

The worthy employee: Serious leisure through alternative forms of spirituality

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Abstract

The analyzes undertaken in the present study focus on those who have adopted a new lifestyle, strongly centered around self-development through recreational practices. Also, the interest of the research was directed towards the way in which leisure became a new type of work for some of the employees of large corporations. As recent research shows, a significant portion of employees feel the pressure to outdo themselves and build an impressive career. Precisely to maximize their chances of success, individuals become more flexible, more creative, more autonomous and more motivated to improve their skills. As my fieldwork has shown, in order to be able to survive the increased competition, employees are in a continuous work with their own person, which can lead to frustration, anxiety and insecurity. In this context, individuals seek support and, at least some of them, identify them in recreational practices that resonate with alternative forms of spirituality. In order to understand how alternative forms of spirituality have entered the area of recreational practices and how leisure has become a new type of work, I began to participate in various spiritual development programs existing in Romania.

Keywords: *Employee; neoliberalism; serious leisure; spirituality; self-development.*

Recent ethnographies in the fields of work and organization reveal the increasing importance of so-called 'new-careers', especially among highly educated people. These new careers are pushing individuals to become flexible, autonomous, creative and centered on the perpetual discovery of the facets of their own abilities and interests but often insecure and anxious (Binkley 2017, 2011). At the same time, a new vision about leisure practices began to take shape. In this context alternative forms of spirituality have been rapidly developed and demand a careful analysis of the means in which they are appropriated to the new economic sectors that have emerged in Romania. My argument is that these new forms of spirituality, usually performed as leisure, are taking roots not only in everyday life practices but also into the logic of economic practices focused on competition.

It is certain that alternative forms of spirituality (such as yoga, meditation or Tai Chi) are becoming more common. To understand how strongly these practices managed to penetrate the daily lives of individuals and how they were internalized, I conducted a fieldwork research over a two-year period. During this essential step I have combined semi-structured in-depth interviews and participant observations. More precisely I

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participated in more than 20 workshops, seminars or sessions on the subject of spiritual and personal development. A significant part of my fieldwork focused on the comparative analysis of trainers' discourses (sometimes called 'shamans' or 'spiritual facilitators'), but also on the existing interactions within the participants at these events. A total of 34 interviews have been conducted with individuals involved in the process of spiritual development and 25 of them were corporations' employees.

1. How leisure becomes a new kind of work?

A major change in social perception of leisure has simultaneously occurred with the change in vision of work (Rojek 2009), with the emergence of flexible jobs, and with the implementation of a neoliberal ideology more and more present in everyday life. For several decades it was clearly regulated a gap between productive and non-productive time, but this distinction has begun to dilute, giving way to a new order and vision of what leisure means; its purpose can no longer be seen as an escape route from everyday life (Rojek 1995), but it starts to be more and more understood as time and space for the performance or enhancement of individual abilities.

The split between labor and leisure becomes much harder to be perceived (Rojek 2005) considering the social and political changes that had occurred in labor dynamics: the decline of the manufacturing sector and the rising of the service sector, then the emergence of flexible work, along with the tendency of consumers to differentiate, and with the increasing of niche production (Binkley 2014). In this mix of work and other life plans, providers of spiritual development programs, as well as authors, propose procedures and techniques for the individual to achieve a new 'energy' and a disconnection from activities related to work and a reconnection with the 'authentic self'. In this context, the responsibility for one's own well-being – and in fact for one's own life – becomes strictly an individual one. At the same time, even if it is not very explicit, generally speaking, there is a dismissal of responsibility towards society and also of institutions towards the individuals.

About two decades after the regime was changed, the unproductive, hedonistic forms of leisure, which Stebbins (1982) calls casual leisure were not incriminated by the common sense. Nowadays we can see how the whole world is a huge supermarket of leisure opportunities for which the free will of each person can decide, at least theoretically (Cohen-Gewerc and Stebbins 2013: p. 5), but this 'full freedom' has attached a prerogative specific to neoliberal ideology: that of being productive in as many circumstances as possible. Productivity should not be understood in strictly material terms, but it mainly refers to a change of vision on how free time should be used to maximize all individual characteristics, in a mixture with work to construct a better 'self' much clearer individualized. It is suggested the idea that the individual must become 'a tailor of his own self, to stay away from all fashionable, comfortable or ready-made identities' (Cohen-Gewerc and Stebbins 2013: p. 8).

This change of perspective on how leisure begins to be perceived is the basis for the development of leisure programs focused on the holistic development of the individual: personal, mental, physical and spiritual. In such a way, leisure is no longer legitimate to be understood in terms of pure hedonism, devoid of any concerns (Rojek 2005). Although hedonism remains an important element for many forms and practices of leisure, it is strongly impregnated with the idea of individual's concern for self, and for his personal development (Rojek, 2005: p. 12). Rojek observes how strong arguments are brought in the current neoliberal context to explain the need for active involvement in

recreational practices that require the personal development of subjects. In order to have the appreciation of those around them, individuals must appear as being happy, or indeed to be happy, wealthy, inventive, and ready for new challenges. As a response to these societal challenges, individuals must engage in what Robert A. Stebbins (1982, 1997, 2006) calls serious leisure. The distinction that the sociologist makes between the concepts of serious leisure and casual leisure can clarify the current meaning of leisure and makes it easier to understand the presence of alternative forms of spirituality in the agenda of leisure activities. Stebbins (1982) introduces the concepts of serious leisure and casual leisure to illustrate, by comparison, what the former refers to, and in a later text (Stebbins 2006) the author introduces a third concept: project-based leisure. Of the three, serious leisure is considered to be the most important and the one that gives name to a new perspective in leisure studies.

Casual leisure is fundamentally focused on hedonism and refers to relatively short or spontaneous activities that bring inherent rewards and do not require special training in advance for bringing satisfaction to the individual (Stebbins 1997). Such activities may include, for example, watching TV, going out to the café for socializing, but also practices classified as deviant (Rojek 2010). By comparison to serious leisure, casual leisure is considered to be substantially less valued by individuals. In addition, the project-based leisure occupies an intermediate position between the two previously discussed and is not necessarily of interest for the present study: as Stebbins says, this third concept refers to occasional activities, which involve the mobilization of the individual for performing specific tasks for a relatively limited period of time, such as the creative involvement in organizing an event (Stebbins 2005).

The importance of practicing an activity from the category of serious leisure started to be exposed through neoliberal lens by specialists in leisure studies, psychologists, company managers, trainers or pedagogues. That happened amid the change of vision regarding the way of how it would be desirable that 'respectable' individuals should spend their free time for the purpose of continuous development and for a better definition of the self. As I have said before, activities that do not require effort to obtain knowledge, skills and benefits, which do not have a certain consistency, begin to be strongly devalued, primarily because they do not provide the subject with the necessary development to achieve success. At the same time, new claims arise that require individuals to use their time wisely and conscientiously. The involvement of individuals in inappropriate activities for the 'self' are perceived as a loss, as a waste of time. According to the specialists interviewed during my research, the practice of alternative forms of spirituality is successfully embraced precisely because that can satisfy all these requirements, being focused especially on the holistic development of the self.

2. Always flexible, autonomous and happy

The capitalism continues to survive largely due to its ability to adapt and accept a plenty of cultural differences (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005). Wrenn (2020: p. 503) said that "capitalism has always and will always depend on a compliant workforce" but we already know from Max Weber (2001) that capitalism cannot survive without devoted people motivated by powerful moral reasons. In this regard, in order to create highly involved employees, corporations sustain programs and adopt motivational strategies focused not so much on material tokens of appreciations (bonuses), but also on constructing an internal motivation, giving the individual the support he/she needs to evolve both professionally and personally. Therefore, other mechanisms are called forward

in order to enhance the employees` degree of involvement, motivation and security. Such mechanisms can be derived from alternative forms of spirituality (Joblin 2009; Vasconcelos 2010; Wrenn 2020). These motivation and fidelization mechanisms, that have emerged in the USA in the 1970s, are not so frequently utilised in Romanian corporations, compared to other Western countries, but some ideas, principles and practices are starting to be increasingly felt in the corporate environment after 2008 (Gog 2016). In other words, the corporate vision on the plan by which employees become more productive can be much more easily obtained through encouraging the participation in personal development courses, professional development courses and programs meant to connect one to his/her spiritual being (meditation techniques, yoga, etc.). “The ultimate promise of all these programs is the control of certain individual techniques and practices through which the individual can easily fulfill personal goals, while discovering one`s potential and identifying the areas in which one can become fully performant” (Tobias 2016: p. 132). This can be obtained without sacrificing the well-being of the individual.

The social and economic changes (among which new global policies, the development of technologies) that have taken place in recent decades have contributed to a new perception upon labor and a shift regarding the role of employees in the companies. It is well known the fact that organizations put an enormous pressure on workers of all levels to serve their companies. The individuals, pressured by organization and a highly sense of self-preservation, usually were complaining about the lack of time, lack of energy and a boring existence. But in the last decade, especially since the global crisis of 2008, some changes were produced and the view of work received a new interpretation. The growing interest of organizations in spirituality is being studied by several researchers. As Vasconcelos (2010) said „the spiritual paradigm has gradually become from an apparent fad management to a respectful theme given that it is attracting increasingly intellectual curiosity and personal research for understanding this phenomenon” (p. 607). Giacalone and Jurkiewicz (2003) also observed the highly interest of the management to introduce short breaks for the employees for their spiritual development. These changes can enact radical transformations on organizations and in the demarcation of work and leisure.

The socio-anthropological literature on the subject matter illustrates that capitalist prosperity is directly bound to the level of involvement of those producing the capital. The involvement of the latter is not determined only by materialistic rewards, but one must find other ways and forms of motivating the staff, morally and affectively (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005). It is certain that organizations make real efforts to increase the employee`s degree of involvement and motivations and my analysis focuses on the ways in which these new forms of spirituality and techniques of subjectification contribute to this plan.

The present study does not aim to produce a thorough analysis of neoliberalism, but it is important to remember that outside this framework practices in the area of spiritual development would have been very difficult to be perceived as leisure forms. These new forms of leisure are very popular these days and help to the development of adaptive mechanisms to the society.

As I mentioned before, a significant part of programs focused on spiritual development have become an important part of daily life and were infiltrated into the leisure practices. For a better understanding of the topic of my research I started to frequent courses centered on prosperity and success, courses that focus on happiness and others which address the individual`s spirituality and I was surprised by the web of options that I found. Almost all the participants (my fellows during these events) were

employees in corporations. Their levels of knowledge were different and also their capability to absorb the information. After few months spent in different programs, I decided to add only one spiritual center, which will henceforth be called T.H. There I started to interact with highly educated persons, keen on developing their careers and anchored in social and economic life that constantly frequent these programs. First of all I was interested to find out what made them get involved in a process of personal and spiritual development. I was also interested to receive an answer to the following questions: What was it that changed on a professional and personal levels?; When did they start acknowledging these changes?; What is the meaning that they attribute to their involvement in these actions?

A few months ago I came to T.H. for the first time out of curiosity and, at the same time, because I felt that I needed to make a change. I met L., P. and C., I saw the happiness in their eyes and I told myself that I want to live with this sense of happiness, especially since I've been through a lot of real hardships in life. I enjoy coming here... not only because it's relaxing and energizing at the same time, it's more than that. [...] Professionally... I actually thought about this, it would be cool to have a team-building with S. It's something else and the benefits are long-term. Professionally... directly... I am more alive, I feel eager to find new challenges in what I do. Not because something changes with the job, but because now I can focus better and I feel more alive. (Anca, 33, employee).

Several common aspects emerged from the interviews and one of the first mentions was 'a generalized sense of well-being'. More concretely, the respondents associated their own 'well-being' with an excellent self-knowledge, plenty of confidence, balance, happiness, contentment and independence. The contribution of the trainers to this state of well-being was strongly valued by all. Although no one has neglected the significant role of the programs, some of the participants have mentioned that the improvement of the 'self' is first of all an individual job.

Therefore, personal or spiritual development programs are often seen as a panacea, as time and space for improving certain aspects strictly related to the individual and his potential. For almost all respondents, the spiritual practices represent an important part of their lives that change the way they look at their time. After the beginning of the process of spiritual development, time began to be valued. A lot of 'casual activities' have been replaced by meditation, spiritual readings, or different kind of exercises. What I want to say is that, for most of the respondents, spiritual practices have come to take place of meaningless recreational activities. In other words, a part of casual leisure activities have been replaced by serious leisure.

One day is still 24 hours. I have to prioritize what is important to me. Time is valuable. Meditation represents for me gained time.... Energizing time [...] I donated my TV. (Marius, 29, employee).

During the fieldwork I took an interview to one of the managers about the way he relates to alternative forms of spirituality. I also asked him about the extent of these practices in the corporation in which he manages. The corporation doesn't propose spiritual development plans, only personal development workshops. More precisely, this company doesn't invite gurus or shamans, but personal trainers are often invited. The

purpose of personal trainers is to guide employees and to offer `intelligent` tools to improve personal abilities. Those employees who succeed in proving that they have improved some abilities during the personal development trainings are the most likely to be the next leaders. As I mentioned, the (team) leaders are chosen taking into account their abilities to discover what motivates each and every employee, encouraging him or her to invest in their potential. Thus, even the charge of motivating the personnel produces changes at an individual level and in order for this to happen one needs a profound knowledge of the key-persons who deserve all the investments beyond the formal office activity.

For some time now, I have been paying close attention to the emotional abilities of those I promote. We are not looking for good professionals only, but also for people with a good vibe. People who are willing to push their limits, to motivate others are my target. This kind of person allows others to grow.” (Manager I)

The manager I have interviewed considers that besides all the professional development trainings (technical trainings), other programs and courses cannot be imposed for every member of the staff, just in case someone will find it interesting or useful. Individual quests are the ones who really contribute to a personal development scheme and, without being intrusive the company serves the purpose of giving support throughout this process. This was also the case of my interviewee, who discovered yoga practices after many job-related travels to India.

At first it was ok. Then I was more and more worn out morally, physically. I knew I wouldn't last long. My lifestyle was too demanding. I wasn't taking a break for years. I was impossible to have a stable relationship. But let's talk about now! Or, I think that I want to present you how I started to love yoga. We all think we know what yoga is. But no! I needed a special moment to discover it. It was during my third visit to India. After that I discovered myself and this is wonderful. (Adi, employee, 34 years).

During the individual conversations with the employees on the topic of the training organized by their companies, I've asked them to talk about what they appreciate most about these experiences, what matters to them and to what extent they consider this knowledge applicable in their day-to-day life, both personally and professionally. Regardless of the courses or programs that I may refer, the common point was creating a state of well-being and the hope that any problems the subjects might have could be overcome through their own means. This new type of fabricated subjectivity allows individuals to bear the `burden` of freedom, creating an unprecedented sense of responsibility for their own destinies. What these experiences yield is a boundless faith in their own strength, a strong feeling of security and a proactive attitude – just the most sought after ingredients in the corporate environment. Although I've always found in each discourse that every individual needs to awaken their own conscience, to detach themselves from what others want and to choose their own path, I've equally observed the fact that one`s path towards their goal is not always easy and each life experience has its own purpose. The examples I've received mostly came from the corporate environment, like the next transcript: *one cannot become a good leader unless they start from the*

bottom, unless they are familiar with the needs of junior employees and with what motivates them (Dan, team leader).

One of the most common ideas that remained from the programs I participated in was the need for self-knowledge, which involves a much stronger focus of the individual to the self, to his/her own feelings and the necessity of maximizing inner abilities. All these aspects can be improved through various procedures, techniques or readings. Another important aspect that remained very clear in my vision was the necessity of living in the present. The spirit of presentism contributes to a better management of all life situations and it is believed that it increases the efficiency. The third retained idea, common in most of the interviews, is the importance of gaining balance. To paraphrase several interviewees, gaining balance depends exclusively on the individual, on the way he wants to arrange all aspects of his life and on the way he decides to relate to society. Other topics discussed during the meetings, retained by the subjects were: gaining happiness, achieving success, holistic development of mind, body and spirit, increasing creativity.

The interviews showed an increased interest of individuals in recreational practices that contribute to the enhancement of certain skills or occupations that are ultimately related to self-government; even if part of their free time is directed towards unproductive activities, the most valued were those to which they can give meaning. The most valuable activities were considered those that had the ability to facilitate the development of certain skills transferable to other levels of life. Despite their great diversity, these programs provide batteries of very similar information to each other, projecting similar lifestyles and primarily requiring self-responsibility of the subject, along with maximizing a long series of characteristics necessary to become more efficient, competitive, entrepreneurial, "successful" people in a given society. The appreciation of programs comes from the fact that they manage to transmit certain information that can be integrated by the individual in everyday life and facilitate adaptation.

As I mentioned before, my focus was also on the discourses of trainers and spiritual facilitator. Without any exception, all of them have discussed about workplace satisfaction, outside the material outline. Also, the presented life-stories of all trainers were similar – professional success, obtaining large financial rewards, but the lack of happiness drove them towards changing their life-view and their perspectives on work. All the aspects highlighted by the speakers/trainer, on one hand, and by the company, on the other hand – autonomy, morals, communication, proactive attitude, motivations and clear purposes – lead towards the uncontested acceptance of exploitation. Thus, not only is the sense of loyalty and belonging to the company's working framework produced, but more importantly, this is the manner through which involvement in high quality working standards is developed.

What I found during my research is that a significant part of workers have a new way to look at work and leisure. The discrepancy between work and leisure has never been so thin. For example, meditation (which can be practiced for few minutes during the work schedule) is seen as a recreational activity, but it provides the energy needed to continue the work.

A strong meritocratic discourse was easily noticed in many discussions, in which the well-being and psychological comfort of the individual have been seen directly dependent on personal actions and the ways in which the person decided to think. Quite often the idea has been circulated that for the state of health (physical and mental) the first

person responsible is the individual. In these circumstances, leisure practices have to support mental and physical comfort and health.

About a half of the respondents took into discussion the concept of success. Although I had not planned to discuss this subject, close connections had been established between leisure practices and success. From the respondents' perspective, the success is largely a consequence of personal leisure options. Being perceived as a time that is not allocated to necessary activities, but rather as a residual one (Roman, 2006; Roberts, 2006), leisure can be consumed as everyone wants, accordingly it can be converted in certain practices that improve specific skills that lead to individual "progress". Success can not only be achieved through leisure practices, but it can be the most favorable environment to show it.

Let's be serious! How many of us were born successful? A few! You make your own success, but first you have to have a passion and cultivate that in your free time! (Cosmin, 37, team leader)

3. Final considerations

In order to be successful and to hope for achievements, employees must develop special skills. It is no longer enough for individuals to be only competent at work, they must constantly focus on the development of three aspects of their life: the professional, the personal and the spiritual. As I tried to show in this study, a possible failure, on one of the three levels is exposed as a personal failure, as the inability to consult and internalize the proper "models". The great diversity of recreational offers and techniques of spiritual development give each individual the possibility to decide what exactly suits him and at the same time makes him responsible if the method does not give the expected results. Presenting the situation this way, the individual is the only one who can take responsibility, both in case of success and in case of failure.

The well-being of others becomes an effect, a derivation of all the individual efforts to evolve personally, spiritually and, of course, professionally. This idea is paramount in the actual working context, because the corporate self is more than frequently invoked in trainers' and corporate leaders' discourses and marked even in the inscriptions that decorate the working environment. The constant aspect in all the trainings I've attended is the idea that personal change (in the sense of personal enhancement) isn't produced in the absence of an individual effort and all the external factors constitute mere tools meant to simplify the individual efforts. During the courses and workshops I've attended as part of the fieldwork I frequently heard that *each and every one of us becomes responsible for the effectiveness of these tools*. The language in which the trainers explain how one can evolve is undressed by all the subtleties and made very clear. Each step is quantified so that every person will know when the personal upgrade is produced. One of my subjects said that the daily discourse in the corporation he is a part of contains the following phrase: *You're the one who delivers value!*, a message addressed by the team-leader. The same message is made visible even during presentations and trainings held by the company, pressing the individuals to truly 'deliver value'. The employees are given a task they need to manage at an individual level, searching for and accessing inner resources in order to perform at the highest level possible. These charges are not necessarily imposed upon the employee by his superiors, but rather the product of a corporate self with an astonishing work ethic. Looking back a few years from now, we can conclude that all institutional politics were centered around the idea of 'control' (Rose and

Miller, 2013). Nowadays `control` succumbs to `self-control` (Binklet 2014; Rojek 2012) and subjectification techniques become increasingly important for the corporate environment. As I strove to outline earlier, there is a pressure on the individual, who needs to perform, to be fully responsible and capable to create his/ her vision and purposes.

Corporations have been manifesting a growing interest for self-managed individuals, both as new employees and as a target for developing the existing workforce. The various development programs being offered, such as courses aimed at developing professional skills, soft-skills, meaning personal and inter-personal skills, as well as those aimed towards spiritual development, they all carry the underlying message that self-improvement is fundamentally an individual endeavor and it is the individual who bears the ultimate responsibility for their own destiny. The benefits of this focus on subjectification are twofold for the corporations in terms of employees: on the one hand they take ownership of their work, they are proactive and act as their own supervisors, and on the other hand they take full responsibility for their own path, including potential failure, blaming their own lack of self-discipline instead of the corporation.

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