

# Autonomy as utopia or dystopia

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## Introduction

This chapter explores a contemporary conventional wisdom of western culture: the understanding that autonomy is an unalloyed virtue, a version of utopia to be pursued without qualification precisely because it is viewed as unequivocally desirable and virtuous. The modern association with individual or collegial freedom, self-determination and self-expression give autonomy its laudatory and seductive appeal.

Autonomy is not a utopia in the sense of a vision of a good place – such as the Utopia imagined by Thomas More or the utopian vision that inspired the architects of Huxley's *Brave New World*<sup>1</sup>. In the modern world, Utopias continue to be imagined: utopias are being actively devised, developed and studied<sup>2</sup>. That said, we are inclined to view this interest, including the present volume, as a minority pursuit that is unlikely, in the contemporary context of widespread cynicism and disillusionment with grand(iose) experiments and their associated 'grand narratives', to have a mass appeal. We avoid seeking to contribute to a debate about specific utopias or dystopias since they are often difficult to distinguish, as one person's vision of virtue is another's view of vice. Instead we believe that it is relevant to give attention to practical, mundane utopian efforts – efforts that are often so taken for granted as to be almost unrecognizable as utopian in inspiration (see also Law and Mol, this volume). Amongst these we count 'autonomy', a desired condition that, as we have just noted, is widely assumed to be an unalloyed virtue, a version of utopia to be pursued without qualification or challenge.

Yet, when subjected to critical scrutiny, the call to become autonomous can, we contend, be seen to have a dark side when the self-discipline of subjects is directed toward undeniably evil rather than virtuous objectives. The twin tower terrorism of September 11th could clearly be seen to have been perpetrated in the name of the autonomy of those who choose to sacrifice their lives for a strong and, it might be said, utopian religious cause. Such appeals are not unequivocally distinct from other versions of utopia that are often criticized for their programmed rather than self-determining characteristics. There are numerous examples of these programmed utopias in John Carey's (1999) anthology but what they share in common is the elimination of real people (*ibid.* xii) and



above all, to be conscious of myself as a thinking, willing, active being, bearing responsibility for my choices and able to explain them by reference to my own ideas and purposes.

We suggest that Berlin's formulation of autonomy rests upon a conception of the individual as a sovereign agent who, asserting ownership of 'reasons', 'purposes', 'choices' and 'ideas', is clearly differentiated from 'external forces', 'the outside'. This conception of agency is grounded in the Cartesian dualism between mind and matter, or subject and object. Human beings are invoked as cognitive agents who act on the world, including their own bodies, in accordance with a reasoned set of self-interests or purposes. Agency in this conceptualization is self-determining, rather than a complex outcome of self-other relationships, interactions and interpretations. Absent is any acknowledgement of how the self, to which Berlin ascribes sovereignty, is a manifestation of historically and culturally bounded interactions, rather than a 'subject' or 'inside' that stands above and beyond the 'objects' comprising its 'outside'.

It is difficult to imagine how the construction of Berlin's sovereign self is possible without engaging the 'forces' that he would regard as 'external'. Thinking and willing, whether in respect of 'autonomy' or anything else, is learned and developed through processes of interaction within traditions of thought and through practices of will formation in which 'subjects' are participants, not observers or consumers. The very process of self-identification as a subject who is differentiated from its 'object' (s) is a social process. The practices – of thinking, willing, choosing, bearing responsibility, etc. – to which Berlin attributes 'autonomy' are socially embedded or situated; they are not, in our view, plausibly conceptualized as the manifestations or possessions of a sovereign, cognitive being.

Does it follow from this that autonomy is an illusion? It does *if* we follow Berlin in conceiving of 'autonomy' as the *sovereign* possession and exercise of will, reason or purpose. What is illusory, arguably, is the ascription of *ownership* of autonomy-generating practices to the self. It is mistaken to conceptualize the self as a *sovereign entity* that is governed by its 'own acts of will', 'choices' and 'purposes'. Autonomy is more persuasively conceived as a *regulative idea* that calls for, promotes and engages particular kinds of persona and actions. Habermas, for example, believes that the aspiration and quest to become autonomous can encourage critical self-reflection upon the credibility and value of established ideas and practices, with the prospect that they become actively chosen rather than passively received and followed. The processes of reflection and action that are ascribed to the motivating effects of autonomy as a regulative idea are not illusory. What is termed 'self-determination' or 'self-mastery' in discussions of autonomy is real or substantive in its effects; and these effects are plausibly attributed to autonomy as a regulative idea insofar as the ideal of autonomy promotes and legitimises particular kinds of action and agency that are described as 'autonomous'. What then is at issue is the social context in which autonomy as a regulative idea is embraced. This context may foster a



critical and self-reflective evaluation of autonomy as a regulative idea but, equally, it may assume the desirability of autonomy in ways that feed upon, and contribute to, anxiety, fear and insecurity. Perversely, fear which Carey (1999) identifies as expressive of dystopias can be a product of the dominant discourse of autonomy when, for example, it acts to push people back on their own devices and makes them feel socially isolated (Foucault, 1982). Within the context of Western capitalism insofar as the self is disciplined by the discourse of autonomy, the outcome may be an anxious preoccupation with survival and success.

Embraced as a regulative idea, autonomy has what Foucault terms 'truth effects' to the extent that subjects identify with its value and participate in processes of self formation that are deemed to confirm it. Acts of will and decision are routinely but mistakenly ascribed to the self. More plausible, we contend, is a conception of the self as a fluid medium of discursive practices through which 'selfhood' is represented in historically and culturally variable ways (eg as sovereign or as predestined by God) and through which human existence is regulated or disciplined. Becoming autonomous, then, is a paradoxical project. The very construction of 'a life and decisions' that 'depend on myself' is reliant upon participation in social practices that make possible the formation and identification of what Berlin (1958:131) sees as '*my own* ideas and purposes'. That it is paradoxical, however, does not mean that it is incoherent or meaningless. Instead of dismissing autonomy as 'illusory', it is possible to appreciate and value it as an historically and culturally available idea. An idea that, nonetheless, merits the same measure of critical scrutiny that its embrace, as a regulative idea, commends to the interrogation of other appealing, yet potentially dystopian, visions and claims.

### **Modernism, humanism and autonomy**

In a sacred world, the position and decisions of human beings are ascribed to the designs of 'other worldly' forces, such as the grace of God. Whether events or actions are abhorrent or admirable, they are interpreted as God's will – a will that is ineffable, beyond human understanding. In modern humanism, by contrast, the will of 'man' (sic), rather than magical forces or the word of God, becomes the centre and measure of all things.<sup>5</sup> Becoming autonomous is tantamount to becoming fully and perfectly human.

Human actions, however vicious or vile, are represented as willed by (wo)men. History is understood to be open-ended rather than preordained, and it therefore presents the possibility of rendering the world responsive to human control through the development and imposition of will-power – a power that is attributed to the individual, putatively autonomous human being. In principle, the social world is susceptible to rational interrogation and transformation as any transient sense of closure is produced by the worldly will of modern individuals<sup>6</sup>.



this is why the ideal of autonomy can coexist with what in this world would seem its opposite – a programmed world. Whether it is the New Lanark Mills of Robert Owen or more recent science fiction narratives (see Lightfoot and Lilley, this volume), they seem readily to combine the notion of autonomy or freedom with oppressive control. Mindful of how the other utopian visions – from Plato to More or from Hitler to Skinner – entertain practices that are, arguably, oppressive, we should be attentive to the potential of autonomy to be dystopic in the name of self-determination.

Ambivalence about the notion of autonomy resonates with the ambiguous status of utopia. Semantic confusion<sup>3</sup> has led to utopia being associated with a good place rather than its correct meaning as no place or nowhere (Carey 1999:xi), in the sense that utopias are and must remain fanciful places. They can fire the imagination and inspire practical endeavours but they can never be realized and, in this sense, they exist nowhere. Be that as it may, utopia is commonsensically understood as a good place that, in principle at least, is realizable. Conversely, the term dystopia emerged to convey its opposite: a bad place. Here we follow Carey (1999:xi) who suggests that:

To count as utopia, an imaginary place must be an expression of desire. To count as dystopia, it must be an expression of fear.

Here we are interested in exploring the seductive, disciplining and potentially misleading effects of autonomy. This exploration is, we suggest, consistent with understanding the embrace of utopias by those seeking the 'good life', or a good place, while recognizing that utopias are, and must remain, figments of our imagination, existing no place or nowhere.

Utopias are imaginary places but they are places imagined within particular historical and cultural contexts that are productive of the desires they articulate. For example, it is difficult to contemplate the utopia hilariously described in the final chapter of Julian Barnes' *A History of the World in 10 1/2 Chapters* as situated anywhere but in a world of unrestrained consumerism. Likewise, the desirability of autonomy, as a possible utopia, is coloured, in the contemporary context, by historically specific notions of freedom, self-determination, independence, individualism and so forth, to which an unequivocally positive value is routinely assigned in modernity. It is implausible to believe that 'autonomy' has a universal, uncontested or invariable meaning any more than to believe that meanings of utopia remain unchanged over time.

'Autonomy' does not *describe* or even point towards some condition or state of mind that exists in the world. Rather, it is a way of imbuing the world with a particular meaning (or meanings) that provide a way of orienting ourselves to the social world – by, for example, ascribing degrees of autonomy to a nation state, a work group or the job allocated to a particular employee. Whatever meanings are attributed to 'autonomy', they are forged and negotiated in particular historical and cultural contexts that are framed within relations of power and knowledge<sup>4</sup>. Broadly speaking, the contemporary meaning of autonomy is associated with the desirability of, and capability ascribed to, institutions,



groups and individuals making their own decisions about how to understand and manage their lives. Increased autonomy is regarded as desirable; conversely, reducing or restricting autonomy is construed as a negative, unappealing prospect.

The argument of this chapter comprises three, related elements. First, we begin by locating our position in relation to the influential arguments of Isaiah Berlin. We elaborate this view that the contemporary positive value ascribed to 'autonomy' is largely a legacy of modern, humanistic thinking reinforced by the Enlightenment and popularized in the modern era through a liberal political consensus. Second, we examine what the ascription of equal rights of all to self-determination means for those disciplined by such principles. Specifically, we attend to ideas of 'responsible autonomy' and 'empowerment' that have become increasingly influential in thinking about management and organization during the past couple of decades. Third, and finally, we interrogate conceptions of autonomy advanced in two of the most important philosophers of the 20th century – Habermas and Foucault. What they share, but in very different ways, is a disillusionment with a liberal tradition of thinking exemplified by Berlin. For Habermas, autonomy is a distinctive and unequivocally positive human quality whose full realization is impeded and distorted by social institutions. He points to the possibility of quasi-autonomous reason detecting and dispelling forms of distortion and oppression so that the form of life anticipated in his concept of the 'ideal speech situation' can be realized. By contrast, Foucault's scepticism about the possibility of power being removed from institutions and forms of communication leads him to be equally sceptical about autonomy. He identifies the danger of the regulative idea of becoming autonomous operating to turn us back on ourselves, thereby tending to (further) isolate us from those who could be a source of collective strength in resisting what we have been made to become (Foucault, 1982). Instead of treating autonomy and reason solely as a means to, or end of, a utopian social life, Foucault invites an interrogation of their power effects. This ambivalence accommodates the understanding that the regulative idea of autonomy may problematize prevailing conventions and disciplines, with the consequence of enabling self-determination and expression; but it may also legitimize forms of tyranny in the name of reason. Autonomy and reason are, therefore, not essentially utopian or dystopian in their effects.

### **Thinking about autonomy**

The idea of autonomy as a utopia to which contemporary, modern human beings routinely aspire is lucidly articulated by Berlin (1958:131):

I wish my life and decisions to depend on myself, not on external forces of whatever kind. I wish to be the instrument of my own, not of other men's acts of will. I wish to be a subject, not an object; to be moved by reasons, by conscious purposes, which are my own, not by causes which affect me, as it were, from the outside . . . I wish,



*Modern humanism and liberal political philosophy*

In contrast to classical beliefs in God or the divine right of Kings to determine the fate of their subjects, modern humanism is founded upon the understanding that there is a natural equality between all humans to determine the course of their own lives. Each human being is conceived to have the (natural) right autonomously to exercise his or her powers of self-determination. These powers are considered to be axiomatic to the potential of human existence. As Carroll (1993:3) has expressed this idea,

The axiom on which the humanist rock was to be forged was put as well by Pico della Mirandola in 1486 as by anyone: 'We can become what we will' . . . So the humanist fathers put their founding axiom: man is all-powerful, if his will is strong enough. He can create himself. He can choose to be courageous, honourable, just, rich, influential, or not . . . Out of his own individual will he can move the earth.

The humanist belief in autonomy is an integral part of the Cartesian legacy of subject-object separation and the project of the Enlightenment. Here Reason is enjoined to challenge dogmatism, superstition and other diverse forms of compulsion that present themselves as beyond questioning and doubt. Conceived as 'all-powerful' and 'creative', everyone is considered to be equipped with the will to 'move the earth'. Humanism re-makes the human condition: the modern, autonomous individual is released from a pre-rational subordination to tradition and unquestionable authorities that assigned individuals to an object(ive) station in life with its accompanying roles and scripts. Only the autonomous individual is robustly sceptical about everything outside of the human mind, including his or her social destiny.

Since the Enlightenment at least, the quest for autonomy or self-determination has become a normal preoccupation. Indeed, it is possible to say that the very sense of personhood, identity and purpose of modern people is forged, 'disciplined' or 'empowered' within the discursive formation of humanism where notions of autonomy and sovereignty of the self occupy a central place. Adulthood and maturity are routinely equated with emotional and intellectual independence. Modern legal systems assume rational autonomy: the attribution of guilt can only be justified where the subject is assumed to have been capable of making rational and autonomous decisions. Except in certain extreme circumstances, minors and the mentally ill are excluded from the normal process of justice precisely because they are not yet fully 'masters' of, or are deemed to have lost, this rational autonomy. To lack or deny a desire for actions that attract the sobriquet of autonomy risks being seen to inhabit a degraded or spoiled identity deficient in will-power and/or maturity. To ignore, disregard, or fail to fully respond to the call of autonomy places in question one's standing and stature as a human being. Autonomy then becomes inseparable from what it is to be human.

The humanist idea of the autonomous individual is celebrated and defended in liberal political philosophy, exemplified in Mill's (1859) *On Liberty*. Founded



on the principle that the liberty of each individual must be respected and protected, the 'right' to self-autonomy or sovereignty is restricted only insofar as the actions of the individual intrude upon the liberty of others. Except in this circumstance, there can be no rational justification for restricting a person's liberty by compelling him or her to act or refrain from acting, or threatening a punishment if s/he refuses. Forms of reasoning, persuasion or entreaty alone should be used without resort to force. Making a clear division between the narrow sphere of activity that limits or polices the actions of others, and an extensive sphere that is exclusively the individual's, Mill (*ibid*: 103, cited in Lindley, 1986:6) contends that

The only part of the conduct of anyone which is amenable to society, is that which concerns others. In the part which merely concerns himself, his independence is, of right, absolute. Over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign.

Mill's philosophy is hostile towards ideas, policies and practices that countenance paternalistic interference in the lives of others. Such benevolence is seen to have the effect of 'compromising rather than facilitating self-determination. More questionable is the claim that 'the individual' has sovereignty of his/her mind when, arguably, its contents and operations are historically embedded and culturally organized, though not determined, by its formation through processes of social interaction and reflection. Although heuristically helpful, it is questionable whether autonomous and heteronomous forms of action can be clearly distinguished. Certainly it is possible to identify (heteronomous) forms of action that are pursued out of habit, ritual or 'blind' obedience. Yet, even actions that are ostensibly the product of 'autonomous' deliberations involving the identification and assessment of alternative courses of action depend upon processes of will formation and decision-making that are learned through social interaction. A condition of assessing alternative forms of action is the individual becoming an object to him/herself, and it is only through interaction with others that it is possible to identify oneself as an object of decision.

As Mead (1934:138) puts it, the person 'becomes an object to himself only by taking the attitudes of other individuals towards himself within a social environment or context of experience and behaviour in which both he and they are involved'. In other words, any claim to be or become 'self-determining' is to be treated sceptically since it implies a separation of the sphere of 'the individual' from 'society'. Arguably, it is only through the medium of (modern) 'society' that the very idea of the (potentially) autonomous individual – as an 'attitude' derived from the other – is developed, positively valued and pursued. This understanding presents a direct challenge to the liberal assumption that the sphere of the private individual can be separate and distinct from public or political life. The so-called autonomous choices of individuals are already infused with political judgments and evaluations of what is just and legitimate. The very liberal notion of respecting and sustaining the autonomy of individuals in a way that is compatible with preservation of others' opportunity to act



autonomously is itself an outcome of political deliberation. In particular, it reflects a consideration of the potential disorder that would follow the 'nasty, brutish and short' behaviour of individuals pursuing their self interests regardless of the effect on others (Hobbes, 1651, see also Grey and Garsten, this volume).

### **Autonomy at work**

From diverse perspectives, work has been examined and represented in terms of the presence or absence of 'control'/'autonomy'. As Halaby and Weakliem (1989:549), in a comprehensive (though US-centric) review of this literature, have observed, 'the choice and discretion workers exercise over the substantive and procedural aspects of their jobs – labelled "control" by some and "autonomy" by others – has been a prominent theme of numerous treatments of the workplace'<sup>7</sup>.

Recently the call of autonomy at work is evident in the value placed, by employers and employee representatives alike, upon 'empowering' workers by giving them more control, choice or discretion in their working lives. The mutual benefits to employer and employee of moving away from close supervision over highly specialized tasks towards greater 'involvement', 'participation' and 'self-actualization' in decisions and processes were first prompted during the 1950s and 1960s (eg Argyris, 1957; Likert, 1961; McGregor, 1960)<sup>8</sup>. This 'humanistic' thinking has been regularly revisited and amplified in the intervening years. Most management fads and fashions – such as TQM, BPR and Knowledge Management – rehearse the value of greater autonomy for individuals and/or groups at the workplace. Summarizing this thinking, Potterfield (1999:xi) notes that:

the overall arguments are that (a) the fast-paced, ever changing, chaotic business environment demands creative, flexible, loyal, and highly motivated employees; (b) to attract and motivate these sort of employees, organizations would have to develop more democratic organizational structures that offer employees greater autonomy, freedom, and participation in decisions that affect their working lives; and (c) the increasingly well-educated citizenry would balk at working within the constraints of traditional 'command and control' organizations and would demand that the same democratic ideals and practices that are valued in the larger society be evidenced in the workplace.

Here Potterfield is attempting to summarize, rather than endorse, the kinds of arguments that are deployed by advocates of increased employee 'autonomy'. On Potterfield's account, increased interest in 'autonomy' has been inspired primarily by an instrumental interest in attracting and shaping the kind of employee who is capable of working effectively in a 'fast-paced, ever changing, chaotic business environment'. A commercial imperative demands (self-



managing) employees at all levels who will respond creatively and flexibly, but also loyally, to changing situations without incurring the cost and delay of waiting for their superiors to instruct them on how to proceed. Any moral concern to introduce more 'humane' practices that provide 'greater autonomy, freedom, and participation in decisions that affect their working lives' is subordinated to this commercial imperative. In allegedly changed circumstances, employees' 'rich and varied, if incoherently organized and under used, insights and experiences' (Eccles, 1993:13 cited in Potterfield, 1999:12) are assigned a positive, rather than disruptive, value.

This formulation is ideologically unstable, however, as it harbours a contradiction between, on the one hand, the representation of increased employee autonomy as a commercial imperative and the commonsense idea that autonomy involves increased self-determination including the possibility of pursuing lines of action that might subvert or refuse such imperatives. This contradiction invites a reframing of the issue that privileges the expectations ascribed to a 'well-educated citizenry'. A coincidence is identified between, firstly, the 'democratic ideals and principles' that allegedly infuse the larger society and thereby shape employee expectations, and, secondly, the preferences of employees who are demotivated by 'traditional "command and control" organizations'.

Most accounts of autonomy and empowerment, such as those developed by prominent management theorists, represent changes in work in terms of opportunities to exercise greater freedom, choice, discretion, etc. These changes are frequently framed in terms of commercial imperatives but their demands are morally neutral, or even progressive, since they are seen to require 'democratic ideals and principles' to be introduced into the workplace, and thus enable people to become as employees what they already are as citizens. Even accounts of increased autonomy that place its introduction in the context of the development of strategies of management control assume that organizing work in ways that grant greater autonomy to employees is mutually beneficial – in the sense that it confers greater status, meaning, authority, etc. upon the employee and enables them to be more adaptable and productive whilst also reducing supervisory overheads.

#### *Revisiting 'responsible autonomy'*

This case has been eloquently made by Andrew Friedman (1977) whose work is most closely identified with the critical examination of Responsible Autonomy as an alternative human resource strategy to Direct Control<sup>9</sup>. Both strategies address the question of how to secure the *capacity* of labour to be productive, and thus 'to create more value in the labour process than it costs to produce that labour power' (ibid: 77). The principle difference between the strategies, Friedman argues, is that the latter (DC) 'treats workers as though they were machines', whereas a Responsible Autonomy (RA) strategy 'attempts to harness the adaptability of labour power by giving workers leeway and encouraging



them to adapt to changing situations in a manner beneficial to the firm' (ibid: 106). This 'encouragement' to exercise autonomy in a way that is responsible (ie, 'beneficial' to the employer) is understood to be attractive to employees because it enables workers to feel 'as though they were not alienated from their labour power' (ibid: 106).

To understand the logic of this argument, it is necessary to appreciate the foundation of Friedman's thinking in Marx's discussion of the alienation of labour within the capitalist mode of production. From a Marxian perspective, the alienation of labour occurs when labour is sold, as a commodity, to an employer. Following its sale, the employer is legally authorized to instruct the worker to do what s/he (the employer/manager) requires (ibid: 77). Ultimately, the employer/manager can mobilize the force of law to secure the productive application of employees' labour power, or to terminate their employment. All variants of the DC strategy are viewed as coercive, the assumption being that coercion is necessary because employees are fundamentally lazy and, in the absence of direct control in the form of close supervision and instruction, will contrive to withhold effort.

Variants of the RA strategy, in contrast, are understood to reduce, or even remove, employees' sense of alienation from the ideal of exercising autonomous control of their labour. RA strategies, in contrast to those based upon DC, are distinguished by how they encourage sellers of labour to experience their work in ways that make it seem non-alienated. This is done by employers and managers 'accentuat(ing) the positive, peculiar aspect of labour capacity, its malleability' or adaptability (Friedman, 1986:98). The work of those subjected to a RA strategy is not directly controlled through mechanisms of close supervision, machine pacing or set procedure, leaving some discretion and choice over how tasks are performed. Instead of seeking to eliminate the adaptability/unpredictability of human labour power, which is the aim of DC strategies, RA strategies strive to harness this peculiar capability and thereby foster active consent, rather than resigned compliance or resistance, to productive activity.

It is the exercise of discretion that justifies the attribution of 'autonomy' to employees' actions, albeit that it is an autonomy viewed by non-managerial commentators as a more subtle or 'indirect' alternative to a DC strategy for securing the subordination of labour to capital. In what does the subtlety of this strategy reside? The answer favoured by humanist Marxists like Friedman is that employees have an innate tendency or desire to exercise autonomous control of their labour; and that this impulse is frustrated when labour is sold, as a commodity, to an employer who is legally able to determine how it will be deployed. A limitation of this thesis is that it cannot account for the willing subordination of employees to strategies of DC and/or RA, except by appealing to some notion of 'false consciousness'. It is simply assumed and asserted that labour is not alienated prior to its sale; and that only 'false consciousness' prevents labour from restoring its non-alienated condition.

The assumption of humanistic Marxism, embraced by Friedman and many other labour process analysts, is that labour arrives at its point of sale in an



unalienated status. It is as if the potential of 'labour power' exists in an historical vacuum whereas, we argue, it is indelibly coloured by its process of formation in which habits and skills, however rudimentary or common, are acquired. No question, the sale of labour routinely involves a loss of control over its use and application for employees, as others – managers, supervisors – determine how it is to be deployed. But it still may be possible to appreciate how, prior to its sale, labour is not an independent sovereign subject since it is already de-centred. That is to say, labour, like other forms of subjectivity, is already embedded in complex power-knowledge relations before entering any particular labour market. For this reason, it is a mistake to assume that labour necessarily strives, consciously or unconsciously, to become non-alienated or even to respond positively to strategies of management control that appear to enable a move in that direction. That such striving does occur is attributable to powerful discourses that value and commend it rather than to any condition of human nature that compels it. Of course, in modern society we are all subjected precisely to such powerful discourses, prevalent among them a humanism and enlightenment reason that 'naturalizes' our desire for autonomy.

Accepting this standpoint makes us sceptical that employees will either react positively to changes that are represented as allowing them to exercise greater discretion or that they will be more or less seduced and duped by the opportunity to act more 'autonomously'. Consequently we are led to question both the former 'progressive' managerialist and the latter humanist Marxist assumptions about labour. The response of employees to opportunities or demands for more autonomy or empowerment may be expected to vary in accordance with context and political orientation (Knights and McCabe, 2000)<sup>10</sup>. For this reason, to the extent that they expand, rather than restrict, individual worker responsibility, RA strategies may be experienced by some employees as overly demanding and anxiety-provoking and by others as confirming a positive sense of self-identity (*ibid.*). While in the latter case, autonomy may stimulate productive power and employee commitment to the organization, as has often been recorded as the effect of teamworking (Barker, 1999), the impact on more sceptical employees is to unsettle them and even to render them unproductive. Regardless of support or opposition, most employees feel obliged to comply with, or even embrace, opportunities or demands for responsible autonomy. At the very least then, the outcome may be stress and burnout as employees are required to assume a degree of responsibility that exceeds the powers of autonomy that are ascribed to them. This occurs as enthusiasm for employee responsibility blinds managers to the limits of capitalist employment relations and their own reluctance to relinquish their managerial prerogative. Employee resistance to RA is often stimulated because of the extra-curricula demands (eg social activities outside work) of programmes designed to generate company identification (Knights and McCabe, 1999). In these and certain other circumstances, Direct Control strategies may be preferred by employees to RA on the basis that then the workplace obligations will be more than highly circumscribed.



From this standpoint, resistance to RA strategies is not an irrational act undertaken by individuals who, in Friedman's (1977:106) words, are 'essentially free and independent, but have alienated their labour power'. Instead, resistance to managerial pressures to work more independently or to exercise greater discretion can be a perfectly understandable response. It is a way of preferring the security of routine provided by DC and/or refusal to become entangled in a regime of subordination that aspires to colonize more, rather than less, of their labour power. However, the difficulty of this resistance and refusal should not be underestimated, given the utopian attributes assigned to autonomy both inside and outside the workplace in the age of enlightenment.

A basic problem with formulations of 'responsible autonomy' and associated ideas of empowerment and self-actualization, whether *managerial* or *Marxist* in inspiration, is that they uncritically embrace a discourse that perceives increased autonomy as a utopian goal. As we have noted, the valorizing of autonomy in this way is unequivocal in managerial versions of such thinking, the justification of which was examined at the beginning of this section. Working life as well as corporate performance will be improved, it is contended, by ensuring that employees have the opportunity to exercise 'self-direction and self-control' (McGregor, 1960:56). Or, for managerialists who doubt that a spontaneous consensus of individual needs and corporate objectives can be assumed, 'culture strengthening' is commended. This involves an active management of consensus through establishing a framework of values 'in which practical autonomy takes place routinely' (Peters and Waterman, 1982:323). Marxian-inspired discussions of managerial strategies characterized by 'responsible autonomy' also favour a utopian conception of autonomy that is understood to be compromised by disingenuous managerial efforts to align workers' interests with those of employers or 'top managers' (Friedman, 1986:99). For the apologists of managerialism, autonomy at work would be perfectly realized when (a) the business environment permits it; (b) managers attract and motivate employees by developing more 'democratic organizational structures' (Potterfield, 1999:xi); and (c) society has evolved to the point at which employees are capable of working effectively in organizations that have moved beyond a reliance upon 'command and control'. In Marxian analysis, in contrast, autonomy is fully realized when labour is no longer sold as a commodity and, as a consequence, regains its non-alienated, 'free and independent' (Friedman, 1986:99) quality. Again, there is no recognition of the potentially dystopian consequences of seeking to pursue the recovery of a non-alienated utopian existence presumed to exist prior to the commodification of labour. In failing to see the pursuit of autonomy, whether post or pre the commodification of labour, as less a reflection of human nature than a function of enlightenment rationality and its associated discourses, Marxists are just as capable as managerialists of reinforcing the separation of subjects from one another.

Having illustrated our position by reference to ideas of autonomy developed within management and Marxist accounts of work, we now further explore the



ambivalence and ambiguity surrounding the idea of autonomy by reviewing how Habermas and Foucault assess its significance.

*Theorising autonomy: Habermas and Foucault*

In this section, we explore the relevance of ideas developed by two key contemporary thinkers, Habermas and Foucault, for interrogating and clarifying the meaning and significance of autonomy in modern society and especially its appeal within the workplace.

For Habermas and Foucault alike, 'autonomy' is a critically important idea for interpreting and changing contemporary social practice. Their respective deliberations on autonomy are positioned in relation to Kant's response to his rhetorical question 'What is Enlightenment?'. For Kant, the significance of the Enlightenment is that it offered a 'release from [the] self-incurred tutelage' where social forces inhibit the capacity to apply reason 'without direction of another'. Kant contends that we are in a state of 'immaturity' when we uncritically accept or simply 'bank' the expertise of someone else – such as blindly accepting a doctor's instructions on a recommended diet (see Knights and Willmott, 1999, Ch1). In his discussion of Kant's ideas, Foucault contends that the Enlightenment did not provide human beings with reason that they previously lacked. Rather, it presented *the socially organized* opportunity to use reason autonomously: '*Sapere aude!* "Have courage to use your own reason!" – that is the motto of enlightenment' (Kant, 1963:3).

As Kant's injunction to be courageous also indicates, he was very much aware of the presence of forces that impeded the autonomous application of reason. For exponents of Critical Theory, Habermas included, the challenge is to develop a *critical science* that is dedicated to exposing and thereby challenging the presence and irrationality of such forces. The mission of this science is to generate forms of knowledge that, by overcoming the ossifying habits and seductions of 'self-incurred tutelage', 'determine when theoretical statements grasp invariant regularities of social action as such and when they express ideologically frozen relations of dependence that can in principle be transformed' (Habermas, 1972:310). This is exemplified in the kind of ideology critique favoured by Friedman (1977, 1986) where he identifies managers conferring 'status, autonomy and responsibility' (Friedman, 1977:6) upon workers as they try to 'win their loyalty to the firms ideals ideologically' (ibid). For Friedman, this involves a form of ideological manipulation, or distorted communication in Habermasian terminology. Its intent, he argues, is 'to have workers behave *as though* they were participating in a process which reflected their own needs' (ibid: 101, emphasis added) or 'as though they were not alienated from their labour capacity' (Friedman, 1986:99).

For Foucault, in contrast, the challenge posed by Kant's 'motto of enlightenment' resides not in the significance of the irrational forces that must be exposed and transformed through the production of critical science. Rather it



is in the injunction to *practise* reason or *embody* the emancipatory possibilities of modernity, whilst remaining aware that the demand for a self-referential and self-disciplinary subjectivity of humanistic endorsements of autonomy, can be the greatest confinement of all. In our discussion of autonomy we have endeavoured to show how the understanding of autonomy favoured by both Marxists like Friedman and the mainstream managerial literature, merits sustained critical scrutiny. Otherwise there is no guarantee that the pursuit of autonomy will not contribute to the very forms of oppression that it claims to challenge and overcome (Knights and Willmott, 2001).

### *Habermas*

For Habermas, the idea of autonomy resides at the centre of his metanarratives about emancipation from dogmatism and the compulsive demands of critically unexamined habitual conduct. Autonomy, Habermas argues, is a necessary condition of critical self-reflection that facilitates emancipation from dogma. But the process is not atomistically individual or asocial. Thus, in contrast to Berlin who conceives of the subject exclusively in terms of individual purposive-rational action (see earlier), Habermas believes this to be embedded in and ultimately dependent on the meanings that flow from, and are reproduced by, symbolic interaction and communicative relations. Consequently, critical reflection is conceived as a social process that is at once enabled and constrained by the particularities of its historical self-formation. It is not so much the consciousness of individuals as their communicative inter-actions that can become (unnecessarily) dogmatic, restricted or distorted in ways which provoke productive challenges to repressive power. Communicative discourses are therefore both the vehicle for, as well as the target of, emancipatory challenges and social/political transformations.

A key question, for Critical Theorists and for Habermas in particular, is how the outcome of critical reflection is justified as more truthful or less distorted, and therefore more enlightened or less irrational, than what preceded it. On what basis are such claims about emancipation to be defended? Habermas's response has been, firstly, to argue that the very act of communicating is founded upon the anticipation of unconstrained and transparent dialogue characterized by him as 'universal pragmatics' (Habermas, 1976); and, secondly, to suggest that the notion of an 'ideal speech situation'<sup>11</sup>, deduced from this insight into the conditions of communication, logically provides the (counterfactual) basis for judging the truth of any claim.

In practice, the assessment of truth claims is recognized to be compromised by historical residues (eg institutionalized social inequalities of class, gender, race and disability or political exclusions) of communicative distortion that it cannot transcend. Truth claims even about the ideal speech situation must await the realization of the latter before they can be consensually validated. Nonetheless, for all its imperfections, the modern condition is understood to harbour the possibility of closely approximating the ideal speech situation in which a col-



lectively forged rational will is consensually produced by the unconstrained force of the 'better' argument. The autonomy of acting subjects', Habermas (1973:89) argues, is guaranteed insofar as a communicative ethics exposes the forces that are shown to impede its full realization.

All those engaged in communicative acts are seen to be persuading others of the validity of their truth claims. In the ideal speech situation, they do so without resorting to anything other than the 'force' of their arguments. Habermas's theory of communication does not, however, assume the existence of an autonomous subject of reason who champions the development of a more rational discourse. Unlike Kant, for whom it is the autonomous individual who is the guarantor of the rational will, Habermas stresses the importance of the structure of language and communication (ie universal pragmatics). As he puts it, 'What raises us out of nature is the only thing whose nature we know: language. Through its structure, autonomy and responsibility are posited for us' (Habermas, 1972:314). It is the structure of language and communication, not an autonomy attributed to human beings, that underwrites and anticipates the possibility of forging the rational will of autonomous subjects out of an unforced consensus.

Anthropologically a degree of 'autonomy' is a condition of emancipatory action inasmuch that the cultural process of 'raising us out of nature' is attributed to or, better, exemplified by, actions that are autonomous with respect to the imperatives of nature. The natural energy of the individual 'libido, [that] has detached itself from the behavioural system of self-preservation and urges towards utopian fulfilment' (ibid: 312), is what drives the autonomous impulse to mobilize natural capacities to extend the possibilities of human life beyond the confines of the repertoire of nature. In short, because human energy is no longer locked into a continuous battle for biological survival, it can be diverted to projects of social improvement. But it is the communicative ordering of the social world through language that facilitates or impedes the impulse of participants to struggle with, and overcome, restrictions and distortions that are at once discovered by and detected in 'the cultural break with nature'. From this it is clear that Habermas's thinking about autonomy poses a radical challenge to the Kantian concept of autonomy. Kantian autonomy rests upon a pure, ahistorical concept of the 'rational will' that can identify timeless, universal maxims. Habermasian autonomy, in contrast, rests upon the situational production of 'rational will' through unconstrained communicative consensus.

#### *Foucault*

Habermas's optimism about the possibility of an ideal speech situation, even as a regulative idea, sharply contrasts with Foucault's understanding of the possibilities of freedom. Foucault is much more ambivalent about the autonomous subject and enlightenment reason. They are not rejected out of hand but, alongside many other discourses, enlightenment reason and autonomy are regarded as potentially dangerous. Unlike Habermas, Foucault believes that power is



synonymous with social relations and therefore is deeply sceptical of any analysis that perceives or even anticipates a human discourse free of power. Accordingly, he eschews the humanist faith in autonomy as the basis for emancipation and the 'good society'. Why? Because the imposition of autonomy is for Foucault the very source of an economy of power that displaces the more barbaric strategies of a pre-modern era. Physical torture of subjects was necessary within classical regimes where transgressions were perceived as a violation of the body of the sovereign and their peoples. Within a modern regime, hierarchy, normalization and the examination of case files can be seen to remove the necessity of torture in a range of institutions from prisons to factories. Human autonomy is normalized as a condition and consequence of subjective self-discipline (Foucault, 1980; 1982). Enlightenment reason and the demand for self-referential autonomy can be linked to the particular gaze (Foucault, 1979) where subjects are conscious of a disciplinary standard even when there are no physical signs of its presence.

As a discourse of modernity, the danger of autonomy is that it exerts a seductive power – a power that can make it a most oppressive discourse, as it imprisons us in its plausible moral reasoning and its rational promise of self-determination. That said, Foucault (1984) does not reject enlightenment reason and the autonomy that it seeks to sustain. He simply remains ambivalent, recognizing how, despite its potential to operate effectively as the greatest confinement (Foucault, 1982), the appeal to reason and autonomy is our only resource in seeking to resist any power that is deemed to be oppressive – including the very demand that we be autonomous, self-referential subjects. Foucault regards the pressure to be either 'for or against the Enlightenment' (Foucault, 1984:43) as a kind of blackmail from which no amount of dialectical nuance of seeing rationality as both good and bad can help us escape. What is needed is for us to interrogate how we as subjects 'are historically determined, to a certain extent, by the Enlightenment' (ibid.) in order to discover 'what is not or is no longer indispensable for the constitution of ourselves as autonomous subjects' (ibid.). This means being for reason *and* against unreason, including what may be regarded as the unreason(able) and potentially dangerous claims about the possibility of discourse free from power made by Habermas.

Foucault's distinctive form of pluralism warns against the excesses of absolute knowledge while, contrary to some of the claims of his critics (cf. Knights and Vurdubakis, 1984), not sliding into a position of complete relativism. It also involves him refusing to conflate or confuse discourses of humanism with those of the Enlightenment. While highly complex, the Enlightenment was a 'set of events' and 'historical processes', of which a key feature, argues Foucault, was an intellectual and philosophical concern with 'the mode of reflective relation to the present' (ibid. 44). Humanism, by contrast, is a set of themes concerned with a diversity of value judgements, dependent on the different historical contexts in which it occurs. In its different forms, humanism has been both linked with, and opposed to, Christianity, religion in general,



science, socialism, existentialism, and even fascism (ibid.). Foucault sought to illustrate the tensions and differences between the Enlightenment and humanism partly to avoid their confusion, specifically arguing that they have tended to be more opposed than conflated, particularly in the 19th century (ibid. 45).

While humanism is capable of endorsing any philosophy or practice that gives pre-eminence to human values, the Enlightenment restricted its support to reflective and autonomous reasoning. The point of overlap between the Enlightenment and humanism appears to occur only in the 20th century, when the idea of human autonomy becomes the central preoccupation. For humanism, the preoccupation with autonomy reflects a universal view, whether secular or sacred, of the significance and elevation of the human individual. In the 20th century, enlightenment beliefs have been less preoccupied with what Foucault identified as their principal 18th century theme – our 'reflective relation to the present'. Instead, they have focused on the centrality of individual reason and rationality, which requires a belief in the autonomous subject as its condition of possibility. Being not so much for reason as against unreason enables Foucault to reject the individualising effects of humanistic thinking while retaining some conception of autonomy (ie our reflective relation to the present) handed down to us by the Enlightenment.

Being able to stand apart from what others seek to impose upon us demands a degree of autonomous self-reflection, even though what often we might seek to oppose are precisely those individualizing consequences engendered by a philosophy of autonomy. This use of autonomy to oppose individualization can easily be seen as contradictory but it is part of the subtlety of Foucault's analysis that underlies his refusal to be for or against the Enlightenment. His stress on 'our reflective relation to the present' rather than reason and rationality enables him to use the Enlightenment against itself. This reflexivity makes it possible to challenge the current preoccupation with autonomy and its relationship to the processes of individualization that turn 'individuals back in on themselves' (Foucault, 1982).

For Foucault, autonomy cannot be the utopian ideal of a communicatively competent discourse unconstrained by power. The embeddedness of discourses of autonomy in power – knowledge relations renders them decidedly dangerous. The Truth can only be realized through social consensus but this occurs as an effect of power. For it can transform individuals into subjects that secure their sense of meaning, purpose and identity through participation in discursive practices that are a reflection of particular power-knowledge relations (Knights, 1992). Deterministic, or should we say, pessimistic interpretations of Foucault are inclined to describe these outcomes as a dystopia – the 'sweat shops' of work intensification and non-stop technological surveillance (Ferne and Metcalfe, 1998, Sewell and Wilkinson, 1992). What such interpretations neglect are the ever – present discontinuities of control and discipline as well as the resistance and recalcitrance of subjects (Knights and McCabe, 2000) that may refuse to identify with the subjectivities imposed by power.



*Discussion*

For Habermas, the basic problem with Foucault's ambivalent orientation to autonomy is that his claims lack normative grounding (Fraser, 1996) in anything equivalent to the ideal speech situation. Habermas demands a transcendental framework that can act as a benchmark for assessing truth claims. Otherwise, claims to truth are viewed as arbitrary and unconvincing. Habermas revises the Kantian autonomous subject of reason, arguing that subjects are inescapably interpellated within forms of communication. Accordingly, the autonomous subject is conditional upon the critique and transformation of communicative practices that currently deny or distort its realization.

The merit of the ideal speech situation, for Habermas, is that it acts as a basis for the consensual validation of competing claims. In the absence of such an evaluative framework, truth claims are considered to remain idiosyncratic, involving subjective judgements of taste rather than a systematic process of inter-subjective assessment. Autonomy is, for Habermas, a condition and consequence of the exercise of critical reason. It makes possible the detection of, and appeal to, the ideal speech situation as a regulative ideal for debunking claims that impede the pursuit of autonomy by imprisoning and distorting it within asymmetrical relations of power. Only in the ideal speech situation is autonomy fully and freely expressed as the remaining impediments to its unqualified realization are convincingly challenged.

Habermas complains that Foucault is unable to provide normative foundations for his claims. But Habermas' vision of autonomy is founded upon a particular understanding of the Enlightenment to which Foucault does not subscribe. Foucault is not persuaded by criticisms levelled against what Habermas (1987:276) characterizes as a 'presentistic' and 'relativistic' position. For Foucault, Habermas's search for such foundations is at best elusive and at worst fanciful. Foucauldians are therefore untroubled by the Habermasian assault, except perhaps insofar as they regret Habermas's failure to recognize or respect their principled refusal to yield to a totalizing conception of Enlightenment. As we noted earlier, Foucault is neither 'for' nor 'against' Enlightenment, and is critical of those who enlist its discourse to support their role as cognitive, and also moral, police who possess a monopoly of truth about the Enlightenment. This occurs as Habermasians proceed to use their conception of Enlightenment – distilled in the formula for the ideal speech situation, for example – to assess the virtue of other, competing efforts to exercise critical reason. Rejecting both the pursuit of the Holy Grail of normative foundations for truth claims and a conception of critique that is 'oriented retrospectively toward the 'essential core of rationality' that can (allegedly) be found in the Enlightenment, Foucault commends an approach – a critical ontology – that is:

oriented to the 'contemporary limits of the necessary', that is, towards what is not or is no longer indispensable for the constitution of ourselves as autonomous subjects (Foucault, 1984: 43).



Foucault takes autonomy as a given of western social life but, in contrast to Habermas, refuses to understand it as an irrefutable utopian good. Unlike Habermas, he sees the danger in autonomy as well as its benefits. He invites us to contemplate what baggage the autonomous self, however reflective, carries with it since it would appear to be a condition and consequence of an enlightenment rationality that reflects and reinforces particular modes of truth. In short, while autonomy facilitates our refusal to be what we have become, it is important to recognize how autonomy also conceals from us the very self-formation of subjectivity as a relation of power and knowledge. This concealment is especially efficacious with respect to those aspects of the self (eg sexuality) that we treasure as autonomous. It could then be precisely Foucault's questioning of the humanistic, autonomous self and especially its philosophical form of a separation between subject (mind) and object (matter) that leaves him *less* deluded about autonomy. He is willing to use autonomy against itself rather than, along with humanists, pursuing it as a utopian means of protecting us against the oppressions of political tyranny or economic exploitation. In this sense, Foucault sees neither utopia nor dystopia arising out of a faith in autonomy and reason.

Foucault is more concerned with how we can refuse the subjectivity of autonomy where it has the effect of individualizing subjects or isolating them from one another. But his approach to its realization is very different. Habermas is preoccupied with the normative foundations of claims that he wishes to make about dogmas or other impediments to autonomy. In contrast, Foucault commends direct intervention into specific spheres and relations, such as those between the sexes, the representation of illness or madness, and so on. His version of critique, or critical ontology, is dedicated to the immediate process of becoming other than we are. It is to showing what is superfluous, redundant or obstructive to the practice of 'constituting ourselves as autonomous subjects' (Foucault, 1984:43). For Foucault, autonomy is a practice kept alive through practice, and not something that must await its validation within the ideal speech situation. Of course, for Habermas, this is unsatisfactory and indeed dangerous as it appears to license any claim, provided it 'passes' as action, that disrupts the 'limits of the necessary', to promote autonomy instead of subjecting claims to rigorous evaluation by reference to a favoured regulative idea.

## **Conclusion**

Our concern in this chapter has been to interrogate the identification of autonomy as a commonsense utopia: an unquestioned aspiration that may never be wholly realized but is nonetheless regarded as a desirable, virtuous goal. Without either confirming or denying the claim that human beings are innately and/or potentially autonomous, we have explored how the notion of autonomy is constructed as an ideal that exerts 'truth' effects in its routine disciplining of subjectivity. We have elaborated this understanding by reference to the world



of work, where ideas of empowerment have been highly influential during the past decade or so, and to the thinking of Foucault and Habermas.

When we considered the sphere of work, we considered discourses on autonomy developed from opposite ends of the political spectrum – managerialist reformers and Marxist critics. Both subscribe to the idea of autonomy as a virtue. Despite their political differences, they share a view of humanistic progress arising incrementally (managerialists) or through violent social change (Marxists). Neither contemplates the possibility that the labour process may involve considerable ambivalence both for employers and employees. They each support a vision of autonomy on behalf of employees without reflection on the potential danger of imposing and promoting a narcissistic and individualistic demand for personal achievement and self-realization.

In addressing the appeal of autonomy as a form of mundane utopianism, we have followed a line of thinking that is closer to Foucault than to Habermas. This is not to say that we wholly reject Habermas's utopian faith in an autonomy that is free of unnecessary controls or constraints perpetrated by relations of asymmetry. But we are sceptical about the idea that rational argument can be the ultimate or sole arbiter of social intercourse. Relatedly, we are concerned about Habermas's obliviousness to the dystopian possibility that autonomy might be the most confining and disciplining of discursive demands. That said, we recognize how at times Foucault (1982) gives the impression that the panoptic society is upon us, having the effect of simultaneously individualizing and totalizing the subject. However, at other times, he stresses resistance such that a fully individualized and totalized subject would seem an impossibility. Most of the time, Foucault (1977; 1980) avoids such universal grand narratives and focuses on the concrete sites (eg prisons, hospitals, and schools) where power-knowledge relations and struggles of resistance are played out. It is within such relations and struggles that the autonomous self is both a resource and an outcome. Power is routinely exercised to develop, appeal to, secure or reinforce an autonomous sense of self or identity, as our discussion of the 'empowering' management strategy of 'responsible autonomy' (Friedman, 1977) sought to demonstrate. But resistance to such power draws precisely upon the same sense of autonomy, often couched in, for example, issues concerning human dignity or equal rights and opportunities.

In conclusion, it is perhaps appropriate to return to the limited comments we made at the beginning of this chapter regarding the concept of utopia. If the original meaning of utopia is retained, then autonomy can be seen as utopian in the sense of it representing no more than a vision that inspires the imagination rather than a blueprint of a future concrete state of affairs. The autonomy anticipated by Habermas's ideal speech situation conforms to this conception of utopia but Habermas does not contemplate its potentially dystopian effects. Should we accept the more commonsense definition of utopia as representing the 'good' society, then along with Foucault we should remain sceptical and ambivalent about the attribution of utopian values to autonomy, recognizing that the pursuit of autonomy can be as dangerous as its denial. For us, the value



of utopias and utopianism resides less in their visions of good or better societies that, in any event, effectively demand 'the elimination of real people' (Carey, 1999:xii) than in the invitation they unwittingly extend to reflect critically upon the utopian promises and residues present within everyday anticipations of the good life.

## Notes

- 1 For a very extensive listing of Utopian literature from the 16th century to the present day, visit the New York Public Library website at <http://www.nypl.org/utopia/primarysources.html>
- 2 Visit, for example, the Utopia Pathway Association at <http://www.angelfire.com/col/harmony/utopiapa.html>, the Utopian Studies Society at <http://www.utopianstudies.org/> and the Society for Utopian Studies website at <http://www.utoronto.ca/utopia/>. A comprehensive gateway to information on utopia is at <http://users.erols.com/jonwill/utopialist.htm>.
- 3 The confusion relates to the first syllable of the word utopia being associated with the Greek word for good – eu. See Parker, this volume.
- 4 Of course, 'autonomy' is by no means unique in this respect as all concepts secure their meaning and value through particular power-knowledge relations.
- 5 It is worth stressing that we are concerned here with a modernist conception of humanism that is not that form of humanism said to be founded by the pre-Christian philosopher Cicero who, 100 years before Christ, translated the ancient Greek philosophers for Roman consumption. While there are a number of contrasts, for our purposes it is simply that the autonomous subject was not a part of the ancient philosophies whereas it is an essential element in modern versions of humanism. This is not to suggest that modernity be characterized by a singular universal humanist discourse. There is a diversity of such discourses – Christian, existentialist, Marxist, Freudian – but they share one common belief in treating the human being at the centre of the universe. Indeed Foucault (1984) has argued that 'humanism is too diverse and inconsistent to serve as an axis for reflection' (Quoted in Townley, 1999:301).
- 6 For Kant, autonomy is conceived in terms of the exercise of a *rational* will to identify *universal*, self-ruling maxims. In later humanist thought, influenced by existentialist thinking, autonomy is conceived as a leap of faith, rather than rational calculation, to a fundamentally arbitrary (rather than rationally defensible) value-position. For Weber, for example, this leap may be rationally framed and informed but it is not rationally calculated (see Willmott, 1993; Alvesson and Willmott, 1996).
- 7 Amongst such studies they include the classic studies by Walker and Guest (1952), Gouldner (1954), Blauner (1964) as well as Marxist studies (eg Braverman, 1974; Burawoy, 1979; Clawson, 1980; Friedman, 1977).
- 8 As with all aspects of innovation, it is possible to find even earlier versions of these strategies of involving employees more in the work activity. Jacques (1996:156) sees parallels to the job enrichment/enlargement literature in the industrial psychology of Scott and Clothier (1923).
- 9 While there is not space here to discuss it in detail, this analytical distinction is in danger of being reified as if management had no choice but to adopt one or other of these polarized approaches. We distance ourselves from such a view, for as Knights and McCabe (2000a) argue: 'these distinctions are not in practice alternative approaches to management let alone polar opposites. For power and control is only necessary because those over whom it is exercised are free and autonomous to behave in ways contrary to that desired by those exercising the power. Consequently, power is always about persuading others to use their autonomy in a 'responsible' manner' . . . 'power is exercised on the actions (power) of others; if this were not so, subordinates would be subject to domination and their behaviour simply determined'.
- 10 In this study, although by no means exhaustive of possibilities, we found 3 common responses to teamworking and its demand for responsible autonomy that we labelled the 'bewitched' who



welcomed it and the 'bothered' and 'bewildered' who were more sceptical or highly critical (Knights and McCabe, 2000).

- 11 The ideal speech situation includes, for example, equal chances of all participants to engage in the dialogue. For Habermas, the ideal speech situation operates in the process of communication and is anticipated by it. In this sense it is a regulative idea but it is an idea presupposed by all communication rather than one that is identified, as one possibility, by it.

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