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# Internal Europeanization: Emotional Capital and Class in the Selection of EU Officials

*The article explores how the concept of emotional capital intersects with class in the highly competitive process of selecting EU officials. It is primarily based on an analysis of a test preparation guide for the EU concours, examined through the lens of Eva Illouz’s understanding of emotional capital. The article focuses on both tacit and embodied inscriptions of Europeanness – its “internal” dimensions that embed emotions within the broader context of secular and supposedly rational work practices. The author argues that the influence of therapy culture in the contemporary workplace is class-bound and may be both liberating and constraining.*

**Keywords:** emotional capital, social hierarchy, officials, European Union, europeanization

## FROM WINNERS TO EMPLOYEES

About twenty years ago, a group of Croatian sociologists performed a quantitative study primarily designed to research the ways in which young people in Croatia were related to “European values, institutions and the process of integration” (Ilišin 2005: 21).<sup>1</sup> Among many other aspects, one question asked the respondents to determine, from a list of suggested categories, who would be potential winners and losers of the future Croatian membership in the EU. Both young and older groups of respondents predicted that the top three categories of those who would benefit from the membership and live better were “experts”, “those who speak foreign languages” and “young people”<sup>2</sup> (Ilišin and Mendeš 2005: 227). As predictable as they may seem from the

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1 This article was produced as part of the project *Infrapolitical Practices and Changes: From the 1990s to Lived Futures* (INFRA), funded by the European Union – NextGenerationEU.

2 It may be interesting to note that younger respondents were less optimistic about their own prospects than the older ones, with almost 10 percent less of them (67,8 versus 77,1 percent) answering that young people would prosper from EU membership (cf. Ilišin and Mendeš 2005: 227).

present perspective, these results kept coming back to me during my fieldwork in Brussels' EU institutions, as my collocutors could easily be described as winners of the EU accession process and they indeed matched these categories.

I started my research in the second half of 2014, when I conducted the first set of semi-structured interviews with Croatian EU officials, who were employed in EU institutions following the country's accession to the Union in 2013. The second set of interviews was performed in the first half of 2015, also in Brussels, and in-between those two sets I gathered multiple interviews in Zagreb during the Christmas break, when my collocutors visited their friends and families. In this research I decided to focus on the "permanent" officials because I was particularly interested in their experiences with the so-called *concours*, the highly competitive and lengthy procedure through which they were employed in EU institutions. I was curious both about their traceable career trajectories as well as the tacit requirements that brought them success in obtaining those positions.

The status of winners may be justified if we consider the benefits their functions offer, such as high salaries,<sup>3</sup> pensions, high level of job security, meticulously defined working conditions and obligations, as well as accompanying privileges. One could argue that being acquainted with the process of employment within EU institutions, such is the *concours*, as well as the requirements and benefits that such a function carries with it, is the first round of selection-before-selection. There may have been many who met the requirements, but only a limited number were ready to apply, prepared in time and seized the opportunity. The interviewees were typically men and women in their late twenties or thirties. From what I gathered in the biographical part of the conversations, many of my interviewees spoke more than one foreign language, some of them as many as four or five. They have learned languages through their regular education and also in additional, paid language courses. In some cases, the knowledge of languages was acquired through their families' international career trajectories. The majority of my interviewees were situated in the Croatian capital of Zagreb before coming to Brussels.

Many among the EU officials I talked to had an experience of studying or working abroad for a considerable period of time.<sup>4</sup> Postgraduate studies that appeared to come up more often in the interviews were in the fields of European studies, economics and law. Some of the interviewees were, in various ways, related to the European Union long before the date of the country's accession. They were directly involved in the accession process in their previous careers, for example, as junior staff members in state ministries, while others had experience managing EU-funded projects (cf. Ban 2010: 17). Overall, the interviews I conducted supported the findings of a study performed by Merje Kuus among EU civil servants in Brussels in which she focuses, among other things, on the importance of the European East-West axis of differentiation. Back at the time of the "Eastern enlargement", as a Commission official said in 2005, they "expected mad communists", people who would be "completely different", while people who actually got employed were "exactly the same", "white, middle class, well-educated" who "speak languages" (Kuus 2014: 105).

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3 Basic salary at the AD5 grade, at which almost all of my interviewees were employed, was at the time about six times higher than the average salary net wage in Croatia. Registered unemployment rate in Croatia was about 17 percent. Job posts within EU institutions are surely not equally financially appealing to candidates coming from the richest EU members.

4 These impressions are based on the pool of interviewees I assembled. One collocutor warned me that, in his experience, few among Croatian EU officials had lived or studied abroad prior to coming to Brussels, and also, that most of them did not speak other foreign languages apart from English. This differing perception may be important regarding the critique of the *concours* which will be discussed later in the text.

In this analysis I will focus on the examining of “soft”, less tangible skills and characteristics, such as verbal and nonverbal communication, bodily hexis, and manners of conduct. This article aims to contribute to the body of literature which has already examined the EU administration with regards to the question of cultural differences, style and habitus, as well as power relations related to the East-West cultural axis (cf. Keinz and Lewicki 2019: 7-24; Kuus 2014; McDonald 2012: 540-561; Lewicki 2017, 2020: 128-144; Różańska 2011: 263-298) by adding an additional layer of analysis which focuses on the intersection of class and emotional capital.

Within the context of research on EU institutions, it may be important to sensitize the interpretation to the cultural threads of the secular, as well as the “equally broad and vague notions such as modern, liberal, Christian, Protestant or Western” (Scheer et al. 2019: 9). The secular is a thread particularly relevant to civil service and bureaucracy which may be difficult to discern from other, intertwined notions, in particular because it resides in the background, a white noise of sorts which implies “neutrality, impartiality, factuality, rationality and reason” (cf. *ibid.*: 2.). Also, those “very areas which self-describe as secular (...) are typically predicated upon an exclusion of the emotional, affective and sensorial from their operations” (*ibid.*).

Thus, emotional containment is expected from judges in courtrooms, civil servants and bureaucrats, all illustrations of how the very idea of a ‘secular public’ is performed by individuals in their continuous display and expectation of a certain comportment. Though this self-presentation and self-cultivation is coded as ‘rational’ or ‘neutral’ in opposition to ‘irrational’ and ‘emotional’, we suggest that it could also be viewed as a certain mode or style of affectivity invited by an ordering of the social known as ‘secularism’ (*ibid.*).

The authors go on to remark that “secular is not per se ‘un-emotional’ even when it is presented as adhering to the ideals of objectivity and rationality”. It is not about the lack of emotions, it is about “a specific mode of emotionality” (*ibid.*: 2) as the secularity of a subject will not only be found in her propositional knowledge but also in “the embodied actions of perception, emotion, and comportment” (*ibid.*: 4).

The becoming of a peculiar, class-related mode of emotionality is one of central topics of Eva Illouz’s books *Cold Intimacy: The Making of Emotional Capitalism* (2007) and *Saving the Modern Soul: Therapy, Emotions, and the Culture of Self-Help* (2008). Illouz examines, among other things, how the therapeutic discourse has become an important class marker, an asset that provides one with reflexivity and ability to exert control over emotions in various realms of human existence, from intimacy to workplace.

Throughout the twentieth century, under the aegis of the therapeutic discourse, emotional life became imbued with the metaphors and rationality of economics; conversely, economic behavior was consistently shaped by the sphere of emotions and sentiments. The rationalization of emotions created its own converse, which could be characterized as the “emotionalization of economic conduct”. This reciprocal process points to a broader cultural process that I dub emotional capitalism. In emotional capitalism emotional and economic discourses mutually shape one another so that affect is made an essential aspect of economic behavior, and emotional life, especially that of the middle classes, follows the logic of economic relations and exchange (cf. Illouz 2008: 60).

A pronounced conclusion of Illouz’s research is her claim that the reign of therapeutic discourse has suppressed the behaviors traditionally considered masculine such as self-reliance,

aggressivity, competitiveness or orientation to mastery and dominance in the workplace (ibid.: 80), and has brought in the expectation of traditionally more feminine characteristics such as tact or teamwork (cf. ibid.: 77), “paying attention to emotions, controlling anger, and listening sympathetically to others” (Illouz 2007: 16). The author places great importance on investigating this process of *androgynization* in the workplace through examining, among other things, the impact of Elton Mayo and the Hawthorne studies on the management theory. As subjects of the research were “all women (...), unbeknownst to himself, Mayo’s findings were highly gendered” (ibid.: 15). Illouz remarks that the shift in management theory is an example in which “a female method – based on speech and the communication of emotions” was used to inscribe “femininity in ‘universal’ claims” (ibid.).

Mayo was applying the conceptual tools of psychology to women, and based on his findings, he and the cohort of organizational consultants who would work in his footsteps inadvertently initiated a process in which aspects of women’s emotional experiences and selfhood were incorporated into the new guidelines to manage human relationships in the modern workplace (ibid.).

The author argues that experts such as psychologists or consultants in management and human relations slowly shifted emotional styles prevailing in middle-class workplaces. As both genders were, in the end, asked to accept same patterns of behavior, Illouz claims that “emotional fault lines may have less to do with gender than class” (ibid.: 149).

Illouz’s work has been subject to critique in relation to the proposed convergence between middle class men and women when it comes to intimacy or work (cf. McQueen and Osborn 2020: 83-107; Payton 2009: 977-978), with some empirical studies suggesting that the authors’ claims about gender convergence and class divergence are not convincing as “[b]oth qualitative and quantitative data suggest that gender, more than class, strongly shapes our beliefs about the value of emotions talk, though those with higher levels of educational achievement are more likely to know about therapy and counselling” (Brownlie 2014: 104) while generational differences are pronounced and significant.

This article will, however, dedicate more attention to some other arguments in these works, especially those concerning the double bind that therapy culture introduces with respect to the workplace. Therapy culture is viewed as cornerstone of contemporary reflexivity that increasingly obliges people to manage their emotions strategically.

In taking a reflexive posture toward emotions essential to selfhood, and in positing a model of disengaged mastery over one’s emotions, therapeutic culture has paradoxically contributed to a splitting of emotions and action. By insisting that the rules governing the expression of emotions are to be learned reflexively, the therapeutic discourse has made emotional life a matter of procedural and reflexive monitoring of the self, especially for members of the middle class and perhaps even more especially for women. I suggest that here lies what may be a major area of differences between different categories of emotional culture, separating middle-class from working-class men and women (...) (Illouz 2008: 150).

As Illouz states, therapy culture may appear to bring in positive aspects: it can be viewed as a reaction opposing the modern “stultifying technical and bureaucratic disenchantment” because it values “individual uniqueness, pleasure, and introspection” (ibid.: 149). It could be interpreted as a “vast cultural effort to recapture meaning and feeling in an otherwise barren and technical world of meanings” (ibid.), while simultaneously calling for critical examination.

This article will attempt to analyze the welded joints of these two worlds: one which is supposedly rational, punctual, and precise, and the other, which is said to have surfaced from the inner well of emotions and unique imprints of unrepeatable, one-of-a-kind, individual experiences.

## THE ULTIMATE GUIDE TO THE *CONCOURS*

In this article specific attention is dedicated to the selection of candidates in the *concours*, and especially those aspects of this competition that point to those less tangible, soft features that legitimize choices which may result in class differentiation. When discussing the European Commission, Suvarierol asserts that “[w]e can speak perhaps of cosmopolitan homophily since this is the common cultural background” of this “cosmopolitan breed of officials” (2007: 128), and provides us with the following descriptions of their trajectories:

A typical follow-up to a master’s degree in Bruges is to do a traineeship at the European Commission, Parliament or Council. This pre-socialisation period is appropriately called an ‘in-service traineeship’. Even though the five-month traineeship does not guarantee a job at the Commission, many trainees end up getting temporary cont[r]acts at the Commission or use this valuable EU experience as a stepping-stone for their career in Brussels (ibid.: 126).

[P]rior international socialization is a strong factor that attracts individuals to a multinational working environment like the Commission. Since these individuals are used to dealing with diverse cultures, they take it for granted, as a result of which nationality becomes an irrelevant factor in the shape of their networks in the Commission (ibid.: 128-129).

Many foci of activity (cf. Feld and Carter 2009: 136-152), such as the workplace, tend to be more open to people who are rather similar in some features. Depending on the profession, the prevalent, joint features may result in a specific intersection of age, gender, socioeconomic status or life-stage.

In the context of this research, it may be important to note the change in the process of selection of staff in EU institutions at the end of the 2000s, an important aim of the introduced modifications being the shift of the focus of testing from measuring knowledge to competency-based testing (cf. Ban 2010: 8; 18). Its conspicuous feature included the removing of the so-called test of European knowledge, which, according to Ban, required “months of study” of sometimes even trivial facts about the EU, which was sometimes also perceived as “a particular deterrent” (ibid.: 13) to potential candidates. Introduced changes were met with sharp criticism according to which it would enhance the agenda of those who argue for the “minimalist EU role”, a European Union understood as a primarily economic institution, since the reform of the staffing process would promote working for EU institutions as “just a job, interchangeable with working in any other organization, public or private” (ibid.: 17).

In a condensed and detailed account of the transformation of the European public field, sociologist Didier Georghakakis portrays an intricate accumulation of changes that took place “micro-battle by micro-battle” (2010: 943) and involved not only member states but also “different types of elites who relay a cultural struggle between two imperialisms of the universal: one oriented toward business, and, to put it briefly, inspired by the Australo-American model, the other oriented toward the state and continental Europe” (ibid.: 942). If the story of the shifts in the field resembles the “refraction of neo-managerial domination”, it is still subject to a peculiar translation that will respect “its proper dynamics” (ibid.).

In his book on the culture of the new capitalism, Richard Sennett juxtaposes the more traditional forms of evaluating one's work or talent which require "mastering and owning a particular domain of knowledge" to the newer forms of searching for talent which are not "content-specific or content-determined" as "[c]utting edge firms and flexible organizations need people who can learn new skills rather than cling to old competencies" (2006: 115). If the former mode of acquiring merit is characteristic of a craftsman, a metaphor for a person who *digs deep* (and almost obsessively) to master a particular skill or area of knowledge, the latter capability to move "from problem to problem, subject to subject" is more akin to the consultants' logic of operating (*ibid.*). Sennett asserts that the latter requires "real talent", but he remains critical of its prospects:

It is the ability to think prospectively about what might be done by breaking context and reference – at its best, a work of imagination. At its worst, though, this talent search cuts reference to experience and the chains of circumstance, eschews sensate impressions, divides analyzing from believing, ignores the glue of emotional attachment, penalizes digging deep – a state of living in pure process which the philosopher Zygmunt Bauman calls 'liquid modernity' (c.f. *ibid.*: 121).

The computer-based tests administered at the beginning of the *concours* served as an eliminatory, pre-selection stage. They comprised tests of verbal and numerical reasoning, the then newly introduced test of abstract reasoning (cf. Baneth 2011: 28), as well as the so-called situational judgment tests. Such tests were primarily meant to measure the candidate's *innate* abilities, thereby selecting the *natural aristocracy* of the society, regardless of their social background (cf. Sennett 2006). Still, prior practice of this type of problem-solving may significantly improve the end results, and many of my interviewees reported preparing for this part of *concours* months ahead.

Because of the focus on the class-related, the processes of internal Europeanization and the importance of emotional capital, I will more closely examine the part of the *concours* which took place in the so-called assessment center, in which candidates were probed for a set of specific competences. The assessment center of the European Personnel Selection Office listed the following eight competencies which were tested: (1) analysis and problem solving, (2) communicating, (3) delivering quality and results, (4) learning and development, (5) prioritizing and organizing, (6) resilience, (7) working with others, and (8) leadership. Each of those was formally defined within the EPSO framework, but in order to grasp how they were supposed to be embodied, practiced in live interactions within the *concours*, one should best consult a *consecrator*, an insider with sufficient experience and authority to offer such explanations.

I consider one such consecrator András Baneth, the author of what was marketed as best-selling book on EU exams entitled "The Ultimate EU Test Book", which multiple interviewees singled out as primary literature they used in the preparation. In the introduction of the edition my collocutors used at the time this research was conducted, Baneth (2011) presents himself as trainer, consultant and senior partner at a company who deals with "strategy and online marketing" (n.p.). He mentions spending seven years at the European Commission and the European Court of Justice, his roles including "coordinating briefings for Commission President Barros", and serving as a "member of the cabinet of Commissioner Kovács". He holds an "M.A. in law and political sciences and the degree of Master of European Public Administration from the College of Europe, Bruges, Belgium" (Baneth 2025).

## THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE THERAPEUTIC

In this article, I will focus on the last part of Baneth's book, in which the author presents "sample reports against the EPSO competency headings" (Baneth 2011: 360) for two fictional characters – a "good" and a "bad" candidate at the *concours*. I consider this chapter particularly valuable for the analysis since the presentation of candidates both deepens and deconstructs the understanding of the advice given throughout the book. I will focus in particular on the recommended and discouraged body language and displays of emotional states.

A good candidate is Mr X, who exhibited the following set of strengths at the assessment center: he has "[s]trong quality focus and drive", he was "[s]trong at keeping his professional knowledge up to date", he "[r]emains calm and focused on delivery when under pressure", he exhibits "[s]trong analytical skills and formulates creative solutions", has good "teamworking and networking abilities", he "[c]ommunicates clearly and in an entertaining way", is "[c]omfortable directing the work of others and motivating them", and – finally – he has a "[g]ood understanding of EU institutions, his specialist field and the global context" (Baneth 2011: 360).

Throughout the description, the "good candidate's" specialized knowledge about the EU is given less importance than his easily transferable skills. Various traits related to emotional intelligence are given prominence in this fictional report, from communication and interpersonal skills to leadership and professional presence. The following are typical excerpts from the text, which display an almost supernatural performance that in the context of 2025 may resonate with the way AI blends sycophantic mirroring with calm, soothing communication.

In the Oral Presentation, Mr X remained *confident* and *composed* under questioning. When the assessor stated they disagreed with Mr X's recommendation, Mr X remained *calm* and asked for more information. He *listened*, *nodding* and then proceeded to state: 'I understand your perspective and your concerns are valid'. He then went on to explain how the assessor's concerns could be overcome in a *measured* and *relaxed* way (ibid.: 361).<sup>5</sup>

The preferred sequence of interpersonal communication seems to be an unperturbed reception of information, validation of the content of the message, and a non-confronting, pacifying reply, which is delivered in a constructive manner. Listening is of particular importance, since it "is deemed crucial to the ability to prevent conflict and create chains of cooperation" (Illouz 2007: 20).

Even the candidate's weak spots, described in the following paragraph, are moderate.

Mr X was less strong on developing his softer skills. He tends to receive feedback on an ad hoc basis and never sought to collect this proactively in a structured way. He has sought to develop some of his interpersonal skills, such as influencing, but this tended to consist of just attending a relevant training course with little evidence of putting what he has learnt into practice subsequently. He showed little interest in pursuing such courses if he were to become an EU official (cf. Baneth, 2011: 361).

Here, we are informed of the kinds of acceptable flaws candidates are expected to have. These in question seem corrigible, and, perhaps more importantly, the candidate himself is capable of reflecting upon it even if he fails to implement what he has learned into practice. The lack of willingness to take on and confront such flaws in a fashion that would, within the framework of

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5 All italics in this and subsequent quotes are the author's own.

therapy culture, be considered emotionally mature, is frowned upon. Psyche is, after all, “composed of many layers in need of understanding and mastery”, and self is something that not only could but also ought to “be transformed and shaped” (Illouz 2008: 28).

In the Group Exercise, Mr X showed *consideration* and *empathy* with his fellow group members. He *did not interrupt* while they were speaking and *built upon their ideas*, showing that he was *listening*. There was one member of the group who was very quiet and Mr X sought to bring her into the conversation on a number of occasions by asking her for her views. When Mr X disagreed with someone, he always *expressed an appreciation* for their perspective before putting forward his alternative (cf. Baneth 2011: 362).

In a highly competitive context, such as applying for a prospective job, one would typically aim to stand out and outshine the opponents. Here, opposite action is advised: it is about standing out through collaboration and empathic behavior. The proposed mode of operating is based on a reflexive self which “has internalized strong mechanisms of self-control to maintain its self-interest, not through the blatant display of selfish competitiveness, but through the art of mastering social relations” (Illouz 2008: 93). It is expected to be capable to incorporate “the other’s point of view by imagining and identifying with it both sympathetically and strategically” (ibid.). It is about remaining composed rather than dominant, persisting in a cooperative rather than competitive mode, and being able to respond to opposing views in a soft, tactful manner – guiding the discussion through gentle shifts and thoughtful expressions of a diverse perspective. Secular emotions are, as Scheer et al. assert, an oxymoron as secularity is traditionally linked to “[b]anishing emotion from interactions thereafter deemed objective and neutral” which can “also be seen as a kind of disenchantment” (Scheer et al. 2019: 10). If the secular body may, in certain contexts, be “postulated as hegemonic: ‘this is how we live here’” (ibid.: 12), secular emotions may transmit information on “the ways in which we express feelings here”.

In other parts of the book, a potential candidate could find advice “not to patronize the interviewer” and to keep his or her “body language (...) entirely respectful” (Baneth 2011: 35). Also, to be a team player. One should be committed to hard work, and simultaneously demonstrate willingness to maintain work-life balance. One should display high analytical skills and be accurate, while also being capable of communicating in a way that captures the audience. One could “include some light humor” in the selection process, while remaining aware of dangers that lie in being cynical or drawing upon stereotypes “about an EU Member State, race, religion or other sensitive matters” (ibid.: 335).

An ideal EU official is thus highly disciplined, civil, understated, and in control of emotions. He or she is capable of remaining composed and restrained, even when faced with considerable pressure. Viewed from the perspective of an Eastern European, or a Balkan country, all of the above features may also be perceived as contemporary markers of Western Europeanness. The interpretive relevance of examining the discourse of the horizontal “civilizational slope” along with its “gradual Westernization” (Melegh 2006: 5) within the processes of internal Europeanization becomes all the more convincing when the profile of an imagined “bad candidate”, Mr Y is examined.

Some of his “development needs” are listed as following: developing “greater positivity about reaching objectives”, and ensuring that he “delivers on expectations”. He “[w]ould benefit from a more focused approach to developing knowledge and skills”, he “prefers to work in isolation: when in a team he may show his frustrations openly”, and he also “[n]eeds to develop a greater range of motivational strategies in addition to penalising poor performance” (Baneth 2011: 364).

This candidate expresses negative views regarding the prospects of “reaching a workable decision by the end of the meeting” (ibid.: 364-365). When he seems to be at the edge of patience, his bodily gestures such as “throwing his hands in the air in exasperation, sitting back and crossing his arms” (ibid.: 365) demonstrate what is considered as substantial lack of constraint. Mr Y also expresses resistance and even antagonism toward the prevailing work culture postulates of continuous growth and improvement.

He got rather *defensive* in the interview when asked about his development areas, stating ‘I don’t have any’ and showed discontent over the need to attend compulsory training courses (‘they are quite a waste of time’). When pushed, he admitted to having feedback from his supervisor that he can be a little intimidating towards others, so he has tried to be more welcoming since. He has not sought any feedback on how he has progressed on this since (ibid.).

The lack of emotional capital translates into telling bodily manifestations and usage of wording that would, from the perspective of therapeutic discourse, probably be labeled as defensive, dysregulated, or passive aggressive.

In the Oral Presentation, Mr Y became *flustered* and *went red* when his views were challenged. When the assessor put forward an alternative course of action, Mr Y simply responded ‘Well, that’s your view and you’re entitled to it... even if it’s *wrong*’ without any further explanation or quoting any evidence. He showed a *cynical* approach about the limited room for manoeuvre of a single EU official in a situation where his hierarchy opposes a proposed course of action (ibid.).

He forgot other group members’ names, causing him to *point at people* when referring to their ideas. Once the group seemed to be reaching a consensus on how to spend the budget, which was contrary to his views, Mr Y seemed to *withdraw* from the discussion about subsequent points and demonstrated *closed body language*. When he became particularly *passionate* about a point, Mr Y *raised his voice* almost into a shout and *banged the table* with emphasis a couple of times. This *intimidated* other group members and created an adversarial team atmosphere (ibid.: 366).

Here, the lack of good manners and etiquette is coupled with outbursts that approach threatening behavior. It may be hard to imagine actual candidates acting in such a way during a high-stakes elimination procedure. Nonetheless, the description serves as a cautionary tale that wards off “the inept” in that crudeness is associated with lower, organically emotional modes. As Keinz and Lewicki claim, “[d]isbelonging is ascribed discursively through attributing practices” such as, among other things, violent acts and “use of language (loud, quiet, elaborate, sloppy)” (2019: 11).

The preferred form of emotional performance depicts a peculiar double bind: in the above quotes, the issue at hand is not whether the room for maneuver for a single EU official is, indeed, limited, or whether compulsory training courses actually are a waste of time. It is about whether one is capable of containing frustration and refraining from expressing opinionated, inflexible stances. Therapy culture divorces not only emotions from action; it also encourages one to prioritize the importance of appropriate emotional response over engaging within the realm of right and wrong. Just as the final arbiter on what is right or wrong, normal or abnormal, resides outside the therapeutic subject, the ground of *truth* in the workplace is equally shifting. Paradoxically, both resistance to and denial of the dominant codes of emotional capitalism enable “the generation of meaning even (and perhaps especially) when one refused to impart that meaning” (Illouz 2008: 46). The *damned if you do, damned if you don’t* characteristic of the therapeutic narrative

nudges Illouz to link it to religious narratives, as everything may have “a hidden meaning and purpose” (Illouz 2007: 47).

One should, again, keep in mind that the concours is an arena in which individuals compete for a rather elite, privileged position. Reflexivity afforded by emotional capital “enables one to manipulate and control oneself more skillfully without, however, inviting a cold or cynical approach to others” (Illouz 2008: 90). As a matter of fact, “self-awareness is contiguous with the injunction to identify with others and to listen to them” (ibid.). The reflexive selfhood represents a particular blend of sympathy and self-interest; one is encouraged to keep the “attention to oneself” and perform the allowed forms of steering other people’s opinions and views (ibid.: 93). To an uninformed spectator – possibly a member of an older generation (cf. Brownlie 2014) – critiquing the behavior described above as poor performance may appear somewhat volatile, subject to contradictory expectations.

Emotional capitalism is about the intertwining of economic and “interactional-emotional scripts, as illustrated by the prevalent cultural frames of ‘cooperation’ and ‘teamwork’” (Illouz 2008: 60). Those scripts have “reshaped the ways actors conceptualize horizontal and vertical hierarchies, power, and even, to a limited but definite extent, gender relations” (ibid.: 61). This intertwining and reciprocal influence has been, claims Illouz, particularly apparent in the motif of emotional control as “properly groomed selfhood” should be capable of exhibiting “self-mastery, self-possession, and moral autonomy” (ibid.: 62). The author claims:

New cultural scripts promoting emotional control could gain quick legitimacy because the link between rationality and emotional self-control had had a long and venerable history and because it reflected one of the most important organizational myths, that of rationality (ibid.: 76).

The following two extracts from *The Ultimate EU Test Book* are approached as a possible entry point into a gendered perspective. They distinguish the ideal of emotional control, which could be considered closer to masculine norm, from emotionally disengaged or control-oriented workplace practices.

He stated that he generally *dislikes networking* and he sees it as ‘fake’ (...). He says that he generally feels the best approach when there is conflict is to move on and *not dwell on it*: which shows a certain *reluctance to deal with these issues* openly (Baneth 2011: 366).

He many times *misspelled* words and technical terms, which caused some dismay among group members. (...) In the Oral Presentation, Mr Y spoke at length about how he would keep staff motivated through *close supervision* and *penalizing* those who did not meet their performance targets (ibid.: 367).

The lack of emotional capital of a “bad” candidate is addressed once again. It is implied that a connoisseur of the *managerialized* work culture (cf. Clarke 2015: 95-130) would identify and engage with the underlying psychological problematics rather than glide over an unresolved issue dismissively. More importantly, the traits traditionally considered feminine – such as tendency toward cooperation and resolving disputes through communication – are presented as desirable. In contrast, stereotypically masculine traits, such as insensitivity or even severity, are associated with markers of lower social class, which are illustrated through spelling errors that elicit no less than dismay. The propagated management of emotions seems to be, at least in part, derived from the traditionally subordinate feminine emotional economy and distilled into impersonal or,

rather, superpersonal guidelines intended to facilitate smoother business operations. Ultimately, it functions as a prescription that molds feelings into socially acceptable forms and expressions.

The “bad” candidate’s movements and postures draw much more attention. This candidate is not in command of his emotional states: he is easily agitated, rude, abrupt, and close to threatening in the expression of emotional states. When frustrated, he goes red in the face, and when excited, he bangs the table. At the same time, the good candidate’s bodily hexis is not subject to extensive analysis. It could be precisely because of the “centrality of linguistic self-expression” (Illouz 2007: 29) in the therapeutic discourse: the more the body is subdued and emotions regulated, the more successful the therapeutic subject is.

What is expected stands in direct contrast to the perceived authenticity and directness of children, “crudes”, or members of the lower classes. Required is a thoroughly refined habitus – one shaped from the inside out and grounded in familiarity with therapeutic practices aimed at resolving troublesome or conflicting emotions. It is about another, less obvious but essential line of differentiation between the civilized and the backward.

## CONCLUSION

In this article I have used the text under examination – test book used as preparation manual for the *concours* – in order to delineate tacit requirements that intertwine class and emotional capital.

The propagated model of reflexive emotional style does not necessarily hold ground in real life. I have interviewed a successful applicant who has, upon learning the instructions and well aware of the predominant expectations, decided to put up a show and be loud, expressive, and not hold back his opinions. He knew that standing out could be a somewhat risky performance, he took chances, and he succeeded. Another one of my collocutors was quick to explain that she knew exactly what *they* wanted to hear in the selection process – among other things, that the job she is competing for is all she ever dreamed about. Her performance was successful as well. Brownlie is justified in emphasizing “the importance of not conflating people’s actual practices with discursive shifts in emotion culture” (2014: 127): despite the clearly preferred emotional style, we are not necessarily made what Illouz (2007) names *hyperrational fools*. What we perform as a standardized code of professionalism in a meeting room may later be mocked as a performative act among peers in the hallways. Our professional profiles on LinkedIn may be filled with expressions of gratitude and pride that sometimes barely cover an underlying mockery. And those whose personalities align too closely with the performance may – depending on circumstances – be secretly feared or subject to ridicule.

The argument that there is a predominant emotional style that doubles as a class marker in the contemporary work culture is nonetheless convincing. Eva Illouz seems to depict the infrapolitical impacts of therapy culture as a new kind of “cage within a cage” that shapes and transforms how our *souls* relate to one another in daily life and in the workplace. A decade-long temporal gap that separates us from the period in which this research was conducted provides us with a valuable opportunity to reflect with greater distance, and possibly enrich the critical perspective with more nuance. Writing in the first half of 2025, at a time we once again witness the dominance of caricaturally masculine and ultimately violent political figures, one might already feel nostalgic about the promotion of a restrained and sustained bodily hexis cultivated in *therapeutically cultured* workplaces. As Illouz put it, albeit in another context, we should “distinguish

between different modes of domination”, as “position that the exercise of soft power is worse than the exercise of brutal and overt forms of power” is absurd (2008: 83).

Should we regard the reflexive emotional style embedded in emotional capitalism as repressive, impeding our possibly organic flow of emotions? In a critical overview of Illouz’s work Jessie Dong decides to stress that “the processes of reflexivity need not be tied so neatly to the consumerist mindset”, that one should avoid “the pitfalls of critiquing ‘modernity’ en masse”, and also that it is precisely the “process of ontologizing and rationalizing emotions [that] enables individuals to leave – or stay – in relationships after sufficient reflexivity” (Dong 2023).

The reflexive emotional style has profoundly changed the way in which contemporary “Western” subjects experience workplace, intimate relationships, and their inner selves. Therapeutic discourse not only shapes our emotional core, it destabilizes and relativizes it as well. The process has produced profound effects, of which an ironic or even cynical shield is an essential component. In the context of this article, therapy culture may have loosened the simplicity and clarity of what is right and wrong, authentic and performed, in the workplace, as superprocessed emotions foster an inward-facing, disengaged gaze. If this velvet cage is omnipresent and, at times, cumbersome, the restraints are nonetheless accompanied by possibilities for gentleness and compassion that arise in the interstices of the reign of the therapeutic.

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