The feasibility of resistance in the workplace: A critical investigation

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ABSTRACT: In this article, I undertake a critical interrogation of the complex relations of control operating in the contemporary workplace of the knowledge worker by drawing on Foucault's theorisation of power and resistance. I plot the risks to which the knowledge worker are exposed, the conditions of possibility as well as the challenges that complicate productive resistance in the workplace. In the process, I make use of an array of existing scholarly research that utilises the Foucauldian framework of the relationality of power and develops some Foucauldian concepts further and applies them to our present context.

Keywords: complex control; Foucault; knowledge work(er); neoliberal governmentality; power; resistance; workplace

Introduction

The typical neoliberal knowledge worker is characterised by his/her paradoxical addiction to work. For the compulsive knowledge worker, beyond the world of work there is not only escapist consumption and guilt-ridden procrastination, but also a soul-seated craving for a kind of satisfaction of an existential and/or ontological kind. This kind of addiction defies reason and desire on account of the thumotic source from which it derives. In other words, for the constantly self-controlled, self-responsible, neoliberal knowledge worker, work addiction is fuelled by the thumotic satisfaction it produces. It is therefore *not* the appetites that are associated with contemporary capitalist profit-seeking and consumption, as is generally assumed. It is not the dark horse of desire, *but the spirited white stallion of thumos.*

The Greek notion of thumos is associated with spirited anger in the face of injustice, especially when it concerns a party that cannot fend for him/herself. Importantly, Plato contends that this anger must be balanced by gentleness. Knowing when to harness thumotic anger and when gentleness is called for requires practical wisdom. Accordingly, the high-spirited soul needs to undergo a philosophical education to learn restraint and forbearance. Hence, thumos is both a necessary condition for the possibility of justice and poses a fundamental challenge to it. This dilemma is resolved through education. The ingenuity of the neoliberal theory of human capital is that it harnesses this spiritedness of the soul against its original role of anger against injustice. Hence, the neoliberal foregrounding of human capital as most decisive for optimising productivity and increasing profit provides the answer to how neoliberal capitalism succeeds in tapping into the soul-seated spiritedness to generate the competitive entrepreneurial spirit, which is the latter's diving force. This harnessing of thumos to its own ends would suggest that possibilities of resisting neoliberal governmentality are severely compromised since thumos is the very source of

indignation in the face of injustice, and the readiness to stand up and oppose it.

In line with the spirit of Michel Foucault's analyses, I am not in the habit of offering solutions. Foucault offers problematisations rather than solutions, since solutions are themselves prone to being co-opted by prevailing relations of power and put to work to further the very agendas they seek to resist. Exemplary is precisely the manner in which neoliberal governmentality succeeds in putting the thumos of knowledge workers to work by way of the theory of human capital that informs the latest management theories pertaining to knowledge workers. However, I find the case studies and their analyses offered by Courpasson et al. (2012) heuristic in terms of providing a method for producing practicable avenues of productive resistance in the workplace. I critically interrogate their analyses by contextualising it against the backdrop of the "complex" mechanisms of control operative in contemporary neoliberal workplaces, which, I contend, makes their proposed method of resistance not impossible, but poses significant challenges to it that they fail to take into account.

Biopolitical control

The subject as entrepreneurial project in the making is inscribed in a process of continuous self-improvement. Here self-improvement takes the form of a normalised internalised injunction, which is the means through which power insinuates and inscribes itself "smartly" (Han, 2017) into every minute aspect of life through self-learning, smart, connected devices that track our flows of physical movements and the rhythms of our biological processes. The consumption patterns of the knowledge worker are traced in miniscule detail, whether it concerns online resources and research consumption, or online shopping through digital platforms that redirect the clicking subject's conduct through highly seductive clickbait

that nudges the surfer to craft a path of online activity that renders the maximum return of profits. The online working life of the knowledge worker is traceable, directable, and as such, controllable. The mindboggling pace of technological innovation is catapulting us into a future of what Törnberg and Uitermark (2020, p. 6) calls "complex control". They contend that

> control is increasingly moving to lower-level strata, operating by setting the context and conditions for self-organization – which Foucault theorised in terms of the "microphysics of power" (Foucault, 1976) and power as the "conduct of conduct" (Foucault, 1982). Thus, the order of things emerge naturally from the rules of the game.

The era of digital platforms has been welcomed as one of unprecedented freedom that puts the self in the driver's seat against the static, linear and top-down configurations of former regimes of governmentality. These former regimes of power may be likened to what Foucault (1975) called "disciplinary power". The digital platforms through which neoliberal governmentality wields biopolitical control over the life of the individual and the population (Foucault, 1976) is "open, informal and non-linear" (Törnberg & Uitermark, 2020, p. 7). Importantly, Törnberg and Uitermark ask, "[t]o what extent does self-organization actually imply *empowerment* or *freedom?* Who is the 'self' in 'self-organization'?" (ibid.; emphasis in original).

In a relatively short period of time, digital platforms have become essential infrastructure for social and economic life. Marres (2017) reports that user-generated content has become a standard aspect of new technologies to such an extent that the terms "digital" and "social" have become interchangeable. Social/digital platform engineers such as Zuckerberg (2019) proclaim these platforms to be spaces for personal liberation where every voice can be heard, and each and every one can realise their intellectual and democratic potential and express their own individuality. This is part and parcel of the "sharing economy" (Puschmann & Alt, 2016) or "commons-based peer production" (Benkler, 2002). It is worthwhile reminding ourselves of the benign and liberating meaning of the "commons" – that which is held in common and not owned privately. It is what is ours and what we created together; it is the product of the power of the people as opposed to top-down governance. Mattijssen et al. (2018) define the political ideal associated with the term self-organisation as an array of diverse governance arrangements where private actors take their own initiative to act autonomously to pursue public or collective objectives.

New digital technology is associated with new forms of social organisation that is considered disintermediated by means of "prosumption" and hence liberated from central leadership or control. The utopian vision that people will voluntarily and cooperatively self-organise if the opportunity presents itself is the very principle upon which digital platforms of the sharing economy, like Wikipedia, Airbnb, Uber, etc. or social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook are based (Benkler, 2006; Srnicek, 2017). This principle is closely aligned to the way in which complexity theory defines self-organised systems: "systems in which the components 'are to some degree independent, and thus autonomous in their behavior, while undergoing various direct and indirect interactions'" (Heylighen et al., 2006, p. 125; cited by Törnberg & Uitermark, 2020, p. 8). The notion draws on the collective behaviour of social insects that succeed in accomplishing masterful and hugely sophisticated feats of collaborative organisation without centralised leadership or control. They succeed in maintaining huge, complex colonies, which emerge from local mass-interactions of individual ants (Mitchell, 2009; Ball, 2012). Törnberg and Uitermark (2020) explain that complex systems are distinguished from complicated systems in that the latter are assembled – they are top-down, hierarchical and bureaucratic. The former, on the other hand, emerges through self-organisation. The genius of the self-organised system is its resilience, which results from the inherent redundancy of each individual part of the same class – each and every part's role can just as easily be performed by any other part. Complex systems operate by means of what Jones et al. (1997) calls "network governance" and Folke (2007) refers to as "adaptive governance". What these forms of governance refer to is a general shift away from bureaucratic structures in organisations to organic or informal social relations. Contemporary neoliberal governmentality, then, is characterised by complex, decentralised governance, which inscribes every aspect of individual and collective life in digital platforms that operate through self-organisation.

Bauman (2013) theorises that the concomitant acquisition of consumption freedom signals the depoliticisation of the citizen who, when reduced to a mere consumer, loses his/her capacities for political action. This claim is based on Bauman's conviction that freedom has a collective basis. Importantly, he draws our attention to the fact that just because something is individualised and "bottom-up" does not necessarily mean it serves the interests of its constituents or constitutes an expression of their will. Bauman's contention regarding the depoliticisation of the citizen is supported by my own argument that suggests that the neoliberal knowledge worker that lives to work is not interested in opposing the injustice to which s/he is subjected because s/he is incapable of recognising the injustice of the neoliberal working existence and the radically unequal world it contributes to. The worker is incapable because his/her thumos has been harnessed by neoliberal capitalism by way of a governmentality that funnels this self-regarding energy and spirit into the self's individual entrepreneurial projects.

The paradoxical individualisation of the social/digital platforms of the post-disciplinary society signals a fundamental disempowerment. Digital technology affords unparalleled flexibility in the construction of the subjectivities of its users. As Halpern (2015) and Kitchin et al. (2017) point out, the digital interface comprises an encoding of an epistemology, representing what is important and orchestrating how the user can navigate the world by what it includes, how it is included and what it omits. Such representational logic structure the agency and subjectivity of the user, not merely by defining the user role, but also by determining in an inconspicuous but decisive way how the user conceives of, relates to and inhabits his/her social world. As such, the digital platform interface embodies an ontology that defines what the world is and what it is not.

> How the user will act is a function of what affordances and view of the world...the platform provides...While the user is free in the sense that she gets to choose from a menu of options, what is on the menu, the order of the options or the subtle designs that shape how it is perceived is provided by the platform (Törnberg & Uitermark, 2020, p. 9).

This ontology draws on social psychology insights to optimise engagement such as the fact that negativity rather than positivity captures attention (Rozin & Royzman, 2001). Bad news engages users much more than good news, locking each user in their own individualised bubble, an ever-diminishing self-fulfilling prophecy of what the world is like and the user's place in it. As Törnberg and Uitermark (2020, p. 10) remark in a Foucauldian vein, "[t]hrough platform design, the platform citizens' agency can be reconfigured as easily as the platform can itself, making the 'conducting of the conduct' of subjects precise and efficient".

Drawing on Bauman (2013)'s notion of the "synopticon", Törnberg and Uitermark (2020) contend that the contemporary form of control and surveillance may be conceived of as the "social synopticon" which operates by means of digital platforms, in which the many watch the many. In the age of disciplinary power, as theorised by Foucault (1975), power operated by way of the model of the panopticon, in which the few watched the many (from a centralised watchtower in prisons). Bauman's synopticon considers the way in which mass media and television in particular have shifted the functioning of power relations to a model in which the many can watch and admire the few. The social synopticon of digital/social platforms provides the means through which "we write ourselves into being" (Sundén, 2002, cited in Törnberg & Uitermark, 2020, p. 5) and constitutes social indicators of reputation and standing (Ert et al., 2016). In this way, these platforms gamify the innate human need for recognition and our insecurities for corporate profits. In other words, these platforms employ typical elements of game playing (e.g. point scoring, competition, game rules) to encourage engagement with a product or service.

Han (2017) uses notions such as the "digital panopticon", "smart power" and "friendly Big Brother" to theorise the workings of contemporary relations of power as control and surveillance. The model neoliberal working subject welcomes constant surveillance as benevolent and willingly subjects him/herself to audits, indicators, grading and rankings to feed the insatiable appetite for recognition. To be optimally competitive compels religious self-discipline and self-surveillance. This form of biopolitical control of neoliberal governmentality is based on "tuning and shifting the market competition, using flexible and market-based forms of control, while concealing and de-politicizing through technical coding, which modifies the competition within the market, rather than regulating top-down" (Törnberg & Uitermark, 2020, p. 11).

What is brought to the fore by Törnberg and Uitermark's notion of complex power is the appearance of *spontaneity*. The fact that phenomena that emerge from mass-interactive systems are hard to trace back to specific causal roots is taken as evidence of their *spontaneous* emanation, "as if micro-level causes were not just as much a function of external constraints and conditions" (ibid.). We know from Foucault's analyses of neoliberal governmentality that the supposedly free market is carefully constructed and maintained and not free or spontaneous in any sense. Likewise, the digital/social platforms that form the predominant working environment of the knowledge worker is not disintermediated as it proclaims to be. These platforms operate by making the social technically mediated by recasting modes of interaction into quantified and "datafied" forms that permit control through intervention and manipulation (Van Dijck & Poell, 2013). Digital/social platforms employ quantification that distorts

social reality and employs ideological choices in their technical codification (Feenberg, 2002). The idea of "nudging" comes from behavioural economics (Thaler et al., 2013) and is employed in the "choice architectures" of digital platforms which drive the user's behaviour by shaping the contexts in which they make decisions and altering it in predictable ways. Various mechanisms are employed such as altering how and what information is presented, what options are available to the user, what the default choices are, or by creating implicit or explicit awards, scores or rankings (Törnberg & Uitermark, 2020). Foucault theorised this in terms of how neoliberal governmentality orchestrates the conduct of individuals indirectly by operating to manipulate the rules of the game rather than the players. Much like the neoliberal market, this orchestration is perceived as a "natural" or "inherent" outcome of digital technology rather than the intended result of a political design choice. In the process, the unequal outcomes of self-organising systems are exonerated from any political, conflictual or power dimensions. This is complex power in action – "the power of *designed self-organization*" (ibid., p. 8; emphasis in original). Importantly, self-organisation is imbued with a normative dimension, which casts it as inherently good, apart from being inevitable since it results not from any active intention of the actors, but *emerges* on account of some imperceptible synergy co-created among the actors. If "the new instrument of control is horizontal, decentralized, networked communication" (ibid., p. 9), in which actors not only voluntarily but enthusiastically engage in constantly, to what extent is resistance possible – especially if it is not sought because control is intangible?

Foucault and the possibility of resistance (in the workplace)

If we are to draw on Foucault in our attempt to answer the question, we need to remember the evolution of the notion of resistance in Foucault's later works, starting with *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. I (1976), from reaction to creation through to normalisation, which I have traced in Hofmeyr (2008). To what extent is resistance possible, given that the power relations at work in neoliberal governmentality have successfully tethered the noble white stallion of thumos to the unquenchable aspirations of the self as a project: the entrepreneurial self? Bearing this "project" in mind, it is instructive to remember that Foucault revisited the Greco-Roman notion of care of the self as a site of potential resistance. In the second and third volumes of the *History of Sexuality*, Foucault returns to antiquity to develop a contemporary "post-moral(ity)" ethics of self-transformation. To be clear, Foucault's conception of ethics, which is realised as a practice of "care of the self", entails the self's relation to itself and not some subscription to a rigid moral code. "Care of the self" conceives of the subject as individual agency characterised by its capacity for self-formation *amid* power relations, as we shall see. In other words, being situated amid the forces that constitute subjectivity does not mean that we cannot counter them through self-creation – unless these forces amount to a physical determination. Given the present neoliberal configuration of complex power that has insinuated itself precisely within the site of individual agency, it seems implausible that care of the self could still be capable of subverting the "government of individuation" (Foucault, 1982, p. 212) through the invention of new forms of *self*-government.

In Foucault's later work, resistance undergoes a certain evolution (Hartmann, 2003; Thompson, 2003; Hofmeyr, 2008) and it is instructive to revisit this evolution with a view to the possibility of resistance under the present conditions of complex power relations. In the chapter titled "Method" in Volume I of *The History of Sexuality* (1976), Foucault understands resistance as a *tactical reversal*: resistance can be pinpointed where local clashes are assimilated or re-inscribed into the existing order. This re-appropriation entails a mutual conditioning in which both active and reactive forces are strategically altered. In other words, although power bears the inherent threat of domination, the threat is countered by the constitutive potential of reversal – the possibility of overturning subjugating relations of force. Here, Foucault (1976, p 96) theorises

> mobile and transitory points of resistance, producing cleavages in a society that shift about, fracturing unities and effecting regroupings, furrowing across individuals themselves, cutting them up and remoulding them, marking off irreducible regions in them, in their bodies and minds.

I find this conceptualisation far more realistic and convincing than the likelihood of some great revolutionary liberation once and for all, or "radical ruptures" or "massive binary divisions" (Foucault, 1976, p. 96). The possibility afforded by reversal to overturn subjugating relations of force confines resistance to a reactive stance. In other words, it is confined to the ability to seize the power to *react to* constraining governmental regulations, institutionalised normalisations and societal intolerance. We might ask ourselves, then, if resistance is a mere *re*-action or negation, what is inherently *creative* about it? Care of the self as creative resistance – as fashioning oneself as a work of art, as Nietzsche and Foucault suggest – is after all a positive action on its own terms.

Between the publication of Volume I in 1976 and the subsequent second and third volumes of Foucault's *History of Sexuality* (1984b), there is certainly evidence of a shift of emphasis regarding power and resistance, if not a fundamental rethinking of the analysis of power and knowledge. Perhaps Foucault's turn towards governmentality and the technologies of the self may be seen as an implicit concession on Foucault's part, an admission that his depiction of power and resistance in Volume I was too constrictive.

There is certainly a readily discernible modification in Foucault's consideration of power and resistance in this period, culminating in his 1982 essay, "The subject and power". Here, and in the second and third volumes of his *History of Sexuality*, a reconceptualised self appears on the scene: the self is now no longer considered the passive product of an external system of constraint and prescription, but the active agent of its own formation. Foucault consequently articulates a more positive means of resistance, that is, resistance as autonomy through heteronomy. There is, however, also a continuity in Foucault's thinking between the first and later two volumes of *The History of Sexuality*. In the well-known interview titled "The ethic of care for the self as a practice of freedom" (1984a), it becomes apparent that resistance as creative force cannot do away with the necessity of resistance as a reactive force. Here, Foucault (1984a) introduces the self as conceived by the Greeks, as *individual agency* characterised by autarchy and auto-affection. He theorises "care of the self" as a site of resistance opposed to

all those material, historical, economic, discursive and linguistic structures, practices and drives that constitute subjectivity and of which the subject is an effect. He is not suggesting that the subject can ever entirely be free from relations of power, but rather that the self's embeddedness in power "*does not* entail the necessity of accepting an inescapable form of domination" (Foucault, 1977, p. 141; emphasis added). The struggle against the submission of subjectivity (Foucault, 1982) is possible precisely because it occurs in the same place as power. If we understand the exercise of power as a mode of action upon the action of others, the freedom to act and to react is implicit to power. That is why resistance to power can only occur amid relations of power (Foucault, 1977; 1980). The subject musters autonomy in spite of, but also through, heteronomous power relations. The disempowering forces which it resists are simultaneously the forces that power self-creation. Greenblatt (1980) explains that the freedom of the art of the self does not consist in self-creation, but in the experience of self-formation in the face of all the other forces that fashion us.

Foucault's conception of power therefore leads to the conclusion that, as Balibar (2002, p. 15) puts it, "the conditions of existence which are to be transformed are woven from the same cloth as the practice of transformation itself" – they are both of the order of "an action upon an action" (Foucault, 1982, p. 221). The relations of power are indeed *constituent*, whereas the more or less stabilised social norms, the norms of behaviour, are *constituted*. As a consequence, liberty might just be within our reach, but is not attainable once and for all. It requires constant work in the form of *practices* of freedom. Freedom, then, is not something one has, like a possession, but something that one exercises or performs. The pervasiveness of power might dispel the myth of autonomous self-creation, but it does facilitate heteronomous practices of freedom – a difficult freedom that is not freedom *from* power, but freedom *through* power, despite power and because of power (Hofmeyr, 2005). Power in Foucault is the common territory of both liberation and subjugation, the place where freedom is both realised and diminished or annihilated. The self can resist power because it is ensnared in relations of power – in the very relational network that makes resistance necessary. However, every act of resistance puts in place new relationships of power that in turn have to be resisted (Foucault, 1984a). As a result, the self faces the danger of being caught in what Balibar (2002, p. 19) refers to as "an infinite regress". "Regress" here refers to a series of actions (practices or technologies of the self) in which resistance is continually reapplied to its own result without approaching a conclusive state of absolute liberation. The subject, then, is caught in an infinite regress of cycles of repetition of liberation and domination. Every newly created self-invention is co-opted by the power relations in which it is entangled, and hence necessitates self-refusal if it is not to congeal into a state of domination. The trajectory leading from resistance to liberation, from liberation to domination, and back again (via resistance) has to be inscribed in the very fabric of individual subject-formation as a constant practice or exercise of liberty.

Accordingly, to avoid normalisation, every new formation of resistance has to dismantle itself in an effort to resist more effectively. Put differently, every newly created subject identity has to be abandoned if it is not to risk being incorporated into the prevailing regime. Think, for example, how capitalism

mobilises countercultural subject identities to promote products as "cool", "hip and happening", thereby taking into its fold those that are "alternative" or counter-cultural, those that wish to diverge from the mainstream. The hoped-for effectiveness of countless relays of reimaginings of the self is situated in the fact that it presents the powers that be not with one force of resistance, but with countless small individual acts of self-(re) formation (Hofmeyr, 2008).

However, in the context of neoliberal governmentality with its complex network of biopolitical controls and powers of omnipotent surveillance that seek not to normalise, but to capitalise on difference and variations from the norm, the prevailing order has succeeded in defusing whatever subversive potential these relays might have by putting them to work. It has latched onto our thumotic drive towards creative self-actualisation through the invention of the entrepreneurial subject – a project invested in constant self-improvement and reinvention. Instead of constituting a more effective provocation of inhibiting governmental rationalities, these forms of self-actualisation and self-empowerment turn out to be sanctioned and actively encouraged by biopolitical control – their seditious potential is sublimated through incorporation in schemes orchestrated by precisely those powers they seek to contest. In other words, instead of effectively promoting new forms of subjectivity through the refusal of the kind of subjectivity coupled to biopolitical control, as Foucault (1982) urges, the self's transformative labours are forging exactly the kind of ambitious individuality that furthers the agenda of efficiency and ever-increasing profit generation. The latest governing techniques posit "intelligent" limits – limits sensitive to our every creative, entrepreneurial ambition, which means that being "different" has itself become a part of subjugation (Hofmeyr, 2008). But before we conclude that Foucault's notion of care of the self no longer has any chance of success as a means of resistance in the context of the forms of biopolitical control operative in the Information Age, it is worth revisiting his understanding of the critical attitude as virtue.

The critical attitude

Critique, Foucault insists, "only exists in relation to something other than itself" (Foucault, 1978, p. 25). It is a certain way of relating to existing reality, to knowledge, action, society, culture, and also to others that despite this dependency and heteronomy remains *other*. In other words, as critique it only exists in as much as it succeeds in remaining outside, in as much as it resists being assimilated into its object. Moreover, critique entails not just questioning a specific law, but also its very epistemological underpinning, which legitimates the rules of governmental validity. If so, then questioning the law will entail renouncing the established grounds of its validity. This is something different and far more dangerous than the simple rejection of a given law (Butler, 2000). The practice of critique when practised consistently should then not only be able to keep track of changing governmentally imposed limits, but also of the politics of truth that supports it. Resistance effectively posed to one limit by extension also questions the entire order that supports it (Hofmeyr, 2008).

How does Foucault's understanding of critique or the critical attitude take shape as resistance, i.e. not blind rebellion but constructive or productive resistance – in the workplace?

Productive resistance is not about becoming ungovernable, but about how not to be governed *like that*, in the name of *those principles* (Foucault, 1978) exclusively driven by profit generation *at the expense of ideas*. Examples of "productive resistance" in the workplace which produce change that significantly challenges top management decisions have instructively been documented by Courpasson et al. (2012), who identify the following steps in the process of productive resistance that they plotted based on two case studies. What they call "enclave insurgency" in two different companies started with (1) a trigger, which led to (2) the formation of an enclave. Next, (3) the enclave made their concerns public in the context of the company, which then (4) resulted in a temporary realignment of power relations. Importantly, this outcome requires that resistance is founded on principles that support the core business of the company, that it is posed by powerful and successful stakeholders in the company, and that it is directed at a *receptive* management that is equally driven by the *core* business of the company. Such dissent might be met with initial indignation, but it is eventually accommodated and new roles emerge. What is evident about this documented "productive" resistance is the fact that it depends on a number of decisive preconditions. It must be initiated by the *right* people in the name of the *right* principles and met by the *right* management in order to succeed. The *right* management is management motivated not exclusively by profit generation at whatever cost, but by the core business of *knowledge generation* of the company. What is striking in the case of both case studies is that the conflict that arose was between two camps: researchers' (knowledge workers') need for autonomy and power over decisions in key projects, and the so-called marketers' concern to expedite products to market and to recognise the constraints of competition (Courpasson et al., 2012). The resisters cast competing values into relief – "the durability of science and how quickly a scientific endeavour becomes a marketable product" (ibid., p. 810). A crucial ingredient in the success of dissent as productive resistance is management's acknowledgement of the researchers' expertise and their legitimate participation in decisions as condition for the company's success. What Courpasson et al. (2012) claim is that they succeed in showing evidence that successful or productive resistance is within the capability of the workers, as opposed to being at the discretion of management. However, their entire argument hinges on two case studies that feature management that – although struck with initial disgruntlement – was amenable to the case put before them by the dissenters, since they are themselves driven by ideas rather than primarily by profit. In both cases, the respective CEOs recognised that the core business of their company is the innovative ideas of their employees, and it is these very ideas that are wholly responsible for whatever profit followed.

Numerous other case studies, to the contrary, show evidence of a neoliberal governmentality that prioritises profit regardless of the cost. One example that comes to mind is Ford SA's failure to recall the Kuga SUV after being alerted to a manufacturer's defect that caused 47 vehicles to catch alight and led to the death of one person as a result. Insurance companies confirmed that they had alerted the company to issues related to the Kuga going back as far as 2014. What is crucial to note about this case is that it was one company's (the insurer's) profit incentive that suffered at the expense of another's (Ford's) and that it was profit

generation that decided the battle and drove the resistance.[1] The reason we now see recalls of defective products on a scale not seen before is not because they pose a serious safety risk to the public, but primarily because they "cause significant financial and reputational damage to the companies concerned".[2]

To return to the two case studies cited by Courpasson et al. (2012), both feature situations in which opposition arose between the organisation's knowledge workers and its "market guys": the former wanting to advance fundamental research, the latter exclusively interested in advancing the profit incentive at the expense of such research which was seen as not rendering marketable products quickly enough. They were interested in products rather than concepts. While Courpasson et al. (2012) do not wholly succeed in circumventing the decision-making power of management at the outset of the process of dissent, they do effectively show that the "success" of dissent hinges on whether it is posed by the right people, and in the right way, that is, "strategically" in Foucauldian terms. In other words, of critical importance in both cases is *how* and by *who* dissent is carried out, i.e. through the ingenious mobilisation of ideas in a way that shows the dissenters' commitment to ideas in the interest of the organisation, not dissent to further their own interests or because they are "ungovernable". As noted above, dissent in both cases is shown to start with a trigger and then voicing it to test the waters for support in the organisation and specifically among influential employees. The next step is to identify the vested stakeholders that are committed to the cause and willing to take it on. The success of dissent hinges on the fact that it needs to be posed by a pool of highly successful, influential employees in senior positions that enjoy management's respect and that are considered team players rather than rebels. Another important step is to identify the positions of the various players on the playing field – not only who is in favour, but also who opposes the issue at stake and where they are located in the organisational hierarchy. The issue is then posed to management in a constructive and informed manner that compels management to take it seriously. Decisive for the success of productive resistance is management's initial recognition that it is the mobilisation of concepts in the interest of ideas that trump the marketers' insistence on products.

So, posing resistance that produces change that significantly challenges top management's decisions is far from evident. Courpasson et al. (2012) themselves recognise that the potential positive effects of productive resistance are not enough to guarantee its accommodation by top management. The first obstacle to accommodation, they note, is "the risk that top management will fail to grasp the relevance of resisters' claims, especially in contexts where it does not trust lay employees and presumes them to be reluctant to change and to make extra effort" (ibid., p. 803). Fox (1974) refers to this familiar scenario as the low trust/high control syndrome, a scenario that resonates with conditions in the workplace under biopolitical control, although in that case the "low trust" and "high control" are both veiled since being constantly watched, monitored, tracked and traced is self-imposed and the "controlled" worker

experiences him/herself as free. Resistance also risks being met with opposition by top management since it could potentially delegitimise management's past actions and decisions (Courpasson et al., 2012). I would wager that this fear of losing face accounts for much of top management's obstinacy and intolerance in the face of constructive critique. Shifting from contention to cooperation to achieve settlements (O'Mahony & Bechky, 2008) is not only far from evident, but highly unlikely in workplaces where command and control have been the norm. As Courpasson et al. (2012, p. 804) contend, they have to

> give powerful proof of their superior understanding of a given situation...craft their concerns and proposals in a skilful way that makes obvious that they can be productive for the organization even while opposing present policies.

They suggest, in other words, that resisters should be able to "create temporary realignments of normal power relations in which the commanded achieve control of an agenda that is presumed to govern them" (ibid.). What makes this manoeuvre even more tricky is the fact that this should all be done without bringing top management or any of their previous actions into disrepute, i.e. without making them look incompetent.

An additional dimension, which I cannot explore in the present context in any great detail, but which is too critical a factor to omit, is the fact that "the modern, open, more flexible corporate world" has been found to be the perfect breeding ground for psychopaths (Babiak & Hare, 2007). Although the prevalence of psychopathy in the general population is relatively small – only about 1% – they is a far higher prevalence in the corporate environment since the business world incentivises ruthless behaviour regardless of the cost to others to further its agenda. These personalities may appear articulate, intelligent and charismatic to outsiders, but their general behaviour is "controlling, aggressive, threatening, and abusive". Their aggression tends to be "predatory in nature", devoid of the emotional upheaval that typically accompanies violent or aggressive behaviour in others. Moreover, their aggression is *instrumental*, simply a means to an end, and is seldom followed by any normal concern for the suffering or harm inflicted on others (ibid., pp. 17–18). If Babiak and Hare's research is to be taken seriously, and we accept that psychopathic personalities are prevalent in contemporary corporate environments that attract them since they provide power and control, and that actively incentivises their ruthless, unconscionable behaviour, then productive resistance becomes even more improbable.

This argument becomes even more compelling when we consider Paulhus and Williams (2002)'s characterisation of Machiavellianism, the manipulative personality, subclinical or "normal" narcissism characterised by grandiosity, entitlement, dominance and superiority, and subclinical psychopathy, which means that these socially aversive personalities are not considered clinically pathological. If it is indeed these Marchiavellian, narcissistic and psychopathic personality types that populate the top management structures of the average contemporary organisation, it is doubtful that they would be receptive to any "realignments of normal power relations in which the commanded achieve control of an agenda that is presumed to govern them (Courpasson et al., 2012, p. 804). To the contrary, these personality types are known to

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1   Source: https://www.businesslive.co.za/rdm/news/2017–01-16-exposed-how-ford-was-warned-about-burning-kugas-but-did-nothing/

2   Source: https://www.kiplinger.com/slideshow/investing/t052-s000–10-biggest-product-recalls-of-all-time/index.html

actively undermine cooperative and positive power practices in underhanded and self-serving ways, they are unlikely to "'listen to' challenges from below and coproduce a process to accommodate resistance" (ibid., p. 806). The resisters in the case cited earlier opposed authoritarianism in a decisive manner that, while cooperative, did not call for a truce. In fact, they confronted top management with an ultimatum, insisting that if no discussion of the issues in question were possible, they would not proceed with the annual performance evaluations of their local collaborators. It is precisely such acts of backing top management into a corner that incurs the merciless wrath of the typical narcissist or psychopath, which results in severely detrimental effects for the resisters.

What I find highly compelling about Courpasson et al.'s research, on the other hand, is the Foucauldian rationale they provide for drawing on the "stories of resistance" as their data collection strategy. They provide two reasons:

> (1) Stories of resistance show how resisters politicize contested categories. They help supersede purely formal accounts that can mask contested definitions. (2) Stories of resistance clarify how opportunities for resistance derive from regular power relations, More specifically, we consider that it is "through everyday practical engagements [that] individuals identify the cracks and vulnerabilities of institutionalized power" and stories of resistance shed light on how individuals actually "make a diagnosis of social contexts" (Ewick & Silbey, 2003, p. 1331), because stories of resistance reveal conscious attempts to shift the dynamics or openly challenge the givenness of situational power relations (Courpasson et al., 2012, p. 806).

For Foucault, the possibility of resistance is always centred around "the most immediate, the most local power relations at work" (Foucault, 1976, p. 97). It is within the context of the local, the concrete, specific and contiguous that Foucault asks how the human subject fits into certain games of truth such as those one might encounter in practices of control (Foucault, 1984a). It is in the enmeshment of power/knowledge or governmentality as truth/control that he emphasises "practices of liberty over processes of liberation" (ibid., p. 3). What is the practical form that liberty or freedom takes? Here Foucault makes a crucial distinction between power and domination. The all-pervasive field of power relations is always mobile and agonistic in the Greek sense of combat in which the opponents retain the power of acting and reacting. Contrary to this, domination is a congealment of power relations into a state in which one opponent makes it impossible for the other to react and the relation solidifies into one of complete subjugation. This means relations of power necessarily entail and require relations of resistance. Where there is power, there is resistance. When and to what extent do these relations or acts of resistance become practices of liberty? Resistance becomes a practice of liberty when it succeeds in realising more manoeuvring space than what was previously possible, when the subject assumes his/her right to question relations of power on their potential or imminent effects of domination and to counter them in such a way as to modify the relation between action and reaction.

Against this strategic backdrop, the individual subject takes the form of a node in a network of power/knowledge.

Being constituted in and through power, this "individual" is something other or something more than a distinct singularity. Not that Foucault is personifying power and "depersonifying" or dehumanising persons by making them into effects of power. The individual is still vulnerable to subordinating forces but also invested with the possibility of resistance through subjectivisation [*subjectivation*]. As Butler (2002, p. 19) points out, the "effect" in Foucault

> is not the simple and unilateral consequence of a prior cause. "Effects" do not stop being affected: they are incessant activities, in the Spinozistic sense. They do not, in this sense, presuppose power as a "cause"; on the contrary, they recast power as an activity of effectuation with no origin and no end.

The all-pervasiveness of power relations, then, does not give cause for defeatism. "Individual" action, understood as an acting or reacting relation of force, cannot simply remain localised (or be conceived of as individualistic) for it has the potential to cause a chain reaction or ripple effect through the social (or organisational) fabric – as Courpasson et al.'s case studies illustrate. To be sure, force relations can either mutually support each other like links in a chain, or be isolated from one another due to disjunctions and contradictions (Foucault, 1976). Foucault's insistence that power is never subjective – that is, that it cannot be reduced to an individual subject's decision or action – can also be understood in this light. There might be an initial instigating agent of resistance, as was the case in the cited case studies, but the possibility of resistance is itself inextricably linked to pre-existing relations of power. Moreover, since it is neither localised nor isolated, the individual's "practices of liberty" would then also have the potential of effecting larger-scale political changes. In fact, if we are to accept Foucault's claim that power is all-pervasive, the individual's practices of liberty become a necessary condition for political action (Hofmeyr, 2005). However, liberation in turn installs new relations of power, which have to be controlled by practices of liberty. The practices of liberty then appear as a *necessity* emerging after liberation – to maintain freedom (ibid.).

Conclusion: A call to constant critical vigilance

While I recognise and appreciate that the real-life case studies cited by Courpasson et al. provide concrete and practicable ways and means to articulate and formalise claims about issues that were hitherto not recognised by top management as well as possible ways to solve the tensions (Courpasson et al., 2012), I am plagued by a persistent worry about the actual feasibility of productive resistance in contemporary organisations. Is productive or collaborative resistance a realistic option in the average neoliberal organisation that is characterised by complex relations of control? What complicates the possibility of resistance even further is the inextricable entanglement of our own interests with those of power. The financial success of the organisation, after all, also serves our own interests. But when does profit generation come at too high a cost? It comes at too high a cost when expediting the process of delivering marketable products or services is at the expense of the fundamental research and knowledge generation that inform the design of those very products or services. It comes at too

a high a cost when the biopolitical controls installed to ensure profit generation is at the expense of mutually respectful and supportive collegial relations. In other words, the cost is too high when ideas and people are compromised for the sake of money. The cost is too high because it undermines the sustainability of profit generation. We know all too well that the ingenuity and well-being of human capital and the synergy between knowledge workers are the fountainhead of knowledge generation. The right people in the right place surrounded by the right colleagues in a healthy and supportive work environment are the sources of the ideas that generate the knowledge that drives organisational success. However, these knowledge workers are at risk. On the one hand, their work environment attracts and incentivises a proportionally high percentage of individuals with Machiavellian, psychopathic and narcissistic traits that pose a serious threat to healthy relationships in these organisations. On the other hand, their work environment is dominated by digital/social platforms that insinuate complex relations of control into every aspect of their lives – controls that predetermine their freedom of choice in predictable ways and hence greatly diminish their creative problem-solving, knowledge-generating capacities. As Törnberg and Uitermark (2020) point out, digital platforms may seem to create individual freedom, but they in part are doing so by concealing the pushing, nudging and pulling that set the context and boundaries of individual freedom. To be sure, the complex control operating in and through digital/social platforms serves the profit incentive of the organisation behind them, be it Google, Academia.edu or LinkedIn, but not the organisations that the knowledge workers work for. Instead, they put the thumotic drive for recognition and self-actualisation of the entrepreneurial knowledge worker to work to serve their own interests. In the process, they severely compromise the knowledge worker's freedom to create truly innovative ideas. In addition, it diminishes the knowledge worker's capacity for critique, which is crucial for the possibility of resistance, because these platforms actively steer the user to follow digital pathways that expose them to content that merely confirms their worldview instead of questioning it. It could be argued that in the era of complex control, the last two phases of what I have called the evolution that Foucault's notion of resistance has undergone, that is, creation and normalisation, have been rolled into one. On the one hand, the entrepreneurial knowledge worker as "project" (Han, 2017) is incited to create and actively pursues creating him/herself as ever-increasingly efficient enterprise-unit (Foucault, 2008). As such, self-creation or self-care in the Foucauldian sense has been co-opted by the neoliberal power/knowledge configuration in which it is inscribed, stripped of its critical, liberating potential, and normalised. Enterprising creativity is the new norm. Biopolitical control does not seek to normalise creative otherness, but seeks only to map how it is distributed around the norm. It thus "tolerates" that which is alternative or otherwise and profits from it. Along the same line as Foucault's contention that power is not bad, but dangerous, I conclude that resistance in this context is not impossible, but complicated by a host of challenges. In a context of constantly changing, flexible flows of complex control the odds seem to be stacked against the working subject's ability to keep track of the governmentally imposed limits that have become increasingly imperceptible and elusive. As Foucault points out, what should be questioned is the politics of truth that underlie these flows of control. The possibility thereof calls for a pessimistic activism,[3] a renewed and constant critical vigilance and awareness of just how dangerous power relations have become in our present Information Age. What prevents us from surrendering to a complete fatalism is Miller and Rose's (2008, p. 39) contention that

> [g]overning is not the realization; of a programmer's dream. The "real" always insists in the form of resistance to programming; and the programmer's world is one of constant experiment, invention, failure, critique and adjustment.

In other words, the reality that they seek to control invariably confronts them with forces removed from their access, capable of perhaps even deflecting or effectively blocking them (see Bröckling et al., 2010). Control, no matter how pervasive, is never complete. What is called for, however, is a critical consciousness of the operationalisation of truth or complex control that conditions the possibilities of our being, acting and thinking in the present.

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3   According to Eagleton (1990, p. 387), Foucault is exemplary of what he calls "libertarian pessimism". The oxymoron is instructive, Eagleton continues. Foucault's position is libertarian in that it advocates for an aesthetics of existence, i.e. "an existence blessedly free from the shackles of truth, meaning and sociality". At the same time, however, it is pessimistic, "because whatever blocks such creativity –– law, meaning, power, closure – is acknowledged to be built into it, in a sceptical recognition of the imbrication of authority and desire". Taylor (1984) points out that although Foucault wishes to discredit the very notion of a liberation from power, his own concept of power does not in fact make sense without the idea of such liberation.

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