

# **New Challenges to the Enlightenment: How 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Socio-technological Systems Facilitate Organized Immaturity, and How to Counteract It<sup>1</sup>**

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Zurich, Newcastle, Copenhagen, Dresden 2023

Paper accepted for publication in the  
*Business Ethics Quarterly*

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<sup>1</sup> This article has been further developed and expanded from an initial paper by Scherer, A. G., & Neesham, C. 2021. New challenges to Enlightenment: Why socio-technological conditions lead to organized immaturity and what to do about it. SSRN Working paper. Available at: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3753612>

# **New Challenges to the Enlightenment: How 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Socio-technological Systems Facilitate Organized Immaturity – and How to Counteract It<sup>1</sup>**

## ABSTRACT

Organized immaturity, the reduction of individual capacities for public use of reason constrained by socio-technological systems, constitutes a significant pushback against the project of Enlightenment. Forms of immaturity have long been a concern for philosophers and social theorists such as Kant, Arendt, Fromm, Marcuse, or Foucault. Recently, Zuboff's concept of "surveillance capitalism" describes how advancements in digital technologies lead to new, increasingly sophisticated forms of organized immaturity in democratic societies. We discuss how socio-technological systems initially designed to meet human needs can inhibit the multi-dimensional development of individuals as mature citizens. To counteract these trends we suggest two mechanisms: *disorganizing immaturity* as a way to safeguard individuals' and collectives' negative freedoms ('freedom *from*'); and *organizing maturity* as a way to strengthen positive freedoms ('freedom *to*'). Finally, we provide an outlook to the five further articles that constitute the *BEQ* Special Issue "Socio-Technological Conditions of Organized Immaturity in the 21st Century".

**Key Words:** organized immaturity, technology, control, surveillance, freedom, Enlightenment

**Acknowledgements:** We acknowledge Tom Donaldson for his input and encouragement in the early stages, former *BEQ* chief editor Bruce Barry for his confidence and remarks, and current *BEQ* chief editors Frank den Hond and Mollie Painter-Moreland for their mentoring and comments that helped us realize this *BEQ* special issue and our paper project. Thank you all!

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In seeking to define the existential condition of the modern human being, 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> Century thinkers of the European Enlightenment (such as Locke, Hume, Montesquieu, Rousseau, or Kant) conceived of humanity as engaging in a new intellectual and socio-political project: if individuals were to claim their natural rights and have them protected by social institutions through which they could exercise democratic citizenship, then it would take enlightened citizens to achieve this project – that is, citizens whose intellectual maturity allows them individual autonomy of judgment, choice, and decision-making without the dominance of an external authority; ability to use their own reason and experience in order to reflect and judge critically and ethically upon complex or problematic situations; and capacity to challenge given norms and institutions from a perspective that goes beyond private interests, defending the common good. In a nutshell, the project of the Enlightenment establishes the basic conditions under which citizens are both entitled and able to govern themselves (see, e.g., Bristow, 2017; Dupré, 2004; Fleischacker, 2013).

Since the contours of this Enlightenment project were first sketched, individuals (also as part of groups and communities) have found themselves in a continuous struggle for their rights – including various forms of freedom. As thinkers of (post-)modernity (such as Arendt, Fromm, Marcuse and Foucault) have cautioned us (in more or less explicit ways), the anti-Enlightenment challenges posed by the very socio-technological systems that humans have created to protect and enhance their freedoms have been relentless. In this article, we argue that the socio-technological systems of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century are not only reinforcing challenges of the past: they are, in fact, taking them to a new, unprecedented level – in which individuals voluntarily contribute to the institution and entrenchment of socio-technological conditions from which they could no longer break free (see also Zuboff, 2015, 2019). In the same context, we understand socio-technological systems as relatively stable and influential modes of human-technology interaction.

Hence, as some authors celebrate today the overwhelming role of new technology in augmenting the conveniences of our lives (e.g., Varian, 2010), it seems necessary asking ourselves: what price are we prepared to pay for these conveniences? When submitting more and more of our decision-making processes to automation (e.g., through algorithms and artificial intelligence), how much are we ready to give up with regards to privacy, independence, and the ability to make autonomous and mature choices? For instance, when we search for specific information online and receive newsfeeds selecting information customized to our interests (from reading lists and vacations to potential employers), we need to keep in mind that these are in fact personalized advertisements generated by analysis of our past online preferences and set by ‘nudging’ algorithms to influence our decisions and behaviors in both private and public realms (Gigerenzer, 2022; Hansen, 2015; Mittelstadt, Allo, Taddeo, Wachter, & Floridi, 2016; Tsamados, Aggarwal, & Cowls, 2022; Zuboff, 2019). Similarly, when we accept to become ‘passengers’ of automatic driving or predictable ‘moving objects’ in a smart city, we should reflect on the deeper kinds of knowledge and skills we are relinquishing, thus diminishing our abilities to exercise mature control over our own lives.

All these and similar bundles of trade-offs in privacy, autonomy, and independent thinking seem to compound and place the modern human into an overall condition of immaturity, as increasing technological potential seems to constrain and even thwart human development instead of enhancing it (Scherer & Neesham, 2022). Also, these trade-offs, induced and orchestrated by forces of humans’ own creation, tend to exceed human control. This phenomenon, hereby called ‘organized immaturity’, needs to be further examined – and so does the role of organizations and organizing in promoting it.

Based on Scherer and Neesham (2022), we define organized immaturity as the erosion of individuals’ and collectives’ capacities for public use of reason, facilitated by recent socio-

technological developments that simultaneously collect, analyze and manipulate data on social exchange and have the capacity to normatively influence the behavior of individuals and social groups instantaneously. Identified by these authors as one of the most persistent and insidious threats to the Enlightenment project, organized immaturity can be regarded as a problem created by socio-technological systems that are used to invasively influence and perpetuate normative behavior at various levels of society – be they private, commercial, or political. As further evidenced in this study, rational and mature thinking of individuals, which is arguably the most important component of the Enlightenment, is one of the main victims of this influence.

Consequently, we identify organized immaturity as a problem because it constitutes a form of counter-Enlightenment: in other words, individuals stop reasoning and delegate decision-making capacities to socio-technological systems. Gradually deprived of opportunities to exercise autonomous, critical-reflective reasoning, individuals are more likely to unwittingly confirm, establish, and enhance this new ‘normality’ (Galloway, 2017; Gigerenzer, 2022). Thus, safeguarding the basic liberties of individuals becomes a difficult endeavor, and the institutions emerging from uncritical forms of agency are likely to suppress rather than foster human and democratic development. In other words, instead of harnessing social and technological progress to create a propitious environment for human fulfilment and self-determination (Tegmark, 2017) and a public sphere for collective decision making based on reasoned argument (Cohen & Fung, 2021; Habermas, 1962/1989, 2021), most of us likely become complicit to engaging in systems that control and dominate individuals and groups in new ways (Zuboff, 2019).

The threats induced by organized immaturity can be summarized into two large categories: (1) threats to liberties (mostly related to decisions in the private realm), and (2) threats to democracy (related to collective decisions in the public realm). In the first category,

we note the following significant social changes over the past few decades: legitimate authority based on shared values, equal and mutual rights, democratic entitlement, and the rule of law tends to become more and more replaced by technology and, eventually, by the control of the ‘Big Other’, an emergent, opaque, decentralized, and “ubiquitous institutional regime” (Zuboff, 2015: 81), to which individual citizens are destined to submit their liberties, giving up autonomy both in the private and public realm; conformity is no longer an action imposed from the outside but the natural effect of internalizing invasive technologies in our everyday decisions and actions (Gigerenzer, 2022; Zuboff, 2015); and, by losing social control in general, humans see their freedoms minimized.

In the second category, reason as a basis for informed individual and collective decision-making and action is increasingly replaced by algorithms that take (partial) control of human lives (for an overview, see Tsamados et al., 2022). In this way, organized immaturity can lead to a disintegration of society as we know it: by designing socio-technological systems in a way that are customized to the needs/preferences of the individual, contemporary Western societies face the problem of an increasing disintegration of the public sphere (Bennett & Livingston, 2020; Cohen & Fung, 2021; Habermas, 2021; McCoy, Rahman, & Somer, 2018). Other threats to democracy are posed by the fact that suggestions or decisions made by these systems lack democratic legitimacy, which is also further eroded by social-institutional subject construction processes led through these new technologies (e.g., big data).

Under such conditions, there is a possibility that the human individual may no longer be able to exercise freedom to construct and reconstruct her own subjectivity (Harari, 2018). As a result, the human individual may become the victim of an enhanced form of capitalism that submits her liberty and autonomy to the control of a handful of social agents who escape public accountability while skewing mass preferences in favor of their private economic,

social and political interests. Under this predicament, such socio-technological systems may become uncontrollable by democratic means and render public notions of fairness and justice meaningless.

In this article, which also serves as the introduction to the *BEQ* Special Issue “Socio-Technological Conditions of Organized Immaturity in the 21st Century”, we describe how the new socio-technological systems work and how they emerge, thus creating conditions for organized immaturity to emerge in contemporary democratic societies. We then define the phenomenon of organized immaturity from a Kantian perspective, explore it through a historical discussion of modern critiques of technology, and update the problem in the context of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, with the aim to develop solutions to which future research in business ethics and organization studies are particularly well placed to contribute. We suggest, accordingly, two principal ways in which organizations and organizing could play a positive role in human emancipation – namely, by protecting individuals’ negative freedoms (freedoms *from*), and by enhancing their positive freedoms (freedoms *to*) (Berlin, 1969; Fromm, 1941/1969). In closing our analysis, we briefly introduce the papers selected for publication in this Special Issue and call business ethics scholars and organization theorists to further study organized immaturity and to explore potential countermeasures.

## CONTEMPORARY SOCIO-TECHNOLOGICAL SYSTEMS

### AND THEIR ORGANIZATIONAL DIMENSION

Humankind’s love-hate affair with technology has always been complex. Coordinated efforts to use technology in order to produce human wellbeing-sustaining cultures has morphed into *socio-technological systems* (as defined in the Introduction). In the modern era, socio-technical systems have been studied in relation to work optimization in organizations and rationalization of society (Dusek, 1993; Emery, 2016; Mumford, 1981; Rophol, 1999; Trist, 1971). Today we see an unprecedented development: such systems have evolved from the

level of *techne* (that is, knowledge about using artefacts and know-how to better achieve certain ends – Aristotle, 2011) and *technologies* (that is, knowledge embedded in tools, procedures, machines, and plants), to *technological infrastructures* interlinked with *technology-enhanced communication* (see Green, 2002) reaching a level of technological rationality that takes a life of its own. “The technical structure is medium and outcome of human agency, it enables and constrains human activity and thinking” (Fuchs, 2005: 57) but also “produces new forms of domination and competition” (*ibid*: 7) in global society. In a nutshell, we are witnessing how the digital transformation of democratic society is generating socio-technological systems that are becoming so efficient that they leave limited avenues to escape them.

The new socio-technological systems that are now influencing contemporary democratic societies so decisively are mostly based on big data, machine learning, and AI algorithms. They range from selecting information customized to individual consumers’ interests (e.g., via newsfeeds) and personalized advertisements (e.g., Amazon reading lists, food choices, vacation and travelling options) to using algorithms to ‘nudge’ consumers based on existing biases. The success of such practices is largely due to the fact that they are not coercive or overtly oppressive but developed to serve humans’ most intimate desires, for instance, set to augment individual well-being (Cederström & Spicer, 2015, 2017; Harcourt, 2015) by responding to enduring human aspirations to be healthier, faster, stronger, younger, and so on. We briefly outline the key features of these technological developments here.

Advances of socio-technological systems in the Fourth Industrial Revolution (see Schwab, 2017) have consolidated globalizing information and communication technologies (ICTs) as driving forces of societal development. New big data and artificial intelligence (AI) based systems (such as social media platforms, Internet-of-Things, Smart Cities) have been met with a mix of enthusiasm and fatalistic acceptance. Creative technological disruptions are



observed as already shaping the future of work, for example (PEGA, 2020), and business leaders are advised to embrace the new technologies as reliable alternatives to capital investment and labor in order to generate increasing levels of economic growth (Purdy & Dogherty, 2016). However, they have also attracted new waves of criticism and anxiety (Kamishima, Gremmen, & Akizawa, 2018; Khanna, 2018; Korinek, 2019; Sachs, 2016) – in particular, fear that these systems will deprive people, in subtle and almost undetectable ways, of individual autonomy, privacy and other human rights (O'Connor & Weatherall, 2019; Richards, 2013; Trittin-Ulbrich, Scherer, Munro, & Whelan, 2021; Zuboff, 2015, 2019).

An important, distinctive feature of these new socio-technological systems is the pervasive manner in which they have emerged in democratic societies. Stimulated by market-based responses to consumers' private interests, they have been generated in decentralized ways, via loose networks, not necessarily from intentions or plans to monitor and control human behaviors. Even more so, there seems to be a progression in control systems, starting (1) with voluntary connection to social media platforms, progressing (2) with fragmented surveillance (e.g., via the so-called Internet of Things), and culminating (3) into integrated external surveillance systems, such as smart city projects that embrace individual decision making and behavior in their totality (see Scherer & Neesham, 2021). However, as we examine the evolution of new technologies through these three stages, we note that these multiple-origin developments seem to converge toward complementarity and integration into systems that induce immaturity in increasingly coordinated (that is, organized) ways. The following section outlines earlier warnings about technology-induced immaturity, in its organizational dimension, from Kant to (post-)modernity, to help us acquire a more profound understanding of historical developments and lessons learned.

## CONCEPTUALIZING ORGANIZED IMMATURITY

### FROM A KANTIAN PERSPECTIVE

According to Kant, intellectual immaturity<sup>2</sup> is an individual's lack of development of capabilities required to effectively exercise autonomy in judgment and decision-making, to apply reason and experience for the public good, and to challenge existing institutions in order to change them for the benefit of the wider community. Here we are especially concerned with the propensity of humans to embrace intellectual immaturity voluntarily, in certain conditions. Kant himself described this kind of immaturity as being "self-inflicted"<sup>3</sup> (Kant, 1784: 481). Although what he observed was occurring in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, the phenomenon is still enduring – albeit with different manifestations in different periods of human civilization. Disruptive technological advancements create new opportunities for such self-inflicted immaturity, and this is not just a problem for or about individual actors but also collective actors. Contemporary technologies, organizations, and institutions can perpetuate such immaturity in the very ways they function, and it is in this sense that we examine here how immaturity becomes 'organized', that is, how it manifests itself in structured and systematic ways, and what impacts it has on the human condition today.

In sum, we understand "immaturity" as a characteristic of individuals or social collectives that arises when individuals defer or delegate autonomous reasoning to external authorities (Grimwood, 2019), including the authority of socio-technical systems (Fromm, 1941/1969; Marcuse, 1964/1991). Organized forms of immaturity have been addressed

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<sup>2</sup> In the German original, Kant uses the term "Unmündigkeit" and not "Unreife". Although the latter would be the standard translation for "immaturity" in German, the meaning of "Unreife" is connected to age and aging, which has connotations that largely depart from our concerns here. By contrast, "Unmündigkeit" is a state of mind, "a lack of understanding", that is (at least for adults) independent of the individual's age and does not simply go away by aging but results "from the lack of resolve and courage to use one's reason without the guidance of another" (Kant, 1784: 481). This better reflects the key feature of the organized immaturity phenomenon analyzed here.

<sup>3</sup> All original quotes taken from Kant have been translated from German to English by the first author.

(although without explicitly using the term) in the analysis of bureaucratic organizations and capitalist society, where the individual is subject to domination and control (Clegg, 1990; Hilferding, 1910/1981). Today, many new forms of such immaturity are possible when technologies advance and autocracies rise while democracy and individual liberties are in decline, and each of these forms impact individual or collective autonomy (Bradshaw & Howard, 2018; de Jonquières, 2017; Eatwell & Goodwin, 2018; Taplin, 2017). Despite modernity's endeavor to advance liberty as a natural right of humans, contemporary society, assisted by technological revolutions, also creates more complex systems that place the individual under increasing external surveillance and control instead of promoting emancipation and freedom (Gorton, 2016; Richards, 2013; Zuboff, 2015). Below we propose a 'history' or genealogy of organized immaturity – from Kantian ideas to thinkers of (post-) modernity who critically explore the effects of socio-technological developments on the formation of the individual: Arendt, Fromm, Marcuse, Foucault, and, more recently, Zuboff.

#### TOWARD A HISTORY OF ORGANIZED IMMATURITY

Concerns about socio-technological advancements causing loss of rights and liberties have a long history – although morphed to respond to different challenges at different times. Humankind has always strived to advance its knowledge in order to improve its condition. The most popular technologies owe their success to their ability to respond well to this desire for better living. Deleuze and Guattari (1983), for example, have explored the role of desire in driving social development, and conceived of individuals as desiring and desire-producing machines that seek an assemblage of sensations, pleasures, and physical or social experiences. Today, individuals are confronted with machines and other technologies that promise to meet these desires all too easily (e.g., smart phones, tablets, Facebook, Instagram). The lure of technology consists in its impressive capacity for providing immediate solutions for our most private and intimate concerns, for instance, to be more attractive, more knowledgeable, more

powerful – and, daring further: to stop aging, and, why not, to become immortal. Our implicit expectation is, therefore, that technology has an instrumental value, that its vocation is service to our human needs and unconscious desires (Harcourt, 2015).

However, we note that socio-technological systems (at both societal and organizational levels) tend to slide from the originally intended service to pervasive forms of control, in a subliminal reversal of subject authority between humans and machines. It is this effect that should give us increasing concern. With the advent of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (Schwab, 2017), as technologies tend to exceed human capabilities, human deference to the processing performance of algorithms is increasingly apparent, especially in the interpretation of data processing and machine ‘learning’ power as supra-human intelligence (Bostrom, 2014; Harari, 2018). As the seductive powers of these new systems (e.g., social media platforms, the Internet of Things, or Smart Cities) are induced, maintained, and enhanced via organized environments, this deference is particularly harmful to the human condition as it has the potential to undermine human consciousness and decreases freedom in society. Therefore, the phenomenon of interest here is not just immaturity – but *organized* immaturity. The impacts of technology on individuals and collectives are mediated to an increasing extent by deliberate human organizing, and human-led organizations constitute a fundamental part of the problem.

But, in essence, the phenomenon of organized immaturity is not new. The social effects of technology, as well as human complicity in accepting them, have been steadily critiqued since the age of the Enlightenment. In what follows, we spell out what predecessors have observed about immaturity, its variously organized forms, and humans’ attempts to deal with this condition. In doing so, we seek new lessons to learn from the past, in order to better understand humankind’s contemporary challenges and to suggest new contributions that organization studies could make to tackle these challenges.

### *The Legacy of the Enlightenment*

The role of the Enlightenment in crystallizing aspirations of maturity was recently addressed by Scherer and Neesham (2022). In summary, in contrast to an enlightened state is a condition that Kant describes as “self-inflicted immaturity” and which results not “from a lack of understanding, but from the lack of resolve and courage to use one's reason without the guidance of another” (Kant, 1784: 481). During the European medieval times up until the Renaissance, the human being was determined by its fixed role in pre-modern society, where the individual was subordinated to the needs and forces of the collective:

A person was identical with his role in society; he was a peasant, an artisan, a knight, and not *an individual* who *happened* to have this or that occupation. The social order was conceived as a natural order, and being a definite part of it gave a feeling of security and belonging. (Fromm, 1941/1969: 41)

The European Enlightenment of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> Centuries enabled the individual to break off the chains of these traditional roles, to gain some freedom from external social pressures, to form individual identities or to change his or her role in society. However, the development of bureaucratic organizations and capitalist societies in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries submitted individuals to social and economic systems of dependence and control, which largely restricted individual autonomy and self-determination in new ways (Clegg, 1990; Hilferding, 1910/1981). Even more so, the majority of individuals “have not yet acquired the maturity to be independent, to be rational, to be objective” (Fromm, 1941/1969: xvi). Individuals are, on the one hand, overburdened by the liberties that our contemporary forms of enlightenment offer (Pinker, 2018) and, on the other hand, largely unprepared and incapable to fill the space created by negative freedoms with a vision for, and a practice of, positive freedoms (Berlin, 1969). In other words, there is a lag between “freedom from” external social and economic

pressures (negative freedom) and “freedom to” pursue *the good life* (εὐδαιμονία) along values of one’s own choosing (positive freedom).

Yet, Fromm (1941/1969: 36) argues that the imbalance in the development of negative and positive freedoms and the unpreparedness to determine one’s own destiny motivates individuals to a “flight from freedom into new ties or at least into complete indifference”. Thus, pessimistic perspectives on the future of human civilization, emphasizing the perverse effects of new technology, have also been proposed, suggesting that complex uncertainty is likely to deprive humans of their natural capabilities for empathy (Bridle, 2018). The promise of the Enlightenment project may again be diverted – unless human beings are prepared to learn from past errors and develop radical solutions not only to how we as individuals relate to technology but also to how we organize.

#### *Individuality as “Automated Functioning”: Arendt’s Critique*

In *The Human Condition* (first published 1958), Hannah Arendt warns against the dangers of individuals voluntarily relinquishing their judgment and decision-making spaces and freedoms to the comforts and conveniences offered by technology (see also Zuboff, 2015). She foresees the world of work as developing into a “society of jobholders” (Arendt, 1958/1998: 322) whose lives are filled by automatic responses to system-set stimuli, devoid of any individuality and responsibility for the “trouble of living” (*ibid.*):

It is quite conceivable that the modern age – which began with such an unprecedented and promising outburst of human activity – may end in the deadliest, most sterile passivity history has ever known. (*ibid.*)

Today human beings seem to be drawing closer to Arendt’s dystopic vision. Her analyses of the laboring society in the automation stage of the industrial revolution anticipate our contemporary concerns about the unwitting conversion of technology-as-servant into technology-as-master:

To design objects for the operational capacity of the machine instead of designing machines for the production of certain objects would indeed be the exact reversal of the means-end category, if this category still made any sense. (Arendt, 1958/1998: 152)

The phenomenon described by Arendt here appears eerily similar to the realization of computer scientists today that AI is increasingly developing not into a means of augmenting or extending human intelligence in order to comprehend the world but into a means of digitizing the world to make it machine-processible (Broussard, 2018). Driven by such rationality, human beings tend to follow the imperative of socio-technological systems and give up on human individuality and freedom in favor of an automated functioning within the system. A similar effect is also analyzed in the work of Erich Fromm that we turn to next.

*“Escape from Freedom”: Fromm’s Critique*

To make sense of the entrapment experienced amidst rational systems of capitalist control on the one hand and increased civic liberties (they are not prepared for) on the other, individuals tend to resolve this dissonance by seeking to *Escape from Freedom* altogether as the title of Fromm’s seminal book suggests (first published 1941). Fromm (1941/1969: 133) suggests there are two “principal social avenues of escape”.<sup>4</sup> The first is *submission to an authority* – that is, by submitting oneself to autocratic leaders and ideologies in the political sphere. At the time of Fromm’s writing, this concerned the rise of fascist and communist leaders in Europe and the Soviet Union; today, however, we see an emergence of ‘new’ autocratic leaders even in democratic countries (De Matas, 2017). Fromm explains this phenomenon as

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<sup>4</sup> Aside from these two main roads, Fromm mentions other mechanisms of escape such as “destructiveness” (1941/1969: 177), “withdrawal from the world” (184), and “inflation of oneself psychologically” (184). These other mechanisms may be relevant to further discussions of various forms of resistance needed for disorganizing immaturity (see below).

the tendency to give up the independence of one's own individual self and to fuse one's self with somebody or something outside of oneself in order to acquire the strength which the individual self is lacking. (Fromm, 1941/1969: 140)

The second principal avenue for escape is “*compulsive conforming*” (Fromm 1941/1969: 133, italics not in the original) , which Fromm describes as a person's propensity “to seek his identity by continuous approval and recognition by others” (*ibid.*: 203) “in his private or social relations”, for example “by success in business, or by ‘making contacts’” (*ibid.*: 133). Seen from this perspective, the individual adopts the identity that is imposed on her or him by cultural patterns:

The person who gives up his individual self and becomes an automaton, identical with millions of other automatons around him, need not feel alone and anxious any more.

But the price he pays, however, is high; it is the loss of his self. (*ibid.*: 184)

Today, in the digital age, we recognize these symptoms in the practice of ‘likes’ or relationships on social media, or the adherence to social groups and movements, leading to the subordination of the individual in favor of collective identities (Brünker, Deitelhoff, & Mirbabaie, 2019). This includes imitating role models in the social or economic sphere, or as a modern form, adapting to social media ‘influencers’ or group identities (e.g., based on social attributes such as nation, class, or gender). Contemporary automata are human beings reduced to immature desire-holders who cannot escape the dominance of their networks over their lives (Harcourt, 2015). This has a significant oppressive impact on the multi-dimensionality and complexity of human beings – a phenomenon discussed in detail by Herbert Marcuse.

#### *“Containment of Social Change”: Marcuse's Critique*

Concerned about the controlling effects of the global technology emerging in the 1960s (with the growth of TV and advertising, for example), Marcuse (1964/1991) diagnoses the problem in his book *One-Dimensional Man* (originally published in 1964), in the following ways: it is



not just that individuals' increasing dependence on all-encompassing technological systems reduces their ability to exercise personal reasoning and reflection; in fact, such freedom, to the extent of fundamentally challenging the existing systems, is no longer available. All possible dissent is already co-opted into the given premises.

In response, Marcuse advocates for critical-dialectical analysis as an approach that adequately captures the dominance-resistance dynamic (see also Harraca, Castelló, & Gawer, 2023, in this issue) as the foundational principle of social change. A politically salient result of this critical-dialectical thinking should be, he argues, the 'Great Refusal' (Marcuse 1964/1991: 63 et passim) – namely, the individual act of resisting the insidious forms of oppression propagated by globalized (and totalizing) socio-technological systems. Today, the individual refusal often culminates with subordination to collective refusals embodied by social movements that oppose systemic disciplining forces and form a collective identity. An example of this phenomenon is the *Fridays for Future* movement (see Brünker et al., 2019). While oppression of individuals by social institutions is not new, the extent and voluntariness of individuals' participation in their own oppression reaches new heights:

Our society distinguishes itself by conquering the centrifugal social forces with Technology rather than Terror, on the dual basis of an overwhelming efficiency and an increasing standard of living. (Marcuse, 1964/1991: xlii)

Therefore, the promise of a more comfortable life can, and does, attract individuals into a vortex of subordination to ever increasing technological complexity. The social and political context of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century emerges naturally in the horizon of Marcuse's diagnosis over five decades ago.

While his critique is radical, the emancipatory premises resulting from it are fundamentally optimistic: human life is valuable, and it can be improved through social organization, mainly by increasing individual autonomy rather than reducing it. But the

advent of technologies that claim to generalize precisely individual freedoms, in the form of freedom of choice, by facilitating access to enhanced lifestyle options, poses an unprecedented challenge: the incorporation of all social change, actual and potential, within existing socio-technological systems ensures the co-optation of all destabilizing possibilities, with profound consequences for individual autonomy. Accordingly, individuals are often unable to find any space for radically challenging the existence and rationale of these systems (*ibid.*: xliii-xlviii). This social change containment phenomenon is the main outcome of the conversion of service into domination described by Arendt. A historical-genealogical explanation of how this conversion has emerged in modernity is provided by Michel Foucault.

*“Pastoral Power” and the Refusal of the “Subject”: Foucault’s Critique*

Foucault explains that the focus of his work is “the way a human being turns itself into a subject” (Foucault, 1982: 778). In this context, he also offers an original interpretation of the Enlightenment, describing Kant’s philosophy (and philosophy in general) as having the role of keeping in check “the excessive powers of political rationality” (*ibid.*: 779). Foucault observes that anti-authority struggles are not only about obtaining freedoms for individuals or communities but are also struggles against the “government of individualization”, namely the authoritarian pressure of social institutions to confine the existence of individuals into socially constructed subjects with fixed identities (*ibid.*: 781). The ‘Great Refusal’ (Marcuse, 1964/1991) thus becomes a refusal of social-institutional subject-construction processes, a refusal of... abstractions, of economic and ideological state violence, which ignore who we are individually, and also a refusal of a scientific and administrative inquisition which determines who one is. (Foucault, 1982: 781)

Furthermore, its targets are not specific institutions, groups, or classes of people but a particular form of power that, in Foucault's view, has specialized in constructing individuals as subjects – namely, subjects of the State, of society, as well as subjects for themselves.

Using genealogical analysis, Foucault identifies a crucial aspect of the power of the modern state, in the historical context of Europe, and of France in particular. He names this peculiar form of power 'pastoral power', and finds it to be specific to modernity. What is distinctive about pastoral power is that it engages the "totalization procedures" of the state in serving human well-being via "individualization techniques". Thus, both individualization and totalization are played out within the same political structures. In this "tricky combination", the modern state is called to recognize, protect and enhance the natural rights of individuals – but it does so by engaging "an old power technique which originated in the Christian institutions" of pre-modern eras (*ibid.*: 782; see also Fromm 1941/1969, ch. 3).

In Foucault's historical interpretation, the power of the Christian Church looking after the souls of its flock has been secularized into "salvation... in this world" rather than in the after-life; and the indicators of this salvation are now health, well-being, security, safety, and so on. In the new state – which is the same state that designs and governs integrated national systems for wages, pensions and welfare services of all kinds – the "globalizing and quantitative" study of populations, through the development of statistics-supported national policies, is intertwined with customized concern for individuals. Pastoral power is no longer confined to a centralized institution but flows "into the whole social body" and is exercised by a wide range of social institutions, such as "medicine, psychiatry, education, and employers" (*ibid.*: 784).

Foucault's characterization of the modern state as an expression of pastoral power articulates, in general terms, the defining aspects of social systems' orientation towards individual welfare that we are so familiar with today. The interest of the state in serving its

people must be acknowledged – but one must also recognize that the integration of individuals into the requisite social structures comes at a price: the paternalistic construction of the individual as a subject by the system itself (*ibid.*: 783).

Inspired by Foucault's interpretation, we note that, in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, Big-Data-based technologies are now gradually taking on the role of the state, particularly with regard to the social construction of individual subjects. When using Big Data to know a person more than that person know themselves, as Harari (2018) puts it, an algorithm does not respect individuals' freedom to construct and reconstruct their own subjectivity: it does in fact precisely what Foucault describes about subject-constructing social systems such as the State exercising pastoral power. It imposes on individuals identities that they themselves may not be prepared to freely accept. At the same time, as individuals more readily relinquish the exercise of their intellectual maturity for the convenience of being served by technology, this creates increasing distance between power and responsibility in system-wide decisions affecting individuals in society. As Foucault describes, pastoral power

cannot be exercised without knowing the inside of people's minds, without exploring their souls, without making them reveal their innermost secrets. It implies a knowledge of the conscience and an ability to direct it. (Foucault, 1982: 783)

We infer from Foucault's analysis that socio-technological systems are not only taking over control and restricting the human socialization and individualization processes but they are also becoming deeply embedded into the institutions of the State as they shape the conditions for the formulation and execution of collective rules. This problem reaches a new level of complexity in contemporary capitalism, as argued by Shoshana Zuboff.

### *Contemporary Surveillance Capitalism: An Unprecedented Challenge*

In her critical analysis of today's computer-mediated society, Zuboff (2015, 2019, 2022) takes issue with the emergence of what she calls *surveillance capitalism*, defined as a new social

order that generates and relies on information capital to influence individual behaviors and market exchanges. In this context, the ‘Big Other’, an emergent socio-technological system driven by the rationality of multiple societal actors seeking power and profits from digital technology, is far from a monolithic, central authority and yet, through its pervasive influence on individual behaviors, manages to impose dominant logics on the lives of individuals in society, co-opting and transforming human experience into marketable data, in opaque and undemocratic ways.

Following an overwhelming wave of enthusiasm around the potential of digital technologies to improve human life, Zuboff’s critical account of its less desirable, corrosive effects on the foundations of democratic society is a powerful wake-up call. Her critique of digitalization apologists such as Varian (2010, 2014) shifts attention from technological conveniences to loss of social values (see also, Lanier, 2018; Pal & Crowcroft, 2019) such as trust, autonomy, and transparency. Her analysis also outlines how a new global economic oligopoly is emerging as a result, also supporting a new social oligarchy (Zuboff, 2022).

Contemporary digital technology is characterized by its power to convert any human activity into data, which is in turn sold by ICT firms (West, 2019) to other corporations, mainly for commercial purposes. While this commodification of human life via datafication (Mejias & Couldry, 2019) may appear well-intended or benign, its grip has grown so powerful that individuals face difficulties to extract themselves (and their lives) from it.

Initially hailed as a new era of improvements in human well-being, digitalization has been criticized for its far-reaching negative impacts on liberal democracy as we know it (Eubanks, 2018; Harcourt, 2015; West, 2019). Zuboff’s comprehensive research monograph of 2019 offers detailed examples of how giant ICT firms collect vast amounts of data from individuals, and then use this data in ways for purposes that its original owners are largely unaware of. Her examples refer to automated data capture as well as digital surveillance

devices (both private and public), and her critique is especially directed at the lucrative practice of selling personalized data to advertisers in search of potential consumers. Zuboff refers to this new phenomenon, which proliferates the selling and buying information-based opportunities for influencing purchasing behaviors, as the appearance of markets in behavioral modification” (Zuboff, 2019: 323).

It can be said that the non-transparent and undemocratic use of algorithms to predict, direct and control individual and collective behaviors has wider and deeper impacts on human lives and freedoms than class-ridden social structures and technologies of the previous century (Habermas, 1970). The key power of digitalization, which consists in determining the range and structure of choices available to users, lies in confining the latter to conformity under the guise of free choice and voluntary action (see, e.g., Ruehle, 2023, in this issue). Thus, an impersonal ‘Big Other’ generates forms of organized immaturity by distorting the very meaning of human freedom and inducing subliminal forms of paternalism.

#### THE PROBLEM OF PATERNALISM AND GOVERNANCE BY DECENTRALIZED SOCIO-TECHNOLOGICAL SYSTEMS

Our historical examples show that organized immaturity does not need to be (centrally) planned. It can simply emerge as an effect of more or less subtle versions of paternalism. No matter how much more effective in deploying superior expertise to protect an individual’s interests, paternalism remains, in a political sense, a form of interference with one’s liberty to make one’s own decisions (Mill, 1859/1989), thus suppressing one’s rational will (Cholbi, 2017). Paradoxically, however, the most difficult problems of paternalism seem to occur precisely in those social order that are organized around valuing human freedoms the most – namely, democracies. As early as 1840, Alexis de Tocqueville comments on the tendency of the democratic system to keep people “in perpetual childhood: [...] it provides for their security, foresees and supplies their necessities, facilitates their pleasures” (1840/1945: 318;

see also Harcourt, 2015: 336). Thus, democratic societies, where individual liberties are assumed or expected to be paramount, are vulnerable to paternalism in a specific way. They feed on the complicity of human subjects with the technologies of their less abstract, more immediate desires.

But this is not all. Under the technological paternalism specific to data capitalism – namely, value extraction based on data commercialization (West, 2019), the meaning of democracy itself has taken a new turn. While inheriting enlightenment values of reflection and independent reasoning as foundations of meaning, knowledge, and informed action, modernity has also adopted technological advancements as a means to maximize efficiency and to centralize the administration of society through systems that constrain and act against the individual self-determination and freedom ideals that the Enlightenment had originally been engaged to promote. Crouch (2004) reminds us that, today, democracies are not so much characterized by the self-governance of the people, but due to the complexity of the steering task, by the governance of technocrats and technocratic systems. As a result, reason as a basis for informed individual and collective action is increasingly replaced by intelligent machines and algorithms that can influence our decisions (including nudging measures; see also Ruehle, 2023, in this issue). Furthermore, even in democratic societies we have recently witnessed digitally-enhanced practices that have empowered autocratic and populist politics against scientific truth, responsible media and adequate protection of the rights of minorities (Eatwell & Goodwin, 2018).

Digitalization puts forth socio-technological systems that influence citizens' consciousness in the absence of an identifiable agent centralizing the power and control. While the loose-network aspect of such systems may suggest potential for democratic spaces, the AI dimension in particular increases the possibility of human creators losing their grip on machine-learning processes that they may no longer be able to comprehend (Bostrom, 2014)

while algorithms themselves may misunderstand humans, with significant and far-reaching consequences (Broussard, 2018).

As a consequence of widespread digitalization, the governance of contemporary society has to include different categories of actors, beyond the governments of national states. Such actors may be international organizations, multinational corporations, non-profit organizations, mass-media organizations, and even social or civil movements. Importantly, the public accountability that characterized democratic societies of previous eras (Habermas, 1998/2001) is not evenly distributed across these categories, with some (such as transnationals) escaping it almost entirely. In this context, digital technologies seem to support ways to avoid (rather than enhance) accountability, making it even more difficult for less powerful social groups to identify the forces they should be struggling against in order to secure their emancipation.

#### COUNTERACTING ORGANIZED IMMATURITY:

##### THE ROLE OF BUSINESS ETHICS AND ORGANIZATION STUDIES

Acknowledging that organizations are part of the problem – we argue, therefore, that business ethics in particular and organization studies more generally can and should deploy research capabilities to critically diagnose the current challenges of organized immaturity, and to forge new paths towards effective solutions. Between disorganizing immaturity and organizing maturity, we are not the first to suggest that the risk is worth taking (see Clegg & Higgins, 1990; Urry, 1990). In this sense, we propose to examine social mechanisms (Hedström & Ylikoski, 2010) as leverage points in inducing social change. Building on a concept defined by Bunge, yet without subscribing to his positivist epistemology, we understand social mechanism as “a process in a concrete system, such that it is capable of bringing about or preventing some change in the system as a whole or in some of its subsystems” (Bunge, 1997: 414).



Accordingly, we consider two social mechanisms for enhancing individual freedom and autonomy: first, disorganizing immaturity; and second, organizing maturity – both at individual and collective levels. We invite scholars of business ethics and organization studies to critically explore the potentials of these mechanisms to liberate individuals and collectives from the seductive effects of organized immaturity. Both of these mechanisms can be related to the multi-faceted concept of freedom as it has been discussed in political philosophy. Specifically, political philosophers distinguish between *negative* and *positive* freedoms (Berlin, 1969; see also Fromm, 1941/1969; Arendt, 1959). The former deals with the *freedom from* external restrictions and pressures (as suggested earlier in this article), and has been the main focus of philosophical and political analysis. In contrast, the latter is concerned with the *freedom to* pursue an agenda or endeavor in the public arena, and has been emphasized mainly in the development of citizenship rights and specific systems of democratic governance.

In this context, the social mechanism of *disorganizing immaturity* makes use of various forms of resistance, at individual and collective levels, that sidestep or weaken the restricting and controlling forces of socio-technological systems. The aim is thus to protect or increase negative freedom (‘freedom from’) of individuals by pushing back structural restrictions on individual and collective reasoning and weakening the totalizing effects of these systems on individual consciousness and maturation. In turn, the social mechanism of *organizing maturity* emphasizes the strengthening of positive freedom (‘freedom to’) of individuals (and finally also of social groups and collectives) and makes use of various forms of enabling individuals to exercise autonomous reasoning in processes of deliberation – that is, “debate and discussion aimed at producing reasonable, well-informed opinions in which participants are willing to revise preferences in light of discussion, new information, and claims made by fellow participants” (Chambers, 2003: 309).

### *Disorganizing Immaturity*

Disorganizing the phenomenon of organized immaturity becomes possible using critiques by authors who propose various forms of *resistance* to its effects on human autonomy (Foucault, 1982; Fromm, 1941/1969; Harcourt, 2015; Marcuse, 1964/1991). Resistance can be mobilized at individual, organizational, and collective levels when, for example, individuals avoid or break entrenched systemic rules, social activists counteract the control machinery, or social movements destabilize and change the prevailing (albeit subliminal) repressive order. The mechanism works by curtailing the negative effects of socio-technical systems in order to loosen the restrictions on individual freedom and autonomy. In organization theory, this option has also been discussed as a form of ‘anti-organization’ (Burrell & Morgan, 1979: 310-325), where the disciplining effects of bureaucracy and the capitalist order are taken under scrutiny and replaced by forms of inclusive and democratic decision-making and control in small collectives rather than in large, anonymous corporations and social systems (Clegg, 1990; Hilferding, 1910/1981). Whether or not such forms of resistance are justified and under what conditions is a matter of debate (see, e.g., Fromm, 1941/1969: 177-183, on “destructiveness”).

To address the problem of hegemonic subject-constructing systems, Foucault (1982) proposes the refusal of externally imposed individuality:

Maybe the target nowadays is not to discover what we are but to refuse what we are... [T]he political, ethical, social, philosophical problem of our days is not to try to liberate the individual from the state and from the state’s institutions but to liberate us both from the state and from the type of individualization which is linked to the state. We have to promote new forms of subjectivity through the refusal of this kind of individuality which has been imposed on us for several centuries. (Foucault, 1982: 785)

Foucault also provides a list of elements that need to be analyzed in order to deconstruct an individualizing-totalizing political order and initiate an effective anti-authority struggle – namely, the system of differentiations (by which “one can act upon the actions of others”), the types of objectives (to be “pursued by those who act upon the actions of others”), the means of bringing power relations into being, forms of institutionalization, and degrees of rationalization (Foucault, 1982: 792). Yet, the particular form of political order (or, in our context, of socio-technological systems) rests on some elements that are emergent and on others that are deliberately created.

We note, however, that today we are already at least one level of complexity above Foucault’s social and political realities of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century: the gradual replacement of State paternalism by big data technology – or, in sum, what Zuboff defines as the ‘Big Other’ – is having new systemic effects on the life of human communities. We do, however, learn from Foucault that between power and anti-authority struggle there is a dynamic relationship that can be reversed – and that recovering human freedom against totalizing systems is “a permanent political task inherent in all social existence” (*ibid.*: 791–792; see also, more recently, Lindebaum, den Hond, Greenwood, Chamberlain, & Andersson, 2022: 1864–1866, on “world-making” in their relational concept of freedom).

This conclusion should give us hope that, in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century as well, the potential is there for individuals to adopt certain (perhaps yet to be conceived) strategies to protect themselves from the new forms of organized immaturity facilitated by the socio-technological systems specific to the Fourth Industrial Revolution. For example, one such strategy could be refusing (and confusing) the individual identities assigned to us through algorithm-generated profiles; and another strategy could be to challenge and unsettle the profile-generation processes themselves. The challenge now, however, is that responsibility for the

consequences of decisions and actions undertaken within the new systems is increasingly elusive.

Considering the case of social media, we note their ability to collect and track individual data and to micro-target individuals and social groups with their feeds, while optimizing the manipulation system with the help of algorithms. This concerns not only commercial decisions of potential or actual consumers but also political decisions when citizens are influenced in their political behavior. Lanier (2018) considers this a serious threat for the democratic institutions and political culture of contemporary society. As an immediate remedy, he recommends to any individual to immediately disconnect from social media in order to avoid their influence. This resisting behavior could force social media companies to change their business model and loosen their focus on manipulative objectives.

Others propose a less rigid, more fine-grained approach. Harcourt (2015) suggests there is already a range of new ‘weapons’ available for avoiding visibility, transparency and thus surveillance and control of individual behavior. These rely on a combination of education, awareness building, self-help, and technical devices (both hardware- and software-based) that enable individuals to scrutinize, encrypt, and protect their personal information or to surf anonymously in the Internet.<sup>5</sup> Yet, there are even more radical strategies of digital disobedience, such as whistleblowing or distorting personal information, that can counteract the surveillance apparatus – all of which aim to restore the negative freedom of individuals.

### *Organizing Maturity*

Organizing maturity is a social mechanism that aims to strengthen positive freedoms of individuals and social groups. Therefore, one can speak about organizing individual and/or

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<sup>5</sup> See, for example, the tools and information displayed on websites such as ‘I fight surveillance’ by the *Electronic Frontier Foundation* (<https://www.eff.org/pages/tools>) or ‘Security in a Box’ by the NGOs *Front Line Defenders* and *Tactical Tech* (<https://securityinabox.org/en/>) (Harcourt, 2015: 270 and ff.).

collective maturity. In modern liberal societies, individuals are considered as bearers of equal and impartial liberties – that is, civil, social, and political rights which, when fully developed, make them autonomous members of society (Marshall, 1965). Civil rights such as the right to exercise freedom of speech, the right to own and inherit property, or the right to conclude contracts with other social actors are largely negative rights, as they establish the individual's right to be protected, or *free, from* unjustified interference by powerful third parties, be it governmental or private actors (Berlin, 1969). By contrast, social and political rights are considered positive rights, as they entitle individual right-bearers with the *freedom to* participate in the public sphere as full and equal members of society (Berlin, 1969). Social rights provide the preconditions for such participation. These are the right to education, healthcare, or social welfare – because only when these basic capacities are developed can individuals act effectively as citizens in liberal society. Even more so, political rights provide individuals with the ability to engage in collective will formation on public matters. Some examples of such political rights are: the right to vote and to be elected, the right to engage in social movements, the right to form collectives and political parties, and the right to hold public office.

As argued in Scherer and Neesham (2022), such rights have to be supported not only by public institutions but also by a political culture maintained by citizens who know how to claim and exercise their rights autonomously. However, under the prevailing socio-technological conditions described above, this socialization process seems distorted, and the result is a restriction of individual rights and the facilitation of organized immaturity. In the same context, the role of the state, the media, social movements, and organizations in general, in strengthening positive freedoms of individuals and social groups deserves further attention.

The Role of the State

In the liberal conception of society, the state is the actor that is responsible for providing public goods such as basic and higher education, creating the requisite institutional environment, and protecting the equal and impartial private, social, and political rights of individuals and social groups (Rawls, 1993). Organizing maturity, accordingly, means strengthening these basic functions of the state. A number of public policies are helpful in this regard: (1) strengthening basic, higher and continuing education by informing and preparing citizens of all ages to confront and manage the dark aspects of social media and ICT influences (Carmi, Yates, Lockley, & Pawluczuk, 2020); (2) developing legal regulations, procedures and institutions that effectively protect individuals from surveillance and manipulation by the socio-technical complex – for instance, using informed consent provisions, the right to be forgotten and effective appeal processes, and control mechanisms as established in the European Union’s General Data Protection Regulation of 2018 (see critically Schade, 2023, in this issue); (3) granting and protecting property rights on personal data in the benefit of those who produce them so that, for instance, Internet users receive compensation any time their data are used by third parties (Pal & Crowcroft, 2019; Lanier, 2013; see also Harcourt, 2015: 274); (4) providing regulatory and financial support to non-governmental organizations that exercise a watchdog function upon and within the socio-technical complex; (5) providing and protecting public forums, including conditions for a viable and plural media landscape (see below), for open public debate, so that citizens can effectively exercise their political rights or deliberate on issues of public concern (Buhmann & Fieseler, 2022; Cohen & Fung, 2021; Habermas, 2021; Lundgaard & Etter, 2022; Picard, 2016).

## The Role of the Media

News media are essential for the proper functioning of the public sphere in liberal democratic society (Cohen & Fung, 2021; Habermas, 1962/1989, 2021). They generate and distribute news, reports, and information on issues of public concern – and this is an important basis for individual and collective decision-making in both private and public realms (Schwoon, Schoeneborn, & Scherer, 2022). Furthermore, they inform citizens about critical issues and developments in society, thus enabling citizens to develop their own views and to take corrective actions where they consider it appropriate. In order to strengthen positive freedoms of individuals and social groups, organization studies need to explore how media organizations can and should take responsibility in providing accurate information, applying transparency, delivering sound critique, and offering multiple perspectives and food for thought rather than manipulating audiences or imposing definitive answers (see, e.g., Castello & Lopez-Berzosa, 2021). This means we need to study for example the effects of media policy on media organizations and public discourse and explore how and under what conditions open public discourse is facilitated by proper media regulations and incentives (Cohen & Fung, 2021; Habermas, 2021; Picard & Pickard, 2017). In addition, organization studies need to research how news media can and should uphold and develop the ethical standards of their profession (Ward, 2019), for example, by installing proper quality management systems and investing in proper human resource management policies so that high standards are being applied in selecting, training, evaluating, and compensating democratically engaged journalists (see Ward, 2019: 121). Social media have become important players in the news media ecosystem. As much as they are part of the problem, some argue they should become part of the solution (Napoli, 2019). Yet, self-regulation seems just as insufficient as the sole reliance on technical solutions. A smart mixture of personal and automated moderation, combined with elements of self-regulation and governmental regulation, seems more promising instead (Napoli, 2019; Ward, 2019).

## The Role of Social Movements

Organization studies also needs to further analyze the role of non-governmental organizations, social activists and movements which also play an important role in organizing individual and collective maturity. They function as watchdogs for the national economy and politics, providing spaces for social and political exchange outside and above the institutionalized political arenas, and contribute to the proper functioning of the public sphere by supporting citizens in exercising their public and/or collective responsibilities (Habermas, 1962/1989). This applies particularly to juveniles who earn their first merits in political engagement, as the *Fridays for Future* movement has impressively shown (Etchanchu, de Bakker, & Delmestri, 2021). Aside from well-known global NGOs with a broader social or environmental agenda such as Greenpeace, Amnesty International, or Human Rights Watch, some NGOs have focused on the challenges of digitalization: for example, the *Electronic Frontier Foundation*, *Tactical Tech*, or the *Chaos Computer Club* have earned a reputation of alerting, informing, and educating citizens about the dark sides of digitalization and pushing governmental officials to assume concern of these issues (however, for example, see Lovink & Rossiter, 2018).

## The Role of (Working) Organizations

Finally, business organizations also have a responsibility to contribute to organizing individual and collective maturity. This has already been emphasized in the discussion of corporate citizenship and political corporate social responsibility (Matten & Crane, 2005; Scherer & Palazzo, 2007, 2011). The responsibility of corporations is not only to avoid harm by restricting manipulation and the mechanisms of the surveillance capitalism but even more so to do good for society by providing enabling conditions for the maturation and liberation of



individuals, taking social responsibility when other actors such as state agencies in oppressive or fragile states are unwilling or incapable to do so (Scherer & Voegtlin, 2020, 2023). As a consequence, corporations can administer citizenship rights by various means (Matten & Crane, 2005). Extending on Matten and Crane's ideas, this could mean for surveillance capitalism contexts: (1) enabling civil rights by acknowledging property rights of individuals, for instance, granting property rights to Internet users who generate data in the first place; (2) providing social rights by informing and training citizens in the appropriate use of social media and the pitfalls of manipulative algorithms; and (3) operating as a channel for political rights, whereby individuals are provided with opportunities and training in argumentation processes and collective will formation (see, e.g., Pek, Mena, & Lyons, 2022).

These are only a few illustrations of how (and in what capacity) public, private, and civil society actors can jointly contribute to organizing maturity, by strengthening positive freedoms and, thus, potentially counteracting the detrimental effects of organized immaturity under the socio-technical conditions of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. The field of organization studies can be mobilized to further explore such mechanisms and their outcomes.

#### THIS ISSUE'S CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE STUDY OF ORGANIZED IMMATURITY

This special issue of *Business Ethics Quarterly* brings together five articles that feature a broad range of conceptual and empirical inquiries into phenomena of organized immaturity. More specifically, the Special Issue includes three articles that are primarily on the *diagnostic* side of organized immaturity, covering topics as diverse as power dynamics on digital platforms (Harraca et al., 2023), standards of digital data protection (Schade, 2023), or digital workplace nudging (Ruehle, 2023). In addition, the Special Issue also includes two articles that emphasize the *therapeutic* side, either by nurturing maturity through craft work, asceticism, and self-care, exemplified here with an empirical study in the vinyl industry (Wiedner & Holt,

2023), or by mobilizing ethics of care in the context of socially engaged arts (Alacovska, Booth & Fieseler, 2023). Both are offered as ways to counter technology-induced trends of organized immaturity. Also, the articles in this Special Issue fruitfully mobilize and employ different philosophical and theoretical traditions to the study of organized immaturity, ranging from Bourdieu (Harraca et al., 2023) or Forst (Ruehle, 2023) to Heidegger and Foucault (Wiedner & Holt, 2023) or Stiegler (Alacovska et al., 2023). Together, these articles also point to theoretical connections that reach beyond the initial set of authors and perspectives discussed in this introduction or in other outlets (such as Scherer & Neesham, 2021, 2022). In the following, we provide a brief overview of each article in this Special Issue, and point out where we see its main contribution to the study of organized immaturity.

The article by Harraca, Castelló, and Gawer (2023) is focused on the rising power of digital platform organizations (such as Facebook, Amazon, Uber) over the last two decades. The authors argue that platform organizations foster phenomena of organized immaturity (e.g., through technologies of algorithmic filtering and customization that ultimately lead to an informational disintegration of society), which are also driven platform owners' efforts to protect and defend their privileged power positions. The authors mobilize Bourdieu's notions of field, social capital, and (digital) habitus to develop a fine-grained explanation of the power dynamics that typically unfold between platform owners and its users. In this way, the Bourdieusian lens allows Harraca and his colleagues not only to differentiate between different forms of power that the platform owners utilize but also between practices of resistance and hacking that allow users to (re-)gain 'platform power'. So, even if organized immaturity needs to be seen as a largely decentralized and multipolar phenomenon (as argued above), the article contributes to the study of organized immaturity by directly addressing digital platform organizations as one of the main catalysts of this development (see also Whelan, 2021). At the same time, and by drawing on Bourdieu in knowledgeable ways,

Harraca and his co-authors add to earlier works that have critically scrutinized the role of digital platforms in contemporary capitalism (Zuboff, 2015, 2019) by providing them with a processual framework that can explain platform-based power dynamics over time.

The article by Schade (2023) critically engages with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) standard, a European Union regulation that aims to protect individual citizens'/users' data and privacy rights. The author convincingly argues that, even though the standard is intended to foster transparency, to protect individual freedoms, and to enable individual users' capacities for using their own reasoning (that is, maturity in a Kantian sense), the design principles and technological affordances of this particular standard lead, paradoxically, to intransparencies as well as to an infantilization of users (e.g., when one has to click through myriads of detailed GDPR settings before being able to access a webpage). While most of the article focuses on diagnosing and analyzing this conundrum, the author also proposes some remedies – for instance, by pointing to the need to develop more complex ethical vocabularies that can more adequately reflect the complexities and paradoxes inherent in regulating digital (in)transparencies. In this regard, Schade has identified an important processual pattern that may also be relevant for tackling other phenomena of organized immaturity and beyond the particular case of GDPR.

The article by Ruehle (2023) is concerned with the growing literature on nudging – that is, efforts by governments or other organizations to influence individual and collective behavior indirectly and “gently” via the design of choice architectures (see Thaler & Sunstein, 2008). While the vast majority of works on nudging originate in law and economics, and are primarily focused on how (nation state) governments can influence citizens' behaviors in desirable ways (e.g., towards more healthy eating habits), Ruehle focuses instead on the smaller and more specialized research area of the intra-organizational use of (digital) nudges in workplace settings (see also Bohnet, 2016). In this context, her article sheds light on the

dark sides of nudging, by advancing the argument that digital workplace nudging, in its paternalistic impetus, runs the risk of fostering tendencies of organized immaturity. To counter such tendencies, Ruehle develops a theoretical model that combines contract- and deliberation-based ethical approaches and that allows for the ethical balancing of workplace nudging.

In contrast to the previous three articles, the article by Wiedner and Holt (2023) is primarily concerned with the therapeutic side by pursuing the question of whether and how craft work can help foster maturity despite powerful digitalization trends that can induce organized immaturity (as argued above). The authors locate their inquiry in the empirical context of the global vinyl manufacturing industry that was facing severe challenges of declining demand over the last decades, especially caused by the digital revolution, but that survived nevertheless in a niche of committed craft work. By drawing on works by Heidegger and Foucault, the authors use this empirical context to show how craft work is deeply grounded in ascesis as a form of self-care. Their study contributes to research on organized immaturity by unpacking how maturity, as its opposite, can constitute social resilience in the wake of seemingly inevitable trends of digitalization.

The article by Alacovska, Booth, and Fieseler (2023) also contributes to the therapeutic dimension – that is, how to counteract organized immaturity. The authors develop the argument that contemporary societies need to find new ways of co-existing with toxic technologies by creating means to de-toxify them and render them curative or at least benign. Inspired by Bernard Stiegler’s philosophy of technology, they propose a pharmacological approach to living with (and through) digitalization, which focuses on engaging with the same media to use its ‘venom’ for socially ‘therapeutic’ rather than harmful effects. In this context, the authors elaborate on the distinction between disorganizing immaturity and organizing maturity explained in this article. They add to and enrich this distinction by exploring how the

socially engaged arts can provide solutions that preserve and enhance (rather than undermine) human abilities for *savoir vivre* (in particular, how to live with technology) and *savoir faire* (in particular, how to create “better technological worlds” [page no]). Alacovska and her colleagues argue here that immaturity can be disorganized through forms of “artivism” such as anti-surveillance art, which channels techniques for confusing and de-fusing surveillance systems into socially militant aesthetic pursuits. In turn, maturity can be organized through arts-based hacking, which takes new ownership of digital technologies to promote social justice, emancipation and empowerment.

#### CONCLUSION: A CALL FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

To conclude, the emergence of new forms of organized immaturity and the problematic role of organizations in turning these into systems of dominance and control prompts us to call business ethics scholars and organization theory researchers to engage in further conceptual and empirical studies of these phenomena. It is only from a nuanced and sophisticated knowledge base that we can build the critical responses needed to protect enlightenment and self-determination qualities that are so fundamental to mature human beings and to democracy. The proposed theoretical and philosophical lenses are only a few initial suggestions for analyzing how and why the phenomenon of organized immaturity emerges within the socio-technological conditions of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

In addition to the individual-focused organized immaturity and related sub-phenomena addressed by the further articles in this Special Issue, we see particular merit in further exploring the collective side of organized immaturity (the collective side is also emphasized in relational concepts of freedom based on interactions of individuals with others, see, e.g., Arendt, 1968; Lindebaum et al., 2022). This is also where our conceptualization moves beyond Kant’s (1784) initial notion of immaturity as a property of the individual and seeks to contribute a consistent socio-philosophical explanation and critique of the phenomenon.

Attending to the collective dimension of immaturity can help to reveal the very mechanisms that constitute its widespread, systematic, and thus ‘organized’ character. The post-Kantian critique and analysis of surveillance capitalism undertaken by Scherer and Neesham (2022) uncovers, for example, three such mechanisms – namely, infantilization (as a systematic source of ally producing behavioral reflexes of seeking external protection from responsibility and uncertainty), reductionism (as a propensity to reduce human complexity to technology-digestible material) and totalization (as exhaustive co-optation of human life and experience into the logic of the socio-technological systems).

More specific examples abound in the rising tide of disinformation and fake news, as powerfully distributed via digital media (Bennett & Livingston, 2020), and in some cases even facilitated and multiplied by AI technologies (Floridi & Chiriatti, 2020). Such cases seem to foster tendencies of organized immaturity that affect entire collectives, because disinformation and fake news can endanger individuals’ and collectives’ capacities to distinguish actual facts from mere fiction (Knight & Tsoukas, 2019). In other words, as private and social learning no longer helps in distinguishing between true and enlighten false, or right and wrong, neither individuals nor the collectives they form are any longer capable of building up the capacities needed for making such distinctions. This, in turn, increases the likelihood of a polarized society where citizens struggle to share a joint social reality, to find common ground, and to draw on the use of reason to agree on collaborative solutions (McCoy et al., 2018; Schoeneborn, Vázquez, & Cornelissen, 2022; Schwoon et al., 2022).

Again, it is the use of socio-technological systems, including algorithmic management, filter bubbles, and echo chambers, that provides the preconditions for organized immaturity and societal disintegration to emerge (Kitchens, Johnson, & Gray, 2020). While our Special Issue could only scratch the surface of some of these developments, we encourage scholars to examine more thoroughly, in future research, the intricate interplay between

organized immaturity and “post-truth” streams in the public discourse (e.g., Knight & Tsoukas, 2019) – not least because both phenomena tend to be united in their impetus against the Enlightenment project, thus undermining the very foundation of democratic institutions and capacities for public deliberation.

Beyond this issue, and more generally, business ethicists and organization scholars are called upon to focus on actual and potential countermeasures, and to explore the upsides and downsides of such measures as tools for disorganizing immaturity. In the same context, we invite scholars to study the role of the state, the media, social movements, and organizations in general, in strengthening positive freedoms of individuals and social groups. This may involve studies on the capacities of state and non-state actors in educating individuals and collectives to critically deal with digital technologies – sometimes also referred to as “digital literacy” or “data literacy” (Carmi et al., 2020). Importantly, scholars will need to study the causes of these developments and advance knowledge on how to disorganize immaturity or organize maturity, at both individual and collective levels. In this way, researchers will explore the conditions under which socio-technological systems contribute to the Enlightenment project in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, and will help humankind to escape being controlled by technologies and (re-)gain control of their future development.

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