

UNPLUGGED

Predatory Capitalism

A reading of *The Ungovernable Society. A Genealogy of Authoritarian Liberalism* by Grégoire Chamayou

Chahrazad Abdallah*

Université du Québec à Montréal, Montreal, Canada

The great hunting power, which casts its nets on a scale unprecedented in the history of humanity, is that of capital.

G. Chamayou

Manhunts, A Philosophical History, 2012.

What the business world defends tooth and nail – for this is the meaning of its political mobilization – is the autonomy of its private government. If there is a social actor that does not want to be governed, it is this world: it seeks to make itself ungovernable, but only so that it can govern others.

G. Chamayou,

The Ungovernable Society, 2021.

According to Walter Benjamin, only 'dialectical images' are authentic. These images, created from the juxtaposition of simultaneous and irreconcilable contradictions, enable the legibility of their time; they allow meaning to erupt in a constellation of possibilities. Dialectical images are what Benjamin called 'the present of knowledgeability' (1999), that which illuminates the present time and consents to understanding it in its impossible expansion.

The Ungovernable Society, Grégoire Chamayou's latest book, published in French in 2018 and in English in 2021, offers a series of dialectical juxtapositions that illuminate the present and help make it more intelligible. The book continues the philosopher's genealogical work on the concepts of power and predation by deploying an implacable argument about the transformations of the relationships of the dominant classes to the rest of society in the last 50 years. This book, somber yet enlightening, rigorously rational yet angry, will mark its time. It signals, amongst other brilliant interventions, the entry of 'grey literature'¹ in

management into the field of philosophical analysis. Chamayou mobilizes and disassembles foundational management texts, long ignored by philosophers, to break down their arguments and show their determinant effects on society. In this book, the philosopher unfolds the long history of a reactionary movement – authoritarian liberalism – that takes root in the crisis of governability of the 1970s and whose devastating consequences do not cease to inhabit our present.

In *The Ungovernable Society*, Chamayou carries on his study of technologies of predation that had started with *Manhunts* (2012) and was followed up by *A Theory of the Drone* (2015). Based on a sharp analysis of systems of predation, Chamayou offers a remarkable critique of the technologies of power and domination at work in late capitalism (Jameson, 1991). Since for him domination presupposes predation, Chamayou strives to develop what he calls 'a fragment of the long history of domination' (Chamayou, 2010) through an examination of the phenomenology of predation in its various forms.

In order to demonstrate the articulation of these 'technologies of predation indispensable to the establishment and reproduction of relations of domination' (Chamayou, 2021), Chamayou addresses the symbolic form of predation at the

¹. Chamayou defines a 'grey literature' as 'different/disparate texts to be considered as the elements of a same set of practice' (2021). These texts can be as different as academic papers, private correspondences, various reports and notes, minutes from meetings, articles in the press or workers or union busters' statements.

*Corresponding author: Chahrazad Abdallah, Email: abdallah.chahrazad@uqam.ca

heart of financial capitalism whose nature, as management researchers, we continuously and perhaps unconvincingly strive to grasp. In what follows, I offer a reading of the book that will be based on three dialectical associations whose intertwinements allow us to better get a sense of our troubled present.

The danse of authoritarian liberalism

In a contribution to *Le Monde Diplomatique* about a violent blaze at the Lubrizol factory in Rouen in 2019, Frédéric Lordon, a French economist-philosopher, suggests the idea that there is a 'general authorization of Capital² by the State. According to him, this authorization is 'logically doubled with a general repression towards all those who do not agree to it'. For Lordon (2019), a dual logic is at play: a logic of consent on the one hand and a logic of punishment on the other: The State *consents* to Capital while coercing anyone else to do the same. More so, in *authorizing* it, it *does not authorize any alternative*, hence securing from Capital an endless gratitude, which will keep this precarious dialectic working infinitely at the service of its two protagonists.

The authorization of Capital by the State first entails a specific dynamic. For the State, authorizing Capital means enabling it to spread out, unhindered, and to colonize the totality of time and space. For Capital, it implies the assurance of a powerful ally to better discipline society and enable what Chamayou calls *catallarchy*. This concept, inspired by Hayek's *catallaxy* – or the spontaneous order of markets – designates for Chamayou 'a new regime of government, one that needs to be conceived as a government of rulers by the markets.' (2021, p. 102). Capital and State, far from being antagonists as liberal theory pretends, become the two sides of a same system of domination within the neoliberal order: This 'danse' of authoritarian liberalism describes the nested and mutually constitutive logic of the capitalist and political orders (Aarons, 2013).

Chamayou takes his critique of this logic further however and shows how it is propelled by a primary drive: predation. Grounding his arguments on Marx's analysis of capitalism in its phase of primitive accumulation, Chamayou attempts to illustrate, book after book, *capitalism's widespread power of capture*. First, in *Manhunts*, through a history of cynegetic power whose various forms of predation – ('Hunting Indians', 'Hunting Black Skins', 'Hunting the Poor', 'Hunting Foreigners', 'Hunting Jews', 'Hunting Illegals') – enabled capitalist accumulation through slavery, colonization and the formation of the proletariat; then, in *A Theory of the Drone*, through an analysis of the disincarnated power of drones

which transforms our relationship to territory, ethics, and form of alterity in a new contemporary imperialism; and finally, in *The Ungovernable Society*, by demonstrating of a new managerial governmentality was established and institutionalized. This form of governmentality represents for Chamayou the ultimate cynical and strategic declination of a predominantly financial and legalistic conception of the modern corporation.

Becoming ungovernable

The power of this book lies in its ability to show that ungovernability is not located where we think. It 'can have two great polarities: at the bottom, among the governed, or at the top, among the governors' (2021, p. 12). Indeed, even if workers' indocility is gathering new momentum today ('Gilets jaunes' movement, union formation supporting rallies, anti-austerity protests, etc.), it is on the side of corporations that the old binds are disintegrating. Indeed, to face its various 'crises', authoritarian liberalism has functioned as a means to *autonomize* Capital via the transformation of a political power that has become 'strong with the weak and weak with the strong' (2021, p. 375).

The history of authoritarian liberalism is the history of a formidable autonomization of Capital. The transformation of its relationship to the State as described above has had the gradual effect of 'liberating' firms from political power whilst benefiting from the latter's coercive and 'generous' nature. In time, the State, increasingly constraining for individuals, became habilitating for corporations through an array of measures ranging from massive public aid to strategies of fiscal enticements and bank bailouts. Corporations on the other hand, through a clever theoretical sleight of hand, heavily used 'micropolitics', a technology of power derived from the economic theory of micro choices. According to this theory, by focusing on individuals' micro choices, it is possible to create a new social order that wouldn't have been chosen voluntarily by the majority. In other words, the gradual atomization of workers' political and economic choices has resulted for most in involuntary but generalized submission to the power of corporations.

Depoliticizing the battlefield

An additional dialectical image is conjured in *The Ungovernable Society*; that which links reality to its 'corporate' version. For example, the cozy fakeness of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) discourses juxtaposed with the sobbing women sitting by the ruins of the Rana Plaza; or the empty slogans on diversity and inclusion the and 50 million dollars paid by Abercrombie & Fitch to settle a lawsuit for

² Capital is understood here as comprising – but not limited to – firms and markets.

racial discrimination. The history of authoritarian liberalism was built on the gradual elaboration of a discursive sphere totally disconnected if not in complete contradiction with the reality of workers. The modalities of depoliticization of managerial capitalism unfold through 'softer' elements whose rhetorical articulations Chamayou cleverly describes. Indeed, behind pumped-up corporate discourses on 'empowerment', 'diversity', 'participation', and 'work-life balance', reality is much bleaker for workers today: contemporary managerialism is a technology of power that works through images and representations. But as Chamayou rightly pinpoints: 'Behind the false representations, there are real technologies' (2021, p. 220).

The notion of 'dialogue' is also a good illustration of that corporate mechanism. As the new catchword of management, dialogue is only considered possible by corporations when it takes the form of adherence, compliance, consent and quiet acceptance of the 'reality of the firm'. Dialogue as a technology of power is increasingly being deployed – today more than ever – from the business field to the wider social and political spheres. Chamayou shows how dialogue in the era of managerial speak is a 'soft' technology of subjugation and subordination to the 'interest of the firm', meaning to the interests of its shareholders.

Moreover, sections of the book dealing with the evolution of the theory of the firm around the notions of ownership, control, and 'nexus of contracts', demonstrate that these are theoretical tools that fuel a derealization machine. The hegemonic theoretical postures pretending to axiological neutrality have the sole function to impose a normative order, to produce useless complexity – and therefore ignorance – and, to *lay political acts of definition*. Chamayou's analysis of the use of these specific concepts – and the refusal by corporations to acknowledge their ideological underpinning – skillfully illustrates how 'depolticized categories are used to engage in politics, and demilitarized categories are used to wage war.' (2021, p. 222). On many occasions, Chamayou wants to offer 'weapons'³ to those who want to fight the ideas put in place by a thought whose philosophical foundation can be summarized in this maxim: *to destruct better in order to dominate better*. 'If we want to grasp the true meaning of the current 'ecological crisis', we need to see it in the context of that history of an economic system whose expansion has been essentially based on the destructive appropriation of nature and see it as part of a continuous tradition of colonial predation and the primitive accumulation of capital.' (2021, p. 271)

³ 'More than ever, philosophy is a battlefield. It is time to enter the fray. What I have to say is openly polemical, for, over and above the possible analytical contribution this book may make, its objective is to provide discursive weapons for the use of those men and women who wish to oppose the policy served by the drones' (*A Theory of the Drone*, p. 15).

In this book, the ambiguities of the links between the corporation and its employees are deconstructed one by one. Amongst those many ambiguities, the rise of a form of 'ethical' managerialism that looks more like enlightened despotism rather than true democratization. Another one is an increasingly coercive conception of power that fades in a deceptive participation discourse. New modalities for the deployment of workers autonomy – a notion dear to Human Resources (HR) directors throughout the world – take the shape of a deceitful make believe in the independence of action of individuals who are increasingly 'made responsible' when it only serves to bind them more. Justified by the systematic disengagement of the state from its function of social protection, neoliberal managerialism – through a clever 'trick' – promotes autonomy and responsibility to employees as tools of liberation from organizational control when they are in fact tools of dereponsibilization for the firm. To shift responsibility onto others in order to deresponsibilize oneself; this is the magic formula. In an overwhelming and somewhat numbing rhetorical texture in which the reality of the many violently collides with the reality of the few, we all end up resigning ourselves to wait for the end of the world.

Destroying the master's house...

In the post-pandemic current context however, the *political*, whose higher stakes remain emancipation and social transformation (Balibar, 2015), is reclaiming center stage again and the hopes of workers are embodied in millions of angry bodies. The transformation of the social forms of wealth production, the opening-up of fossilized social relationships between employees serving their bosses and bosses serving their shareholders, are at stake and are all the more critical since they have left the domain of fantasy to become a reality. 'For the secret of the power of masters, bosses, or colonizers is not to be found in their DNA, nor in their blood or chromosomes, but in the social relationships that ground their dominance' (Chamayou, 2010)

In her famous quote, Audre Lorde rightly said that 'the master's tools won't dismantle the master's house' (Lorde, 2012). With *The Ungovernable Society*, Grégoire Chamayou dismantles the master's tools in order to build new modes of thinking and action. He offers management researchers an escape, a way out from the enclosed thinking at play in large parts of our discipline. The work of Grégoire Chamayou never ceases to interrogate domination in all its forms and reveals liberating insights that are also powerfully *moving*; this book allows us to better think the world but also to better exist in it.

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