification. ‘Politics’ became clientelism: whomever most effectively promised improved living standards, as well as public order and security, got the votes. Ideals, telos or historical analyses were superfluous. The politicians proclaimed that they ‘were neither left nor right’ but ‘problem solvers’. Governments supported the transformations in the economy caused by globalization and fermented by new information technologies, without debating or questioning the consequences. Politicians casted themselves as ‘result-directed’ and ‘pragmatic’. Goals were not debated; the rhetoric of ‘optimal results’ and efficiency dominated.

Chamayou thinks that an ideological super-structure created by thinktanks, consultants and business interests, was needed to create the politics of depoliticization; but did ‘mindless pragmatism’ really need any such self-conscious and intellectual antecedents? Politics explicitly or implicitly as ideation indeed fell by the wayside.

If we look at contemporary politics, for instance Emanuel Macron's *La République en Marche*, through the eyes of Bickerton and Accetti, we see ‘technopopulism’ in practice. Macron pretends to act in the name of the ‘people’ i.e. in the name of the all-inclusive popular will --- as if the French could be seen as one thing or identity. He claims to represent ‘change from below’, wherein he directly translates the voice of the ‘people’ into pragmatic action. And he has portrayed himself as ‘capable of getting results’. The goal is not framed in terms of policy commitments but as pragmatic action. The leader claims to ‘be the people’ and to have mastered ‘techno-managerialism’. Goals are not debated; governing is a matter of defining and achieving

pragmatic ‘solutions’. Leadership is personalized in terms of claims of competence and expertise. Politics resembles a ‘start-up culture’.

Of course, there has been the backlash; first with the ‘yellow-vests’, and then the anti-vaxxers, and now the opposition to pension reform, all of which have taken to the streets. But the personalization of power and pretense of embodying the popular will really a thought through strategy of capital, as Chamayou claims? Macron’s leadership style is personalistic and claims to be change directed. It represents a seemingly contradictory amalgam of populism and technocratic governance. An image of effective and even powerful governance is attempted; with opportunistic macroeconomic policies and less successful attempts at social management. ‘Technopopulism’ does not act in service of social justice. But is Chamayou’s effort to convince us that contemporary political governance has been thought up by neo-liberal guru’s, and that it is self-consciously ideologically constructed, does not really seem convincing.

Chamayou defends the idea that there needs to be a social-economic telos. Ultimately his episteme is that of historical meaningfulness. Behind social history and politics there supposedly ought to be truths and principles. ‘Technopopulism’ has been consciously invented and is purposefully in service of capitalism as it makes genuine democracy impossible. The university may well have embraced ‘technopopulism’, for instance, in the business schools and economics faculties as its new ideology. The ‘techno’ leads to behavioral finance and the monetization of decision-making; and the ‘populism’ is to be found in the claim that the pursuit of individual wealth is a universal good. Care or concern for the Other, or commitment to social and welfare justice, are not in evidence. Entrepreneurial success supposedly is universally advantageous; and everyone supposedly benefits from business prosperity. Business is a universal ‘good’. Curriculum that presupposes divisiveness or conflicts of interest is no longer welcome. Critical Management Studies (CMS), which presupposed that business entailed winners and losers, conflicts and a ‘dark side’ to success; has been expunged from the university. Business ethics as a critique of corporate practice and organization studies as investigation of misbehavior, bullying or scape-goating, has been banished from the curriculum. There is one ‘people’ and it is defined in terms of consumerism, business success and global economics. Divisive voices are silenced; the study of business organization as exploitive, environmentally irresponsible, racist, sexist or neo-colonial, is labelled as ‘woke’ and not worthy of academic attention. The university produces technocratic experts who are in control and who can ‘make things happen’.

Conclusion

Chamayou has asserted that business ethics is the dummy pacifier of the hard economic capitalist reality. Once the social-democratic order, which in a way was ethical, was defeated or at least put under enormous pressure; business ethics supposedly was ‘invented’ as a rhetorical substitute. Since the ‘multitude’ or democratic masses were powerless and corporate economic and ideological power was all-powerful, the ideological front of business ethics could colonize ‘responsibility’ without having to give away any real ‘power’. Business ethics was an appearance without substantive reality. It allowed academics and public relations departments to pretend that contemporary corporate action can be politically and socially defended. For Chamayou, business ethics is merely the latest simulacra of corporate ideology. It is a way of trying to make corporate power appear legitimate, while in democratic terms it is not.

But has Chamayou really demonstrated that business guru’s, think tanks or consultants can make a critical difference in practice? Of course they will all be too glad to claim that their ideation has made a difference; but is it really so? Chamayou’s rather cynical description of business ethics, accountability and social dialogue as illusionary pacifiers, that were cast aside as soon as they were not needed, seems credible enough. The fate of business ethics in business schools, where it came into vogue post-Enron and disappeared as soon as the scandals were forgotten, confirms Chamayou’s point. Business will claim an ethical telos if it has to, and appeal to the principle of *homo economicus* the rest of the time. An episteme of ‘technopopulism’ prevails. Chamayou assumes that pro-business rhetoric has had (will have) an effect on the ‘real economy’. Business ethics can indeed be understood as an ideological form of fiction. But has Chamayou given us more a ‘technopopulist’ rhetoric, than an actual archaeology?

If we take our lead from Foucault, we must admit that there are unavoidable limits both to the researcher’s and society’s understanding of politics, awareness of its ideation and insight into its own praxis: “a society cannot ever succeed in being fully transparent to itself because the very conceptual structures it uses to reflect upon itself must always exceed its conceptual grasp” (Accetti, 2010, p 266). Chamayou does not acknowledge the epistemological dilemma. He seems to think that capital has succeeded in determining the theoretical and practical orientation of contemporary governance. And he claims to report on how capitalism has produced crises in the social order, but how it has managed to overcome these in its own self-interest. Business, when threatened or challenged in the 1970’s and after by popular demands, created a ‘normative legitimacy’ for itself with ‘ethics’, ‘dialogue’ and ‘participation’; all of which it shed again as soon as they were no longer needed. The stakeholder perspective, which includes manifold Others in its point of view does not match what Chamayou claims to be really possible. In the contemporary business paradigm, every elaboration of ‘Other’ is false; capital only knows

itself. Capital, it is asserted, is fundamentally ‘exclusionary’ --- any pretension to inclusion is a simulacra.

Chamayou’s “now”, in the form of his historical analysis, is rather surprising. Globalization and financialization are little explored. The crisis of 2008-2011 is almost ignored. And the development of ‘independent contractors’, as a form of individualization and the de-corporatization of capitalism, is neglected. Is corporate legitimacy really as important as Chamayou claims? Writers such as David Graeber (2022), Frédéric Lordon (2019, 2020, 2021) and Slavoj Žižek (2009, 2015) would agree willingly enough that business ethics has served as a smokescreen for corporate hegemony, but they would not reify thinktank rhetoric as crucial to globalization, financialization and the contemporary social order.

Chamayou does not really address Foucault’s point that an archeology of business ethics texts (and text books) would reveal them as dubious literature without much philosophical credit. Nor does Chamayou address his own implicit claim (in the title of his book) that neo-con ideology is identity formative, creating a sort of personality that could be researched via a Foucaultian practice of genealogy. Foucault’s contribution, I submit, is to make us aware that literature that pretends to be philosophy, but is not, is dangerous because of the distorted nature of its truth claim. Pseudo-philosophy is not grounded in thought that is in a self-examinatory mode, but in authorial conceits organized to create an impression on the reader, where accountability is scant or even nonexistent. Philosophy, Foucault claims, has an inherent structure of accountability in its relationship to its history and identity. Moral philosophy, as grounded in our world, has no secure metaphysical base; it cannot claim God, Soul and World as self-evident truths. In effect, the radical doubt of Descartes has been overwhelmed by the even more radical doubt of Nietzsche. Philosophy, when addressing economic behavior, must accept that it has no ability to define ‘good and evil’ with any assurance. It has to realize that corporate economic capture is so strong that any claim to meta-analysis of business ideology is precarious. Access to what business ‘means’ is uncertain and fraught. Contemporary human action or agency is ethically uncertain and suspect. Chamayou seems in Foucaultian terms to be all too certain of himself and of his claims. His pretense to ‘know’ what is ‘good and evil’ in the last fifty years of economic and political thought and action needs to be questioned. Have the corporations been as evil as he assumes; was the opposition as virtuous as he asserts; are Truth and falsity so clearly evident as he believes? Foucault would insist that philosophy cannot answer these questions. Foucault’s archeology was all about the indefiniteness of the justness of contemporary efforts to make Truth claims, and the regime of radical doubt in human awareness that contemporary philosophy has cast upon us. We may identify with Chamayou’s politics, but we need to acknowledge that in Foucault’s terms it is a literature --- i.e. an attempted simulacra of contemporary social existence, which we can better not philosophically trust. One possible response is to say ‘philosophy be damned’ --- we choose for our politics (which in effect was Sartre’s reaction to Foucault). But Chamayou did not make that move in this book.

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