

## **Autonomy as a narrative of oppression and of the oppressed**

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# Autonomy as a narrative of oppression and of the oppressed

## Abstract

This paper seeks to examine autonomy as a narrative that at once can perpetrate oppression and be a force for its erosion. Our point of departure is the conventional wisdom that autonomy is a self-evident virtue to be pursued without qualification. Our aim is to interrogate this wisdom and its associated aspiration to become (more) autonomous. To show how commonsense notions of autonomy and self-determination can be problematical and, indeed, oppressive we first consider Tom Wolfe's novel *Bonfire of the Vanities* where the self-identity and associated projects of Sherman McCoy, self-styled Master of the Universe are portrayed. Wolfe shows how McCoy struggles to enact his self-identity, how this identity is eventually consumed on the bonfire of the vanities and finally how its loss is ultimately found to be liberating rather than destroying. We then turn to recent managerialist discourses designed to shake the world of work out of what are seen to be oppressive and self-destructive modes of organization. Specifically, we examine the narratives of corporate culturism and teamworking, both of which share an idealised but untheorised conception of self-identity in which autonomy is a central, unquestionable feature. It is our argument that an unreflective attachment to autonomy has oppressive effects especially when incorporated into particular power-knowledge relations such as (new) managerial interventions at work. When taken for granted as a utopian idea, we show how autonomy has a potential to be counter productive where it serves as a narrative of oppression. Our analysis is not wholly negative, however, as we also focus on the extent to which autonomy is enacted as an important and perhaps necessary resource to resist the discourse of autonomy producing a disciplinary or dystopian nightmare.

## Introduction

This paper seeks to examine autonomy as a narrative that at once can perpetrate oppression and be a force for its erosion. Our point of departure is the conventional wisdom that autonomy is a self-evident virtue to be pursued without qualification. This understanding is lent credibility by the humanist assumption that autonomy is a defining feature of what it is to be human. Since the Enlightenment at least, the quest for autonomy or self-determination has become such a normal preoccupation that it is possible, along with Foucault (1984), to argue that we are enslaved by our desire for autonomy. Yet without the idea of autonomy, some argue, we cannot have anything that resembles an emancipatory project<sup>1</sup>: of liberating workers from capitalist exploitation; of freeing women from patriarchal oppression; of removing racial intolerance and discrimination; or attaining an anti-colonial transformation of western domination over the developing world. For these and other reasons, narratives of autonomy are rarely questioned or interrogated. Human autonomy is so embedded in our ways of thinking in western culture that it has come to occupy a space that seems to lie beyond critique – we simply have to treat it as a taken for granted virtue.

Our aim is to interrogate the identification of autonomy as a self-evident value and aspiration, an aspiration that may never be wholly realised but which nonetheless is assumed to present itself as a virtuous goal. Without either confirming or denying the claim that human beings are innately autonomous, we explore how the notion of autonomy is constructed as an ideal that exerts “truth” effects in its routine disciplining of subjectivity. In the modern world, citizens are **enjoined** to be self-determining and, relatedly, to take responsibility for themselves, albeit, within well-defined limits. Adulthood and maturity are routinely equated with emotional and intellectual independence or autonomy. In the workplace, new employee-centred and customer-focused organisational strategies and designs are promoted as progressive replacements for a bygone era of paternalism and/or bureaucracy. Instead of managers ‘taking care’ of employees, they are urged to facilitate employee empowerment by acting as coaches or guides to promote responsible autonomy at work. Strict and rigid rules framed within bureaucratic career hierarchies are no longer seen as the most appropriate means of building the ‘new’ organisation that is competitively self-disciplined and efficient. All of this ‘new managerialism’<sup>2</sup> involves initiatives that are intended to inspire/induce employees to become ‘empowered’, ‘self-managing’ subjects who can be trusted to work diligently and responsibly in the comparative absence of close, hierarchical supervision or inflationary, financial incentives.

The prospect of removing forms of close supervision, and bureaucratic regulations is appealing to subordinates at the bottom of workplace hierarchies. Undoubtedly a sense of oppression can be lifted when employees are presumed to be responsible and trustworthy rather than denied any scope for exercising their own discretion. Yet, to those who are sceptical or suspicious of managerial claims to represent or accommodate the values and priorities of employees, the concept of empowerment may be suggestive of some problems with the ideal of autonomy. The opportunity to exercise greater discretion (within managerially defined acceptable limits) can also result in more exacting and even tyrannical forms of individual and/or collective self-discipline (Barker, 1993; 1999; Ezzamel and Willmott, 1998). In addition, there is the danger of a loss of protective rights as ‘progressive’ moves to ‘liberate’ employees from ‘rigid’ work procedures (e.g. job demarcations, custom and practice, ) are enacted (see du Gay, 2000). That said, autonomy is an important condition of knowledge of oppression and the emancipation of the oppressed. When such knowledge is defined as a reflection on oneself and others (Patton, 1994: 61 quoted in Ashenden and Owen, 1999: 9), it can serve as a means of identifying and resisting oppression. It is partly through this relationship of the self to the self, or what Foucault (1984: 44) has described as a ‘reflective relation to the present’, that subordinates can find their own narratives – narratives of subjugated power that have the potential to become expressive of subversion and collective self-determination. Discourses of autonomy have this dual capacity. That is why they are both seductive and dangerous. Their oppressive character can be perpetuated precisely by the desire to celebrate and protect them as a vehicle for resisting oppression. The taken for granted virtue of autonomy can displace its oppressive features from visibility, thereby rendering opaque its dystopian effects. We therefore give equal if not greater attention to the subjugated, and often concealed, narratives of the oppressed as they resist invitations to autonomy that can be instrumental in their becoming what others would have them become (Foucault, 1982).

In doing so, we hope to minimize the danger of concluding that the self-disciplining effects of the ‘new managerialism’ are by definition, or inevitably, pathways to an oppressive regime in which management control is exhaustive of human subjectivity. To be sure, autonomous work is far from the idealised image presented by consultants, gurus or managerialists. But it

is also possible to exaggerate the coherence and consistency of the self-disciplining, 'technologies of power' (Foucault, 1980) that promise empowerment, autonomy and fulfilment. These technologies may have a potential to transform individuals into subjects who secure a sense of meaning, purpose and significance from identifying with the tasks (Knights, 1992) over which they have been permitted to exercise autonomy. Yet employees are not empty vessels in which to pour the champagne of autonomy; nor are organisations and management the homogeneous and integrated, orderly and rational, entities that render protest and opposition futile. If we are keen to avoid falling for the utopia that the discourse of autonomy can portray, equally we should beware narratives of dystopia in which the numerous instances of, and opportunities for, resistance are disavowed (Knights and McCabe, 2000).

The paper articulates this understanding of autonomy by reference to contrasting narratives of oppression. To show how commonsense notions of autonomy and self-determination can be problematical and, indeed, oppressive we first consider Tom Wolfe's novel *Bonfire of the Vanities* where the self-identity and associated projects of Sherman McCoy, self-styled Master of the Universe are portrayed. Wolfe shows how McCoy struggles to enact his self-identity, how this identity is eventually consumed on the bonfire of the vanities and finally how its loss is ultimately found to be liberating rather than destroying. We then turn to recent managerialist discourses designed to shake the world of work out of what are seen to be oppressive and self-destructive modes of organization. Specifically, we examine the narratives of corporate culturism and teamworking, both of which share an idealised but untheorised conception of self-identity in which autonomy is a central, unquestionable feature. It is our argument that an unreflective attachment to autonomy has oppressive effects especially when incorporated into particular power-knowledge relations such as (new) managerial interventions at work. Through a critical reflection on these narratives, we seek to develop a theoretically informed understanding of autonomy. When taken for granted as a utopian idea, we show how autonomy has a potential to be counter productive where it serves as a narrative of oppression. Our analysis is not wholly negative, however, as we also focus on the extent to which autonomy is enacted as an important and perhaps necessary resource to resist the discourse of autonomy producing a disciplinary or dystopian nightmare.

### **Autonomy as the Great American Dream**

We can illustrate the burden of our position by referring to the fictional, yet highly suggestive, example of Sherman McCoy, the (anti)hero of Tom Wolfe's novel *The Bonfire of the Vanities*. Sherman chases the modernist aspiration to become fully autonomous. Sherman's self-identity, sustained in the narrative of his unvoiced thoughts, is that of 'Master of the Universe', a (super)man endowed with powers of autonomous action. As Wolfe makes clear, the thoughts that define and sustain Sherman's self-identity and life-projects are developed and maintained through social interactions with his colleagues and his family and, especially through his relationship to his father (see especially Wolfe, 1988: 477 et seq.). His father, Sherman believes, expects much from his son. Sherman regards his father as an 'aristocrat'<sup>3</sup>, even though his background was a humble one; and he believes that his father will accept him only by emulating this elevated social standing - by assuming the identity and associated material trappings of a 'Master of the Universe'. Whether or not these beliefs are justified, Sherman is driven to demonstrate his worth by striving to live up to his perceptions of what his father wants for him. In an effort to live up to these expectations, Sherman pursues the trappings of worldly success, yet never quite feels that his life as a highly successful commodity trader matches these expectations. Privately, Sherman understands that

his own materialistic life-style offends against his father's lessons about duty, debt, ostentation, etc.

Sherman acquires the badges of success that promise to fulfil his aspirations - the highly paid job on Wall Street, the very expensive apartment on Park Avenue, his devoted family. But he repeatedly struggles to confirm his Mastery in his social interactions, especially when he finds himself outside of the well-defined hierarchical relations of his workplace. It is not simply that he is gauche in settings that demand more than the gambling skills of the trading floor. There is also a sense in which he struggles fully to believe, and act out, the roles to which he aspires - in substantial part because he is haunted by his father's expectations. Even before his arrest as a hit-and-run suspect who faces a charge of reckless endangerment and failure to report an accident, Sherman seems somewhat removed or alienated from the social world of New York society in which he compulsively participates. Wolfe conveys the sense of a man who is never at ease with himself, always driven by ambition and guilt, and never fully believing in his illusions of grandeur even when he is most captivated by them. Why, after all, would anyone compulsively entertain the fantasy of being a Master of the Universe if s/he were not harbouring some nagging but unacknowledged doubts or insecurities about their mastery?

Following his arrest, Sherman loses his immediate family as well as his social standing. One reading of his downfall is that this turn of events results in a consummation of his sense of being or becoming an autonomous Master of the Universe on the bonfire of the vanities. When reflecting upon his dramatic change of circumstance, Sherman initially regards himself as the same Sherman McCoy, Master of the Universe who has (temporarily) fallen upon hard times. In other words, Sherman finds a way of preserving his self-narrative of Mastery. Gradually, however, he realises that he has nothing to do with Park Avenue or Wall Street anymore; and that the Master of the Universe self-image was simply nurtured by, and supportive of, a grandiose life-style to which Sherman had aspired. Much to Sherman's surprise, however, his fall upon hard times is eventually experienced as liberating rather than destructive. Sherman compares his life to that of a pampered dog that is taken, beaten and taunted to act as an effective, vicious watchdog. The dog, Sherman notes, is quick to dispense with (ego-defending) fantasies about its situation. As it is being beaten, the dog does not continue to think of itself as (essentially) a fancy pet that has temporarily fallen upon tough times. When the dog's circumstances radically change, the dog *'doesn't cling to the notion that he's a fabulous house pet in some terrific dog show, the way the man does'*. The dog gets the idea. The dog knows when it's time to turn into an animal and fight' (Wolfe, 1998 : 693, emphasis added). Sherman, in contrast to the dog, is involved in a protracted and painful period of reflection before he recognises not just that he no longer is, but indeed that he never was or ever could become, in any substantive or meaningful sense a Master of the Universe. In short, Sherman exercises and discovers his autonomy as he deconstructs, rather than neurotically pre-serves, his self-identity of Mastery.

### *Discussion*

How might Sherman's comparison of his life with that of a pampered dog-turned- watchdog be interpreted? Of course, Sherman does not turn into a physical fighter, though he is prepared to defend himself physically in a dispute with his fellow prisoners in a communal detention cell (ibid. : 728). Sherman resolves to face his changed situation rather than fantasise about returning to his former life. He recognises how, in contrast to dogs, human beings do not instinctively know when their situation has changed. The situation does not determine their response to it. In this respect, they have greater possibilities for acting

unpredictably or in ways that are less programmed (Knights and Willmott, 1999 : Ch 3). To frame this insight within the discursive formation of modern humanism, human beings are understood to have a potential to act in ways mediated by historically and culturally available frameworks of interpretation rather than being determined by biological or environmental forces. Sherman was able to reflect upon his life and account for it in a way that allowed him to 'fight' back<sup>4</sup> against those who were cynically exploiting his arrest for their own political purposes.

Sherman's resourcefulness in resisting forces that were threatening to consume him illustrates how human beings develop a *capability* of becoming autonomous. Prior to this turning point, Sherman's plight also shows how this emancipatory possibility is frustrated when human beings *cling* to fantasies about their situation, including their own autonomy and identity. For Sherman, his self-image as Master of the Universe was a fetish object imbued with a magical power (Willmott, 1990). By subordinating himself to this object as definitive of his identity, Sherman was able to feel more secure and valued, even if his recurrent difficulties in acting out the fantasy left him feeling insecure and inadequate. Initially, the loss of the trappings - the job, the car, the apartment - that lent credibility to the fantasy threatened to destroy Sherman; and, indeed, his father implored him not to lose heart, perhaps fearing that Sherman would take his own life. To cope with this threat to his identity and self-esteem, Sherman initially safeguarded his fantasy of being a(n autonomous) Master of the Universe : he told himself that his changed situation was no more than a temporary setback. In striving to preserve the fantasy of Mastery, Sherman acted like an addict who discovers how to manufacture the drug upon which he has become dependent. It is only when Sherman marshals his powers of reflection, and discerns how he had become imprisoned by a fantasy of autonomy, that he is able to kick the habit, proclaiming that he is 'a different human being' (Wolfe, 1988: 693). Sherman's capability of autonomous action makes it possible for him to reflect upon his situation and thereby engage in a process of self-redefinition. Through this process, Sherman dispels and sheds what he regards as self-deceptions about his autonomy. Sherman is no longer haunted and driven by fantasies of autonomy, fantasies which compelled him to work on Wall Street and accumulate the trappings of his Magisterial life-style.

The call of autonomy, writ large in Sherman's fantasy of being a Master of the Universe, is generated within the discursive formation of humanism. This call is rarely examined or interrogated because, in the modern context, it is viewed as a self-evident virtue to be pursued by every rational human being. Autonomy is taken to be the corner stone of the modern sense of identity. It was only when Sherman refused to heed the compelling call of autonomy that he, perversely, felt empowered to 'stop kidding' himself. Through a highly tortuous and painful experience of a 'fall from grace', Sherman came to realise that the pursuit of autonomy as the ultimate virtue was simply oppressive rather than liberating. Ironically though, he could perhaps never have realised this without having been forced back on his own (autonomous) resources of self reflection as a result of the extreme circumstances of losing the comfort (and discomfort) of his earlier ambitions and aspirations. Autonomy had clearly been an oppressive desire for Sherman, a desire enflamed and directed by this embrace of a way of life in which money and success are seen to be the major condition and consequence of the expression of autonomy. Arguably this life-style reflects and reinforces a collapse of autonomy into a pale image of its potential as it is appropriated by an ideology of individualism.

## Autonomy and Individualism<sup>5</sup>

While autonomy is seen as an unquestioned, self-evident virtue in our society, its uncritical embrace is productive of forms of self-identity and associated behaviour, exemplified by Sherman McCoy, that are legitimised by an ideology of individualism. Conventional wisdom renders people prone to regard their own self-interest as 'natural' or self-generated and therefore unproblematic. Yet, arguably it is more plausible to see it as an effect of dominant narratives (e.g. of Mastery) or, to be more precise, a product of the dominant social science – economics<sup>6</sup>. Deployed by government and industry, (neo-classical) economics is the principal representative of, and the means of legitimizing market economics that promotes individual self-interest as a virtue. It justifies this by pointing to the 'hidden hand' (Smith, 1835) which ensures that each person's unremitting pursuit of self-interest has the (unintended) aggregate effect of maximising collective benefits. This conflation of autonomy and individual (often economic) self-interest is treated as the natural condition and legitimate consequence of the practice of 'free' market economics. Postwar western economic affluence is celebrated as the visible sign of its truth and legitimacy. This creed is, of course, precisely what Sherman takes for granted in his pre-downfall pursuit of material and symbolic success as a Master of the Universe.

With the demise of the Cold War that historically provided the bogeyman nightmare scenario of people denied autonomy, material success alone is no longer sufficient as a rationale for the sacrifices suffered at the altar of the market. New Right political philosophies have emerged to secure a 'free' market ideology that is seemingly compelling and beyond challenge. In addition to confirming the market as the most efficient means of generating wealth and allocating scarce resources, it is espoused as the most effective way of enabling the development of *morally* superior, entrepreneurial, autonomous individuals. It is urged that market discipline founded upon contractual relations between providers and customers can and should be extended to the provision of public services (e.g. public utilities, health or welfare). Not surprisingly, this has resulted in some public concern about a rampant or 'new' individualism that might totally eclipse the sense of moral or civic virtue that stems from collective responsibility (see ESRC's 4<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference, 2000). Pragmatists of the 'new' Left (or Centre Right) commend elements of the communitarian emphasis on civic responsibilities and new citizenship subjectivities<sup>7</sup>. But they do so without surrendering the neo-liberal market ideology embodied in, for example, the UK Labour Government's commitment to a policy of private-public partnerships to reconstruct public services and the national infrastructure. This formula appeals to, and reinforces, an ethic of self-interest and individual reward while contending that market relations can be harnessed and regulated by an ethic of 'inclusion' that makes no fundamental inroads into structured social inequalities. Such 'Third Way' policy aspires to create a 'new' socially responsible society whilst strongly supporting the market economy that equates autonomy with individualism. Policies that support and extend the reach of the private sector into the provision of public goods, for example, act, albeit in unintended ways, to undermine values and civic virtues, that pose an alternative to 'free' market capitalism and its individualistic conception of the subject.

Durkheim (1956; 1964), for all his (functionalist) faults, had the insight to understand the relationship between the individual and society in terms of individuality rather than individualism (Knights and Willmott, 1983). The narrative of individuality understands people to be singularly unique by virtue of the incorrigible distinctiveness of their individual experience that arises from the under-determined and unrepeatable character of social life within a field of infinite possibilities. It is appreciated that this uniqueness is produced through participation in social relations. Individuality is *social* not individual. It is not

something for which the individual can take credit any more than escape. It is this uniqueness and its source in social relations that provides the conditions where exchange (i.e. giving and receiving) and a responsibility to the 'other' are made possible (Levinas, 1989). This uniqueness appears to us in all its glory as we apprehend or anticipate our own singular death – that which is irreplaceably and uniquely the property of an individual. While it might be possible to empathise and come close to sharing the uniqueness of another's life, death is something that we cannot share until it is too late. Yet Derrida (1996: 44) argues that 'it is only on the basis of death, and in its name, that *giving and taking* become possible' (Derrida, 1996: 44). In other words, it is an individuality that generates and sustains our social responsibility, a responsibility that is eroded or displaced by individualism and/or by an associated escape from social isolation through an obsessive and unreflective attachment to an identity derived from membership of a collective, group or team. The escape from the isolating, anomic effects of individualism, exemplified by Sherman McCoy (see earlier) is fuelled by a neurotic, and one could say oppressive, desire to maintain identity-confirming projects - such as the widespread desire to be a 'success' - through the control or denial of whatever threatens to disrupt them.

In sum, autonomy is to be welcomed as liberating when it is no more than an acknowledgement of each individual's unique biographical experience and the positive/productive value of sharing this experience through collaborating with others. We should be less triumphant about autonomy when it collapses into individualism, as is so often the case. We now examine the sense in which the oppressive and/or liberating aspects of autonomy may be reflected and reproduced in the workplace.

### **Management Innovation in the Workplace**

The seductive character of autonomy has made it an attractive discourse for managers and employees alike. Yet it could be argued that the history of management innovation reflects repeated attempts to grant and then appropriate the autonomy of employees for productive purposes. From scientific management through human relations to the most recent quality and re-engineering innovations, the effect of reform has been to further individualise employees, but often as a response to previous problems where individualism had begun to undermine collective commitment and responsibility. 'Scientific management' sought to define and manage the employee as an economic rational individual in an effort to eradicate restrictions of collective output indulged or tolerated by incompetent or self-serving, lazy managers.

'Human relations' sought to overcome the excessively individualistic and economically instrumental orientations of Taylorised employees. But the appeal to the autonomy of employees and their 'social recognition' through identity was no less individualising when human relations strategies of management were adopted. This is because social recognition is simply substituted for economic reward as an incentive to stimulate employee performance. Managers were trained in leadership that would enable them to infiltrate work groups to ensure that social recognition could be tied to performance in accordance with organisational goals (Landsberger, 1958). Instead of social recognition being linked to social acceptance within their workgroup, it was to be turned into an individual reward for being responsive to the demands of the new managerial leader. This might have been a solution to the widespread restriction of output that was discovered by the Hawthorne researchers (Homans, 1950). But insofar as it was successful its effect was to turn workers into individuals who competed with one another for recognition by the leader. In undermining the negative and restrictive

constraints on production, it tended to limit the collective and creative productive potential of workgroups.

Post-human relations, the new managerial innovations - from culture change, through quality management to business reengineering - have sought to draw individualised employees back into the organization. Employees have been urged or induced to identify with the corporate culture, the internal market or the processes that focus directly on improving customer service.

Such innovations are a reflection and reproduction of processes that we connected earlier to a preoccupation with individual self-interest. The corrosive effect of individualism upon collective commitment and collaboration accounts, at least in part, for why so many innovations have failed to deliver what they promise<sup>8</sup>. Instead of addressing the socially destructive effects of individualism by calling for the abandonment of free market thinking and practice, it is assumed that individualised employees can be managed (or disciplined) in ways that secures their collective, productive effort. The recurrent refusal to tackle this issue ensures that a space remains for a historical proliferation of new innovations claiming to be the ultimate panacea (Huczynski, 1996). Empirical research on workplace relations carried out over several years has demonstrated the paradoxical aspects of management innovations that transform workers into individualised subjects while, at the same time, aspiring to resolve the problems that result from so doing. Here we consider two such innovations or fads that have been promoted by management pundits in recent years : the strengthening of corporate culture and the introduction of teamworking.

### *Corporate Culturalism<sup>9</sup>*

The past couple of decades have seen management relying less and less on tightly defined regulations and close supervision as a means of controlling employees. Instead, concentration on performance (or output) measures has been underpinned by mission statements and specification of core values that are intended to provide a broad framework for employees to exercise discretion and act in a responsibly autonomous manner. 'Culture' thereby becomes a target of management control and supplements if not supplants bureaucratic rules and direct supervision by increased self-discipline and self-management.

When managers endeavour to 'strengthen' corporate culture, they invite employees to identify with, and to assess their own performance and contribution in relation to, its values. By making this postbureaucratic departure from a heavy reliance upon rules and procedures, the prescriptions of corporate culturism anticipate the possibility of securing 'unusual effort on the part of apparently ordinary employees' (Peters and Waterman, 1982 : xvii). Rather than seeking to restrain or institutionalise the wilfulness of employees, corporate culturism inverts the conventional thinking. It contrives to harness and mobilise the disruptive potential of labour by enabling or empowering 'ordinary employees' to become more productive through various strategies of self-determined engagement and responsible autonomy.

'The "autonomous" subjectivity of the productive individual has become a central economic resource; such programmes promise to turn autonomy into an ally of economic success and not an obstacle to be controlled and disciplined' (Miller and Rose, 1990 : 26)

At the heart of corporate culturism is, paradoxically, an espoused commitment to 'the individual' and the capacity to determine his/her own fate. Equating corporations that can

claim 'strong' cultures with those that pursue and exemplify excellence, Peters and Waterman argue that their employees not only enjoy greater practical autonomy (because they are less closely supervised and constrained by bureaucratic regulations) but are transformed into 'winners'. In the excellent companies, Peters and Waterman (1982 : 238-9) report,

'There was hardly a more pervasive theme...*than respect for the individual*...These companies give people control over their destinies; they make meaning for people. They turn the average Joe and the average Jane into winners. They let, even insist, that people stick out' (emphasis in original)

Like market relations that invite sellers of labour to believe in their freedom, the discursive practices that comprise the 'excellent companies' are reported to 'give people control' and let them 'stick out'. In other words, they appeal to a dominant narrative of autonomy, self-determination and social distinctiveness or status. 'Self-direction' is commemorated but, crucially, its scope and course is dictated and directed by employee commitment to core corporate values. Consider the Tupperware dealer who exemplifies Peters and Waterman's notion of the strong corporate culture that 'can provide a framework in which practical autonomy takes place routinely' (ibid : 322) :

'The company gives me great freedom to develop my own approach. There are certain elements that need to be in every party to make it successful but if those elements are coloured by you, a Tupperware dealer - purple, pink and polka dot, and I prefer it lavender and lace - that's okay. *That freedom allows you to be the best that you are capable of being* (ibid : 105-6, emphasis added).

In the name of 'practical autonomy', corporate culturism appeals to the individualism of modern employees whose self-identity demands that they are able to 'stick out' (ibid : 81) and experience some degree of 'control'. Instead of feeling dictated to by the corporation, employees are invited to develop an approach that is 'distinctive' and thus to experience the 'freedom' of making choices that enables them 'to be the best'. Of course, the Tupperware example may be an extreme case but the principle is intended to apply across the board. The strengthening of corporate culture is critical because, in principle, it eliminates all other values as it provides the value framework within which employees exercise discretion. By presenting itself as a therapy of freedom that unlocks and releases the 'practical autonomy' of employees, corporate culturism strives to mobilise cultural values, and notably the value of autonomy, as powerful, underutilized media of domination.

The appeal of the 'strong culture', is that it enables each person to confirm a modern (humanist) sense of self, as a self-determining individual - without the burden of responsibility or angst that accompanies the making of (existential) choices between ultimate, conflicting values. The excellent companies, Peters and Waterman contend, appreciate the pain of such choices and address them by 'provid(ing) the opportunity to stick out, yet combine it with a philosophy and system of beliefs that provide transcending meaning - a wonderful combination' (ibid : 81). In short, employees can have their 'cake and eat it' in that autonomy is facilitated within an overall system of meaning that guarantees some security as long as the values of the corporate culture are endorsed. While corporate culturism is equated with the individualistic opportunity to 'stick out' and 'be the best' within the highly circumscribed values of the business, the capacity to reflect upon, and make choices between, competing meanings is precluded or rendered irrelevant. In effect, the meaning of autonomy

is stripped of any association with a critical reflection upon what is presented as the self-evident truth of corporate culture and its significance for employee identity.

As Dahler-Larsen (1991 : 91) has remarked, 'Hardly anything could be more foreign to Corporate Culture than the awareness of the problematic aspects of the values on which modern economic life is based'. Cultural diversity is to be dissolved in the acid bath of the core corporate values. Those who resist or subvert these values are removed. There is, as Peters and Waterman (1982: 77) put it, 'no halfway house for most people in the excellent companies' : you either buy in or you are thrown out. Alongside but also sometimes independent of culture change, teamworking has become perhaps one of the most popular management interventions of recent time.

### *Teamworking and Empowerment*

'Teams', or self-managed work groups, have been utilised to generate a sense of autonomy from the bureau-corporate straight jacket whilst channelling the empowered self toward collective team goals. Emancipation from the rigidities of the corporation is in principle combined with stronger identification with these objectives in ways that create and sustain a collective solidarity, rather than the pursuit of individual self-interest. Teamworking is not especially new in that the idea of semi-autonomous workgroups was the principal strategy of 'progressive' Swedish employers in the 1950s at Saab, Volvo (Gyllenhammar, 1977), the Ericsson telephone company (Palm, 1970), and indeed the socio-technical teams that Trist and Bamforth (1951) studied in British coal-mining<sup>10</sup>. The principal reasoning behind these early experiments in teamworking seemed to be one of developing work designs that could limit the conflict and poor motivation consequent upon the monotony by the labour of mass-produced assembly line work.

Such concerns are not absent from current revivals in teamworking, though its virtue is now more directly linked to the sense in which teamworking distributes autonomy and responsibility to employees. Teamworking attracts a laudatory label (Batt, 1998) not least because of its association with narratives of autonomy and self-determination. The assumption is that no one is likely to oppose such consensually agreed values. Therefore it is anticipated or even expected that team workers will welcome rather than resist the freedom to take on increased responsibilities. It is broadly taken for granted that:

'the incorporation of managerial responsibilities within team working will be welcomed by employees as an unconditional benefit, and that its refusal is irrational because it violates their essential human needs' (Ezzamel and Willmott, 1998:5).

Teamwork is championed as a means of replacing the individualistic self-interested preoccupations of employees with a sense of collective and communal collaboration in team projects. Although not spontaneously emergent phenomena, teams may be viewed as something like tribal groupings that consist of 'a patchwork of small local entities'... 'that seem to go beyond individualism' (Maffesoli, 1996: 9). At the very least, teamworking also operates on the humanistic ethical assumption that human beings are able, and should be enabled, to take responsibility for themselves through what is termed 'empowerment'. At the same time, in-group/ out-group rivalry between teams is encouraged and exploited by management to secure even higher levels of productivity<sup>11</sup>.

In the context of 'new managerial teamworking interventions, empowerment is an articulation of the narrative of autonomy. At first glance, it might also appear to reverse the slide into individualism as it advocates the importance of the team rather than the contributions of individuals members that earlier managerial ideologies of scientific management and human relations had adopted and amplified (see earlier). But empowerment is simultaneously a discursive resource in the exercise of managerial power. In other words, the discourse of empowerment must be placed within a particular context to appreciate its meaning and significance. For Foucault (1973), 'a discourse is 'a corpus of "statements" whose organization is regular and systematic' (Kendall and Wickham, 1999: 42). What provides for this regularity and systematicity is not the discourse itself but the practices (e.g. management control) that render it (more or less) coherent and compelling. Discourse is systematic in the sense that the discourse follows rules of its own production – rules about what statements are permitted, how they say something new, and ensure some material as well as symbolic relevance. Empowerment is typically such a discourse; it is wielded regularly by managers who seek to encourage employees to take on more responsibility by identifying with a narrative of autonomy, or what Friedman (1977) has termed 'responsible autonomy'.

Manager's use of the concept of empowerment is intimately tied to their own preoccupations with power, career and identity. As the language of empowerment has come to be associated with laudatory conceptions of what it is to be "progressive" and "modern", managers often present their policies and decisions as claims to be "empowering" employees. The discourse of empowerment places the hierarchical power plays and political machinations of individual career and identity contests into the apparently more neutral terrain of supporting employee and staff development. by deploying the discourse of empowerment, managers are engaged in mobilising resources<sup>12</sup>, enrolling support, deflecting opposition and co-opting individuals to their projects. In this sense, the discourse of empowerment is not only political in its development but, and most importantly, in its effects. Individuals may so internalise the discourse as to rationalise, interpret and explain their actions and the actions of others in an "unthinking" way as 'empowerment'. Where this happens, the discourse clearly begins to infuse their identity. In such circumstances, a strategy of empowerment has begun to have the effect of transforming the person into a subject - a 'subject' who lives and breathes the discourse it propagates.

There have been many critics who have argued that far from providing greater autonomy and freedom for employees, teamworking is simply a more subtle form of surveillance, accountability and control (see Barker,1993; Delbridge et al,1992; Sewell and Wilkinson,1992; Willmott,1993). Barker (1993; 1999) argues that teamworking is not the utopian dream that managerial narratives proclaim. Under self-managing teams, employees are subjected to what he describes as 'concertive control', where responsibility is delegated to team members who collectively police the norms and expectations of the team through disciplinary surveillance and sanctions. While less directive and abrasive than earlier control strategies, concertive control is arguably more penetrating and pervasive. It internalises a collective self-discipline that is all the more effective by virtue of it being 'naturalised' within the team.

'Team workers are both under the eye of the norm and in the eye of the norm, but from where they are, in the eye, all seems natural and as it should be' (Barker, 1993:435).

Autonomy and empowerment associated with teamworking could be seen as something of a mixed blessing for employees. The price of some freedom from traditional controls is an intensification of the more penetrating control of self-discipline. But this appeal to, and simultaneous disavowal of, human autonomy is precisely the value of teamworking and empowerment for management. In making employee autonomy highly conditional on efficiency, productivity and economic growth, or what Lyotard (1984) has described as the principles of performativity, teamworking facilitates the pursuit of corporate objectives independently of directly visible management controls. Rather than a 'right', autonomy becomes an oppressive burden of responsibility for corporate performance. For some employees the very attempt to make them responsibly autonomous may be regarded as oppressive. We studied one company where the expectations of commitment to the organization, even beyond the normal hours of work, increased exponentially as a system of responsible autonomy was introduced and refined. Its effects were experienced as particularly irksome to young mothers and other part time employees (Knights and McCabe, 2001). Yet, few of the full time employees seemed able to articulate their misgivings - a failure that we interpret as symptomatic of the potent and oppressive nature of the narrative of autonomy.

The seductive appeal of autonomy, responsibility and self-determination found in teamworking may trap employees in a ritual of oppressive demands that erode the boundaries between conception and execution, managers and staff, and work and leisure. Moreover, the extension and penetration of control in the name of autonomy may occur without adjusting or restructuring the hierarchical privileges of the past. Given that the responsibilities for command, co-ordination and control are being distributed down the hierarchy, there must be questions as to the legitimacy of retaining traditional managerial privileges. Potentially, instead of being normalised as unequivocal benefit, autonomy and responsibility could provide employees with negotiating opportunities for improved terms and conditions. While the distribution of responsibility implies accountability, there is little doubt that it is also an additional resource that renders management even more dependent on their employees than was previously the case. At the managerial level, this is reflected in the flattening of hierarchies and the downsizing of middle management. For employees, it could mean an upgrading of their rewards to accompany the greater levels of responsibility. As yet, however, there is limited evidence of the former but not much indication of the latter.

Management has initiated measures that enlist employee support as responsible adults in a way that at once confirms and denies their autonomy. There will be a point beyond which increased responsibility generates undue stress and reduces levels of satisfaction, though of course, staff will respond to such pressures in different ways. New demands concerning, for instance, attending social events, participation in quality improvement teams, goal setting via appraisals, National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs), etc, may begin to be seen as threats to staff autonomy rather than opportunities to exercise it. These can become a burden if pushed too hard especially where they are seen to contradict the increased 'freedom' experienced through the less autocratic approach. As a member of staff in a UK bank remarked, management 'don't want you to think of it as just a job' anymore and expect staff to go that extra mile. A team leader in the same bank observed that although feeling uncomfortable, her work was becoming increasingly demanding in that she now has to 'make' her 'presence' felt during various meetings (Knights and McCabe, 2001). Thus, it is no longer sufficient for a team leader to be technically competent; they must also demonstrate leadership skills. Nonetheless, the potential for critical self reflection cannot be eradicated, as another team member in the bank remarked regarding the emphasis on 'fun', 'they can't make me have fun' and similarly NVQ's were dismissed as 'homework' (ibid.)

Since the rules of discourse always leave space for the production of new statements, empowerment may nonetheless be worth supporting despite its practice as simply another means of management control. For there is always the possibility that the newly 'empowered' will take the discourse further and beyond any direct intention of management and it may even be used to resist management endeavours. Autonomy could indeed even be turned back on itself to resist the very burden of responsibility that it imposes on subjects. It is possible to envisage a situation where attempts by management to instigate a tighter work regime, for instance, could be resisted by appeals to 'empowerment'. Here, employees and trade unions could turn the discourse back on management. Such attempts to subvert management control of the empowerment discourse are often met by the notorious re-labelling or rationalising of change by employers. Narratives of the oppressed therefore offer no guarantee against the narratives of oppression, even and perhaps especially when they are perpetrated in the name of autonomy.

### *Discussion*

Our analysis of autonomy in the workplace has indicated how it can be as oppressive as it is liberating. At the same time, we have intimated that autonomy can be a resource for challenging its oppressive features. Employees are not only exposed to, but also constituted by, corporate culturism and teamworking largely because these discursive practices confirm subjects' sense of their own self-determining rational autonomy. Other relations and discourses that extend beyond but may also resonate with the world of work (e.g. the family, parenting, leisure, alternative moral and political values) contribute to the obvious sense in which employees are never passive victims of the demands to which they are subjected. Much remains beyond the reach and control of corporate culture, teamworking or empowerment. Instead of commitment, there can be suspicion and even downright hostility to what may be perceived as intrusive and patronising. Even where there is no outright, oppositional resistance, antagonism may be present in calculative compliance as employees render their behaviour congruent with corporate imperatives only to the extent that it is calculated how material and/or symbolic advantage can be gained from managing the appearance of consent.

This 'leakage' through the container of corporate culturism and teamworking suggests the presence of forms of 'practical autonomy' that are not reducible to individualistic expressions of conformity (or rebellion). Many expressions of 'resistance' or 'misbehaviour' indicate the possibilities and opportunities to challenge, rather than become subordinated, or indifferent, to managerial authority. Yet, these may amount to little more than articulations of individualism that strike out against managerial authority - not so much to challenge this authority but to negate it as a means of employee self-affirmation. In practice, these forms of defiance may be inextricably intertwined in the ambivalence of dissent. For our purposes, however, we argue for the retention of an analytical distinction between rebellion and radical resistance.

Rebellion is ordinarily driven by an individualistic urge to 'stick out' and thereby secure the self by affirming a sense of its own distinctiveness; envy and a desire to remove and replace those that enjoy the privileges of authority motivate it. On the other hand, less individualistic forms of resistance are stimulated by collectively inspired concerns to subject established authority to critical scrutiny as a basis for its renewal or transformation. Corporate culturism, we have suggested, seeks to appropriate for corporate purposes the urge to 'stick out' in a way that at once embraces and normalises a narrative of oppression founded upon an

individualistic, and narcissistic conception of autonomy. We have been more ambivalent with regard to teamworking, recognising that it enhances the subject in ways that can be turned against the oppression that it may also engineer. Against this, we have commended the possibility of an alternative that recognises the dangers of invoking a narrative of autonomy when it is so strongly associated with individualism. While aware of these dangers, this alternative retains a self-critical conception of autonomy that recalls and pre-serves the possibility of a process of change that is not so compromised by individualistic preoccupations with generating social security for the self. As we have suggested, corporate culturism and teamworking are innovations/fads connected by the idea of empowerment that appeals to a narrative of autonomy. The invocation of this narrative is, we contend, rather perverse as it appears to devalue individualism as it makes a virtue of the 'collectivism' of culture and teams. Arguably, however, the collective and the individual are antimonies rather than polar opposites. They complement rather than negate each other.

It is, therefore, important to break away from an understanding of organisations or society in terms of a polarisation of the individual and the collective and their respective ideologies<sup>13</sup>. Following Foucault (1980), it might be more illuminating to examine how individualism and collectivism have been constituted as objects 'of certain forms of knowledge and a target of certain institutional practices' (Gordon, *ibid.* 235). Both individualism and collectivism are little more than narratives designed and drawn upon to mobilise support for, or in claims of the inevitability of, particular discursive practices. Economic science and its promotion of the 'free market' have colonised the former, whereas socialist and other political opponents have sought to mobilise the collectivist ideal. Neither grasp the sense in which self-referential interpretations are the very condition that makes human understanding possible, nor that the self is already social and thereby minimally, at least, collective. The collective world is simply bound up with our understanding of ourselves and our relations with others; in short, with our individuality. This individuality manifests itself in diverse and wholly unpredictable ways but may include individual and/or collective resistance to particular exercises of power. The autonomy that empowerment claims to extend to employees can be treated as simply a way of manipulating their commitment to corporate efficiency, productivity and performance. Contrariwise, this autonomy can take an individually self-interested form that undermines employee interdependence and its creative potential for political engagement. Still, it is the continued sense of autonomy that ensures that no discourse can be totalizing in its effects, even the discourse of autonomy and therefore it is appropriate to retain some ambivalence towards the current popularity of the managerial interventions that have been the focus of our analysis.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

In this paper we have been anxious to avoid jumping too hastily to conclusions about the oppressive character of narratives of autonomy or the power of the oppressed to construct their own narratives to resist such oppression. Although informed by empirical research, this has been primarily an analytical exploration of the discourses of autonomy and their effects. In large part we remain ambivalent about autonomy recognising, following Foucault (1982; 1984), that power and autonomy are positive and productive as well as negative and constraining. We sought to display this ambivalence through examining a diverse range of discourses where narratives of autonomy are strongly in evidence. In outline, we argued that these narratives are at once accessible and can be made incisive in problematizing commonsense conceptions of autonomy and self-determination.

Initially, in an analysis of the novel *Bonfire of the Vanities*, we suggested that the (anti)hero,

Sherman McCoy, only began to recognise the routinely oppressive character of the narrative of autonomy once he had fallen on hard times. But the possibility of this recognition was itself a function of Sherman's capacity to reflect critically on his own past and thereby, to reassess his future from diametrically opposed values to those that had driven his ambition to be a Master of the Universe.

Sherman's self-identity was that of a Master of the Universe endowed with the powers of autonomous action. This identity, which Sherman repeatedly struggled to enact in his social interactions, especially with his family and acquaintances – was seen to be consumed on the bonfire of the vanities. To his surprise, however, Sherman discovers that the loss of his job, his marriage and his social standing – following from an accident that leads to his arrest as a hit-and-run suspect – is liberating rather than destroying.

In the second section, we began by examining the relationship between the neo-liberal and humanist discourse of autonomy and the ideology of individualism to which it is frequently reduced. This provided an analytical link between our discussion of Sherman in *Bonfire of the Vanities* and an exploration of recent managerialist interventions at work. It was argued that the reduction of autonomy to an ideology of individualism is partly what constitutes the discourse as oppressive. But the seduction of autonomy in our Christian secular or humanistic western society also renders the discourse self-oppressive. In order to theorise further autonomy as a narrative of oppression and as a narrative of the oppressed, we focused on various aspects of the recent rise in managerialist solutions to the problems of securing the productive potential of employees at work. In particular, we focused on the discursive practices of corporate culturism and teamworking and the way that they could be seen to sustain oppressive forms of employee self-discipline.

Efforts to transform employees into self-determining but responsible autonomous subjects has met with a mixed reception. Many advocates, as well as some critics of strategies of employee autonomy and empowerment, recognise how the discourse of autonomy stimulates self-discipline; but they neither identify the obstacles to, nor theorise, this process. Consequently, too much power is often attributed both to the discourse of empowerment and to those managers responsible for its translation into practice. Like any discourse, empowerment or autonomy does not have a monopoly over corporate definitions of reality; it is in competition with other discourses, some of which support while others such as company wide 'downsizing' and 'reengineering' conflict directly with its content and spirit. No discourse can be divorced from the social context of its genesis and development nor its differential distinctive reception by a diverse range of individuals and groups.

Accordingly, discourses of autonomy and empowerment cannot be separated from the hierarchical relations of power within the workplace, and the conflict and resistance with which they are often associated. The fear of losing control, for example, may push management to limit the form of autonomy. In terms of allocating resources and facilitating empowerment, it may fall well short of the ideal. There are also problems when, as is frequently the case, management interventions like corporate culturism and teamworking are accompanied by programmes of redundancy or performance monitoring. Talk of empowerment may simply undermine managerial credibility where new managerialism fails to fulfil conceptions of autonomy and empowerment held by employees. Considerable resistance to the inadequacies, inconsistencies, and rhetoric of management and its programmes may be the outcome. Paradoxically, the mere existence of a discourse on autonomy and empowerment can be a major stimulant to resistance, as employees feel

oppressed and provoked - by its comparative absence in practice - to engage in (autonomous) forms of 'misbehaviour' (Knights and McCabe, 2000).

The discourse of empowerment and autonomy can thus be turned back on the organisation as criticism is targeted at the failure or incompetence of management to deliver the very autonomy that it has promised (Knights and McCabe, forthcoming). On the other hand, there is no guarantee that where management do deliver on their promises to empower employees, this will meet with a positive reception. Some employees may resent the increased responsibility and commitment that autonomy appears to demand. Despite elements of resistance, we have suggested that a majority of employees, including those most inclined to resist, are seduced by and trapped in a comparatively unreflective attachment to, the self-disciplining discourse of autonomy. This is the legacy of our subjection to the elevation of rational autonomy and self-determination within humanistic and enlightenment philosophies. In its individualistic form, it is reflected and reinforced by an ideology of individual self-interest as the dominant narrative of a neo-liberal, bourgeois economics that prevails within the power-knowledge relations of contemporary Western social life.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This has been a virulent argument of some feminists (see Benhabib, 1992).

<sup>2</sup> We understand managerialism as a discourse that defines the problems of management and organization entirely from the point of view of practising managers rather than from a perspective that is independent of their immediate interests. 'New managerialism' has been used to describe the recent proliferating interventions (e.g. culture change, quality, teamworking, reengineering, etc.) designed to transform individuals into more autonomous, self-disciplined and responsible employees.

<sup>3</sup> This was partly because of the 'aristocratic chin' that they both shared but, more fundamentally, because of his imperious manner. When as a child he had visited his father at the law firm where he eventually rose to become chief executive officer, Sherman felt himself being treated like 'His Majesty the Child'. Not surprisingly, this treatment led him to strive to live up to this attitude of the other(s), exemplified by his father, towards him. Notably, 'In his entire life [Sherman] had never dared embarrass his father with a single confession of weakness, let alone moral decay and abject vulnerability' (Woolfe, 1988 : 478). His self-image at a 'Master of the Universe' can be seen as an extension of this refusal to acknowledge, or his denial of, any vulnerability.

<sup>4</sup> Notably, Sherman contrives the idea of assuming ownership of a tape recording that otherwise could not be submitted in evidence for his defence (Wolfe, 1988: 690-1).

<sup>5</sup> This section draws on Knights (2000).

<sup>6</sup> For more comprehensive discussions of the construction of individual self-interest see Schwartz (1986); Knights and Willmott (1999).

<sup>7</sup> Some governments (e.g. those led by Blair and Clinton) have been limitedly concerned to modify or ameliorate the oppressive features of this narcissistic 'me-too-ism' through promoting a 'new' society of social responsibility and social inclusion. A 'new' concept of citizenship is promoted in which civil and social responsibility are expected to become the norm and there is a commitment to advancing the opportunities for all in a society where no one is to be disadvantaged. But this responsibility is kept at a comfortable distance from raising taxes, challenging the unregenerate pursuit of capitalist profits, restricting the global domination of multi-national corporations or seriously inconveniencing the mass electorate in stimulating a collective responsibility for the future.

<sup>8</sup> A major concern of senior and divisional managers in a recent survey on management innovation was that 'most tools promise more than they deliver'. From their sample, 68.1% believed this to be the case (Bain & Co., 1997: Table 8).

<sup>9</sup> The following sub-section on corporate culturism draws from Willmott (1993) and the succeeding subsection on teamworking and empowerment draws from Knights and McCabe (1998; 2000a; and 2001).

<sup>10</sup> A similar position is taken by Barker, (1993:413) although he does not trace the phenomenon of teamworking back to the Human Relations School where it rightfully belongs.

<sup>11</sup> Teamworking is also valued by management because it allows a redistribution of responsibility to the point of production or service delivery where it facilitates flexibility and responsiveness inasmuch that it reverses the atomistic legacies of Scientific Management and collective bargaining (Womack et al, 1990; Wickens, 1992) and perhaps fills a vacuum left by the decline of trade unionism in postNew Right capitalist economies (Kerfoot and Knights, 1996).

<sup>12</sup> Latour (1987:172) described the mobilisation of resources as 'the ability to make a configuration of a maximal number of allies act as a single whole in one place'.

<sup>13</sup> This draws on Knights and McCabe (Forthcoming).