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ORIGINAL PAPER

Totally Administered Heteronomy: Adorno on Work, Leisure, and Politics in the Age of Digital Capitalism

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Abstract

This paper aims to demonstrate the contemporary relevance of Adorno's thought for business ethicists working in the critical tradition by showing how his critique of modern social life anticipated, and offers continuing illumination of, recent technological transformations of capitalism. It develops and extrapolates Adorno's thought regarding three central spheres of modern society, which have seen radical changes in light of recent technological developments: work, in which employee monitoring has become ever more sophisticated and intrusive; leisure consumption, in which the algorithmic developments of the culture industry have paved the way for entertainment products to dominate us; and political discourse, in which social media has exacerbated the anti-democratic tendencies Adorno warned of in the mid-twentieth century. We conclude by presenting, as a rejoinder to these developments, the contours of an Adornian ethics of resistance to the reification and dehumanisation of such developments.

Keywords Adorno · Critical Theory · Work · Consumerism · Political discourse · Technology

> *The individual could only become free in a free society, but hitherto he has constantly experienced the social constitution as something opposed, antagonistic to himself; he has experienced it as heteronomous…*
> (Adorno 2000, p. 144).

Introduction

Even the most critical minds think and write for their own time. Marx's (1978) work on alienation was informed by the industrial workers of his day spurning work whenever they could, rather than the ever-present, driven workaholics today's corporate culture seems to produce. Nietzsche's (2017) claim that modern morality is shaped by an "ascetic ideal" seems optimistic even, given the extravagances and superficialities of today. Freud's (1977) preoccupation with repression and neurotic guilt seems quaint from the vantage-point of a cultural world in which narcissistic tendencies are often on display. And now that responding to the grave threats from environmental degradation, biodiversity collapse, novel pathogens, and, above all, man-made climate change are at the top of the political agenda, the progressive credentials of Foucault's (1990) sceptical characterisation of the "power-knowledge" structure of science look questionable.

Such cases present an opportunity for sympathetic scholars to breathe new life into influential critical projects of the past: to take them up in a new historical context, to develop and extend them, and thereby bring them to the concerns and attention of a new audience. The present paper aims to play a part in doing just this for the critique of capitalist society developed by one of the most difficult and yet prescient of twentieth-century Critical Theorists: Theodor Adorno. In so doing, it seeks to complement the contributions made by a new generation of Adorno scholarship (Cook, 2011, 2018; Freyenhagen, 2013; Jutten, 2012; O'Connor, 2004; Prusik, 2020; Shuster, 2014) by highlighting the potential contribution of Adorno's thought within the field of business ethics.

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In what follows, we focus on issues of central concern for both business ethicists and Critical Theorists: work, leisure consumption, and political discourse in contemporary society. While there has been significant interest in more recent members of the Frankfurt School, such as Habermas (Brand et al., 2020; Gilbert & Rasche, 2007; Martens et al., 2019; Scherer & Palazzo, 2007) and Honneth (Brink & Eurich, 2006; Islam, 2012; Trittin-Ulbrich, 2023; Visser, 2019), and while his work has received some attention from critical management and organisation studies scholars (Cluley & Parker, 2023; Granter, 2017; Hancock & Tyler, 2004; Klikauer, 2015; Mumby, 2005; Neimark & Tinker, 1987; Parker, 2003; Zanetti & Carr, 2000), Adorno has been largely neglected within the field of business ethics specifically (though see Reeves & Sinnicks, 2021; Nevasto, 2021). One suspects this is in part because of the extreme contrast between Adorno's "unrelentingly negative global view" (Geuss, 2017, p. 282) and the sunny optimism often characteristic of work in business ethics.

However, this neglect within the business ethics literature also likely stems from perceived difficulties involved in reading Adorno as an *ethicist*, given his insistence that our "wrong life" "cannot be lived rightly" (Adorno, 2005a, p. 39). Moreover, there are clearly difficulties associated with separating the subject matter of "ethics" from "ethics-as-it-happens-to-exist-in-present-social-reality". Indeed, the practice of business ethics, i.e. business ethics as it exists in organisational life rather than scholarly debate, can "be seen to represent the managerial colonization of emancipatory projects" (Parker, 2003, p. 197).

However, Adorno's critical comments on social phenomena are clearly not ethically inert. Rather, Adorno's Critical Theory is explicitly and directly an ethical critique of our social world, and it is the task of unpacking this distinctively ethical critique that occupies us in this paper. Indeed, thanks to Adorno's unusually systematic entwining of ethical theorising and concrete social analysis, we argue that Adorno turns out to be—perhaps surprisingly—a promising resource for a critical understanding of the ethical ramifications of organisational and commercial life in capitalist societies in the era of digitalisation, and in particular topics such as employee monitoring in the workplace, the ways in which leisure consumption comes to resemble the domination experienced in the world of work, and how the exchange principle has come to shape socio-political discourse in the age of social media and the algorithmic public sphere.

We begin by outlining Adorno's critique of capitalist society. Adorno suggested that human needs are instrumentalised and only show up insofar as they are conducive to profit, and that in internalising the norms of such a society we become cold both to our own needs and those of others. Such a society is deeply hostile to human flourishing—Adorno goes so far as to claim that it "mutilates" us (Adorno, 2005a, p. 58), rendering us largely incapable of attaining the self-knowledge, rational capacities, and solidarising impulses necessary for autonomy and flourishing.

This social critique is plainly a radical and hence controversial one. Adorno's core claims may strike many readers as counterintuitive, not to mention disquieting. It is not possible to fully defend Adorno's position here. Nevertheless, we aim to show that it is more plausible and illuminating than it might at first seem. Indeed, the central tendencies he postulated of twentieth-century capitalist societies have arguably been played out and amplified by the technological developments of the decades since Adorno's death, and while he could not have anticipated the specific innovations, his prognoses of their general trajectory were strikingly prescient.

We aim to show why Adorno's critique is still—arguably even more—relevant today, by bringing it to bear on phenomena that have emerged in the decades since Adorno was writing, in three spheres of social life: first, technological change in the sphere of work, where algorithms now make it possible for employees to be electronically micro-monitored, taking what Adorno called the "omnipresent executive" to a new extreme; second, the sphere of leisure consumption and the world outside of work, which has become as regimented and devoid of spontaneity as the world of work, and which has been further degraded by the dominating power of various entertainment "services"; third, the sphere of politics and public discourse, where social media, and the associated subjectivization of thought, are having a damaging impact on the public sphere and democratic culture.

In each sphere, we show how Adorno anticipated key developmental trajectories that have since unfolded. Many of Adorno's diagnoses of capitalist society have been made increasingly plausible by historical developments: in many cases, unfortunately, history has demonstrated what once may have looked like exaggeratedly sceptical speculations to be palpably real societal tendencies. More than this, though, we argue that Adorno's position offers a distinctively integrated, systematic explanatory account of many different but independently intuitively plausible analyses of contemporary economic and organisational life. This systematic explanatory account of various recent developments is part of what gives Adorno's account its plausibility. The distinctive contribution Adorno's Critical Theory is that of a unified ethical critique of contemporary social life in the digital age, underpinned by a unifying explanatory account of disparate intuitions and insights which illuminates each by connecting it to a grasp of the social whole. This critical-explanatory power suggests Adorno's thought will reward more careful consideration both in business ethics and in management and organisation studies more broadly.

Adorno's Critique of Capitalist Society

Exchange Society, Human Needs, and Functional Adaptation

According to Adorno, contemporary societies systematically frustrate flourishing, denigrate or ignore suffering, and suppress, distort, or instrumentalise human needs. This presses individuals to adapt by internalising the pervasive societal coldness to need and suffering. This pressure applies equally to individuals' own needs and suffering, and to that of others. The mechanisms by which subjects typically achieve this adaptation are barriers to autonomy understood in terms of maturity and subjective freedom: "Freedom, which would arise only in the organisation of a free society, is sought precisely where it is denied by the organization of the existing society: in each individual" (Adorno, 1973, p. 276).

In capitalist society, production is "not to satisfy human needs but for profit" (Adorno, 2006, p. 51). Consumptive needs are, from the systemic perspective, mere means for the creation of profit, to be manipulated, distorted, augmented or manufactured as conducive to profit maximisation. And individuals' active needs are reduced to labour, most people's only means for satisfying their consumptive needs, which in turn is also merely a means for profit creation, to be manipulated and augmented as necessary. Survival in modern societies depends on selling one's labour, and most people have little if any say over either the purpose towards which their work is directed or the nature of that work. Work is, for most people, "time that is determined heteronomously" (Adorno, 2005b, p. 167), determined, that is, according to an end and a form which are alien to the individual.

That is, put bluntly, the entire "exchange" system disavows the first-order significance of real human needs and determines people's life activity heteronomously, proceeding with a "disregard for living human beings" (Adorno, 1973, p. 354). Consumption needs are satisfied only contingently, and—as a result of being assimilated to the exchange principle—our active needs for free and creative activity are side-lined or prevented from showing up altogether (Reeves & Sinnicks, 2021). Hence, individuals' "needs are merely ground down" (Adorno, 1993, p. 46).

While defenders of capitalist markets proclaim them as mechanisms that efficiently cater to human wants, the market caters to effective demand, not wants as such. That is, whether someone's wants register in the capitalist market system depends on their desire and their ability to pay. This means that the market's valuations of different sorts of labour cannot be expected to even approximate the actual spread of human wants, let alone human needs. The wealthy consumer's wants will be disproportionately recognised by the market. So even if wants are assumed to track needs—a notion we attempt to cast doubt on in the discussion of the culture industry below—the market's valuation of labour cannot be expected to track the fulfilment of human needs. Indeed, the market's social utility declines as inequality increases because greater disparity in purchasing power undermines the communicative value of each purchase. Wants and needs become subordinate to ability to pay. Yet, as we have seen over the last few decades, the more in thrall to the market a society becomes, the more inequality increases. As the market becomes more central to social and political life, its legitimacy diminishes.

In a society dominated by the "exchange principle", persons show up only as interchangeable units of want or of labour, or as cases of this or that sort, falling under this or that administrative or managerial classification, or as instantiations of laws with this or that probabilistic tendency. The upshot is that individuals' attitudes to one another are increasingly brought under "the truly unbearable coldness spread over all things by the expanding exchange relationship." (Adorno, 1973, p. 284, translation amended).

Given this, it becomes really possible—and tempting—to view others as mere means: their labour as a means to one's consumer satisfaction, their consumer wants as a means to selling one's labour, and both as means to accumulating capital. Individuals are increasingly compelled to adopt this cold, controlling attitude to themselves if they wish to get by, suppressing their needs to accommodate to a cold world, and it is then tempting to regard others with the same coldness. Once other people's needs and interests are reduced to abstractions, even their suffering can be equated to a mere instance of a generality lacking any significance in itself. As Adorno writes,

> Being hard, the vaunted quality education should inculcate, means absolute indifference toward pain as such. In this the distinction between one's own pain and that of another is not so stringently maintained. Whoever is hard with himself earns the right to be hard with others as well and avenges himself for the pain whose manifestations he was not allowed to show and had to repress. (2005b, p. 198)

Under such conditions, where one has adaptively become unreceptive to one's own needs and suffering, it is a short step to seeking rationalisation and compensation for one's disavowal of one's own suffering in the suffering of others. Coldness to oneself and coldness to the other go hand in hand.

Such adaptation proceeds via the induced incorporation of "identity thinking", the tendency to treat concrete particulars as bundles of abstract qualities rather than recognising

their specific reality and richness. As Adorno puts it, "the concept is always less than what is subsumed under it" (2008, p. 7), but the dominant exchange principle ignores this and treats everything as a unit of fungible abstractions. Thus, the dominant experience of reality in contemporary society is misrepresentative of that reality. Adorno's suggestion is that our social world is so inhospitable to human flourishing that it compels individuals to adapt themselves to its "identity principle": "if they want to live, then no other avenue remains but to adapt, submit themselves to the given conditions; they must negate precisely that autonomous subjectivity" (Adorno, 2005b, p. 98). In order to cope, people are pressured to adapt to society's hostility towards their needs by internalising and identifying with that very hostility, identifying with the identity principle and unconsciously organising their relation to their own nature according to it. Society's antagonism to individuals' needs thus gets incorporated and repeated in their antagonistic relation to their own needs: "the ego imitates the coercion that is imposed on it from without, so as to be able to combat it" (2006, p. 220).

Though in the short-term functional for society, for the individual this is a futile fudge: it "mutilates" (Adorno, 2005a, p. 58) subjects, undermining their capacities for self-knowledge, realistic experience, and rational action. However, inner nature cannot in fact be mastered and controlled in this way. Repressed drive demands resurface in the form of neurotic symptoms, in which form inner nature really does manifest as alien material, which only serves to confirm the person's interpretation of their needs as alien. Such symptoms embody a "faulty consciousness of [one's] needs." (Adorno, 1973, p. 92) which in turn inadvertently valorises the repression that is the source of the problem.

Yet, while pathological, neuroses contain an important moment of truth: the faultiness is apparent from the inside; it is clear to the neurotic that something is going wrong, that their urges are directed towards "things not needed by subjects, human beings who have come of age" (Adorno, 1973, p. 92). Neuroses "teach people that alien elements enter into them, that freedom is denied them in what Hegel calls their 'native land', namely the realm of self-consciousness" (Adorno, 2006, p. 218, translation amended). In the experience of self-alienation, the phenomenology of the neurotic contains insight.

However, twentieth-century capitalism saw, according to Adorno, the rise of a different pathology, in which the subject has internalised identity thinking so deeply that people now must "repress not only their desires and insights, but even the symptoms that in bourgeois times resulted from repression" (Adorno, 2005a, p. 58). Such a subject is unable to experience their predicament as generating internal conflict at all. But this absence of felt conflict, of subjective alienation, is no good thing. The objective alienation that the neurotic was subjectively aware of remains, but is compounded by an additional, deeper level of alienation in which even that alienation is unavailable to the subject first-personally. That is, the prevailing form of pathology today is not neurosis but psychosis.

This kind of identification with the way of the world suggests, for Adorno, "what might be called a prehistoric surgical intervention, which incapacitates the opposing forces before they have come to grips with each other, so that the subsequent absence of conflicts reflects a predetermined outcome" (2005a, p. 59). That is, people are prone to adaptively internalising the principle of a harsh world so deeply that their suppressed needs are neutralised in advance and no longer register. The needs themselves do not persist uncontaminated; they are distorted into the "wrong form" (Adorno, 1973, p. 92) into "false" or "inverted needs" pre-emptively deformed so that they are compatible with an inhospitable world (Adorno, 1973, p. 93). This, Adorno claims, helps to explain why people so readily identify with heteronomous conditions. In adapting themselves to an inhospitable social world, they forego autonomously encountering their true needs: "they can preserve themselves only if they renounce their self" (Adorno, 2005b, p. 98).

Adorno's contrast between true and false needs is complex, raising analytic and epistemic issues (see Nevasto, 2021; Reeves & Sinnicks, 2023, pp. 853–5), and requires more unpacking than space allows here, but a few clarifications may be helpful.

First, real needs tell us something important, but they do not necessarily report accurately what that is, because they may be false needs—distorted, inverted, topsy-turvy, directed onto the wrong object by a social world of need-production that is itself false, producing for many people a "faulty consciousness of their needs" which thereby "aim at things not needed by subjects" (Adorno, 1973, p. 92). But even then, the need itself retains a moment of validity. Hence "material needs should be respected even in their wrong form" (Adorno, 1973, p. 92). This helps explain how "needs are conglomerates of truth and falsehood" (Adorno, 1973, p. 93) for the force of needs, even when directed to the wrong thing (false-moment), remains undiluted (truth-moment).

Second, this distinction is not an empirically available one (Adorno, 2017, p. 103). We cannot simply tell what are the true and the false needs and go from there. True versus false needs are not, say, natural versus artificial, or immutable versus historical, for our human nature is essentially social and historical, so that our true needs could only emerge through a socio-historical process of the species' self-development. Thus, Critical Theory does not proceed from some canon of true needs—which, after all, Adorno holds we cannot reliably know—but, rather, by diagnosing the forms of suffering our social world creates, the forms

of inhumanity that are systemic, and the false needs linked them—which negatively imply the true needs they violate.

Autonomy, Ideology, and Negative Dialectics

Though Adorno's critique of capitalist society proceeds negatively, this does not preclude it from being ethically substantive. This ethical substantiveness is reflected in Adorno's treatment of notions such as autonomy and ideology, as well as his broader conception of negative dialectics. In this section, we outline these key facets of Adornian thought.

Given the pressure we face to disavow our true needs, the autonomy/heteronomy distinction must be independent of the distinction between what comes from inside the subject and what comes from outside. Autonomy is not constituted by, say, an egoistic privileging of a person's own preferences as against those of others. This is because a person's own preferences may be heteronomously conditioned, i.e. a result of a one-sided privileging of identarian reason, an uncritical embrace of irrational impulses, or a compliant deference to the expectations of a damaged social world. Nor does autonomy have to do with an individualistic privileging of the self as against social influences: human beings are necessarily and essentially social, such that the autonomy/heteronomy distinction must cut across, rather than along, the individual/society divide. Existing heteronomy should be investigated as a function of our concrete social arrangements, not of social relatedness as such, and autonomy entertained as a real but as-yet unactualised human potential, not as a quality of the individual's self-experience against sociality as such.

Adorno calls his project "negative dialectics". For Adorno, this is not a "method slapped on outwardly, at random" nor does it "begin by taking a standpoint" (1973, p. 5). Rather, negative dialectics is just the form genuine thinking takes given the social world we inhabit; "there is no rule for thought other than that of freedom towards the object" (Adorno, 2017, p. 150)—thinking which does justice to the object, immerses itself in the objective matter, and thus respects "non-identity", the gap and so the relation between subject and object, between how things are conceived and how they are. This freedom towards the object is unlike the identitarian tendency to subsume the object that informs idealism and positivism, but neither is it a passive affair. It is, rather, an ongoing achievement that involves the exercise of subjective spontaneity in and through getting the object into view, thought's own "freedom within itself" in which "it continually seek[s] out relationships with the object… in which alone thought can find itself contented" (2017, p. 150).

For Adorno, genuine thinking is thus inherently self-reflexive in and through confronting its own conceptualisation of itself and its relation to its object with the reality of the object and its relation to it. This much is true of "dialectical" thought as Hegel conceives it, but, for Adorno, Hegel failed to follow through on this insight: Hegel's dialectics are ultimately positive, in that they presuppose that thought and being, subject and object, are identical and so must turn out to be united and reconciled. Thus, by "negative dialectics", Adorno is not proposing some distinctive critical "method"; he is simply naming what he sees as the necessary form genuine thinking takes in a social world that, contra Hegel, is unreconciled—antagonistic, false.

The contrary of negative dialectics qua genuine thought is ideological consciousness, "socially necessary illusion" (2006, p. 118), and the prevalence of ideology is explained by the false character of our social world—its incompatibility with true human needs. To this Marxian notion of socially functional systems of thought, Adorno brings the psychoanalytic dimension that explains how socially functional thought-patterns can get their hooks into the subject by serving a function in the context for individuals as well: as adjustment or adaptation to a hostile social world.

Ideology is thus the privation of thought and experience—the motivated subversion of freedom towards the object. For a society to function, it needs individuals to adapt to its conditions; hence, individually short-term adaptive responses are also liable to be socially functional. Individuals cope with the suffering of the modern world through a variety of adaptations, rationalisations and adjustments, which insofar as they allow individuals to continue to minimally function serve the self-reproduction of the social world at the same time.

The character of ideology is consonant with the duality of true and false needs. Needs are "conglomerates of truth and falsehood" (1973, p. 93) in the same way that, for Adorno, all ideology is. Ideology is always false, in failing to track the truth of humanity, and this because it is functional and motivated consciousness for a social world based on exchange, the disavowal of anything intrinsically, irreducibly important. But any such false consciousness is, in virtue of what it shows rather than says, also true. Ideological illusions are socially necessary because human beings need them (or something like them) to cope with our social world. Their existence testifies to the corruption of our social world and to the dignity of humanity to which it does not do justice. This is one important sense in which the true and the false are entwined in ideology.

Priority of the Object and Critical Theory

Negative dialectics, then, is not a special method or standpoint, but simply the character of genuine—that is,

spontaneously objective—thought in a false social world. This emphasis on objectivity—what he calls the "priority/preponderance of the object" (1973, p. 183[1])—marks Adorno out from poststructuralist varieties of critical theory that have been influential within critical scholarship in business, including those influenced by Butler (1990, see also Harding et al., 2017), Derrida (1978, see also Jones, 2003), and Levinas (1999, see also Rhodes, 2019). The unmasking of how social power-structures distort epistemic authority certainly had its moment, but recent history has shown that such scepticism can also be turned in a regressive direction. For Adorno, it was already dubious, for the idea that power-structures are distorting or inappropriately shaping epistemic practices presupposes the essential objectivity of thought that such power-structures are subverting—as that which, in the distorted case, is being knocked out of shape.

Many poststructuralists would reject the label "relativism", but it is arguably the case that while the scepticism about epistemic authority has placed welcome emphasis on excluded and marginalised voices, this has also sometimes tended to privilege (even in tension with poststructuralist critiques of the subject) self-experience as authoritative at the expense of a concern for objective validity. By contrast, Adorno's negative dialectics explicitly rejects any relativism in which "individual consciousness is taken for the ultimate and all individual opinions are accorded equal rights, as if there were no criterion of their truth" (1973, p. 36), and warned presciently of relativism's liability, "no matter how progressive its bearing," to be available "to the more powerful interests" (1973, p. 37).

The priority of the object thus offers a distinctive critical alternative to poststructuralist scepticism, and in this respect Adorno pre-empted the critique of postmodernity that Habermas (1986) unfairly directed at him also. But the priority of the object, along with the negativist insistence on the possibility (at least) of the falsity of our social world and our capacity to appreciate that from the inside, also marks Adorno out from business scholarship in the affirmative, "postmetaphysical" critical theory paradigms of Habermas (1992, see also Zakhem, 2008) and Honneth (2014, 2023; see also Dejours et al., 2018).

Focusing on normative justification and, from an Adornian perspective, an insufficiently critical appropriation of philosophical pragmatism, later Frankfurt School theory has tried to supplant objectivity—or offer "a more modest conception of objectivity" as Bohman (2005) puts it—by appeal to intersubjective proxies, such as the norms of communication or dynamics of recognition. But such views presuppose that our social world is good-enough: that dialogue or recognition-struggles can be relied on for critical ethical insights. Deferring to intersubjective dynamics assumes—question-beggingly vis a vis Adorno's position—that our social world is sufficiently humane to sustain rationally healthy agents capable of exercising practical wisdom together. This overlooks the possibility that our social world systematically "mutilates" our capacity for ethical, and so critical, experience.

Were our social world as distorting as Adorno claims, affirmative critical theory would be constitutively unable to register the fact. Thus, Adorno's position is distinctive vis a vis both poststructuralist and postmetaphysical approaches, but the significance of this is brought home only through Adorno's detailed accounts (which we explore below) of the ways our social world systematically degrades our capacity for genuine thought and experience. Adorno's conception of ethical critique is essentially a (radical) negative Aristotelian or naturalistic one: ethical judgments concern the flourishing or ailing of particular beings, which are always by implicit reference to the life-form they bear and is thus realised or violated in their actual life (see Thompson, 2008). Critical Theory is fundamentally a critique of a social world in which the human life-form is systematically suppressed. Since our life-form is not-yet realised, we do not have positive standards of flourishing to appeal to, but we can apprehend from the inside the badness, the privation, of our situation. This involves comprehension of forms of social suffering (see Freyenhagen, 2013; Reeves, 2016) and their systematic explanation, where "explanation" is not opposed to but rather necessarily involves interpretation (see Bhaskar, 1979).

These remarks about the general character of Adorno's account make clear that its vindication will not be at the general level, coming from above, but could only be carried out through the concrete analyses of particular social phenomena. The force of the theory depends on its power to illuminate concrete difficulties of our social world—and, for our purposes, particularly on its power to illuminate social developments that were not foreseeable when Adorno was writing. Our analyses in what follows unfold Adornian negative dialectics of recent phenomena, involving ideology critique, and the force of these analyses will ultimately depend on how persuasive the overall explanatory account of them is. The devil, in this respect, is in the detail.

Work: The Omnipresent Executive

The ability to monitor and control employees has been an abiding aim of management, and one which finds its classic statement in Taylor's Principles of Scientific Management (1911). This ability is plausibly a central determinant of the

[1] Adorno uses the German *Vorrang* and *Praponderanz,* which would most straight-forwardly be translated as priority and preponderance respectively, apparently interchangeably here, though the Ashton and Redmond translations use preponderance for both terms.

heteronomous nature of contemporary work and is one reason for thinking that the administrative function of the state, which Adorno highlighted as a central source of unfreedom, is now partially upheld by private businesses. Recent history has shown that monitoring tends to become more prevalent as new technologies make it more feasible (Rosengren & Ottosson, 2016). Even as Taylorism has become less prevalent as a distinct approach to management, the desire to monitor and control is a constant (Tweedie et al., 2019). As such, the transformation of work currently underway as a result of AI seems likely to unleash the troubling tendencies towards observation and control always latent in the capitalist workplace but held in check by various contingent technical limitations. As Spencer notes, employers are largely able "to shape the design and operation of digital technologies to realise their own goals, at the expense of those of workers" (2017, p. 146). This is embodied in managerial algorithms which are giving management an unprecedented ability to be "always on" (see Leicht-Deobald et al., 2019; Martin, 2019).

Indeed, such managerial tools represent a quite definitive break from humanistic models of management which have, from time to time, come into fashion. Alasdair MacIntyre—whose critique of management is well-known in the business ethics literature (Beadle, 2002; Moore, 2008; Sinnicks, 2018), and whose critical social thought bears comparison with Adorno's ethics (Freyenhagen, 2008), and indeed the Frankfurt school more generally (Nicholas, 2012)—offers an arresting disanalogy between the hard sciences and management. He notes that "[m]olecules do not read chemistry books; but managers do read books on organization theory" (MacIntyre, 1979, p. 54), and so managerial ideology inevitably influences the world it seeks to describe, giving lie to positivist management theory's pretentions to detached objectivity, prediction, and control.

However, managerial algorithms are not available to public scrutiny—or even to reflective scrutiny by managers themselves, for the most part—as were the managerial texts of the past. They do not present an argument or offer an attempt to persuade, both of which would need to be understood and implemented in ways shaped by and sensitive to context, and the nuances of human discourse. Instead, they operate unseen, as reified, seemingly alien forces operating as if independently of human decisions and discretion, they evade ethical criticism as such—presenting as "seemingly 'natural' constraints" (Habermas's term: 1971, p. 311). Thus, they allow management to more closely approximate the Taylorist ideal of technical control in the service of efficiency than had been possible in the past, since even the use of AI designed to predict workplace behaviour will inevitably shape it (Leonardi, 2021; Leonardi & Treem, 2020).

While Adorno regarded the project of positivism as deeply flawed and rejected the notion that human affairs could properly be understood using "scientific" means (Adorno, 1976), the "scientific" attitude to workers that algorithmic tools enable is an even starker example of the coldness of capitalism, and thus of the identarian logic at its heart. As data-points in automatic computational processes, workers are exposed to a degree of objectification unthinkable 40 years ago.

Traditional management placed inescapable practical limits on the realisation of the Taylorist model. Being conducted by people, it could never achieve an absolute triumph of cold control, never entirely eliminate the space for nuanced contextual judgment, ethical impulses, or reasonable deliberation and persuasion. For the positivist paradigm, human managers are thus inherently flawed: long before the invention of the computer, the Taylorist ideal was that of an automatic process insulated from the interference of judgment, solidarity, and dialogue. The tendency towards the technical administration of people as fungible units, in line with the notion of "identity thinking" and its accompanying "coldness" outlined above, has long been central to management and organisation (Neimark & Tinker, 1987) and has now been thoroughly unshackled via the emergence of "digital Taylorism" (Altenried, 2020; Liu, 2023).

With the expansion of such technological forms of control, workers are likely to find diminishing room for freedom in their activity. As Adorno puts it, "the administered world has the tendency to strangle all spontaneity" (2005b, p. 292) and the algorithmic world all the more so. This is transparently true of, say, work in call centres and distribution centres, with traditionally high levels of monitoring and measurement undergoing intensification through novel surveillance technologies (Taylor & Bain, 2005; Woodcock, 2017). It is also a facet of the "gig economy", in which online platforms powered by sophisticated machine-learning algorithms coordinate and supervise workers' activity automatically (see Wood et al., 2019).

The pressure to adapt to these new realities of work fosters heteronomy in various ways. As algorithms increasingly mediate their relation to human managers (Meijerink & Keegan, 2019), workers are deprived of whatever room used to remain available for meaningful, reasonable engagement with human managers. The tendency of management to embrace algorithmic tools lies not only in enhanced information harvesting, but in the algorithm's ability to short-circuit the interference of human factors in efficient control. Managerial algorithms are impervious to contextual nuance and discretion: they cannot be reasoned with, nor can one appeal to their judgment, let alone the "spirit of solidarity" that might counterbalance the coldness of bourgeois life (Adorno, 2006, p. 264).

Indeed, the Taylorist managerial ideology arguably relied for its workability in practice on this human element: in practice, human managers probably recognise the limits of the Taylorist model they are supposed to apply and facilitate

its functioning by exercising discretion to mitigate iniquity and imprudence in extreme cases. Algorithmic managerialism has no need for this functionally necessary human "supplement", and in the long run may expose Taylorism as an unworkable doctrine, i.e. as one which always aimed to eliminate the human element present in work, but which always tacitly presupposed its existence. But we should remember that this "long run" would impose a heavy burden on the lives of workers in the meantime.

Moreover, managerial algorithms are typically covert and opaque to workers—who typically have only a vague sense of the extent to which employers utilise managerial algorithms, of what those algorithms do, or of how managers use them (see Brougham & Haar, 2018). This exposes workers to unpredictable effects of algorithmic management, and thereby increased (actual or perceived) precarity and diminished autonomy and democratic self-governance.

Moreover, where mechanisms of monitoring and control are only vaguely understood, subjects are liable to anticipate the worst, exacerbating "the fear of unemployment, lurking in all citizens of countries of high capitalism" (Adorno, 2013, p. 34). Adorno further elaborates:

> This is a fear which is administratively fought off, and therefore nailed to the platonic firmament of stars, a fear that remains even in the glorious times of full employment. Everyone knows that he could become expendable as technology develops, as long as production is only carried on for production's sake; so everyone senses that his job is a disguised unemployment. (Adorno, 2013, p. 34)

Given the looming threat of technological unemployment (Ford, 2015; Kim & Scheller-Wolf, 2019), Adorno's comment here is strikingly prescient. Adorno recognises "the immanent tendency of administration towards expansion" which results in "the transition from administrative apparatuses in the older sense of the word into those of the administrated world, along with their entry into regions not previously subject to administration" (1978, p. 95), including educational organisations, capitalist businesses, and so on. The heightened precarity of the contemporary workplace will tend to erode the possibility of the kind of self-confident action that would allow people to control their working lives. Workers managed increasingly by algorithms are liable to feel increasingly disempowered, their agency to contribute to the shaping of employers' expectations of them stultified, and this plausibly contributes to the lack of organised resistance in such contexts (see Walker et al., 2021). The administered world is "one from which all hiding places are fast disappearing" (Adorno, 1978, p. 111).

However, the rise of such monitoring technology has exacerbated a more pervasive—and yet elusive—driver of heteronomy: the expansion of *self*-monitoring. Adorno identified just such self-monitoring pressures at the centre of everyday economic life in market societies. Such self-monitoring tends to create a pervasive subservience, not only to one's actual employer, but to vast swathes of potential employers. Adorno argued that.

> the private lives of countless people are becoming those of agents and go-betweens; indeed the entire private domain is being engulfed by a mysterious activity that bears all the features of commercial life without there being actually any business to transact... [people aim to] ingratiate themselves with the executive they imagine omnipresent, and soon there is no relationship that is not seen as a 'connection', no impulse not first censored as to whether it deviates from the acceptable. (2005a, p. 23)

As a result, whereas it once seemed "uncouth" to pursue "careerist" aims in one's personal life, it is now seen as "arrogant, alien, and improper to engage in private activity without any evident ulterior motive. Not to be 'after' something is almost suspect" (Adorno, 2005a, pp. 23–24).

This tendency is more pronounced now than it was in Adorno's time precisely because of the possibility and necessity of presenting oneself in one's best, most "professional" (in the sense of "most employable") light through various social media channels, which are now frequently consulted in the recruitment process (Jeske & Shultz, 2019; Root & McKay, 2014). What arises from this is a felt pressure to maintain a persona that is unwaveringly "on brand". Such performances may once have been restricted to professional meetings and networking events but are now part of the need to maintain an online professional presence at all times.

Consequently, Adorno's metaphorical "omnipresent executive" has acquired a literal actuality impossible before. The corresponding vigilance regarding one's self-expression and social interactions, on platforms ostensibly part of the realm of the private life and leisure, has a chilling effect on online communication and self-expression (Clark & Roberts, 2010) and thus is deeply antithetical to autonomy.

There is evidence that applicants find such practices an unwelcome invasion of privacy, including the requirement that applicant's provide usernames and passwords (Bowen et al., 2021), leading some commentators to suggest that "applicants may need to change their conceptualization of social networking websites, viewing them through the eyes of a prospective employer" (Stoughton et al., 2015, p. 73). The result is a kind of strategic self-commodification (Marwick & boyd 2011), which can become an exhausting responsibility (Han, 2018).

And yet, despite the openly antagonistic relationship such practices reveal, and despite the enforced and socially necessary coldness to oneself, shoots of warmth to employers can emerge. The capacity for such warmth has not been

totally destroyed, it has instead been warped into a kind of reverse polarity. In the face of increased precarity and work intensity, people retain "personal attachments" to their employers and occupations (Musílek et al., 2020) even as the damage done by social reality renders them cold to their own needs. Here neuroses dam up the instincts and capacities that might point beyond our present condition. Because employers increasingly determine what passes for "acceptable" in virtue of their greater ability to shape the norms of organisational life, they can increasingly unduly influence employees' expectations and values, to everyone's detriment.

Leisure: The Culture Industry

Having examined some of the ethical contours of work, we now turn to leisure consumption, another topic central to the discipline of business ethics (see Vitell, 2003; Garcia-Ruiz & Rodriguez-Lluesma, 2014; Chowdhury, 2017). Central to Adorno's critique of consumer society is the observation that we tend to willingly embrace the trivialities offered to us by the leisure and culture industries, not because such offerings align with our true needs, but because in a social world that so frustrates people's true needs, such trivialities help us cope, so the need for them is a real but false need:

> People actually do not know what to do with their free time [because] they have been deprived beforehand of what would make the state of freedom pleasant to them. That state of freedom has been refused them and disparaged for so long that they no longer even like it. People need superficial distraction... in order to summon up the energy for the work that is demanded of them from the organization of society (Adorno, 2005b, p. 172)

Furthermore, this socially enforced triviality introduces the quality distinctive of labour as it exists in a society governed by the exchange principle, namely its externally, coercively enforced character, into free time itself (Adorno, 2005b, p. 171). So, although free time is supposed to be the antithesis of work time, it shares one of work time's defining characteristics: societal regimentation. Free time is thus not really that different from work time after all, but merely its mirror image ("abstract negation"). Free time has the same form as work time, with merely a different content: "surreptitiously the contraband of behavioural mores from work, which never lets go of people, is being smuggled in" (Adorno, 2005b, p. 169).

The leisure and culture industries are set up to provide limitless opportunities for superficial distraction—which is not to say that they only offer this, merely that, on top of whatever of value they may offer, they also always offer a practically unlimited supply of superficial distraction. This problem was central to Adorno's critique of both hobbies and the culture industry, but with the emergence of the algorithmic culture industry this idea has attained an actuality that Adorno himself could not have envisaged.

The rise of online streaming platforms is emblematic, providing a practically unending stream of entertainment to consume, with addictiveness baked in. Such platform's default settings automatically play the next episode, so that even the agentive moment of deliberation about whether to continue watching is short-circuited. One need not lift a finger. And it plays the next show as soon as the credits role, depriving the viewer even of the traditional breathing-space of reflection built into the end credits of a film or episode. A cynic might venture that the platform's implicit aim is to ensure there is no time to think about what one is doing, to "stand back", as Kantians say, and consider what one is doing or deliberate about what to do next.

As if it were not obvious enough that atavistic, akratic behaviour is the *telos* of such platforms, one of the categories streaming platforms foist on people is "Binge-Worthy Series". The economic interests of the algorithmic culture industry and society's need to passivize the private lives of individuals converge on manufactured subjective enjoyment that shamelessly promotes itself in the language of appetitive disorders.

Some commentators (e.g. Vargo & Lusch, 2004, 2016) see such service-platforms as engaged in a process of co-creation of value, in which consumers are beneficiaries. Yet, in reality, such addiction-like states are necessarily opposed to our true interests. Vargo & Lusch (2004) have developed the influential concept of "service-dominant logic", intended to put *service* at the centre of the conversation about exchange, instead of a more traditional focus on goods. However, this notion in fact highlights the domination we are liable to suffer at the hands of such products. Empowered by predictive techniques and strategies of addiction, which renders them "both demeaning and objectionably exploitative" (Bhargava & Velasquez, 2021, p. 322), entertainment products dominate our lives rather than "serving" us. As a result, the concept of "service-dominance" has an unintended aptness: the ostensible service of convenience in fact conduces to servitude to the untutored brute preferences consumerism caters to. Far from a leisure economy dominated by services, entertainment is, increasingly, administered in the service of domination.

Indeed, according to Rocklage et al., (2021), expertise dulls consumer experience. Connoisseurship is at odds with business interests, and indeed thinking too much is forbidden: "shifting experts away from using their cognitive structure restored their experience of emotion" (Rocklage et al., 2021, p. 355). While it is true that "rebel" consumers do not escape the system of consumerism and can be recuperated in

sophisticated ways (Heath & Potter, 2004), the prime system imperative is arguably unthinking, unreflective reactions.

The flip side of this enforced triviality is "pseudo-activity", a futile attempt to claw back the meaningful activity that heteronomous work and triviality deny us: "pseudo-activity is misguided spontaneity" (Adorno, 2005b, p. 173). It expresses an urge for genuine activity—i.e. a kind of activity marked by its relative freedom from the heteronomous forces of capitalist society, which approximates genuinely autonomous experience—otherwise denied us but is easily subsumed by the logic of work. As Schoneboom claims, "paid work continually extends its reach and… leisure is caught up in the dynamics of intensification" (2018, p. 360). This is evident in our feeling guilty about not maximising our enjoyment of leisure activities, about "slacking off" from hobbies, about not wringing every ounce of value from our various free-time pursuits—echoing, an abstract efficiency imperative characteristic of capitalism. The point is not merely that we should value repose a little more (though see O'Connor, 2018), but also that the bad features of work—in particular the compulsion to toil, effort, and conscientiousness for their own sake—can come to colour our perception of what is worth pursuing in general so that the impulse for spontaneous activity miscarries.

This elision of work and non-work is evident in the "gamification of work" phenomenon (see Vesa & Harviainen, 2019; Kim, 2018), which has seen employers attempt to foist some of the characteristics of games—fun, frivolous competition, "achievements", and so on—on to work activities. This has in turn generated its counter-image—the emergence of distinctive new technological ways of measuring and organising leisure activities, through such tools as fitness and audiobook apps, "grind"-heavy videogames, etc., which track progress and offer incremental rewards for successfully completed tasks (i.e. "trophies", "badges", "achievements", etc.). In such examples, we see a distinctively gamified-work-like approach to leisure activities, such that we can also meaningfully talk of the "workification of games". The kind of games that work seeks to emulate are already characterised by the superficial tenor of meaningless rewards designed to trick people into working harder under the auspices of fun. Now even fun is something we are tricked into under the auspices of fun, though with a helping hand from techniques derived from contemporary psychology to addict users and extract additional payments from them for "loot" boxes and the like (see Søraker, 2016).

Underlying the antithesis of work time and free time is the imperative: one must not think. Though the enforced triviality of free time presents itself as the opposite of work, both embody an assiduous avoidance of genuine experience, though in different ways. While its contrary, pseudo-activity, expresses the impulse for the genuine activity that is largely denied people in work time, that impulse is undermined as recent technical developments insinuate the rationality of productivity and efficiency into it with increasing rigour.

Politics: Reified Consciousness and Crises of Democracy

Today it is common for businesses to attempt to play roles once reserved for nation states. Indeed, business corporations are unavoidably political as well as economic units (Scherer & Palazzo, 2011). Businesses now seek to "contribute to public health, education, social security, and the protection of human rights, or engage in self-regulation to fill the gaps in legal regulation and to promote societal peace and stability" (Scherer et al., 2014, p. 148). While we may worry about the lack of democratic accountability (Anderson, 2017), clearly the market, business, and the state are interconnected domains and together exert an enormous influence on the lives of citizens and the well-being of communities. Indeed, political thought is deeply relevant to business ethics (Heath et al., 2010; Kaler, 2000; Moriarty, 2005), and the intimate connection between the two is readily apparent when we reflect on how dependent democracy is on news and, increasingly, social media corporations.

That both access to news and participation in public conversation are increasingly via social rather than traditional media (Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, etc.) has fostered much-discussed pathologies of democratic life including, but not limited to, the rise of "fake news", "post-truth" culture, political polarisation, conspiracy theories and extremism of various stripes (Prakasam & Huxtable-Thomas, 2021). It is by now safe to regard the optimistic vision of the internet as neutral facilitator of communication as discredited. This vision, present in the 1990s and early 2000s file-sharing online "anarchists", the "Declaration of cyberspace independence", etc., proved to be a naïve utopianism, born of the delusion that capitalist modernity might spontaneously loosen its grip, rather than drawing on technological opportunities to tighten it further and to evade democratic scrutiny (see Zuboff, 2019).

Social media platforms themselves have also been subject to a misplaced optimism: they "have been vested with hope for their potential to enable 'ordinary citizens' to make their judgments public and contribute to pluralized discussions about organizations and their perceived legitimacy" (Vestergaard and Uldam, 2022, p. 227; see also Etter et al., 2018; Trittin-Ulbrich et al., 2021) and yet their algorithms have led to opacity and disinformation (Etter & Albu, 2021). Indeed, it is becoming uncontroversial to say that they have, in at least some significant respects, degraded public discourse.

Adorno would have found these developments entirely unsurprising, and his account offers a powerful explanatory take on them. Already in the late 1940s he warned of the

underlying irrational and destructive individual tendencies that the administered society fosters (Adorno et al., 2019), and in the 1960s of how right-wing extremism can readily be presented in terms of a defence of "true democracy" (Adorno, 2020, p. 24). The defensive inability to experience oneself or others that is definitive of heteronomy led, he observed, to functional, delusional ideation, and an inability to think, along with persecutory projective distortions of others that rationalise aggressive wishes.

Moreover, on Adorno's view, the structure of public culture in exchange societies promotes a kind of immaturity. The subsumption of news and public discourse by "the culture industry" (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002) had already, he thought, significantly eroded our ability to think and act rationally even with the traditional news media system, for once news and public discussion are governed by the exchange principle the decisive factor becomes not truth or rationality but consumer enjoyment, arbitrary preferences, and the ideological concomitants of this motive. And this will tend to promote a subjectivised and instrumentalised conception of public deliberation—an "opinion delusion society" (see Adorno, 2005b, pp. 105–122). In such a society, "the tendency becomes to view the average of subjective opinions—the average of subjective reason, as it were—as the pinnacle of objectivity" (Adorno, 2019, p. 57).

A system that organises public discourse on the exchange principle tacitly promotes this subjectivization that glamorises opinion and implicitly sanctions functional thinking and the narcissistic refusal of experience. The shift to the algorithmic delivery of news and public discourse via social media continues and exacerbates this tendency. As Just (2019) suggests, online movements often lead to affective intensification, rather than rational deliberation (see Bezio, 2018). Whereas traditional editorial processes meant that news content was obviously subject to curation, the algorithms of social media newsfeeds and recommendations operate in disguise, covertly. Phenomenologically, there is no curation; rather, one simply encounters an endless stream of content that emerges as if by natural growth, but which in fact is already shaped by the data profile our user activity has generated. We are, to put it simply, microtargeted with news that suits our preferences.

Moreover, though ideological, traditional editorial curation strove for a semblance of balance and objectivity, values baked-in to the brand their readers paid for and thus on which their market-share depended. Notwithstanding the marketplace of partisan publications, this provided a minimal degree of plurality in the news and commentary even brand-loyal readers encountered. Social media curation abolishes this: newsfeeds are curated by algorithms in real time according to someone's anticipated preferences, with the single aim of "prolonging user-engagement", i.e. keeping the person reading and clicking. This tends to eliminate any trace of challenge or plurality because what people prefer has no necessary connection to what is rational or true. As the extensive literature on confirmation bias suggests, we tend to explore the world in a way seemingly designed to make us feel clever and right than ignorant and confused (see Nickerson, 1998; Margolis, 1998). It is true that in the long run, in retrospect, we may appreciate the latter, but the algorithms work in the short run, and in the short run we are all susceptible to the preference for being affirmed rather than undermined. "I, the customer, am always right", or at least it feels that way in the moment.

A particularly telling example of this tendency is the "like" button, created by Facebook and quickly adopted, in various guises, by all major platforms. While covert algorithms are insidious, the "like" button is potentially more destructive: in addition to secretly curating someone's newsfeed according to their preferences, it invites them to self-consciously adopt subjective preference as the normative standard by which to appraise what they read and what they say. It is hardly a further step to apply the same standard to what one thinks, a levelling-down of responses to approval given or withheld. Thus, the arbitrary irrationality of subjectively functional (as opposed to objectively appropriate) thought and experience—the thorough reification of consciousness that is the essence of heteronomy—is disastrously sedimented into the structure of the digital public sphere. And yet "likes" are regarded as central drivers of corporate credibility (Seo et al., 2019).

All this ramps up the rationalisation of defensive, functional consciousness that fosters persecutory and destructive tendencies. Adorno postulates that part of the appeal of subjectivist, "opinion-delusion" thinking is the escape it provides from the responsibility to think for oneself. If the standard is subjective preference, one cannot be wrong. It thus helps "to ward off narcissistic injury" (Adorno, 2005b, p. 108). But if one can believe and think whatever one likes, it is then easy to conclude that one can also *do* whatever one likes. If this account is right, it clarifies the striking willingness to believe anything that guards against thinking and licenses one's desire for validation that apparently fuels the increasing attraction to authoritarian political leaders.

However, this subjectivization of thought is so internally unstable that it tends to generate a peculiar reaction-formation, wherein the commitment to truth and reason is not altogether jettisoned, but is displaced into conspiratorial thinking, the arch compromise between functionality and rationality. Adorno devoted considerable attention to the structure of conspiratorial thinking, taking anti-Semitism as a paradigm (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002; Adorno et al., 2019; see also Heins, 2007). With enough conspiratorial architecture, the merely functional character of one's ideation can be disguised as, on the contrary, proof of its courageous rigour. The gratifying distortion of tediously

predictable paranoid-schizoid phantasies becomes brave truth-seeking scepticism, and the greater the distortion, the greater the courage; culturally worn-out prejudicial tropes become hard-won, profound insights (Adorno et al., 2019). From the anti-vaxxers to the Capitol rioters, the implications of this manifestation of such doxastic heteronomy are on show today.

Yet Adorno would warn against the twin errors of blaming either individual "bad actors" or the technology itself. The former tendency Adorno called "personalization", which attributes "grievances to the fault of persons" while ignoring systemic factors (Adorno, 2019, p. 35). The latter Adorno called the 'technological veil', whereby "constraints and necessities resulting from social conditions… are ascribed to technology as such" (2019, p. 136). Sometimes the two impulses are combined, as where the individuals who designed or operate the technologies are deemed the decisive factor. Adorno's account elucidates what is wrong with both positions.

Individuals who exploit the algorithms can do so only because of the nature of the technology and its distorting effect on people's consciousness and public discourse. The notion that social media does not distort public discourse, its users do, is unconvincing. At the very least, social media certainly helps create an environment that is hostile to the exercise of autonomous reason. Personalization of this sort is, Adorno claims, functionally motivated: "the affective power inside people which resists [the idea of] objective, anonymous laws governing events over their heads is so immense that people will fall for this mechanism of personalization, even against their better judgment" (2019, p. 35). The thought that the problem is not particular bad people, but some more general, objective tendency working behind our backs is so unpalatable that we can be easily tempted to trace all problems to individuals, a tendency reflected in the individualism of mainstream business ethics (Jones et al., 2005).

But the anti-technology idea that social media as such is the problem—the "technological veil"—is equally unconvincing. It overlooks that this "technology has been developed only in a very one-sided, particular fashion," (Adorno, 2019, p. 136)—not, however, because of the bad individuals who designed it, as the personalised version of the technological veil would have it. Rather, the algorithmic culture industry has simply accelerated the long-standing reificatory tendency of the culture industry, which flows from the systemic pressures of capitalist market economies: "anything connected to… qualitative diversity has been suppressed… prevented artificially by this constraint of the profit motive… The productive forces of technology are shackled and pushed in a very specific direction" (Adorno, 2019, p. 136).

The "like" button is merely the logical extension of the profit motive in technological form: it merely executes the law of a market economy oriented to the monetization of subjective wants. It represents the gamification of democratic citizenship, by which access to news and public comment is assimilated to the model, discussed above, of addiction. It is the automated extension of the reificatory tendency always present in the culture industry. As technology that has been one-sidedly developed under the aegis of the profit motive, it was bound to participate in the promotion of heteronomy intrinsic to market societies governed by the exchange principle.

Towards an Adornian Ethics of Resistance

Thus far, we have sought to demonstrate the relevance of Adorno's work for a variety of issues central to contemporary business ethics, and to suggest that the prescience of Adorno's analysis means it is worthy of more sustained attention. Adorno has much of value to contribute on topics such as work, leisure consumption, and the way contemporary political discourse has been shaped by social media companies.

However, our invoking Adorno may meet with scepticism. Subsequent Frankfurt School theorists rejected Adorno's project as lacking self-reflexive coherence. Critical theory, so the argument goes, must be able to situate and vindicate itself as part of the social world it criticises, and so to account for its own epistemic and practical validity. But because Adorno's critical theory is so negative, it cannot do this: if our social world is as bad as Adorno claims, it is unclear how he could have access to this insight, and unclear how such supposed insights, as unavailable to most people, could have any practical efficacy.

In response to this worry, there are two points worth bearing in mind. Firstly, Adorno's work can be regarded as a "gadfly of other systems" (Jay, 1996, p. 41), and indeed of our false social reality in general. To recognise the suffering that shows up in reaction against contradiction and antagonism does not require us to be able to somehow step outside our place in this antagonistic social reality, nor indeed to suppose that our claims about such suffering are safe from the distortion of our own need to adapt to this social reality. The aim of the critical project is not to offer timeless, unassailable truths, nor to dream up utopian visions of a flourishing society, but rather to offer insights so far as one is able, tempered of course by appropriate humility and an acknowledgement of one's own fallibility. It could hardly be otherwise. But, as Freyenhagen puts it, "for Adorno, the explanatory success of his critical theory vindicates the negativistic conception of humanity embedded in it" (2013, p. 5). If Adorno's overall explanation of social suffering and privation is persuasive, then "its underlying conception of

humanity is as redeemed as it could be" (Freyenhagen, 2013, p. 6; see also Reeves, 2016).

This takes us to the second point relating to the status of Adorno's claims. Adorno's thought is by no means purely negative—indeed, his reputation as a "pessimist" is deeply misleading. Adorno's eviscerating negative diagnoses of the modern world are intelligible only against the backdrop of a more fundamental optimism about the human potential—including our potential for autonomy. As Adorno puts it, "I am deeply convinced that there is no human being, not even the most wretched, who has not a potential which, by conventional bourgeois standards, is comparable to genius" (2001, pp. 132–133). This potential, he thinks, is held back by our existing social arrangements, but this critique presupposes that it is nonetheless real and could in principle have been, and perhaps could yet be, realised in a more adequate social context. Moreover, Adorno insists that the good is in principle epistemically derivative from the bad rather than the foundation of negative criticism: "the false, once determinately known and precisely expressed, is already an index of what is right and better" (2005b, p. 288).

It is important to note that a negativist critique is perfectly compatible with an optimistic attitude to humanity. Indeed, by Adorno's lights, the real pessimists are the affirmative thinkers who, by restricting themselves to rationalising our existing form of ethical life, and recommending relatively meagre amendments, implicitly concede that this is, at bottom, as good as it gets. Adorno is on principle reluctant to make concrete claims about what the unrealised human potential, or the form of ethical life in which it would be realised, might substantively involve. Nevertheless, he provides fertile resources for thinking about the concrete ways in which that as-yet unrealised human potential—whatever it might, positively, turn out to be—is palpably suppressed in our existing social world, and insists that we ought to, and suggests how we might, resist and push back against that suppression.

Adorno once expressed "the constant feeling that we are merely encouraging the cause of untruth if we turn prematurely to the positive and fail to persevere in the negative" (Adorno & Mann, 2006, p. 97). However, this does not imply a commitment to abstention from engaging with practical questions: while Adorno rejected "actionism"—the arbitrary veneration of doing something—as a "repressive" reaction in which careful understanding of the situation and responsible thinking-through of what to do take a backseat, or are even seen as an impediment, as "impractical" (Adorno, 2005b, p. 273), he by the same token objected to "quietism"—simply stepping back from practical questions on the grounds that the world is too corrupt—as being just another evasion of responsibility, which only facilitates the worst evils.

Indeed, contrary to the received view, Adorno was actively engaged with practical problems. In the post-war period, he made numerous public interventions on current issues—education policy, criminal justice, etc.—that could even be called "reformist" (see Adorno, 2005b), not because they would lead inexorably to utopia, but because they might help avoid the worst—so "that Auschwitz will not repeat itself, so that nothing similar will happen" (Adorno, 1973, p. 365)—in the meantime. This worry, which used to be dismissed as histrionic, looks sensible today.

Furthermore, while capitalist societies are, for Adorno, "radically evil", they are not *so* bad that Auschwitz was inevitable. It could have been avoided; a social world that is as evil as a capitalist society must be may tend towards ethical disaster, but it does not inevitably produce one. The worst excesses of "wrong life" can be ameliorated and mitigated, forestalling the catastrophic. The repetition of something similar to Auschwitz, though likely, is avoidable. This is why Adorno saw value not only in Critical Theory, but in interventions in the wider public discussion: to promote resistance to the badness of our social world.

It is, Adorno insisted, possible, albeit difficult, for individuals to resist the heteronomous conditions of advanced capitalist society (see Freyenhagen, 2013, ch.6). At least some individuals have some scope to resist wrong life, at least to some degree: "despite all this… there is a genuine possibility of freedom, even in a totality steeped in guilt" (Adorno, 2006, p. 265). Because there is a degree of freedom that is possible, we have a responsibility to try to attain it. In this way, Adorno's thought is, perhaps surprisingly, amenable to normative application. As such, it can bolster the resources of existing calls for resistance, both within the workplace (e.g. Mumby, 2020; Paulsen, 2014; Spicer & Fleming, 2016) and beyond (Odell, 2019, see also Finlayson, 2002, 2003).

However, the extent to which freedom is possible in the here and now varies from person to person, and it will be much harder for some to attain it than for others, depending on structural and chance factors, so the practical responsibility to resist will vary from person to person as well, and its extent cannot be fully specified in the abstract (Loacker & Muhr, 2009). Even when structural and chance factors are in one's favour, this freedom will always be a partial achievement.

This responsibility to resist consists primarily in the responsibility to recognise and challenge the conditions—psychological and social—of our heteronomy, rather than to ignore or to essentialise, and thus capitulate to them, even though such responses are themselves promoted by social factors:

> The dominant ideology today dictates that the more individuals are delivered over to objective constellations, over which they have, or believe they have, no power, the more they subjectivize this powerlessness.

> Starting from the phrase that 'everything depends on the person', they attribute to people everything that in fact is due to the external conditions, so that in turn the conditions remain undisturbed. (Adorno, 2005b, p. 93)

The upshot is that individuals have a responsibility not to "make an ideology out of their own immaturity" (Adorno, 2005b, p. 93), but, instead, to recognise the reality of their situation while resisting the dominant subjectivizing ideology that obscures its societal roots.

This requires us to try to understand and challenge the psychological and social conditions that contribute to our unfreedom. Hence, a detailed theoretical account of the technical determinants of our heteronomy, as they have developed since Adorno's time, can help us begin to confront the heteronomous status quo. In this endeavour, "we must not fight lies with lies, we must not try to be just as clever as it is, but we must counteract it with the full force of reason, with the genuinely unideological truth" (Adorno, 2020, pp. 39–40).

In practice, there are no doubt many ways in which this resistance could be pursued in the various domains we have explored in this paper. In the domain of work, we might wish to encourage the tendencies already displayed in the so-called great resignation (Gittleman, 2022) and in employees' resistance to the sometimes arbitrary calls for them to return to the office (Gibson, et al., 2023), as well as a deeper appreciation of work that is geared towards the fulfilment of human needs (Reeves & Sinnicks, 2023). Recent drives for work that is more reasonable and meaningful in itself embody this tendency in reality. When Amazon warehouse workers organise against their employers on the basis that "to them, we are treated like robots" (Shenker, 2023), amid trade unions' intensifying push back against the casualisation and mechanisation of work (De Stefano & Doellgast, 2023; Keune, 2013), this suggests the impulse to resist the degradation of this sphere of life which Adorno appeals to is alive.

In the domain of leisure, and in accordance with Adorno's somewhat unfashionable objectivism, we ought to oppose the drivers of our passivification, and instead come to appreciate leisure in a way that is "qualitatively different, more auspicious" (Adorno, 2005b, p. 167). While it is important that many of us are excluded from realistic opportunities to side-step the culture industry's subsumption, it is also the case that we have in general been complicit in our passivification by that industry. Simply palming off all responsibility to the technology or market forces is also incorrect: they only dominate us insofar as we tend to cooperate. The ethics of resistance urges us to resist that tendency, while recognising that this is much easier said than done. Adorno often invokes the concept of "the spell" (e.g. 1973, pp. 344–9) to characterise the ways we are enchanted by social processes that have power over us only insofar as we believe in and sustain them. It is in this light his suggestions about bringing to people's attention that they do not truly want what they are fed have such urgency.

And in the domain of political discourse, we must try to resist the drivers of subjectivization. To employ the full force of reason, as in opposing fake news, means to resist the equation: of expertise—faith in which has been degraded recently (Dahlgren, 2018)—with institutional power (collapsing genuine authority into mere authoritarianism); of knowledge-claims with instrumental interests (collapsing validity into motivation); and of truth with subjective preferences (collapsing judgment into wish and enjoyment). Resistance would mean refusing the increasingly AI-driven attempts, with which today we are all bombarded, to abolish our capacity to distinguish, even in principle, the objectively meaningful and true from the subjectively convenient or gratifying.

Concluding Remarks

We have sought to demonstrate that Adorno's thought can help to sustain a powerful critique of various tendencies at play in work, leisure consumption, and political discourse, as they operate in contemporary society, as well as to sketch some elements of an Adornian ethics of resistance. In so doing, we hoped to have shown that Adorno's work is worthy of further attention within business ethics. His reflections on work, leisure, and political discourse have proven to be extremely prescient and have anticipated many of the developments which have occurred in the half a century since he was writing. Furthermore, on account of his combination of a thoroughgoing critique of social reality, coupled with his realist, objectivist, negative Aristotelianism, he offers a distinctive position, relative to business ethics inspired by both poststructuralist and postmetaphysical critical theory.

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Data availability This is a theoretical paper, and thus there are no associated data.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Human and Animals Participants This article does not contain any studies with human participants or animals performed by any of the authors.

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