

Theaters of capitalism: Creating conscious capitalism

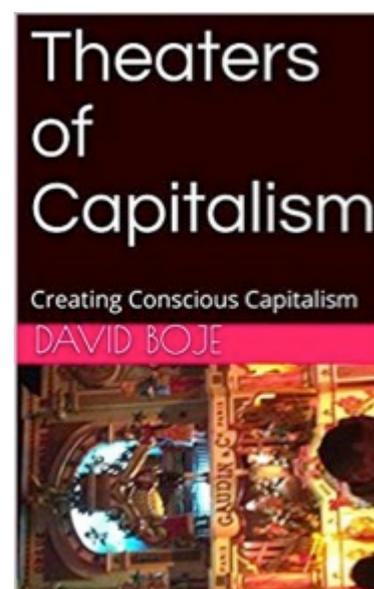
Unplugged - Book review essay

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I cannot resist recalling the circumstances that led me to review the book *Theaters of Capitalism: Creating Conscious Capitalism* by David Boje. I was first intrigued by the title and seduced by the ambitious objective of the author. I contacted Olivier Germain to take responsibility for the review. Then, I was absent when the Amazon deliveryman came to my apartment. Luckily, my neighbor, a French actress and writer, was home and accepted the package on my behalf. I knocked at her door at an unduly hour to get the book. I thought at the time that being handed *Theaters of Capitalism* by an artist was a good omen. I was not disappointed.

The purpose of the book by David Boje is best understood by referring to the celebrated Shakespeare verse:

“All the world’s a stage,
 And all the men and women
 Merely players”

Theaters of Capitalism considers the business world and our current society through the lens of theater and role-playing. David Boje proposes that the prism of theater is adapted to reveal the dynamics of capitalism. His work is firmly grounded in critical studies and, in particular, in critical post-modernism. David Boje recognizes that he is not the first one to make a connection between capitalism and theater. For example, the work of Augusto Boal (1979) on *Theater of the Oppressed* already outlined this relation. David Boje also pays a tribute to the work of Guy Debord (1967) on the society of spectacle. Building on these and other previous insights, David Boje proposes a renewed vision of capitalism as theater.

The author aims at deconstructing capitalism by referring to three main models: spectacle, carnival and festival. *Spectacle* is a notion that describes what businesses actually do, “it is about corporate showmanship and strategies of operating in global theaters” (p.11). Spectacle enables the violence inherent to capitalism, including “inhumanity to labor and

the ecology" (p.67), to be hidden. The corporate spectacle is opposed by *carnival*, a concept used to describe the anti-globalization movements. Further, another type of resistance to capitalism is possible, through festival. *Festival* corresponds to a non-violent festivity. In festival, individuals resist capitalism by adopting specific individual or communal lifestyles that are less harmful to the environment and more human. These lifestyles include vegetarianism or getting involved in collectives such as animal rights movements, to name a few. David Boje uses the tryptic spectacle-carnival- festival to shed a light on post-modern society. In post-modern society, individuals experience forces of capitalism and forces of resistance to capitalism. They can also try to build an alternative path and to find a more balanced way to live and experience life.

The book is structured as follows: the author first positions his work in terms of purpose, definitions and approach (Act 1). He then applies the concepts of theater to several corporate and political case studies (Act 2). This leads David Boje to reflect on how capitalism views human beings and to propose solutions to change the prevailing capitalist approach (Acts 3 and 4).

SPECTACLES OF CAPITALISM

David Boje argues that the concept of spectacle is appropriate to uncover the reality of large corporations. Firms use spectacle to induce individuals to overwork and overconsume. Further, they hide the violent aspects linked to capitalism. Indeed, "spectacle is both a masking of, and an enabling of questionable social engineering, workaholism, shopaholism, and inhumanity to labor and the ecology" (p.67).

Building on previous works on theater, including Aristotle's six *Poetics* elements and the work of Burke (1945), the author proposes a new framework to analyze the spectacle of capitalism and, in particular, situations of oppression. This model includes seven elements: (1) plots, which are incidents in the story, (2) characters, (3) themes, (4) dialogs, (5) rhythms, which relate to timing and cycles, (6) spectacles, which refer to stage appearance, and (7) frames, i.e., worldviews exposed in the context of the play. This model is applied to explain the unfolding of the Enron scandal in 2001-2002, for example.

TYPES OF SPECTACLES

In the work of David Boje, the play "Tamara" plays an important role. "Tamara" is a play written by J. Krizanc in the 1980s that takes place on several stages. The spectator has the choice to follow one character or the other in the play, which leads him to new scenes. Because of the setting and organization of the play, each spectator has a different experience. For David Boje, the play represents post-modern society. Like in "Tamara", the spectacles of capitalism are linked and depend on the choice of actors who are caught in a network of simultaneous stages. Actors, individuals, decide whether and how to participate in the capitalist theater.

Further, David Boje differentiates four types of spectacles used by capitalism: (1) concentrated, (2) diffuse, (3) integrated and (4) mega. These spectacles are forms of oppression as they prevent consumers and collaborators to have a clear understanding of what is actually happening within corporations and their ecosystems. The concentrated spectacle constructs a vision of production and consumption that masks the effects of capitalism. Diffuse spectacle refers to the "hidden background" of

production, including global value chains. In diffuse spectacle, "it is difficult to know who made what product and under what labor conditions" (p.33). Integrated spectacle happens when concentrated and diffuse spectacles combine. Finally, megaspectacles put emphasis on scandal and "extravaganza". Examples include the war on terror and Enron. These four types of spectacles are illustrated by several examples, in particular, Disney, McDonald's, Las Vegas and Enron.

CASE STUDIES

David Boje first unveils how the management of Disney relates to integrated spectacles and transforms traditional culture to appropriate it. Disney represents a certain type of capitalism where production, distribution and consumption become a spectacle. Consumers take part in the spectacle through their purchases and visits to theme parks. In parallel, Disney appropriates traditional cultures and makes people pay to access culture. Further, the firm masks the managerial reality by using a discourse setting the stage of a "Disney family" to which collaborators belong. In fact, managerial practices reflect power centralization and refusal of social dialog. The pursuit of revenues also leads the company to complex situations. Disney sometimes contradicts the very values that it wants to represent, i.e., family values, by targeting niche markets such as heavy metal songs production. The firm is also facing several controversies due to the adoption of gay characters in its movies.

The case study of McDonald's goes further. David Boje sheds a light on the concentrated and diffuse spectacles of the firm. He uncovers the theatrical aspects of McDonald's restaurants, where every part is codified and everyone plays a part, including the customers waiting in line to order food. The author also depicts with precision the brutal treatment of animals in McDonald's slaughterhouses and other inhumane "backstage" practices that remain hidden to consumers. He invites the reader to reflect on the effects of the scripted and mechanistic interactions between clients and workers, as well as on the hidden consequences of consumption. Few groups resist McDonald's by adopting a carnivalesque stance. In particular, David Boje cites José Bové and his supporters, French farmers who destroyed a McDonald's, as incarnating such resistance: "Bové uses a combination of street and courtroom theatrics to resist corporate and state power, and recruit spectators to become spectators in theaters of civil disobedience" (p.149).

In sum, David Boje disassembles corporate spectacles to show their dynamics and effects on consumers and society. In his analysis of Disney and McDonald's, the author points out the excesses of American corporations that mold consumer habits and socialization processes and hide the consequences of their activities.

Finally, D. Boje points out the links between war and business: "The War on Terror is a pretty darn good excuse to control an estimated \$5 trillion of oil and gas resources from the Caspian Basin" (p.218). He also reminds the reader about the relations between Enron management and the former US president George Bush Jr.

BETTER SCRIPTS FOR CAPITALISM

In the third part of the book, David Boje unveils the consequences of capitalism at the individual level. He proposes solutions to address the issues raised by the spectacles of capitalism. In particular, he promotes raising consciousness about the corporate systems of domination, as well as adopting lifestyles that permit "festivalism".

At the level of the individual, the author shows that capitalism promotes workaholism. He describes motivation theory as a means to achieve full dedication to corporations. Motivation theory incites individuals to measure their worth by their work and rewards them with addiction to consumption. It is based on manipulation and omits important human desires linked to sexuality and death. Work becomes the only way to satisfy stereotyped human needs, as reflected by the pyramid of Maslow, a central framework in motivation theory. At the organizational level, firms create work addiction and adapt to an addictive society based on consumption. They create false needs that can only be satisfied with overwork. An example of a man in Fiji illustrates this idea. This man left his city job where "he needed to buy food in the supermarket, needed to get a car, and needed an apartment with all the utilities" (p.333) to go back to his village and live a simpler life based on fishing and picking. There, he was happy every day.

To develop awareness of the spectacles of capitalism, the author proposes using the different types of theaters depicted by the work of Boal (1979, 1992): image theater, invisibility theater and forum theater. In image or visual theater, actors set out on stage in a mute way the routines and processes that are used in corporations such as McDonald's. This type of theater shows the robotic and dehumanized interactions that detailed procedures and excessive control can create. D. Boje also suggests using "invisibility theater". Invisibility theater brings on stage realities that are hidden by corporations, such as sweatshops, child labor and effects on the environment. It can raise awareness about the spectacles of capitalism notably by recalling trials where large corporations have been condemned or pointed out for their misbehaviors. The last type of theater that can be used to denounce current forms of capitalism is forum theater. Forum theater is the ultimate stage of both image and invisibility theater. In forum theater, spectators can stop the spectacle and propose alternatives to what they see. They deconstruct and reconstruct the corporation.

Finally, what can individual actors do to resist capitalism? David Boje promotes the idea of "festive work", where individuals adopt certain types of behaviors to counter the corporate spectacle. Individual action resists institutional pressure. Human beings come back to the center of the stage. D. Boje outlines a series of advice to help individuals adopt this type of conduct. They include slowing down, setting a limit to work time, and making progress, but not perfection, the goal. Individual forms of resistance lead to work that is festive. However, the author warns against adopting other addictions such as sports and hobbies. David Boje denounces capitalism and unveils the totalitarianism of excessive work and consumption. He promotes festivalism as an alternative. Festivalism permits freedom and non-violent resistance to capitalism. It transforms capitalism into life affirming production. The development of organic farming movements and of virtual communities both belong to festivalism.

In conclusion, David Boje pleads for the construction of a conscious capitalism, which involves an increased awareness in workers and consumers of the theaters of capitalism. Spectacle, carnival and festival are interrelated. The role of consumers is to investigate these relations and to improve the practices of corporate actors by reflecting and adopting different behaviors. These activities could lead to the reconciliation of moral and wealth.

The work of David Boje is a revelation on dynamics at work in our post-modern society. It also proposes a reflection on our human condition. It questions capitalism to unveil possibilities of resistance and change that are actionable by individuals and communities. Finally, on a more personal note, this work is an homage to the author's father as well as a personal testimony, and I was particularly touched by the personal examples that illustrated the statements of this book.

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